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Perceptions of Complexions: Consciousness and Self- Identification Among Dark-Skinned Blacks

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Perceptions of Complexions: Consciousness and Self-Identification
Among Dark-Skinned Blacks

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
University of New Orleans
In partial fulfillment of the
Requirements for the degree of

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In
Sociology

By

Brian Kenneth Morris

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Table of Contents

Abstract.....	iv
Introduction.....	1
Review of the Literature	3
Origin of Colorism.....	4
Duality	9
Contemporary Studies	11
Theory.....	14
Self-esteem, Self-efficacy, and Self-Identification.....	20
Data and Method.....	22
Limitations	23
Sample	23
Measures	25
Analysis	28
Results.....	29
Interview Results	36
Discussion.....	39
References.....	43
Appendices.....	47
Vita.....	50

Abstract

Skin tone variation within American black communities has long been associated with intraracial stratification. Data from the National Survey of Black Americans (NSBA) indicate that lighter-skinned blacks – net of such factors as region of residence, age, and sex – consistently have higher levels of nearly every socioeconomic indicator including educational attainment, personal and family income, and perceived physical attractiveness when compared to their darker counterparts. What does this color caste system mean for the personal identities and emotional experiences of dark-skinned blacks in America? Using data from the NSBA and six interviews with dark-skinned blacks, I set forth social psychological implications of a phenotypically stratified subgroup in the United States.

Keywords: Colorism, Self-Identification, Socioeconomic Disparities, Stigma

Introduction

Skin tone variation plays a significant role in shaping socioeconomic stratification patterns within African American communities. Several studies have indicated that discrimination based on skin color is not limited to interracial interactions, but also includes intraracial relations (Frazier 1957a, 1957b; Harvey et al. 2005; Hill 2000, 2002; Hochschild and Weaver 2007; Hughes and Hertel 1990; Hunter 2002; Kerr 2005). There has long been a preference for light or white skin (Dyson 2004; Frazier 1957a, 1957b; Harvey et al. 2005; Hill 2000, 2002; Hochschild and Weaver 2007; Hughes and Hertel 1990; Hunter 2002; Kerr 2005), and these preferences have permeated black America.

Critical race theorists have questioned the salience and normative acceptance of whiteness and have attempted to underscore antecedent causes of skin color discrimination; still, dark skin largely remains a symbol of oppression. Whiteness, as it functions in the black community, does not solely refer to the privileges afforded to white – or Caucasian – persons, but also to the higher levels of social status blacks may attain simply by having a lighter complexion.

During the 1960s, blacks experienced high levels of socioeconomic progress. The Civil Rights Movement sparked a great increase in the intensity of racial pride, and skin color temporarily became an unreliable indicator of socioeconomic success. However, recent data from the National Survey of Black Americans (Jackson and Gurin 1997) indicate that fairer-skinned blacks have higher levels of attainment than darker-skinned blacks on nearly every dimension of stratification. The dark complexion that was once a rallying mechanism and a sign of authenticity among blacks has seemingly become the albatross.

This study explores social psychological implications of intraracial discrimination for dark-skinned blacks in the continental United States. Using data from the NSBA, I examine the relationship between skin color and self-identification among black Americans. I also present qualitative data gathered from six interviews, which focus on dark-skinned blacks' perceptions of existing folklore, personal and group identity, and biases associated with colorism. The task of this thesis is not to note the ways in which darker-skinned blacks are oppressed, but rather to set forth social psychological consequences of the perceived oppression associated with skin color.

Review of the Literature

Skin color discrimination – or colorism – in the United States is not limited to interracial relations and/or interactions. Studies (Frazier 1957a, 1957b; Harvey et al. 2005; Hill 2000, 2002; Hochschild and Weaver 2007; Hughes and Hertel 1990; Hunter 2002; Kerr 2005) indicate that black communities, in particular, have had instances of intraracial discrimination, whereby lighter-skinned blacks have received preferential treatment over their darker-skinned counterparts. Quite possibly the black community's last great taboo, skin color discrimination has seemingly driven a socioeconomic wedge between light-skinned and dark-skinned blacks in America, and remains a relevant topic of research and discussion.

The following review examines three sets of literature; the first dealing with perceived skin color discrimination within black communities, the next focusing on the theoretical concepts of this paper, and the last looking at personal identity. The first set looks at the origin of colorism, the duality of being both black and dark-skinned, and contemporary studies of skin color discrimination (which highlight socioeconomic differences between light-skinned and dark-skinned blacks). The contemporary studies section is further broken down into two sub-sections: (1) studies on how the significance of skin color remains salient and (2) a study on how the significance of skin color has declined. Nearly all the reviews conclude that colorism is still pervasive and indicate that dark-skinned blacks remain at a socioeconomic disadvantage compared to those with lighter complexions (Harvey et al. 2005; Hill 2000; Hochschild and Weaver 2007; Hughes and Hertel 1990; Hunter 2002).

The second set of literature examines different social psychological aspects of self-perception. Specifically, three concepts provide the foundation for this study: Du Bois' (1903) concept of "double consciousness" (and the "veil"), Cooley's (1902) concept of "looking-glass self," and Goffman's (1963) concept of "Stigma." A final set explores the relationship between self-esteem, self-efficacy, and self-perceptions. In addition, I refer to critical race theory to examine the role that "whiteness" plays in American black communities. Considering the above-mentioned conceptions, I present possible social psychological implications of intraracial discrimination for dark-skinned blacks.

The Origin of Colorism

Many contend that the preference for light skin can be traced back to the days of slavery, where slave owners regarded light skin as a type of privilege (Dyson 2004; Frazier 1957a, 1957b; Harvey et al. 2005; Hill 2000, 2002; Hochschild and Weaver 2007; Hughes and Hertel 1990; Hunter 2002; Kerr 2005). Dyson (2004) notes;

The preference for [light skin] finds painful precedent in black culture. It dates back to slavery when the lightest blacks – whose skin color was often the result of rape by white slave masters – were favored over their darker kin because they were closer in color and appearance to dominant society. Unfortunately, despite the challenge to the mythology of inherently superior white standards of beauty, there persists in black life the belief that light is preferable to dark (2004:156).

Skin tone differences among enslaved Africans were exploited by white slave owners, who created caste systems on the plantation as a basis to divide the slaves for work chores and to create distrust and animosity among them, minimizing the chances for revolt (Harvey et al. 2005; Hunter 2005). Generally, there were two types of jobs: the house servants and the field servants. Slave owners would habitually delegate "intelligent" (Kerr 2005:273) tasks, such as craftsmanship or light labor, to lighter-skinned blacks, while darker-skinned blacks

were tasked with tougher, more laborious work, usually in the field. Slaves were acutely aware of the skin color stratification system, and this “internalized valuing and devaluing of skin tones,” as Harvey et al. wrote, “[reflected] the intragroup nature of the skin-tone dilemma” (2005:238).

In a seemingly intrinsic manner, individuals, at very young ages, become aware that white is preferred to black. Hill (2002) argues, “Whiteness [is] identified with all that is civilized, virtuous, and beautiful; blackness, in opposition, with all that is lowly, sinful, and ugly” (2002:77). This dichotomy, some claim (Clark and Clark 1940, 1950; Dyson 2004; Hill 2002; Hunter 2002; Kerr 2005), is subconsciously indoctrinated into the minds of blacks in America. Clark and Clark (1940, 1950) demonstrated that black children, when given the choice, preferred white dolls and pictures of white children to black dolls and pictures of black children.

The preference for white or light skin tone is not limited to adolescence. Black filmmaker Spike Lee (1990) maintains that the majority of black men seek mates of a lighter hue. Lee (1990) asserts:

Whether black men admit it or not, they feel light-skinned women are more attractive than dark-skinned, and they’d rather see long hair than a short Afro, because that’s closer to white women. That comes from being inundated with media from the time you’re born that constantly fed you the white woman as the image of beauty. That’s both conscious and unconscious... But on the whole, talking to my friends and knowing men, I see that a premium is put on light-skinned sisters with long hair (1990:55).

Socially constructed views of whiteness have perhaps contributed to the desirability of light skin in black communities. Because light skin is rewarded within the black community, a racial caste system based on skin tone is cultivated and perpetrated, which seems to breed disparities. Kerr (2005) claims, “complexion discrimination is the implosion

of racism... wherein the profound and enduring residue of black social quarantine resides” (2005:273). Of the negative connotation affiliated with dark skin, Dyson (2004) wrote:

The continued preference for [light skin] among blacks bears witness to psychic wounds that are not completely healed. The poisonous self-hatred that pours freely in the rejection of dark blackness is painful evidence of our unresolved racial anxieties about our true beauty and self-worth. [Dark-skinned] blacks have often been cast aside and looked down upon because they embody the most visible connection to a fertile African heritage whose value remains suspect in our culture and nation (2004:157).

In his study of the black bourgeoisie, Frazier (1957a) argued that mulattoes (blacks with white ancestors) led a “more privileged life” when compared with their “pure black” counterparts (1957a: 257). These mulattoes, according to Frazier (1957b), were conscious of the distinctions between themselves and darker slaves, and believed that their white blood did indeed make them superior. One’s social position ultimately reflected the amount of “white blood” in his or her ancestry, and patterns of stratification among blacks included considerations of skin tone. Affluent, free mulattos were treated as a third group by whites in the lower South, which placed them in an intermediate position between white and black – or slave and free. Because of this structure of privilege, the slaves viewed light skin color as desirable and as a symbol of more humane treatment. Black skin and black physical characteristics, on the other hand, were viewed as undesirable and as signs of inferiority. For these reasons, the negative stereotypes associated with blackness and the value placed on lightness of skin by whites became widely accepted by slaves.

During the late 1800s and early 1900s self-proclaimed “blue vein societies” began forming in dozens of U.S. cities, which represented the miniscule black upper and middle classes. These societies limited its membership to African Americans who were of a lighter complexion, or whose skin color was light enough to show blue veins. Chesnutt (1898)

described the blue vein society as such: “Some envious outsider made the suggestion that no one was eligible for membership who was not white enough to show blue vein. The suggestion was readily adopted by those who were not of the favored few, and since that time the society had been known far and wide as the ‘Blue Vein Society,’ and its members as the ‘Blue Veins’” (1898:55). Chesnutt’s quote suggests that even as early as the 1800s, blacks were aware of skin color’s salience and the privileges associated with lighter skin tone.

One of the seminal studies regarding the origins and mythology of colorism was conducted by Kerr (2005), who argued, “the perpetuation of [the complexion] lore confirms social statuses in principle and, historically, in practice” (2005:271). In addition to addressing the relationship between skin color and elitism in black communities, Kerr focused on the nascency of colorism, and how this “folklore” (2005:272) contributed to building the social structure that now – in part – governs the lives of blacks in America.

The “paper bag principle” is perhaps the most complex of the many legends in black history. Originating in Louisiana, the term is believed to signify degrees of “acceptance and inclusion” (Kerr 2005:272) – that is, if one is lighter than a brown paper bag. Kerr (2005) wrote, “the phrase ‘paper bag test’ traditionally has been used liberally and with great frequency by African Americans throughout the twentieth and into the twenty-first century, with references to paper bag parties, paper bag churches, brown bag clubs, or brown bag social circles that have resulted in a proscribed language of exclusion and exclusiveness” (2005:272). After interviewing more than 150 people – in person and by telephone – in Philadelphia, Washington, D.C., and Louisiana about complexion-related legends and

rumors, Kerr (2005) found that nearly all the interviewees were able to provide anecdotes and share “unusual, rich, and sometimes peculiar or fantastic lore” (2005:274).

Although the color of the brown paper bag is no longer explicitly used as a demarcation point separating light-skinned from dark-skinned blacks, its distinctive shade has been inculcated into the minds of blacks, and “pervasiveness” (Kerr 2005:272) of this lore continues.

Dyson (2006) characterized the paper bag principle as such:

“There is... a curious color dynamic that sadly persists in our culture. In fact, New Orleans invented the brown paper bag party – usually at a gathering in a home – where anyone darker than the bag attached to the door was denied entrance. The brown bag criterion survives as a metaphor for how the black cultural elite quite literally establishes caste along color lines within black life. On my many trips to New Orleans, whether to lecture at one of its universities or colleges, to preach from one of its pulpits, or to speak at an empowerment seminar during the annual Essence Music Festival, I have observed color politics at work among black folk” (2006:145).

Lighter-skinned blacks not only experience higher levels of socioeconomic status when compared to darker-skinned blacks, they also avert the psychological ramifications associated with dark skin. National media often portrays lighter-skinned blacks as genteel or heroic, while usually presenting darker-skinned blacks as menacing, dishonest, and uncooperative (Thompson and Keith 2001:352). Negative connotations associated with dark skin are not solely left to the media to emphasize. Inner-city grade school and high school campuses, for example, serve as public forums where black youth can be heard “playing the dozens,” which usually involved deriding the darker skin of their comrade or comrade’s kin. Terms such as “redbone” and “high-yellow,” which refer to racially mixed or lighter-skinned blacks, have become part of the American lexicon. Although these slang terms have not been

coined, they remain part of the accepted knowledge about the daily complex of the black race.

An Internal Duality

In 1903, Du Bois declared, “It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others... One ever feels his two-ness, – an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder” ([1903] 1994:2). This declaration, one could argue, may be specifically applied to the lives of dark-skinned blacks, whose perpetual sense of two-ness may stem from the unending anxiety of being both black and dark-skinned. Hochschild and Weaver (2007) asked, “Do dark-skinned blacks suffer from serious ‘excessive’ discrimination as a consequence of historical and contemporary colorism – or does the pattern of outcomes mostly reflect mere differences in tastes or marginal concerns in the larger scheme of racial hierarchy?” (2007:658). A mere difference in taste does not explain the significant and lingering socioeconomic gap between light and dark-skin blacks. Accepting the notion that a group of socially oppressed people subsists within a larger group of socially oppressed people should lead one to recognize the existence and persistence of a “double disadvantage” within black communities (Hochschild and Weaver 2007:658).

There is an old Louisiana saying that goes, “if you brown, hang around. If you yellow, you mellow. If you white, you all right. If you black, get back” (Parrish 1944:90). This rather simple adage has a profound effect on the psyche of young blacks. It instills the idea that the darker one is, the less he or she is needed or wanted. Hochschild and Weaver (2007) state, “It is deeply troubling to find that dark-skinned blacks must deal with even

more barriers to success and happiness than others in their group, especially given that they have no regularized political channels for redress or even public recognition” (2007:645).

The perceived internal duality experienced by dark-skinned blacks, I argue, is perhaps perpetrated by the flight of light-skinned blacks away from the “cultural stereotype” (Maddox 2004:388) of blacks in general. Maddox (2004) wrote, “Assuming that darker skin tone is more typical of the representation of blacks, the darker a black person’s skin tone, the more likely he will be viewed through the lens of the cultural stereotype... Because the cultural stereotype of black Americans is predominantly negative, blacks should also be perceived more negatively as skin tone darkens” (2004:388-389). Because skin color is often the first attribute noticed – especially when looking at blacks in America – one is essentially visually raced through their skin tone, which is the very essence of what it means to be black in America. Therefore, the darker a person’s skin, the “blacker” they become, which, unfortunately, seems to be euphemistic for “more problematic.”

Thompson and Keith (2001) argue that skin color is an important indicator of self-efficacy for black men. Although lighter-skinned blacks are aware of the challenges of being black in America, they learn very early in life that the social ramifications of being both black and dark-skinned are far graver. Thompson and Keith (2001) assert, “During adolescence, lighter skinned boys discover that they have better job prospects, appear less threatening to whites, and have a clearer sense of who they are and their competency. In contrast, darker skinned [blacks] may feel powerless and less able to affect change through the ‘normal’ channels available to lighter skinned [blacks]” (2001:352). Black culture in America is not truly homogenized, and a hierarchy of skin tones exists, which shapes the life chances and emotional experiences of blacks.

Contemporary Studies

Several studies (Frazier 1957a, 1957b; Harrison and Thomas 2006; Hill 2000, 2002; Hochschild and Weaver 2007; Hersch 2006; Hunter 2000; Hughes and Hertel 1990; Keith and Herring 1991; Ross 1997) on colorism have attempted to show a relationship between skin color and life chances, and many have concluded that – when compared to their dark-skinned counterparts – lighter-skinned blacks, on average, experience higher levels of education, income, and even perceived physical attractiveness.

Using a national probability sample of black adults in the U.S. completed in 1980, Hughes and Hertel (1990) found that blacks with lighter skin have more education, occupational prestige, personal income, and family income than those with darker skin. They presented zero-order correlation coefficients and standardized regression coefficients showing the effects of skin color on socioeconomic status variables, controlling for age, gender, and parents' socioeconomic status. Hughes and Hertel (1990) also examined two indicators of spouse's socioeconomic status: education of spouse and occupational prestige of spouse. For these analyses they controlled for age, gender, and parents' socioeconomic status, as well as respondent's education and occupational prestige. The findings showed that those with lighter skin have spouses with more education and higher occupational prestige (1990:1110). Thus, according to the findings of Hughes and Hertel (1990), lighter-skinned blacks are more likely than darker-skinned blacks to marry individuals with higher socioeconomic status.

Like Hughes and Hertel (1990), Keith and Herring (1991) contend that skin tone is a predictor of occupation and income within the black community. Data from the 1979-80 NSBA – gathered by “professionally trained black interviewers” (1991:765) – were used in

their study. Interviewers rated respondents' skin color on a scale from one to five, with one indicating a "very dark" complexion and five denoting a "very light" complexion. Keith and Herring (1991) found that educational attainment increases as skin color becomes lighter. Specifically, they found that very light respondents attain on average more than two additional years of education than dark respondents (1991:767).

Keith and Herring (1991) also found that very light respondents are "substantially more likely to be employed as professional and technical workers than are those with darker complexions... [And] those with very dark complexions are more likely than all others to be laborers" (1991:768). Both the educational and occupational differences by skin tone were statistically significant.

Keith and Herring (1991) conclude their study by looking at color-related income distributions. They found that both personal and family income increased significantly with lighter complexion. Keith and Herring (1991) state, "On the family-income dimension, this relationship yields incomes for very light respondents that are more than 50% greater than those for very dark respondents. When it comes to personal income, the differences are even greater, as incomes for very light respondents are nearly 65% higher than those of their very dark counterparts" (1991:769).

Using a longitudinal study that linked the death certificates of southern-reared African American men from 1980 and 1985 to records of the men's family members in the U.S. Census of 1920, Hill (2000) concluded that men identified as mulatto experienced higher levels of socioeconomic attainment compared with men identified as black. In addition to studying socioeconomic differences between light-skin and dark-skin blacks, Hill (2002) used data from Wave 1 of the NSBA to examine the association between skin color and

perceived physical attractiveness among African American adults. Interviewers rated respondents' skin color on a scale from one to five, with one indicating a "very dark" complexion and five denoting a "very light" complexion. Hill found that lighter-skin blacks, in general were seen as more attractive than darker-skin blacks but, specifically, only men in the second lightest group – "light brown" – were considered substantially more attractive than the darkest men (2002:83).

In contrast, Gullickson (2005) argues that previous studies (Hill 2000, 2002; Hughes and Hertel 1990; Keith and Herring 1991) only examined aggregate skin tone differences across periods, thus overlooking the potentially different experiences of younger and older birth cohorts. Gullickson (2005) wrote, "there have been pronounced cohort declines in educational skin tone differentials, and both cohort and period declines in labor market outcomes, beginning with cohorts born in the mid 1940s" (2005:157). Using data from the four waves of the National Survey of Black Americans (NSBA) and the 1982 General Social Survey (GSS82), Gullickson (2005) found that skin tone differences in educational and occupational attainment, which have traditionally privileged lighter-skinned blacks, declined significantly. In fact, Gullickson implied that data from Wave II of the NSBA indicates an actual reversal in the effect of skin tone for the youngest cohorts studied. This means that one would expect to see higher levels of socioeconomic status among darker-skinned blacks. Gullickson (2005) wrote, "The decline [in the significance of skin color] was so dramatic that skin tone does not appear to have been relevant at all for cohorts born at the end of the study period (1963)" (2005:172-173). It should be noted that Gullickson did not imply that prejudice based on skin color has declined, but that it is possible that a skin tone hierarchy may simply be the result of lighter-skinned blacks' dominance of access to opportunity.

These various studies all examine the effects of skin color on socioeconomic status and success within black communities. Despite Gullickson's challenge of the mainstream, his conclusions remain part of the minority. Gullickson contends that skin color, when studied longitudinally, is not a significant factor in determining levels of educational and occupational attainment. However, data from many other studies on skin color stratification are almost uniformly consistent in indicating that blacks with lighter skin tones have greater levels of virtually every measurement of stratification. Still, these reviews do not address the social psychological implications of a phenotypically stratified subgroup in America. My study intends to fill that gap.

Theory

The social psychological implications of intraracial discrimination within black communities cannot be completely considered or inferred without mentioning the role of critical race theory. Among the many tasks located in their scope of practice, critical race theorists question the salience and normative acceptance of whiteness. Some of these theorists (Dyson 2004; Mahoney 1997) have argued that those with white skin have long taken privilege for granted, and in most cases whiteness is only visible to whites "when it appears to be the basis on which well-being is threatened" (Mahoney 1997:331). Conversely, blacks are highly aware of their skin color (Frazier 1957a, 1957b), especially since it may dictate levels of socioeconomic opportunity afforded them. For this reason, a demarcation line between light skin and dark skin is forged within black communities, whereby darker-skinned individuals remain on the outer rings of society. Harris (2000) wrote, "the mistrust and hostility often directed at light-skinned African Americans by dark-skinned [have] in

part to do with the sense that what it means to be black is to have one's inferior status indelibly written on one's skin, hair, and features" (2000:442-443). Thus, whereas some whites may rarely, or possibly never, become aware of their whiteness, dark-skinned blacks seemingly cannot escape their blackness.

As a dark-skinned black individual, one is tasked with distinguishing their personal identity from the identity (usually menacing, unattractive, unintelligent, etc.) that has been prescribed to them by society. This task is further complicated by the fact that the identity accorded them is largely based on skin color, which, generally speaking, cannot be altered. Because socioeconomic and emotional well-being is influenced by skin color (Jackson and Gurin 1997), those with darker skin – upon recognizing the societal disadvantages associated with darker complexions – are likely to experience negative psychological effects such as frustration and/or depression. This study, therefore, rests on three central theoretical concepts: Du Bois' (1903) concept of "double consciousness" (and the "veil"), Cooley's (1902) concept of "looking-glass self," and Goffman's (1963) concept of "stigma."

Rooted in social psychology, these theories are used to better understand the perceived skin color complex that exists within black communities (Hochschild and Weaver 2007). The skin color complex arises when color is made to function as a cultural index for racial determination. The presence or absence of certain phenotypic qualities (i.e. light skin) determines whether a person belongs to an inferior or superior social group. Life chances, therefore, can be affected by both interracial and intraracial discrimination. However, because most blacks see the fight against racial hierarchy as requiring their full commitment, they either cannot see or do not acknowledge the internal hierarchy of skin color.

In 1903, Du Bois proclaimed, “The problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color-line – the relation of darker to the lighter races of men” ([1903] 1994:9). This “problem” (Du Bois 1903), Du Bois recounted, became personal one early morning in New England when he realized that he was a black child living in a country that wanted no part of African American people. Of this encounter, Du Bois (1903) wrote:

In a wee wooden schoolhouse, something put it into the boys’ and girls’ heads to buy gorgeous visiting cards... and exchange. The exchange was merry, till one girl, a tall newcomer, refused my card, – refused it peremptorily, with a glance. Then it dawned upon me with a certain suddenness that I was different from the others; or like, mayhap, in heart and life and longing, but shut out from their world by a vast veil ([1903] 1994:2).

For Du Bois (1903), the veil has several implications. First, it suggests the literal darker skin of blacks, which is a physical and socioeconomic demarcation of difference from whiteness. Second, it suggests that whites do not see blacks as genuine Americans. Third, it suggests that blacks cannot see themselves outside of what white America describes and prescribes for them. The veil – though metaphorical – serves as an obfuscating mechanism, yet it remains affixed and irremovable. An internal discord lingers behind this veil, as blacks search for a true identity.

For blacks, Du Bois (1903) intimated, the cognitive dissonance caused by warring identities could be overwhelming. Being black in America is tantamount to being a “stranger in [one’s] own house” (Du Bois [1903] 1994:2). A sense of “two-ness” (Du Bois 1903) is firmly lodged into the psyche of blacks, whereby they realize that they must learn to operate in two Americas – one that is white and one that is black. Du Bois described this phenomenon as “double-consciousness” ([1903] 1994:2), which is the awareness of the two-ness of being both American and an African-American.

Of a certain kind of two-ness, Hathaway (1943) wrote:

Over and over I forgot what I had seen in the mirror. It could not penetrate into the interior of my mind and become an integral part of me. I felt as if it had nothing to do with me; it was only a disguise. But it was not the kind of disguise which is put on voluntarily by the person who wears it, and which is intended to confuse other people as to one's identity. My disguise had been put on without my consent or knowledge... and it was I myself who was confused by it, as to my own identity... It was only a disguise, but it was on me, for life (1943:46-47).

Although this anecdote details Hathaway's life as a "deformed" (Hathaway 1943) girl, it echoes the sentiments of Du Bois' notion of a double consciousness, particularly the awareness of being seen by others differently than what one sees of themselves in the mirror.

Du Bois (1903) described African-Americans as "a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight" ([1903] 1994:2). He posited that blacks in America are inherently without a true self-consciousness and suggested that it was society, or more pointedly the "white world" (Du Bois 1903), that in essence shapes the identity of the African American.

The notion that identity is created by environment was also held by Cooley (1902), who maintained that the individual and society do not exist separately, but rather one is the product of the other. He contended that the self and society "do not denote separable phenomena" (1902:37). Therefore, we see ourselves through the eyes of other people, even to the extent of incorporating their views of us into our own self-concept. For blacks, recognizing one's own skin color – particularly if it is a dark complexion – can generate feelings of inferiority.

Because there are so many shades of skin color within the black community, the relationship between identity and reflexivity is worthy of exploration. Cooley (1902) wrote,

“In a very large and interesting class of cases the social reference takes the form of a somewhat definite imagination of how one’s self... appears in a particular mind, and the kind of self-feeling one has is determined by the attitude toward this attributed to that other mind” (1902:184). Cooley (1902) referred to this reflexivity as the “looking-glass self” (1902:184). He (1902) noted three principle elements of the looking-glass self concept: “the imagination of our appearance to the other person, the imagination of his judgment of that appearance, and some sort of self-feeling, such as pride or mortification” (1902:184). Cooley’s theory of the self highlighted the ways in which an individual’s sense of self is derived from the perceptions of others. Just like the reflections in a mirror, the self depends on the perceived responses of others; or, as Cooley (1902) himself puts it, “each to each a looking glass reflects the other that doth pass” (1902:184).

One’s consciousness of himself is a reflection of the ideas about himself that he attributes to other minds; hence, there can be no isolated selves. Cooley stated, “There is no sense of ‘I’ without its correlative sense of you, or he, or they” (1902:182). Thus, there can be no feelings of inferiority without feelings of perceived superiority. For instance, Hill Collins (1991) suggested that standards of beauty that privilege whiteness could only function by degrading blackness. She argues, “identity is relational, and those who are defined as beautiful are only beautiful in relation to others who are defined as ugly... white beauty is based on the racist assumption of black ugliness” (1991:79). Researchers (Harrison and Thomas 2006; Hill, 2000 2002; Hochschild and Weaver 2007; Hersch 2006; Hunter 2000; Hughes and Hertel 1990; Keith and Herring 1991; Ross 1997) have underscored the ways in which skin color is relational within black communities, particularly how light skin

is preferred, and is thus accorded better social treatment, while, conversely, dark-skinned individuals are stigmatized.

A stigma can be thought of as a gap between virtual social identity and actual social identity (Goffman 1963). Goffman (1963) asserted, “the Greeks originated the term stigma to refer to bodily signs designed to expose something unusual and bad about the moral status of the signifier” (1963:1). For dark-skinned blacks, it is a congenital characteristic that identifies and, consequently, stigmatizes them. Goffman (1963) referred to this type of stigma as a “tribal stigma” (1963:4), which is transmitted through lineages and “equally contaminates all members of a family” (1963:4). Similarly, Falk (2001) referred to the notion of an inherited or innate stigma as an “existential stigma,” which he defined as “stigma deriving from a condition which the target of the stigma either did not cause or over which he has little control” (2001:11). For blacks, skin color – like other phenotypic traits – is, in large part, randomly assigned and unalterable, and studies have indicated that there is a penalty associated with those who are born with a darker hue.

What remains interesting in the United States is how one stigmatized group (i.e. American blacks) manages to stigmatize members within its own group (i.e. light-skinned blacks stigmatizing dark-skinned blacks). Goffman (1963) noted:

The stigmatized individual exhibits a tendency to stratify his ‘own’ according to the degree to which their stigma is apparent and obtrusive. He can then take up in regard to those who are more evidently stigmatized than himself the attitudes the normals take to him... It is in his affiliation with, or separation from, his more evidently stigmatized fellows, that the individual’s oscillation of identification is most sharply marked (1963:107).

Goffman’s sentiment provides a foundation for understanding the antecedent causes of stratification within black communities, and when coupled with Du Bois’ theory of double

consciousness and Cooley's concept of the looking-glass, presents a framework for understanding American hierarchy in general. Thus, a person's self-perception is a product of how others see him, as the principle of "reflected appraisals" suggests (Cooley 1902). Those who are "othered" (Hegel 1807 [1977]) will internalize the negative evaluation of society and, consequently, have a negative self-perception.

Although the socioeconomic ramifications of intraracial discrimination have been addressed in depth, the social psychological implications of intraracial discrimination for dark-skinned blacks have largely remained unexplored. Of the racial discrimination experienced by blacks, Du Bois ([1903] 1994) wrote, "the facing of so vast a prejudice could not but bring the inevitable self-questioning, self-disparagement, and lowering of ideals which ever accompany repression and breed in an atmosphere of contempt and hate" ([1903] 1994:6). If a double consciousness (being both black and dark-skinned) is, indeed, experienced by dark-skinned blacks (which, I argue) – in addition to the "two-ness," Du Bois ([1903] 1994) argued, that blacks experience – then, certainly, there will be psychological implications.

Self-Esteem, Self-Efficacy, and Self-Identification

Several studies (Hughes and Demo 1989; Smith et al. 1999) have explored the effects of race and ethnicity on self-esteem. Many of these studies have concentrated on issues of racial differences, usually comparing the self-esteem levels of blacks and whites (Hughes and Demo 1989). Because self-esteem is influenced by the social comparisons we make and the reactions to those comparisons, the self-esteem of African Americans will be partly based on how they compare themselves to whites. Hughes and Demo (1989) argue, "If blacks experience low levels of social and economic achievement in American society and

recognize their status in comparison with whites, this should lead to low self-esteem” (1989:134).

Self-esteem and self-efficacy, as Hughes and Demo (1989) note, are positively correlated. Self-efficacy, according to Bandura (1982), is the belief that one can “master situations” and “control events” (124). Thus, if failure (i.e. socioeconomic) is attributed to an innate – or uncontrollable – characteristic, such as skin color, one should expect blacks to be less efficacious than whites. Smith et al. (1999) contend “Youth with a marginalized view of their ethnic group, who vicariously perceive many barriers to their success because of their ethnicity, may be those who feel less efficacious about conventional means of goal attainment” (1999:871). Because darker skin color in the United States is often associated with a lower ascribed status (Thompson and Keith 2001), many blacks experience a diminished sense of self simply because skin color is a detriment that cannot be remedied. Hardships and difficulties, Pearlin et al. (1981) argue, “to which people can see no end, those that seem to become fixtures of their existence” pose the most sustained affront to a sense of efficacy and self-worth (1981:345).

Self-identification can be comprised of self-esteem and self-efficacy, reflecting one’s self-worth and agency. Studies (Hughes and Demo 1989; Smith et al. 1999) have indicated low personal efficacy levels and moderate self-esteem levels among African Americans when compared to whites. However, research on the relationship, if any, between complexion and personal identity among blacks – taking into account the myriad skin tones of African Americans – remains relatively scarce. In this study I consider the continuum that is skin color, and hypothesize that as skin color darkens, one’s sense of identity becomes incrementally negative.

Data and Method

In this study I employ a sequential transformative strategy (Creswell 2009), using a social psychological lens, to explore the implications of intraracial discrimination for dark-skinned blacks in the United States. Creswell (2009) defines the sequential transformative strategy as “a two-phase project with a theoretical lens overlaying the procedures, with an initial phase (either qualitative or quantitative) that builds on the earlier phase” (2009:212). The intent of this two-phase sequential mixed method study is to examine the relationship between skin tone and self-regard. In the first phase, quantitative data from the NSBA are used to address the relationship between respondents’ skin color and respondents’ self-esteem and self-efficacy levels. This relationship is explored further in a second phase in which I conduct qualitative interviews with six (6) dark-skinned African Americans. The interview questions focus on the relationship between the interviewees’ skin color and their personal relationships and emotional experiences.

I conducted six separate face-to-face interviews, which lasted approximately thirty minutes each. Because I looked for specific physical characteristics of each interviewee, I used a snowball technique to generate each additional subject. Four of the interviews were conducted at the interviewee’s residence, and the other two were conducted in the Earl K. Long library on the campus of the University of New Orleans. There were no specific coding techniques used to interpret data from the interviews, however, each interview was taped using a voice recorder and transcribed. I listened for commonalities in personal and group identification between interviewees. Questions used for the interviews are included in the Appendix (page 48).

Limitations

The limitations of this study derive primarily from the age of the NSBA data set. The survey was started in 1979 and the final wave of the four-wave project was completed in 1992, meaning that some of the quantitative data used for this study are nearly three decades old. Still, the NSBA remains one of the more substantial surveys on black Americans. Unlike other national surveys that are limited to small and non-representative samples of blacks, the NSBA “goes beyond superficial analyses of gross black-white comparisons” to present a more in-depth and realistic view of black experiences (Jackson and Gurin 1997).

With respect to the qualitative interviews conducted for this study, it should be noted that 5 of the 6 interviewees were current students at the University of New Orleans¹; therefore, their responses, though insightful, should neither be considered to be representative of dark-skinned blacks interviewed in the NSBA – who, statistically, attained far fewer years of education (Jackson and Gurin 1997) – nor of dark-skinned blacks living in other U.S. cities. Because interview candidates were limited to individuals residing in New Orleans, Louisiana, data may indicate a discernible bias toward African Americans living in other U.S. regions. The interview portion of this study is not intended to provide substantial data, but rather to document first hand accounts of how each interviewee perceives the role of skin tone as it relates to shaping one’s self-regard.

Sample

Data for this study come from the NSBA, which contains a total of 2,107 respondents (Jackson and Gurin 1997). The sample for the survey was drawn according to a multistage

¹ One interviewee attended the University of New Orleans but dropped out after the first semester of study. Of the five current students, four were undergraduates and one was a graduate student.

probability process that was designed to ensure that every black American household in the continental United States had an equal probability of being selected for the study. Within each household in the sample, one person aged 18² or older was randomly chosen to be interviewed from among those eligible for the study. Only self-identified black Americans were eligible for the study. Face-to-face interviews were administered by a professionally trained team of 239 black interviewers (56 men and 183 women).

In contrast with previous studies of black Americans, which have typically been restricted to limited and/or special populations (Jackson and Gurin 1997), the NSBA reflects a level of geographic diversity that considers the “unique cultural experiences of black Americans” (Jackson and Gurin 1997:15). Approximately 38 percent of the interviewers worked in the South census region, 21 percent in the Northeast, 31 percent in the North Central region, and 10 percent in the West. All interviewers were 18 years of age or older (with a mean age of 38) and had completed high school (71 percent had completed at least a bachelor’s degree). Interviewers performed an average of 8.7 interviews each, which took an average of 2 hours and 21 minutes per interview to complete.

In addition to data collected from the NSBA, I conducted separate interviews with six (6) black persons (3 males and 3 females). Interviewees were individuals whom I, as the researcher, deemed to be “dark-skinned.” I used a “phenomenologically based method” (Seidman 1998) to conduct the interviews. This method, according to Seidman (1998), “combines life-history interviewing and focused, in-depth interviewing informed by assumptions drawn from phenomenology” (1998:9). All interviewees were 18 years of age or older at the time of the interview.

² There was one respondent who was 17 years of age at the time of the interview.

Measures

Dependent variables. I use two indicators of self-identification: self-esteem and self-efficacy. To measure self-esteem, I refer to six items in the NSBA, whose descriptive statistics are shown in Table 1 (page 26). The Items were summed to form a scale where high values indicate a high level of self-esteem. Positively worded items were reverse coded so that low values represent negative self-esteem. Reliability analysis yields a Cronbach's alpha of .67, indicating a moderate correlation between the items³.

For self-efficacy, I refer to four items in the NSBA to measure respondents' feelings of self-control and confidence in managing their own lives. Table 2 (page 27) shows descriptive statistics for self-efficacy. Reliability analysis produces a Cronbach's alpha of .55. Again, positively worded items were reverse coded so that low values represent negative self-efficacy. Items were summed to form a scale where high values represent a high sense of self-efficacy.

³ In general, values of at least .60 are considered acceptable for exploratory studies (Garson 2009). Furthermore, although Cronbach's alpha measures how well each individual item in a scale correlates with the sum of the remaining items, it does not necessarily address the major concerns of one's data.

Table 1. Variables, Measurement, and Descriptive Statistics for Self-esteem

Var	Description	Measurement	Mean (Standard Deviation)
0061	I am a useful person to have around	Responses: (1) Never True (2) Not Often True (3) Often True (4) Almost Always True	3.58 (.560)
0062	I feel that I am a person of worth	Responses: (1) Never True (2) Not Often True (3) Often True (4) Almost Always True	3.63 (.547)
0063	I feel that I cannot do anything right	Responses: (1) Never True (2) Not Often True (3) Often True (4) Almost Always True	3.35 (.779)
0064	I feel that my life is not very useful	Responses: (1) Never True (2) Not Often True (3) Often True (4) Almost Always True	3.51 (.830)
0065	I feel I do not have much to be proud of	Responses: (1) Never True (2) Not Often True (3) Often True (4) Almost Always True	3.58 (.807)
0066	As a person, I do a good job these days	Responses: (1) Never True (2) Not Often True (3) Often True (4) Almost Always True	3.55 (.597)

Table 2. Variables, Measurement, and Descriptive Statistics for Self-Efficacy

Var	Description	Measurement	Mean (Standard Deviation)
0078	Do you think it's better to plan your life a good ways ahead, or would you say life is too much a matter of luck to plan ahead very far?	Responses: (1) Too much luck to plan (2) Plan Ahead	1.57 (.501)
0079	When you do make plans ahead, do you usually get to carry out things the way you expected, or do things usually come up to make you change your plans?	Responses: (1) Have to change plans (2) Carry out way expected	1.47 (.563)
0080	Have you usually felt pretty sure your life would work out the way you want it to, or have there been times when you haven't been sure about it?	Responses: (1) Haven't been sure (2) Pretty sure	1.33 (.472)
0081	Some people feel they can run their lives pretty much the way they want to, others feel the problems of life are sometimes too big for them. Which one are you most like?	Responses: (1) Problems of life are too big (2) Can run own life	1.65 (.488)

Independent variables. Skin color is the primary independent variable in this study. Respondent's skin color was rated – by the NSBA interviewer – on a scale from one to five, with one indicating a very dark brown skin color and five denoting a very light brown or very light skin complexion. NSBA interviewers were asked to respond to the following: “The respondent's skin color is: (1) very dark brown; (2) dark brown; (3) medium brown; (4) light brown (light-skinned); (5) very light brown (very light-skinned).” Data provided by the interviewers indicate that 8.5 percent of the respondents had a very dark brown complexion, 29.9 percent dark brown, 44.6 percent medium brown, 14.4 percent light brown (light skinned), and 2.6 percent very light brown (very light skinned).

In addition to skin color, respondent's sex, age, education, and employment status are used as independent variables. Sex is a dummy variable and coded (1) for male and (2) for female. Age of the respondent is self-reported and measured in years. Education is coded by taking the actual number of grades of school the respondent completed. Regarding employment, respondents were asked to indicate if they were currently working or not. Employment status is a dummy variable a coded (1) for currently not working for pay and (2) for currently working at all for pay.

Analysis

I create bar graphs to show the bivariate relationship between skin color and self-identification. I also employ a multiple regression strategy to assess the impact of skin color on self-esteem and self-efficacy. Column 1 in each of the two tables (page 35) shows the regression of self-esteem and self-efficacy, respectively, on skin color. Column 2 shows how the relationship between skin color and self-esteem and self-efficacy is altered as more independent variables are introduced as controls. Column 2 includes respondent's skin color,

sex, education, employment status, and age. A complete matrix of means, standard deviations and correlations among variables is presented in the Appendix (page 47).

Results

Figures 1 and 2 provide information about skin color and identification outcomes. These bar graphs present bivariate relationships between skin color and self-esteem and self-efficacy, respectively. To measure self-esteem, I formed a scale by summing the corresponding numbers of each item comprising the variable. Scores ranged from 6 (lowest) to 24 (highest). Figure 1 (page 31), for example, presents mean levels of self-esteem by skin color. Nearly a full point separates the mean esteem levels of “very light-skinned” respondents and “very dark-skinned” respondents as well as “light-skinned” and “very dark-skinned”. Although the relationship between skin color and self-esteem is not shown to be perfectly linear, the graph still indicates that lighter skin tones are associated with higher mean self-esteem levels.

In figure 2 (page 32), I present mean levels of self-efficacy, formed by using the same method employed in creating the esteem scale. Scores ranged from 4 (lowest) to 8 (highest). The graph shows a significant contrast between the means of “very dark-skinned” respondents and “very light-skinned” respondents. For example, very dark respondents are substantially more likely to experience negative efficacy levels than those with lighter complexions. Almost half a point separates the two groups, and once again we notice that, although the graph is not perfectly linear, lighter skin connotes a higher mean efficacy level.

Although the figures seem to depict moderate effects of skin color on self-esteem and self-efficacy, they nevertheless indicate a noteworthy psychological trend; showing that as

complexion lightens, personal regard becomes more positive. It is this trend that, despite the modest differences in mean esteem and efficacy scores, that must be given due attention.

Figure 1. Mean Self-Esteem Levels by Skin Color

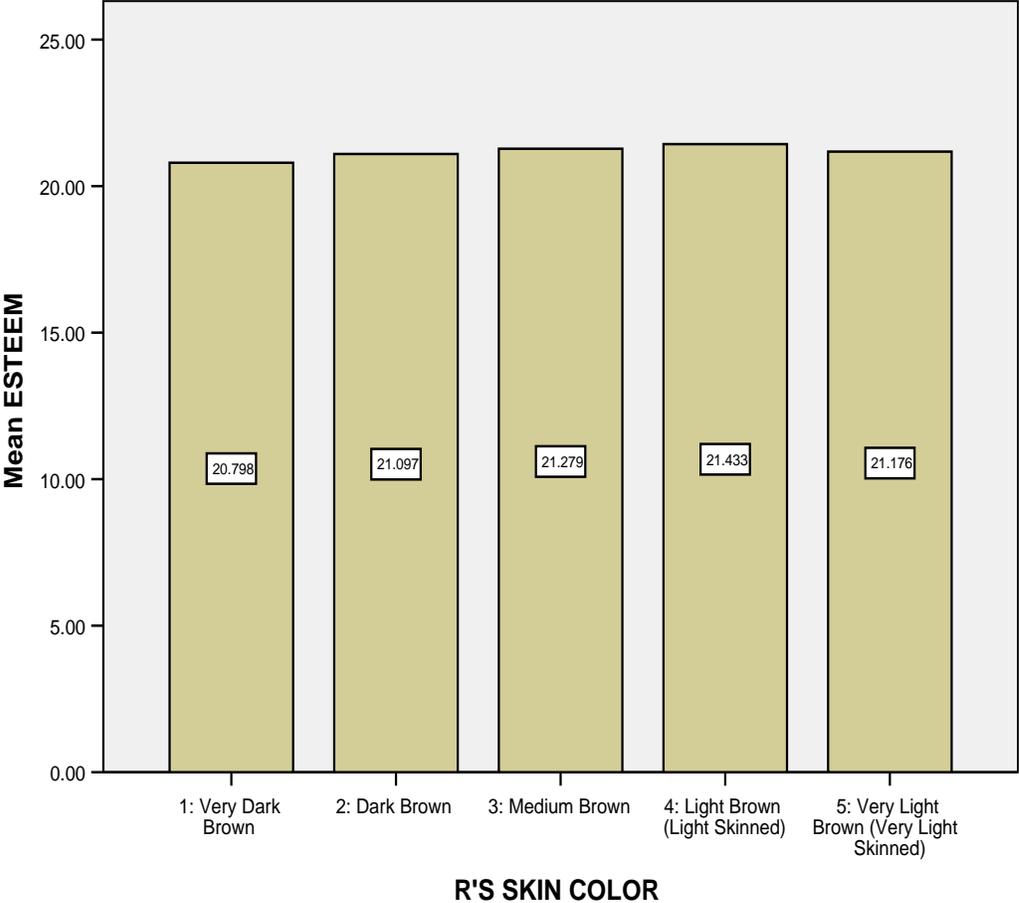


Figure 2. Mean Self-Efficacy Levels by Skin Color

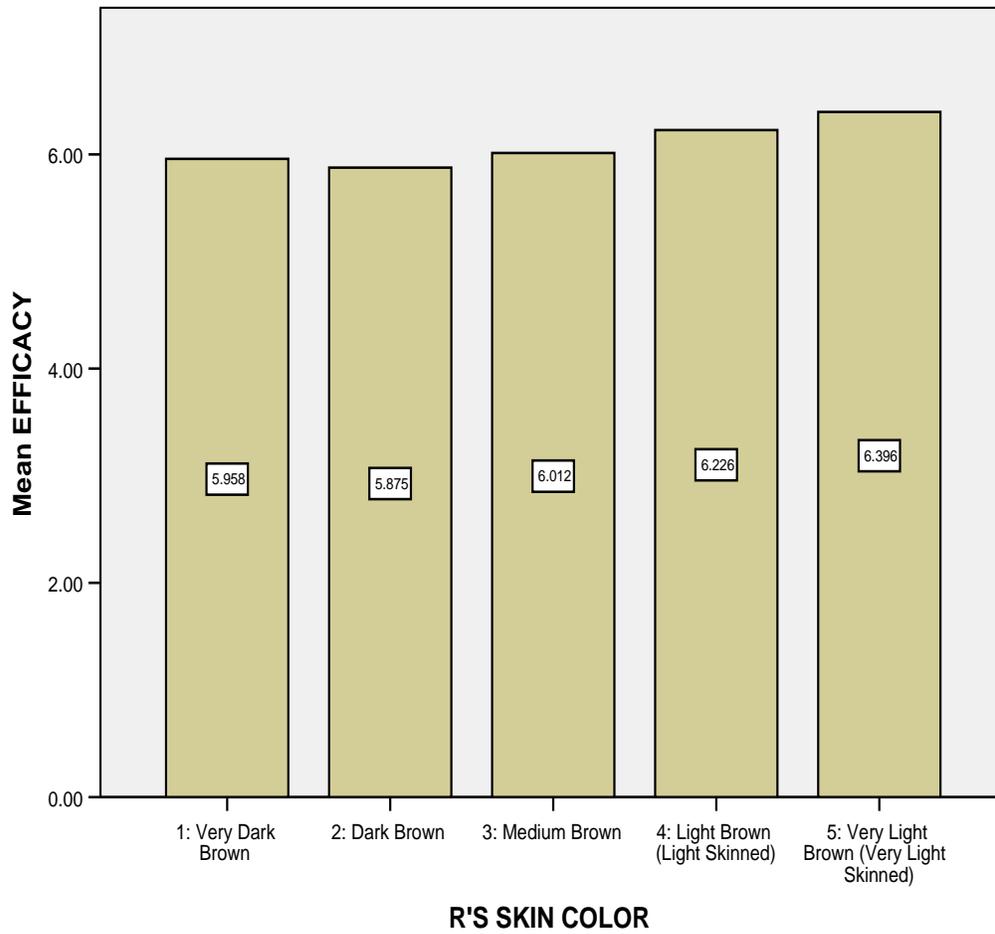


Table 3 (page 35) shows the regression of self-esteem on measures of skin color, sex, education, employment status, and age. Column 1 indicates that skin color has a significant positive effect on self-esteem. A lighter complexion is associated with higher levels of self-esteem. According to the results, each incremental change in skin color from dark to light is associated with a .16 increase in self-esteem.

As sociodemographic variables are added to the equation, skin color effects lessen slightly. However, as indicated in column 2, the effect of skin color on self-esteem – even after controlling for sex, education, employment status, and age – remains fairly significant. Each incremental change in skin color from dark to light is associated with a .13 increase in self-esteem. It should be noted that the standard coefficients for education and age are more than twice as large as that of skin color, suggesting that educational attainment and age have a stronger effect on determining self-esteem than skin color.

Table 4 (page 35) shows the regression of self-efficacy on measures of skin color, sex, education, employment status, and age. Like self-esteem, one's self-efficacy levels are positively related to skin color, such that as skin tone lightens, efficacy levels increase. Among all respondents, each incremental change in skin color from dark to light is associated with a .12 rise in self-esteem.

Again, as additional sociodemographic variables are introduced into the equation, the effects of skin color lessen. Column 2 in table 4 shows that each incremental change in skin color from dark to light is associated with a .09 increase in self-esteem. The standardized coefficients of education and age were both more than three times as large as that of skin color, suggesting, again, that educational attainment and age, respectively, have a stronger effect on self-efficacy than does skin color.

Consistent with my earlier assertion, regression results indicate that skin color is a strong indicator of one's self-regard, and darker-skinned blacks – as a result of the numerous existing socioeconomic barriers – may have a proclivity for exhibiting a more negative outlook on life. Examples of how these negative experiences might manifest themselves are given in the interview results and discussion sections of this thesis.

Table 3. Regression Analysis For Self-Esteem

	1	2
R's Skin Color	.164 (.058)**	.130 (.046) *
R's Sex		-.146 (-.028)
Education		.088 (.119) ***
Employment		-.338 (-.127) ***
R's Age		.024 (.162) ***
Constant	20.756	19.714
R ²	.003	.042
Adjusted R ²	.003	.040

Note: Standardized coefficients are in parentheses.

*p ≤ .05 **p ≤ .01 ***p ≤ .001.

Table 4. Regression Analysis For Self-Efficacy

	1	2
R's Skin Color	.122 (.084) ***	.090 (.062) **
R's Sex		-.243 (-.090)
Education		.097 (.257) ***
Employment		-.035 (-.026)
R's Age		.015 (.203) ***
Constant	5.674	4.513
R ²	.007	.073
Adjusted R ²	.006	.071

Note: Standardized coefficients are in parentheses.

*p ≤ .05 **p ≤ .01 ***p ≤ .001.

Interview Results

Responses to the interview questions varied among the six interviewees, and there seemed to be mixed feelings in regard to the main hypothesis about the differential self-regard levels of light-skinned and dark-skinned blacks. Some of the interviewees were surprised, and others were in disbelief after being made aware of certain NSBA data, such as differences in income, occupation type, attractiveness, etc. based on skin color. All of the interviewees were unaware that such a vast study had been done on black Americans, which had explored skin tone so profoundly. When asked “thinking about the way things are today (i.e. more racially diverse, having a black president), how do you think your skin color affects the way white people treat you?” one female interviewee quickly responded, “it don’t matter what you look like, if you black, white people treat you different.” Of the six interviewees, four of them made similar, and quite hasty, statements [i.e. “us” (blacks) versus “them” (whites)] about the way in which whites treated blacks, suggesting the existence of a deep seeded, and perhaps intrinsic mistrust of whites.

Based on the responses to the question concerning black/white relations, I concluded that the majority of the interviewees harbored negative feelings toward whites, which appeared to be manifested in skepticism, hatred, and even fear of the group. But are these and other types of psychological stressors exhibited during light-skinned black/dark-skinned black relations? I asked respondents about relations within the black community, specifically how skin color functions.

When asked, “thinking about the way things are today, how do you think your skin color affects the way black people treat you?” one female interviewee calmly replied, “most black men I like wouldn’t give me the time of day. I think they go for light-skinned girls or

white girls.” The respondent seemed to have resigned herself to a very small pool of men of whom she considered herself to be acceptable. None of the other five interviewees saw their skin color as a detriment to their personal relationships with other blacks or as a reason for lighter-skinned blacks to treat them any differently. Regarding the previous question, one male interviewee sarcastically responded, “it’s not like having black skin means I have a disease or something. Black people treat me normal and I treat other black people normal. It would probably be different if I was poor or something.” His response prompted me to present NSBA data, which indicate that lighter-skinned blacks achieve much higher levels of attainment than dark-skinned blacks in numerous socioeconomic categories. When asked how he felt about the data, he paused briefly and replied:

I mean, I’m not saying that information is wrong, I’m just saying that I don’t think black people think about all that stuff. Where I come from, all black people are struggling to make it, so you just don’t think about that kind of stuff. You just don’t. Maybe there’s some truth behind all that [NSBA] stuff, but I try not to think about it that much.

Sensing that he was uncomfortable and perhaps attempting to avoid delving too far into the topic, I thanked him for his time and ended the interview.

As mentioned in the limitations section, the views of the interviewees can, in part, be attributed to the higher levels of education they have attained. Five of the six interviewees did not consider their dark complexion to be a hindrance in their personal relations with other blacks, which may indicate that neither of the respondents had experienced any noteworthy forms of intraracial discrimination. Perhaps many of the socioeconomic opportunities that were unavailable or simply not granted to many of the dark-skinned NSBA respondents were, in fact, accorded to the interviewees, consequently, allowing for a more positive view of personal relations within the black community.

Still, I wanted more specifics about the myriad skin tones within the black community and how one's complexion may have certain psychological ramifications. One male interviewee (a graduate student at the University of New Orleans), when asked, "how he would characterize the differences in the ways that light-skinned blacks and dark-skinned blacks identify themselves?" replied:

Let's see; I don't think light-skinned blacks think they are really black. Being black is a state of mind. They're black when it gives them an advantage, otherwise they don't ever think about it. I have to think about being black every day I wake up and look in the mirror. [Pause] It doesn't matter that I have a PhD in mathematics. I know that if I go to the grocery store or the mall, I have to deal with white people looking at me like I'm gonna steal something. It's not right but it is what it is.

This response suggests that attempting to quantify differences in self-regard levels between dark-skinned and light-skinned blacks would only scratch the surface of a much larger psychological issue. Because the above-mentioned respondent identified himself as someone who has or will soon have a PhD, one could assume that NSBA data indicating a lower self-esteem and self-efficacy level for dark-skinned blacks (when compared to light-skinned blacks) would not necessarily be representative of him. However, the interviewee displayed signs of anger and frustration, which fall under the umbrella of psychological disenchantment and emotional distress, and ultimately playing a part in one's overall self-regard.

The results of these interviews were not intended to buttress the data on skin color and self-identification gathered from the NSBA. Rather, they were conducted to further explore the multidimensional natures of self-identification and emotional experience, specifically as they relate to colorism. As indicated by NSBA data, discrimination against persons with dark skin can be manifested in many forms, and psychological ramifications to

this discrimination may not always be seen in lower self-esteem and/or self-efficacy levels. Ellison (1952) wrote, “Too often there [are] figures caught up in the most intense forms of social struggle, subject to the most extreme forms of the human predicament but yet seldom able to articulate the issues which [torture] them” (Ellison, [1952] 1995:xix). NSBA data highlighted numerous ways in which dark-skinned blacks are disadvantaged, however, there remain countless other psychological indicators (such as stress, frustration, anger, etc.) that are not always clearly recognizable but should be noted and explored.

The primary task of these interviews was to give a voice to a subgroup that I believe to be often overlooked in American society. It is imperative to acknowledge dark-skinned African Americans’ propensity for harboring psychological distress – considering the socioeconomic disparities between them and light-skinned blacks – even if this distress appears to be insignificant and manageable; only then can myths about dark skin must be addressed and dispelled.

Discussion

Despite the progress made in race relations in the United States, the stigmas associated with dark skin linger. This is evident in the socioeconomic gap between light-skinned blacks and dark-skinned blacks, as seen in the data presented in the appendix (page 49). With respect to wages, for example, Hughes and Hertel (1990), using NSBA data, found that for every dollar a light-skinned African American earns, the darker skinned person earns 72 cents. Previous studies (Frazier 1957a, 1957b; Harrison and Thomas 2006; Hill 2000, 2002; Hochschild and Weaver 2007; Hersch 2006; Hunter 2000; Hughes and Hertel 1990; Keith and Herring 1991; Ross 1997) have all indicated that blacks with darker skin are

disadvantaged in nearly every socioeconomic category, and my findings are consistent with these studies.

Countless studies have shown that skin color is an important predictor of personal and family income, occupational prestige, and educational attainment. Another study (Hill 2002), using NSBA data, found that as skin tone lightens, blacks are perceived to be more attractive. Hill (2002) concluded that men with light brown skin were considered “substantially more attractive than the darkest men” (2002:83). What have remained largely unexplored, however, are the social psychological consequences of a dark complexion. Although analysis yielded moderate results, this study concluded that skin color – net of such variables as sex, education, employment status, and age – is a significant predictor of black American’s self-esteem and self-efficacy levels, as predicted; and although variables such as education and age may have stronger effects in determining how positively or negatively one perceives themselves, they are not as clearly visible as one’s skin color, and thus not necessarily more pertinent. The interviews conducted for this study indicated that while not all dark-skinned blacks are prone to lower self-esteem and self-efficacy levels, they may be more likely than lighter-skinned blacks to exhibit other forms of psychological distress, such as frustration, anger, and resentment. The data presented in this study are by no means unequivocal; however, they indicate a potentially perilous pattern that may explain the many differences in the identities and emotional experiences among African Americans.

It is important to understand the history of skin color in America. As mentioned earlier, African Americans have histories of slavery and oppression, which largely centered on their complexion, causing the devaluation of dark skin to become commonplace. Blacks

with darker skin received fewer socioeconomic rewards, despite having equal education or investing the same amount of “human capital” as those with lighter skin (Hunter 2002).

The task of this thesis was to underscore how the emotional experiences of dark-skinned blacks – considering the many systemic disadvantages they face – are seemingly more negative than those of light-skinned blacks, and the data presented in this study indicate a clear, although modest, difference in the self-identification levels of dark-skinned and light-skinned blacks. Undoubtedly, interracial disparities can be detrimental to a person’s psyche, and, likewise, so can intraracial disparities. In fact, one could argue that intraracial discrimination is accompanied by a greater psychological disenchantment, particularly when the source of discrimination stems from the presence, or lack, of physical or phenotypical features. Davis et al (1946) wrote, “What is really crucial behind the color point is class; the implication that light color goes with higher status and the Negroid appearance with lower status, is what makes these characteristics so important” (1946:137). Like racism, colorism rests on the privileging of whiteness in terms of phenotype, aesthetics, and culture (Hunter 2002). However, the thorny tentacles of colorism, one could argue, are much more deleterious than racism because with colorism, skin color does not serve as an indicator of race. Rather, it is the social meaning afforded to skin color itself that results in differential treatment.

Future research concerning the effects of skin color on self-regard will need to fully exhaust the numerous social psychological variables of the NSBA. Perhaps a “fifth wave” conducted by the NSBA – or a more contemporary survey of black Americans – would provide a more current, and thus more accurate data set, which would allow for more reliable results. In addition, interviews with African Americans must include more questions about

the personal feeling and emotional experiences of being darker skinned so that the larger psychological effects of skin color can be further clarified.

I have also considered examining and attempting to conceptualize a *multiple consciousness* – simultaneously being American, black, and dark-skinned – experienced by dark-skinned blacks, in hopes of explaining the phenomenon that is the propensity of low self-concept levels for dark-skinned blacks. Finally, the notion of *whitewashing* – a term that refers to the way in which lighter-skinned blacks have learned to take advantage of the additional opportunities accorded to them because of their lighter complexion – must be explored as an alternative explanation to the socioeconomic discrepancies between light-skinned and dark-skinned blacks.

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Appendix

Correlations, Means, and Standard Deviations

	Mean	Standard Deviation	N
R's Skin Color	2.73	.902	2066
Employment Status	1.82	.965	2105
No. of School Grades Finished	10.81	3.587	2105
R's Sex	1.62	.486	2125
R's Age	43.21	17.731	2104
Esteem Total	21.2139	2.54729	2048
Efficacy Total	6.0080	1.30819	1997

Interview Questions

1. Black people have many different shades of skin color. Thinking about the way things are today (i.e. more racially diverse, having a black president), how do you think your skin color affects the way white people treat you?
2. How about the way black people treat you?
3. How would you characterize the differences in the ways that light-skinned blacks and dark-skinned blacks identify themselves?
4. Would you mind telling me an instance in which you or a family member was discriminated against because of your complexion?
5. Several studies have concluded that lighter-skinned blacks are generally more advantaged than darker-skinned blacks. How does this make you feel?

Skin Tone and Socioeconomics Statistics

Educational Attainment in Years by Skin Tone

Very Dark	Dark Brown	Medium Brown	Light Brown	Very Light
10.3	10.2	11.0	11.6	12.2

Source: Keith and Herring (1991) using NSBA data. $P < .01$

Occupational Distribution (In Percentages) by Skin Tone

	Very Dark	Dark Brown	Medium Brown	Light Brown	Very Light
Prof/Tech	9%	12%	16%	20%	32%
Managerial	7%	8%	10%	12%	9%
Clerical	14%	16%	19%	29%	29%
Crafts	18%	14%	10%	10%	9%
Operatives	24%	24%	23%	16%	9%
Laborers	28%	26%	22%	13%	12%

Source: Keith and Herring (1991) using NSBA data. $P < .01$

Mean Personal and Family Annual Income by Skin Tone

	Very Dark	Dark Brown	Medium Brown	Light Brown	Very Light
Personal	\$6,503	\$7,427	\$7,938	\$8,632	\$10,627
Family	\$11,303	\$11,888	\$13,900	\$15,907	\$16,977

Source: Keith and Herring (1991) using NSBA data.

Vita

Brian Morris was born in Jackson, MS on June 26, 1980. His family moved to Los Angeles, CA shortly after his birth, where he received all his formal schooling. After serving four years in the United States Air Force, Brian attended Louisiana State University, where in 2006 he received his B.A. in political science. Brian then enrolled at the University of New Orleans, where he plans to receive his M.A. in sociology in 2009.