

The Effects of Colorism on Self Perception and Self-Esteem

Shaquila O'Shay Massey, De'Onna Smith, Shanika Lavi Wilson*, Christopher Solomon

North Carolina Central University, United States America.

*Corresponding author: Shanika Lavi Wilson, North Carolina Central University;

Received date: April 01, 2021; Accepted Date: May 08 2021; Published Date: May 14, 2021.

Citation: Shaquila O'Shay Massey, De'Onna Smith, Shanika Lavi Wilson, Christopher Solomon. The Effectiveness of Group Therapy in Supporting Adoptive Families, *J. Psychology and Mental Health Care*, 5(2). Doi: 10.31579/2637-8892/120

Copyright: © 2021 Shanika Lavi Wilson, This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License, which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium provided the original author and source are credited.

Abstract

Colorism has been a historical racial dilemma for the African American community since slavery. Colorism can be defined as a form of bias, based upon different aspects of physical appearance including skin color, facial features, and hair that favors the facial appearance of Caucasian white Americans (Beopple, 2015). Over the last 10 years quantitative and qualitative data has been gathered to study the effect of colorism on the African American community with a specific focus on the psychological well-being of this population. A survey was conducted to evaluate the effects of colorism on African American women and their self-esteem and self-perception. A total of 25(N=25) surveys were gathered of women, ages 18-50, who all identified as black, African American or a person of color. The analyzed research results concluded that colorism, although has negatively impacted many participants, has not lowered or altered their self esteem or self perception.

Keywords: Self Perception; Self-Esteem

Introduction of Study

Colorism is defined as the tendency to perceive or behave towards members of a racial category based on the lightness or darkness of their skin tone according to Heckstall's findings, (Heckstall, 2013). The proposed topic of study will explore the effects of colorism on self-perception and self-esteem among women of color. Many hypothesize that the effects of colorism negatively impact many different aspects of well-being in black men and women. Although there is empirically based research relating different factors to African American self-esteem as a whole, there is a need for more information regarding skin tone or complexion as it relates to African American self-esteem and satisfaction (Smith, 2015). Most research looks in depth into the mental or psychological effects of the American culture that has consistently supported the colorist system. This colorist system specifically valuing lighter skin tones of black people in society (Beopple, 2015). European features have promoted this tension and conflict within the Black American society for years (Wilder, 2008). Through this study we hope to gather data that will support our hypothesis, concluding that colorism in the workplace, school environment, and social environment can affect a person's well-being, self-esteem, and overall their perception of themselves. This study will identify rather, or not social and environmental factors have included experiences of colorism among women of color ages 18-50.

Statement and Scope of the Problem

Many African Americans have grown up hearing colloquial phrases within the black community like "If you're White, you're right, / If you're yellow, you're mellow, / If you're brown, stick around, / If you're Black, get back" (Hall, 2017). Colorism has been a historical racial dilemma for

the African American community dating back to the early days of slavery. Throughout centuries we have seen the effects of colorism manifest in many ways throughout society and the African American culture. Colorism can be defined as a form of biased, based upon different aspects of physical appearance including skin color, facial features, and hair texture that favors the physical appearances of Caucasians (Beopple, 2015). Reece (2015) states that Eurocentric standards of beauty reign supreme in the world. There is an increased value of white features like light skin and straight hair. It is believed, Caucasian people being more privileged over darker complexions, has enabled skin color stratification to continually operate in today's society. (Jablonski, 2012). Over the last 10 years quantitative and qualitative data has been gathered to study the effect of colorism on the African American community with a specific focus on the psychological well-being of this population. Researchers and scholars have measured these different aspects of psychological well-being with self-esteem assessments, racial identity evaluations, measures of depression and anxiety and overall one's personal perception of self. In this study we will conduct a survey to evaluate the effects of colorism on the women of color through how they perceive themselves and their self-esteem.

Justification and Purpose of the Study

The Proposed research seeks to explore and investigate the following:

- Identify and evaluate how the looking glass self-theory plays a role in the effects of colorism
- Identify and evaluate one's self-esteem in regard to their skin tone
- Identify and evaluate personal experiences with colorism

Assess whether colorism affects one's personal opinion of themselves

Literature Review

Colorism and Slavery

Colorism was developed during the early seventeenth century where it was rooted in the institution of slavery and the slave trade. During this time the favored treatment of lighter skinned slaves can be seen. This included the well-known idea of lighter skinned slaves being treated with more consideration to health and comfort and easier working conditions versus the darker complexioned slaves working in very poor and harsh conditions out in the fields (Smith, 2014). This concept may be better known as the difference between a 'house slave' and 'field slave'. Even after the Civil War, colorism during slavery led to the division of African American people based on skin color and hair texture. The 20th Century introduced the 'paper bag test' and 'comb test'. Social organizations, housing communities, and even churches used these tests for requirements for membership (The Association of Black Psychologist, 2018).

Colorism and Families

In 2011, researchers Wilder and Cain interviewed 26 African American women about the influence colorism has on family acceptance. Through their findings, it was determined that women learned to associate blackness with negativity and lightness with ideal beauty (Wilder and Cain, 2011). According to Hannon and Defina (2014), posited that skin tone continues to play a role in shaping opportunities and life experiences.

Colorism and Social Influences

Now in the 21st century where media is at the peak of society you see skin tone biased still being used to represent African American women. Frequently in the media you see lighter complexion being used as the beauty standard for black women implying that lighter complexion is what is considered attractive/beautiful (Adam, 2014). In previous research black women were asked to share their associations with different terms relating to skin color and found that words like "blue-black," "purple" and even "burnt" are more associated with darker skin tones. In addition, descriptive words like "loud", "ghetto", "unattractive" were negatively used to describe darker skin tones. In the reverse, words like "attractiveness," "intelligence," and "trust worthy" were used to describe women of color with lighter skin tones (Davis, 2017).

Colorism and Employment

An unspoken preference in skin tone often appears in the workforce. Research shows lighter complexion individuals regularly obtain higher salaries, occupational advancement and has a better opportunity at desirable jobs (Harrison & Thomas, 2009). Many have wondered the cause for preferential treatment. According to Hunter (2002), data shows white employers and colleagues select light skinned black employees as they are deemed to be more agreeable to whites and hold a higher competency than those of a darker tone.

Colorism and Relationships

Skin color influences relationship dynamics. Research has shown White and Hispanic women are more likely to marry than Black women (Chaney & Perkins, 2018). Not only are Black women less likely to get married than their counterparts, dark-skinned Black women are less likely to marry than lighter-skinned women. (Chaney & Perkins, 2018). Yellow-boned also known as light-skinned women are idolized in the black community, especially in the music industry. The lyrics glorify the attributes men look forward to in a light-skinned woman. There is a significant social influence on colorism and relationships.

Findings

The demographics of previous research widely varies. Research has been conducted on both men and women, children and adolescents, college and universities with both majority white or predominantly black students, and from ages 15 to 50 years old.

Researcher's used a mix of methods and testing including likert-type scales, meta-analysis, visual analogue scales, and The Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale all to get both qualitative and quantitative results. Starting at the childhood and adolescent level findings suggested that adolescents are aware of how people perceive their skin tone. Some researchers also looked into the actual lived experiences of African American women in regard to racial socialization of skin tone (Tamkin, 2009). All research, in short, show how colorism has an influence on how many people perceive themselves (Elmore,

2009). Researcher's studies of attitude and preference have showed that, even during early childhood, darker skin is viewed more negatively than lighter skin (Adams, 2014). It is suggested through research that colorism affects how a person sees and feels about themselves and how they treat themselves (The Association of Black Psychologist, 2018). Multiple researchers used the Rosenberg's Self Esteem Scale in order to evaluate low and high self-esteem. Many conclusions showed that a participant's skin tone didn't have a significant impact on their level of self-esteem (Matthews & Johnson, 2015). However, when looking at the entire psychological well-being and psychological adjustment of African Americans some results revealed that negative skin tone perception increased depressive symptoms of participants, but those findings outcomes were inconsistent (Gaskin, 2015). In addition to those results, it was found that gender more so moderated relationships between self-esteem, being that men were more likely to have lower self-esteem than women. It is suggested that future research be done to more closely look into this specific variable (Green, 2016). Most of the research expresses the gaps in research theoretical conceptualization of colorism due to the lack of in-depth exploration of the effect of colorism. However, in all, there is a general desire to continue to develop a foundation for a theoretical framework that captures the key features of colorism in today's society (Wilder, 2008.) All in all, looking in to how the effects of colorism, or skin color stratification, is continuing to have on African American in today's society is still very necessary.

Theoretical Framework

Cooley's Looking Glass Self theory (LGS) is the proposed theoretical framework for this theory. Charles Cooley coined the idea of the looking glass self in 1922. Cooley supported the theory that an individual will inevitably learn to see themselves based on how society views them. LGS is the idea that we as individuals take on characteristics that are mostly influenced by what we believe society perceives us to be. (Rahim, 2012). Cooley noted we self-consciousness monitor ourselves from the point of view of others. Muehlenkamp (2011) says, the process of self-objectification is subtle, dominating, and powerful form of social control that can strip women of their ability to be free, autonomous, vibrant participants in the world. The LGS is used in the study to show how women of color have subconsciously and consciously allowed society's prejudice opinions, regarding skin tone, alter and/or mold their views on themselves. Often stereotyped individuals will integrate society's label of them as their identity, and then will reproduce the behaviors associated with that identity. Cooley's looking glass-self theory can share many aspects with the attitude's society has on women of color and their skin tone. It is perceived that women of color with lighter complexions experience light skin privilege. This notion has been maintained by society and the black community specifically, since slavery. Therefore, this knowledge of color continues to divide and psychologically damage the regime of color hierarchy (Davis, 2017). Negative stereotypes can be

internalized and affect interpersonal relations, how people see themselves, their attitudes, beliefs and behaviors. (Rahim, 2010). The study will look into the LGS theory to identify and evaluate how society's use of colorism affects a woman of color's perception of herself.

Methodology

In order to support our theory, we will explore the looking glass self-theory in addition to the social and environmental factors that may contribute to lack of self-esteem among women of color ages 18-50. By gathering responses from our participants, we hope to be able to formulate general ideas and feelings regarding the effects of colorism on individuals based on their personal experiences. By gathering this information, we hope to be able to measure how colorism has influenced the way and individual feels or has felt about themselves.

Sample and Participant Selection

The sample frame will be women of color and or non-Caucasian women ages 18-50 years old. The sample size will be women ages 18-50 in the United States. The demographics of participants of this sample will be female, ethnicities of color, and any marital status. The survey criteria are only for women of color ages between 18-50. Education level will not be and eligibility criterion for this sample; all education levels are welcomed. 30 Participants were invited to participate in an online survey through, emails, social media, and electronic flyers. The number of participants sample size of the data was 25 where n=25. Convenience sampling was used in order to collect data amidst the current COVID-19 Pandemic that limited the number of surveys collected from the number distributed.

Research Method Design

Data for this study was collected through a mixed methodological approach with a qualitative and quantitative survey that will include open-ended, multiple choice, and Likert scaled questions. Data will be gathered

Table 1:

Age Range		
18-20	1	4%
21-30	18	72%
31-40	2	12%
41-50	1	4%

Table 1 shows the age range of the total number of participants. Of the total sample size more than 70 percent of the participants ranged between the age of 20-30 years old (72%).

Table 2:

Ethnicity	Total	%
African	20	87%
Caribbean	8.7%	2%
Mixed	1	4.3%

Table 2: Participants were asked to indicate their ethnicity. 87% of participants (20) indicated African as their ethnicity, where as 8.7% (2) Identified as Caribbean, 4.3% (1) Identified as Mixed.

Skin Tone	Total	%
Light Skin	5	20%
Brown Skin	18	72%
Dark Skin	2	8%

Table 3: Skin Tone

In Table 3 the survey divided skin tone into three categories; light skin, brown skin, and dark skin. Participants were asked to identify with which skin tone they most identified with.

to determine if the self-esteem of women of color is affected by colorism. Participants will be asked to identify with their skin complexion and reflect on their personal experiences with colorism when answering the survey questions. Multiple choice questions will be used to gather demographics and background experience of participants. Open ended questions will be used to interpret a common feeling or meaning among participants in regard to their knowledge of colorism, their personal experiences with colorism, the outcome of those experiences, what could be done about colorism, and their opinion of why and who it affects the most. Responses selected for the data analysis will be ones of common theme and in-depth thought from participants. Self-esteem will be measured using an adaptation of The Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale. Surveys will be available through social media and email. The surveys will be distributed electronically through a Google survey form. The survey link will be available 24/7 for 1 week. Once the open survey period has ended the survey results will be accessed by student researchers only. Data will be analyzed in addition to student researchers sharing and discussing previous research that finds systems effects on self-esteem. We will also present our previous research in order to defend the credibility, reliability, and validity of our hypothesis. In an effort to solicit participants we will post flyers on social media, and throughout the community.

Intended Results

With the data collected we will be able to support our hypothesis that the effects of colorism among individuals' different systems can negatively affect the self-esteem and self-perception of women of color. We intend to find common themes and feelings regarding individuals' personal experiences with colorism. We hope to attain feedback on individuals' knowledge of colorism and its effects as well.

Results/ Findings

In **Table 4** Participants were asked if they (1) have experienced colorism in the school or work place (2) if they have ever experienced bullying or

colorism by someone of their same race due to their skin complexion and (3) if they felt like their skin tone was represented well in the media. 72% of participants have experienced colorism in their school or work place.

72% of participants have been bullied by someone of the same race due to their skin complexion. Lastly 64% of participants do not feel like their skin complexion is well represented in the media.

Table 4:

Experience	Yes	%	No	%
School and Work Place	18	72%	7	28%
Bullying	9	36%	16	64%
Media Representation	9	36%	16	64%

Table 4: Experience with colorism and Representation

In **Table 5** Participants participated in a Likert scale questionnaire based off of the The Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale adapted to focus on skin complexion and colorism in regard to self-esteem. Participants were given

different statements about self-esteem to respond to, using a Likert scale with choices of strongly agree (SA), Agree (A), Neutral (N), Disagree (D), and strongly disagree (SD).

Table 5

Self-esteem Statement	SA	%	A	%	N	%	D	%	SD	%
Overall, satisfied with skin complexion	17	68%	4	16%	2	8%	3	12%	0	0
Positive outlook on skin complexion	15	60%	4	16%	0	0	5	20%	1	4%
Lack in Appearance/ Attractiveness	4	16%	3	12%	2	8%	3	12%	13	52%
No issues with appearance/ attractiveness	18	72%	2	8%	2	8%	2	8%	2	8%
Proud of skin complexion	21	84%	4	16%	0	0	0	0	0	0
Equal with other skin complexions	6	24%	8	32%	2	8%	5	20%	4	16%
Would change skin complexion	4	16%	4	16%	1	4%	6	24%	10	40%
Self-esteem has been affected by colorism	3	12%	4	16%	4	16%	3	12%	11	44%

Table 5: Self-Esteem Likert Scale

Open Ended Questions were asked to get common themes and opinions from participants in regard to their opinions on colorism. Out of the 25

participants, answers with common themes and answers were the ones selected to better demonstrate the common themes among survey results.

Table 6 Question 1 Answers

Answer 1	“I understood that colorism has had a huge negative impact on my community.”
Answer 2	“It is basically black people against black people.”
Answer 3	“That it plays a big effect in the black community. It’s a struggle in our own community”
Answer 4	“Before the survey, I understood that colorism is a basis of systematic prejudice inside of a race, most prominent in African Americans.”
Answer 5	“I understood that colorism has taken place well since slavery and still plagues a lot of people within the African American community.”

Table 6 Shows the most common answers and themes among the responses of open-ended Questions and Responses. Question: What did you know or understand about colorism before this survey?

Table 7: Question 2 Answers

Answer 1	“Find ways to put in the media beauty that represents all colors and complexions.”
Answer 2	“I think positive representation in the media would help.”
Answer 3	“Having more representation of the different skin tones”
Answer 4	“More Representation”
Answer 5	“See more brown skinned people in the media of all shades not just light skin”

Table 7 Shows the most common answers and themes among the responses of open-ended Questions and Responses. Question: What changes do you think could be made in order to change the effects of colorism?

Table 8: Question 3 Answers

Answer 1	“Dark skin women because they are portrayed (<i>in media</i>) as not attractive”
Answer 2	“I think most of the time it negatively affects dark-skinned people and positively affects light skinned people”
Answer 3	Darker women specifically because they society has taught people with darker skin that they aren’t as beautiful or important”
Answer 4	“Black person, especially dark skinned. There is this idea that dark skin equated to ugliness. This goes back in history with slaves and their masters.”

Table 8 Shows the most common answers and themes among the responses of open-ended Questions and Responses. Question: Who do you think colorism affects the most and why?

Table 9: Question 4 Answers

Answer 1	I went to school with girls of different skin tones and they would judge each other who was better than who. It was embarrassing to watch.
Answer 2	In a history class in undergrad there were about 30 students and of the 30 there were 2 black students, one including myself, the other student was a lighter skin black female. She was more accepted in than I was.
Answer 3	I’ve witness blatant Colorism in friendships and within my family. People make remarks that they think are endearing but can truly be hurtful and harmful
Answer 4	I experienced this predominantly in college and my first professional job. I felt like there were stereotypes associated with someone who looked like me and I always felt like I had to prove myself.

Table 9 Shows the most common answers and themes among the responses of open-ended Questions and Responses. Question: What has been your personal experience with colorism?

Table 10: Question 5 Answers

Answer 1	I think Colorism affects African/black American women the most. We are quick to judge each other instead of lifting each other up.
Answer 2	I think colorism affects brown and dark skin women the most because we’ve been trained for many years by the media to think that darker skin is not beautiful.
Answer 3	I feel as though Colorism has a heavier negative effect on dark skin women the most and in general, aside from negative or positive, on women.
Answer 4	Darker skin toned women because, society views darker skin as ugly. We’re finally getting to a place where we can acknowledge that dark is beautiful within our own race.
Answer 5	Darker skinned women because the media and society tells us that lighter is better. But that’s not true. Chocolate women are poppin!

Table 10 Shows the most common answers and themes among the responses of open-ended Questions and Responses. Question: Who do you think colorism affects the most and why?

Discussion

The effects of colorism is believed to have a lasting impact on the African American community. This study was conducted to see what effects colorism had on self-esteem and self perception for women of color. The results of this survey illustrate the negative impact and experiences African Americans have encountered. It suggests that there is a positive correlation with colorism and its effects at work and school. The data also shows that many people believe that the media does not well represent every skin tone and complexion and this could also be a reason behind the prominence in colorism. Contrary to the hypothesis given, there are no concrete statistics to show that the majority of people’s experience with colorism has affected their self-esteem negatively. This is inclusive of previous research. Although there were no high scores for self-esteem issues, the results do infer that a percentage of people have been

negatively affected by colorism and face issues with their self-esteem due to those personal experiences. Although colorism may not have a large impact on self-esteem it is still a prevalent issue that many feels need to be addressed and fixed. Thus, future research should use a qualitative tool to develop a more comprehensive study. The study should specifically detail the experiences in which colorism has affected African American women.

Implications of Social Work

Social workers working with women of color suffering from self-esteem and self-perception issues will find this study most beneficial. The data gathered in this survey will allow for growth among practices used by social workers, clinicians, and mental health professionals. For the professionals who use interventions that address the self-esteem, self-perception and mental health of women of color, this gathered data can

shape the way certain interventions are used. It can also assist with the evaluation of the effectiveness of certain interventions that have not yet explored the negative effects of colorism on women of color with self-esteem issues. This data can also allow for a new approach to serving and treating women of color who have experienced colorism.

Limitations

Electronic surveys are fast, convenient, and easily accessible. However, there were several drawbacks and disadvantages in advertising and using the online surveys. Due to the nation's pandemic, COVID-19, student researchers risked the possibility of not having maximum participation with exception of at least 30 participants. Another disadvantage was the promotion and advertising of the study flyer was limited due to not being able to draw participants in public places like schools and communities due to the pandemic restrictions. Participants were contacted via a small social media and mobile text communication.

References

1. Adams, E. A. (2014). The developmental influence of skin tone on psychosocial outcomes among african american youth (Order No. 3622285). Available from ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global. (1548325714).
2. Boepple, L. S. (2015). The effect of colorist images on appearance concerns of black women (Order No. 10017614). Available from ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global. (1767769717).
3. Chaney, C.D., & Perkins, R.M. (2018). His and "her" perspectives: the dichotomy of colorism in a black marriage. *Journal of Colorism Studies*, 3(1), 1-24.
4. Davis, C. (2017). From colorism to conjurings: Tracing the dust in beyonce's lemonade. *Taboo*, 16(2), 7-28.
5. Elmore, T. G. (2009). Colorism in the classroom: An exploration of adolescents' skin tone, skin tone preferences, perceptions of skin tone stigma and identity (Order No. 3395695). Available from ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global. (304983676).
6. Gaskin, A. L. (2015). The relationship between skin tone and psychological adjustment: Exploring the role of racial socialization (Order No. 3719751). Available from ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global. (1717848213).
7. Green, K. (2016). Media use, skin tone, and self-esteem (Order No. 10110892). Available from ProQuest Central; ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global. (1797618048).
8. Hall, J.C. (2017). No longer invisible: understanding the psychosocial impact on skin color stratification in the lives of african american women. *Oxford Academic*, 42(2), 71-78. DOI: 10.1093/hsw/hlx001
9. Hannon, J., & DeFina, R. (2014). Just skin deep? The impact of interviewer race on the assessment of African American respondent skin tone. *Race and Social Problems*, 6(4), 356-364. DOI: 10.1007/s12552-014-9128-z
10. Harrison, M.S., & Thoman, K.M. (2009). The hidden prejudice in selection: a research investigation on skin color bias. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, 39(1), 134-168. 10.1111/j.1559-1816.2008.00433.x
12. Heckstall, S. E. (2013). Playing the Game of Colorism. *Journal of Educational and Social Research*, 3(2), 1-10.
13. Hunter, M.L. (2002). "If you're light, you're alright": Light skin color as social capital for women of color. *Sage Journals*, 16(2), 175-193. 10.1177/08912430222104895
15. Jablonski, N.J. (2012). *Living color: The biological and social meaning of skin color*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
16. Mathews, T. J., & Johnson, G. S. (2015). Skin Complexion in the Twenty-First Century: The Impact of Colorism on African American Women. *Race, Gender & Class*, 22(1), 248-274.
17. Muehlenkamp, J. J. (2012). Trapped in the looking glass: Self-objectification in women. *Sex Roles*, 66(9-10), 701-702. doi:10.1007/s11199-011-0094-2
18. Rahim, A. E. (2010). Marginalized through the "Looking Glass Self" The development of Stereotypes and Labeling.
19. Reece, R. L. (2016). What are you mixed with: The effect of multiracial identification on perceived attractiveness. *Review of Black Political Economy*, 43(2), 139-147. doi: http://dx.doi.org.ezproxy.nccu.edu/10.1007/s12114-015-9218-1
20. Smith, F. A. (2014). The impact of the color complex on the self-esteem of african americans (Order No. 3602217). Available from ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global. (1467740466).
21. Tamkin, V. L. (2009). The racial socialization of beliefs and attitudes regarding skin tone in a cohort of older African American women: A phenomenological study (Order No. 3390881). Available from ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global. (304996583).
22. The Association of Black Psychologist. (2018). *The Association of Black Psychologist on Dark Girls*. Washington, MD.
23. Wilder, J. (2008). Everyday colorism in the Lives of Young black women: Revisiting the continuing significance of an Old Phenomenon In a New Generation. (Doctoral dissertation, University of Florida, 2008) [Abstract]. 1-205.
24. Wilder, J.A., & Cain, C. (2011). Teaching and learning color consciousness in black families: Exploring family processes and women's experiences with colorism. *Journal of Family Issues*, 32, 577-604. DOI: 10.1177/0192513X10390858