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AUTHOR Breland, Alfiee M.; Collins, Wanda; Damico, Karen Lowenstein; Steward, Robbie; King, Jennifer

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ABSTRACT

This study surveys African Americans to assess perceptions of and life experiences with the issue of skin tone. Thirty-seven African American adults agreed to complete a survey packet and participate in a semi-structured focus group discussion. Participants completed the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale, the Multigroup Ethnic Identity Measure, the Skin Color Assessment Procedure and Skin Color Questionnaire, and a demographic sheet. The findings appear to indicate that African Americans are indeed aware of and can articulate the ways in which skin tone affects their lives. Results indicate significant relationships between idealized skin tones and self-perceptions of and satisfaction with skin tone. Other significant relationships include global ethnic identity, education levels, parental education levels, and personal income. Focus group analysis indicates the ascription of traits based on skin tone and the significance of skin tone in familial, professional, and social experiences. The study recommends that mental health professionals be aware of the issue of color consciousness so that it may be addressed in counseling. Counselors and counseling psychologists can assist in efforts to educate African Americans to recognize, acknowledge, and directly address issues of skin tone both within and across racial groups. (Contains 19 references.) (GCP)

Running head: EXPLORATION OF COLOR CONSCIOUSNESS

An Exploration of the Effects of Skin Tone on African American Life Experiences

Alfiee M. Breland

Michigan State University

Wanda Collins and Karen Lowenstein Damico

Michigan State University

Robbie Steward and Jennifer King

Michigan State University

Poster presented at the 2000 Great Lakes Regional Counseling Psychology Conference at Ball State University Muncie, Indiana.

This research is part of a study completed through a grant from Michigan State University. Alfiee M. Breland is an assistant professor in the department of Counseling, Education and Educational Psychology at Michigan State University. Wanda Collins, Karen Lowenstein Damico and Jennifer King are graduate students at Michigan State University. Robbie Steward is an associate professor in the department of Counseling, Education and Educational Psychology at Michigan State University. The authors would like to thank Chris Schram and Delila Owens for their assistance in preparing this manuscript. Correspondence concerning this manuscript should be addressed to Alfiee M. Breland, Department of Counseling, Educational Psychology and Special Education, Michigan State University, 444 Erickson Hall, East Lansing, Michigan 48824-1034. Electronic mail may be sent via Internet to breland@msu.edu.

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Abstract

African Americans were surveyed to assess perceptions of and life experiences with the issue of skin tone. 37 African American adults agreed to complete a survey packet and participate in a semi-structured focus group discussion. Participants completed the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale, the Multigroup Ethnic Identity Measure, the Skin Color Assessment Procedure and Skin Color Questionnaire and a demographic sheet. Results indicate significant relationships between idealized and preferred skin tones; self-perceptions of and idealized skin tones; and self-perceptions of and satisfaction with skin tone. Other significant relationships include global ethnic identity and education levels and parental education levels and personal income. Focus group analysis indicates the ascription of traits based on skin tone and the significance of skin tone in familial, professional and social experiences. Implications for counseling and education are discussed.

An Analysis of the Effects of Skin Tone on African American Life Experiences

Introduction

Color consciousness is defined as the manners in which people of color differentially attend and respond to shades of skin. This issue is one that has been demonstrated to be a part of many communities of color including the African American (Breland, 1997; Coard, Breland, & Raskin, 2000; Keith & Herring, 1992); Latino/a Hispanic American (Altaribba & Bauer, 1998; Codina and Montalvo, 1994; Telles & Murguia, 1990;) and Asian American. Generally however, it is within the African American community that most research has been conducted regarding this topic. Perhaps because of the history of slavery, reconstruction and the civil rights movement, skin color has been an issue that has remained salient for African Americans since they were first transported to America en masse. Though most research on color consciousness has demonstrated the prevalence of this issue among African Americans, the data collected has been sparse. As such, the researchers decided to explore this topic to address the scarcity of published data on this topic and to increase awareness of the existence of this phenomenon.

In the past, research on color consciousness has focused on the reanalysis of census-type data collected in the late 70s and early 80s (Hughes & Hertel, 1990; Keith & Herring, 1991, Hunter, 1998). Such data was used to make inferences regarding differences in pre-existing life circumstances among African Americans. Of the remaining, more recent, studies on color consciousness among African Americans, researches have chosen to address issues such as body image and feelings regarding physical attributes and ethnic identity rather than the effects of skin tone on life circumstances (Bond & Cash, 1993). The current study incorporates these important and insightful research ideas while building on them in two ways. First, the data included in this

study is actively gathered from participants rather than being analyzed from a secondary source. Second, the researchers have included qualitatively gathered data in which individuals are asked to comment specifically on personal life experiences as affected by skin tone. This research format is different from previous studies in that the qualitative data collection format allows participants to infuse a degree of personal experience into the discussion (Schwitzer, Griffin, Ancis, & Thomas, 1999). Researchers utilizing a qualitative format have reported that, “qualitative methodologies provide fuller, more detailed descriptions that are more exactly reflective of an individual’s experience” (Schwitzer et al, 1999). We concur with this sentiment and believe that a qualitative component offers new perspective to the powerful, yet limited empirical data available on this topic.

Literature Review

As stated earlier, Previous literature on the topic of color consciousness is focused in a few important areas. Namely, socioeconomic status, ethnic identity, and self esteem.

Skin Tone and Socioeconomic status

In the 1999 book, “Our Kind of People,” Lawrence Otis Graham, an African American man, describes his childhood as one where he clearly understood, at a very early age, the importance of skin tone and socioeconomic status. He writes, “At age six, I already understood the importance of achieving a better shade of black.” (p.1). He proceeds to describe the great distinctions that existed in the 50’s and 60’s, and that persist today, regarding African Americans of differing skin tones and the associated stratification with regard to class. Prior to the publication of this important book Breland (1998), provided sociohistorical evidence of the origins of the class distinctions existent among African Americans. It is a widely researched and held belief that the “house slave/field slave” phenomenon marked the beginning of class

distinctions within the African-descended community here in the United States. Specifically, those enslaved Africans who were afforded opportunities for education, housing, clothing and other basic necessities were more often than not the offspring of forced non-consensual sexual relations that occurred between European male enslavers and enslaved African women. Over time, these children came to have considerably lighter complexions than their fully African counterparts and with their European lineage, came to also have more privileges. The privileges were maintained through the abolition of the institution of slavery and provided the lighter skinned African Americans with the property, education, money and means to then establish themselves as members of a distinctly different socioeconomic group (Breland, 1998; Edwards, 1972; Graham, 1999; Keith & Herring, 1991; Hughes & Hertel, 1990; Seltzer & Smith, 1991).

Ethnic identity and skin tone

Some researchers have suggested that ethnic identity within the African American community is directly related to skin tone, with lighter skinned African Americans purported to have weaker ties to their ethnic heritage than darker skinned African Americans. The research of Hughes and Hertel (1990) as well as that of Keith and Herring (1991), suggests that darker skinned African Americans report greater and more frequent experiences with racism and discrimination and higher degrees of ethnic identity than their lighter skinned counterparts. In addition, recent research has demonstrated similar findings (Coard, Breland & Raskin, 2000). The non-empirically based and qualitatively researched book on upper class African Americans by Lawrence Otis Graham corroborates these findings. He quotes his maternal grandmother with discouraging him and his brother, “from associating with darker skinned children or from standing or playing for long periods in the July sunlight, which threatened to blacken [their]

already too dark skin” (p.1). As disturbing as these trends may seem, note that they are based on just a few studies and as such should be interpreted with caution.

Self-esteem and skin tone

Self-esteem has also been studied in African Americans of differing skin tones. Coard (1997) determined that a sample of darker skinned African Americans who reported satisfaction with their skin tone also reported lower levels of self-esteem. Further, Breland (1997) found that a sample of darker skinned African Americans reported lower levels of self esteem than their light and medium toned counterparts, although the difference was not statistically significant. Other researchers have suggested that skin tone (and its effects on self-esteem) is a very important and pervasive clinical issue for African Americans that is manifested in multiple ways. Boyd-Franklin reports that in her clinical work with families, darker skinned African American family members are often "scapegoated" and made to feel as outcasts (1991). Further, Harvey (1995) describes the significance of skin tone and its affects on African American women's perceived attractiveness and the resulting effects on women's self-esteem. Bond and Cash (1992) report that a majority of the African American women from their study believe that, “African American men prefer lighter skinned women” (p. 880). Hunter (1998) extended this research and determined that lighter skinned women are more likely to marry high status African American men than darker skinned African American women. It seems reasonable to expect that given the findings of the aforementioned studies, an African American’s self-esteem might be affected by his or her skin tone.

Based on the previously mentioned ideas, the researchers wanted to extend the literature on the effects of skin tone on African American life circumstances. As such, we chose to address the following questions: first, what are African American's perceptions of personal and

others skin tones? Second is skin tone significantly related to annual income and educational level for African Americans? Third, is skin tone significantly related to racial identity and self-esteem among African Americans? Fourth, do African Americans demonstrate preferences for skin tone; and finally, in what ways does an African American's skin tone affect his or her life circumstances and experiences?

Methods

Setting and Participants

The settings for this study included 2 large cities, one in the Midwest and another in the Southeast. Participants included 37 African Americans ranging in age from 19 to 78 ($M = 32.74$, $SD = 12.88$) with household incomes ranging from 14,999 to 100,000 (Median = 47,042); years of completed education ranging from 12 years to 20 years ($M = 17.97$, $SD = 2.32$) and with a variety of professional and educational backgrounds. Participants in the Midwest were recruited from a large Midwestern university and the surrounding city via letters, flyers and word of mouth recruitment. Specifically, flyers were posted in all residence halls, and various buildings throughout the campus. In addition, flyers were mailed to all African American undergraduate and graduate students on the campus of the university. For the mailings, the principal investigator enlisted the assistance of one administrative office on campus who prepared mailing labels for all identified African American students on the campus. The principal investigator then delivered sealed envelopes with the flyers enclosed to the administrative office. All letters were mailed in this manner to protect the students' confidentiality. In addition, participants were recruited via word of mouth requests by the PI and 3 research assistants. The participants from the southeast were recruited from the city via word of mouth requests by the PI. All focus group were compensated with a catered dinner upon completion of the focus group.

Measures

The measures used in this study include the following:

The Skin Color Questionnaire (SCQ) and the Skin Color Assessment Procedure (SCAP), standardized measures of African American skin tone and associated attitudes toward skin tone designed by Bond and Cash, (1992). The procedure for use of the SCAP was modified slightly for inclusion in this study. Specifically, rather than the original procedure in which participants select a swatch of paint that most closely resembles their skin tone, participants selected the color that most closely matches their own from a color chart on a single sheet of paper. The remaining portion of the SCAP remained as it was originally designed and included the following procedure. Individual participants were asked to select the color that most resembles their actual facial color; the color they would like to be; and finally, the color that the opposite sex finds most attractive. These ratings reveal participant perceptions of 1) actual skin tone 2) preferred skin tone and 3) opposite sex preferences for skin tone. In addition, the researchers assessed the participants' actual facial color using the color chart and these findings were then subjected to inter-rater reliability tests to determine the convergence between participant and researcher ratings of skin tone. Further, participant self-perceived skin color ratings were compared with the mean of the researcher ratings of participant skin color to determine the accuracy of participant self-ratings and participants' actual skin tone. Participants' SCAP ratings allowed for the calculation of discrepancy scores, which indicated the numerical difference between the selected ideal vs. the self-perceived skin color ratings. In addition, this final procedure was included to assess the accuracy of participants' ratings of personal skin color via a distortion rating.

Regarding the Skin Color Questionnaire, the same color chart was used and participants were asked to answer the following three questions (response items are identified in parentheses): "How satisfied are you with the shade (lightness or darkness) of your own skin color?" (1 = extremely dissatisfied to 9 = extremely satisfied); "Compared to most Black people, I believe my skin color is ..." (1 = extremely light to 9 = extremely dark) and "If I could change my skin color, I would make it ..." (1= much lighter , 5 = exactly the same and 9 = much darker) "Thus the three SCQ items were designed to assess, respectively, skin color satisfaction, self-perceived skin color (light-dark), and ideal skin color" (Bond and Cash, 1992; p. 877). In previous administrations of the SCQ and SCAP, the categories for assigning skin tone categories to respondents is 1-3.4 indicates light; 3.5-6.5 indicates medium and 6.6+ indicates dark.

A short questionnaire on SES/demographic information was developed by two members of the research team. This is an 8-item measure that seeks to identify basic socioeconomic and demographic information on the participant and his or her family. No identifying information was included on this form.

The Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSES, Rosenberg, 1965) is a 10-item scale that is designed to assess self-acceptance aspects of self-esteem. Each item allows participants to provide an answer in the range of 1 to 4 with 1 representing strong disagreement and 4 representing strong agreement. "One point is scored for each item answered in the keyed direction, yielding a range from 4 (lowest self-esteem) to 40 (highest self esteem)" (Westaway and Wolmarans, 1992).

The Multigroup Ethnic Identity Measure (MEIM, Phinney, 1992) is a 23 item scale used to examine similarities and differences in the ethnic identity of young people (high school and college aged) of various ethnic identity groups.

A qualitative research method was also used to collect data. Specifically, the researchers employed a focus group format. "Focus groups are in-depth discussions in which groups of between 8 and 12 people who share a particular set of characteristics or experiences are brought together, under the guidance of a facilitator, to discuss a topic of importance to a particular study" (Murray, 1998, p.313). Focus groups have been demonstrated to be especially useful in identifying problems that quantitative methods might miss. In this study, African American participants were asked to describe their personal, familial, and community experiences in dealing with color consciousness. A semi-structured interview guide format was used which allowed the investigator to gauge participant comfort levels and vary questions accordingly.

Following are the questions included in the focus group discussion protocol:

- 1) When you hear the words "color consciousness" "colorism" and "colorstruck" what comes to mind?
- 2) In general do you agree or disagree with what was said in the show (ABC NEWS "Nightline" segment)? a) What one thing did you most agree with in the show? b) What one thing did you most disagree with in the show? How has your experience differed from this one idea that you have identified as untrue for you?
- 3) Do you think the media (TV, Music Videos, and Film) affects the issue of color consciousness with African Americans? If so, in what way?
- 4) What is your earliest memory of discovering what skin tone/skin color you are?
- 5) Did your family discuss skin tone/skin color when you were a child? If so, give one example of things that were said.
- 6) What kinds of things do you remember hearing about your skin tone/skin color or that of your family as an adolescent/teenager? How did you feel when you heard these things?
- 7) What do you remember from your early adulthood experiences with peers about your skin tone/ skin color? How did you feel when these things happened?
- 8) In what ways do you think your own skin tone affects your life now (your career, professional/job promotions, educational experiences/opportunities)?
- 9) Did the skin color of your significant other (husband/wife/partner) have any bearing on why you choose that person? If you do not yet have one, does the skin tone of a potential mate have any bearing on whether or not you choose that person?

The data obtained from these focus group sessions was audiotaped and transcribed (by an investigator not present for the focus groups) to facilitate a qualitative data analysis approach.

Procedures

Data collection occurred in single session 2-hour meetings. During the meetings, participants were briefed about informed consent via the dissemination of instructional letters further explicating the details of the research study. At that time, only those participants who signed the consent form, thereby agreeing to complete the instruments and participate in the focus group, participated. The measures were administered during a single time period on one day, in the same sequential order. Subsequently, the focus group proceeded in the following manner. Once participants completed and signed the consent to participation in research form, they were asked to complete each of the aforementioned measures. Upon completion of the measures, participants viewed a 22-minute video of the television program Nightline on the topic of color consciousness. Participants then engaged in an open-ended question format discussion that was facilitated by the principal investigator and research assistants.

Data Analysis

Both quantitative and qualitative data analysis methods were used in this study. The investigators believe that each method was essential in comprehensively describing the phenomenon of color consciousness as reported by the focus group participants. Specifically, quantitative data collection and analysis methods were used to study the variables skin tone, self-esteem, ethnic identity and demographics because a number of psychometrically sound measures exist for use in understanding these phenomena. Further, the measures employed to assess ethnic identity and self-esteem have been widely reported in the literature to reliably and validly describe ethnic identity and self-esteem in African Americans (Phinney, 1992; Westaway and Wolmarans, 1992). It is important to note that quantitative analysis was especially useful in

analyzing that skin tone variable as few standardized measures exist for use in determining and understanding African Americans' perceptions of skin tone (Bond and Cash, 1992).

For the purpose of understanding the relationships between the variables of self-esteem, ethnic identity, demographics and skin tone, Pearson product correlations were computed. In addition, t-tests were conducted on these variables to compute any differences among participants in their preferences for and perceptions of skin tones (as measured by the SCAP and SCQ). Further, t-tests were conducted to detect any gender differences in ethnic identity, self-esteem, and preferences for and perceptions of skin tone.

Qualitative data collection and analysis methods were employed to comprehensively examine the ways in which color consciousness operates in the lives of African Americans. Recall that qualitative analysis allows investigators to collect data that reflects the participants' experiences in their own words. The investigators believe that a qualitative method is particularly important in understand this prevalent yet often unspoken and unreported phenomenon within the African American community. The investigators employed the focus group method, which is a widely used qualitative methodological approach (Schwitzer, Griffin, Ancis, Thomas, 1999). With regard to the focus groups, all tape-recorded focus group sessions were transcribed and analyzed to determine themes related to the intersection of skin tone and emotional and psychological experiences. This process was conducted by the principal investigator using the constant comparative method coupled with thematic data analysis. The constant comparative method, "is an inductive process for forming a categorical model to describe the data collected in a study" (Schwitzer et al, 1999, p. 192). The constant comparative approach called for the principal investigator to organize and reorganize the responses of the transcribed sessions until the data fit into the fewest, most meaningful categories possible.

Initially, one of the investigators produced handwritten copies of all audio-taped sessions and converted these into word-processed form. Next, a different researcher investigator created a master transcript of all focus group sessions in which responses were grouped according to their categorical "fit" with the questions asked. Any data that could not be categorized in this manner (i.e. that which did not directly address the stimulus questions) was organized in separate categories on the basis of categorical similarity. This system was used to code data into similar response categories. Then, the generally categorized data was reorganized into a smaller number of more specific categories. This process of creating smaller categories was replicated until the data could no longer be reorganized (i.e. no new themes emerged). The use of this method allowed the investigators to, "look for statements and signs of behavior that occur[ed] over time during the study," (Dye, Schatz, Rosenberg, & Coleman, 2000, p.2) with the goal of generating significant themes. Defined, the thematic method generates themes that are, "generalized statements by respondents about beliefs, attitudes, values, and sentiments... [that] are culturally bound" (Murray, 1998, p. 315). This model was especially useful given the multicultural focus of the study and the fact that the investigators were not interested in generating theory so much as they were interested in understanding an existing phenomenon (i.e. color consciousness) and providing a thematic model for announcement of the associated issues.

Results

Overall perceptions of skin tone

Table 1 presents the means and standard deviations for group participants on the various measures. The correlations between participants' self-ratings of skin tone and the mean ratings of the investigators' (who were present for the focus groups) ratings of participant skin tone were computed to assess the accuracy of the skin tone ratings. The acceptable inter-rater reliability of

the researchers' 9 point ratings of participant skin color was indicated by a reliability coefficient of .81. Specifically, the researchers ratings were identical for 41% (n = 15) of the participants; within 1 point for 43% (n=16) of the participants and within 2 points for 11% (n = 4) of the participants. Even though 5% (n = 2) of the participants' ratings were greater than 3 points apart, this finding parallels that of previous administrations of the SCAP (Bond and Cash, 1992) and still placed participants into appropriate light, medium, or dark categories. Overall, this method yielded a moderate positive correlation with participants' SCAP self-ratings ($r = .50, p = .002$) and participants' SCQ light-dark self-rating ratings ($r = .43, p = .009$). In addition, participants' self-ratings and light dark ratings of skin tone were highly positively correlated ($r = .73, p = .000$). Finally, results yielded a moderate positive correlation between the researchers' mean ratings of participant skin tone and participants' preferred skin tone ($r = .45, p = .005$).

Regarding the participants' responses on the skin tone variables, results yielded a moderate positive correlation between participants' idealized skin tone and preferred skin tone ($r = .50, p = .004$) and between participants' self-perceived (light/dark) skin tone and idealized skin tone ($r = .38, p = .03$). In addition, results revealed a moderate positive correlation between participants' preferred skin tone and self-perceived (light/dark) skin tone ($r = .56, p = .000$). Finally, results revealed a strong positive correlation between participants' reported actual skin tone and participants' preferred skin tone ($r = .89, p = .000$).

Following we present the results of additional t-test analyses on the skin tone variables. Of all pairs of skin tone variables studied, results yielded statistically significant differences between the following pairs of variables: preferred skin tone and opposite sex preferences for skin tone $t(36) = 2.83, p = .008$; preferred skin tone and self-perceived (light/dark) skin tone

$t(36) = 5.17, p = .000$; and actual skin tone and self-perceived (light/dark) skin tone $t(36) = 5.15, p = .000$.

Skin Tone, Ethnic Identity , and Socioeconomic Variables

Regarding the relationships between skin tone and African Americans' life circumstances, No significant correlations were found between skin tone and ethnic identity or self-esteem. However, results did reveal a moderate positive relationship between participants' global ethnic identity strength and levels of completed education ($r = .49, p = .002$) as well as global ethnic identity strength and mother's completed level of education ($r = .34, p = .039$). Participant incomes were moderately negatively correlated with their father's level of completed education ($r = -.35, p = .002$) and their mother's level of completed education ($r = -.35, p = .049$).

Skin Tone, Ethnic Identity , Self- Esteem and Gender

T tests were performed to examine any gender effects on self-satisfaction, preferred, idealized or opposite sex preferences for skin tone, ethnic identity and self-esteem. Table 2 presents the results for the significant findings. The only significant difference found for the men and women was on the variable of self-esteem with women obtaining higher self-esteem scores than the men.

Effects of Skin Tone on Life Circumstances and Experiences

Using the constant comparative method of qualitative research, the investigators discovered several emergent themes. Overall, focus group members acknowledged that color consciousness exists and they provided data that contributed to generating the following emergent themes: 1) media reinforcement of negative aspects of color consciousness (via assigned /implied attributes) in portrayals of African Americans; 2) negative childhood and adolescent experiences with color consciousness; 3) within family color consciousness; 4) affects

of skin tone on career/education; 5) negative affects of skin tone on romantic relationships 6) extensive nomenclature used in describing African American skin tones 7) regional differences in color consciousness experiences and 8) economic differences connected to skin tone.

Media reinforcement of negative aspects of color consciousness

Respondents indicated that the media portrays African Americans in very stereotypical manners often portraying light skinned women and dark skinned men as the aesthetic ideals. Many respondents shared the sentiments of a woman who said, ""I mean I know in terms of like music videos, um entertainment...and I always noticed how all the "pretty girls" were light skinned with long hair." And another who shared, " And I think that...when they show Tyson [Beckford, a model] when you look at the black man today, it's a chocolate hunk and so they're pushing it now.

Negative childhood and adolescent experiences with color consciousness

Many respondents reported being ostracized by other African Americans because of the lightness or darkness of their skin. Females respondents in particular recalled being teased and not invited to play with other children because they were "too dark" or because they were light and perceived as haughty by their peers.

Within family color consciousness

2 categories emerged in this area. Most respondents shared stories about personally hurtful experiences within their own families or recounted stories from friends' families. Others shared feelings of parental concern for children's present and future experiences. Most of these stories reflecting the former were focused on finding a mate with the "right" skin tone so that the offspring would be produced with the "right" color. In addition, respondents reported that at times their family members would actively make distinctions and associate attributes to family

member of different skin tones. One respondent recounted how the light and dark skinned siblings within one family formed alliances based on skin tone (i.e. light vs. dark) and argued and fought regularly with no parental intervention. Regarding the latter, a mother reported that she knew her child might be both helped and harmed by her extremely light skin.

Affects of skin tone on career/education

Respondents reported limited effects of skin tone on career. Respondents shared that they perceived there to be some advantages for light skinned women in advancing in work and academic environments. These advances were primarily associated with them being perceived as attractive. A female respondent reported that she could not help but notice that of 5 women selected to earn a prestigious academic fellowship, 4 of them (including she) were very light skinned.

Negative affects of skin tone on romantic relationships

2 subcategories emerged within this larger area of color consciousness. Specifically, respondents reported actively selecting mates in an effort to reverse the deleterious effects of having their own skin tones and/or being hurt by others who engaged in this same process (of selecting mates by skin tone. Participants typically described how they had been hurt by a prospective mates comments that he or she only dated people of a particular "hue" or how they were abandoned by a person of a particular skin tone and subsequently chose to find partners at the opposite end of the skin tone spectrum. Overall, most female respondents reported assigning attributes to men based on skin tone with light skinned men being seen as significantly less virile than dark skinned men

Extensive nomenclature used in describing African American skin tones

Not surprisingly, respondents indicated that an array of names exists for describing African Americans of differing skin tones. Most of the names that group members provided were familiar to all respondents, yet one ("Red-Bone") carried different connotations and was sometimes unfamiliar to the focus group participants.

Regional differences in color consciousness experiences

Group members strongly supported the idea that color consciousness exists in different forms depending on the region of the country in which one resides. Specifically, certain areas of the south were reported to have much more "color consciousness" than the north. In addition, respondents who were graduated from HBCUs (Historically Black Colleges and Universities) reported that they believed color consciousness to exist at greater levels than at PWIs (Predominantly White Institutions) where racism was more prevalent.

Economic differences connected to skin tone

A final aspect of color consciousness that emerged from the data was respondents' beliefs that economics was somehow connected to skin tone for African Americans. They often reported that they perceived general differences between light and dark skinned African Americans with regard to SES, but they did not report any perceptions that skin tone may have caused any of the socioeconomic differences. Many respondents echoed the sentiments of one who shared, "... again it's hooked to economics. It just so happened, it was the light skinned sister that had moved out, [of low income housing] but it had to do with economics. That they were able to leave the projects, go out into the country where Blacks didn't go. I mean you know, you had to afford it. So we as a family never really talked about our skin tones, among ourselves, cause we were all different, you know in the family with color. But we always knew that we were Black."

Discussion

The findings appear to indicate that African Americans are indeed aware of and can articulate the ways in which skin tone affects their lives. Recall that according to previous administrations of the SCQ and SCAP, the categories for assigning skin tone categories to respondents is 1-3.4 indicates light; 3.5-6.5 indicates medium and 6.6+ indicates dark. The findings from this study are particularly interesting given that the overall mean for the group on the actual skin tone variable was in the medium, approaching dark range (mean for researchers' judgements = 6.46 and for participants = 6.41). Further, the participants in this study indicated a preference for dark skin tones overall ($M = 6.72$). However, participants indicated that they idealized a medium tone with this tone being significantly lighter than the group's mean tone. In other words, it appears that participants share a stated preference for dark colors while harboring an ideal preference for a medium color. These findings reflect findings in other studies (Coard, Breland, & Raskin, 1999; Robinson & Ward, 1995) in which participants indicated that those with medium skin fare better in life in general than African Americans at the poles of the skin tone spectrum. As reported by some participants in the focus group, it appears that those African Americans in the middle of the skin tone spectrum do not experience as much trauma around skin tone as individuals at the polar ends experience. Therefore, it stands to reason that participants would idealize a skin tone that would afford them less opportunity to experience trauma.

It is quite interesting that participants stated a self-preference for dark skin, yet idealized a medium skin tone. A possible explanation for this finding might be associated with ethnic identity. Specifically, since the participants reported an overall high degree of ethnic identity (M

phinney = 3.64), it is possible that their stated preference for a dark color reflects their salient affiliations with being African American.

Racial identity theory, as studied by authors like Helms, Carter and Cross, supports this idea of African Americans reporting an affinity for those things noticeably Black, like skin tone and facial features. Further, it is possible that given the generational status of the participants, with most being children of the 50s, 60's and 70s, they were reared in the era of the Civil Rights and/or Black Power movements of the 60s and 70s. Recall that it was during these movements that African Americans espoused a strong ethnic identity and ties to their roots in Africa. As such, many African Americans witnessed the espousal of a Black beauty aesthetic that included traditionally "African" features such as dark skin and "full" facial features. In other words, it may be that the participants wanted to demonstrate their commitment to the ethnic group by professing a dark preference while harboring a like for a medium skin tone. Leeds found similar results in her work with African American women, in that participants in her study reported a preference for darker skin and stated that they did not often make distinctions regarding color among their peers, yet upon further discussion revealed an idealization of lighter skin (Leeds, 1993). As stated earlier, it is possible that within the African American community medium skin is preferred over dark skin due to the perceived and actual stresses often associated with very dark skin (Breland, 1998; Hughes and Hertel, 1992).

Boyd-Franklin (1991) described the pervasive nature of color consciousness within African American families and the current findings support this idea. It appears that many participants learned about color consciousness via verbal and non-verbal family interactions. This is an extremely important finding that might be addressed by mental health professionals in counseling. It is possible that clinical prevention efforts with African American parents, where

they are made aware of the messages about skin tone that can be transmitted to children, may assist in reversing the negative affects of color consciousness. It also imperative for African Americans families to become aware of the ways in which the media assigns attributes to African Americans based on skin tone so that efforts can be developed to reverse the negative effects that are transmitted to group members. Counselors and counseling psychologists can be helpful in these efforts by training African Americans to recognize, acknowledge and directly address these images both within and across racial groups. Counselors and counseling psychologists who are not familiar with this idea should be aware of its potential to exist within African Americans families. Although it may be a sensitive subject to broach with clients, it can be very helpful for a culturally competent therapist to familiarize him or herself with the issue so that he or she may conduct an informed discussion on the topic with clients.

It appears that counselors who work with African American adolescents should particularly be aware of the negative experiences that adolescents may have with this issue. Especially with regard to friendships and romantic relationships, it appears that African American children and adolescents may experience trauma around being excluded as romantic partners or friends based solely on skin tone and conversely may be included as friends or romantic partners based solely on skin tone. Further children and adolescents may be the objects of ridicule due to skin tone and, as described by multiple participants, such ridicule can be quite painful and have enduring effects.

Focus group participants shared their perceptions of attributes associated with African Americans based on skin tone. Generally, they reported that light skinned African Americans (particularly women) are misperceived as haughty; dark skinned African American men are perceived as virile, and light skinned African American men are perceived as impuissant. It is

women in such a way that light skinned women are viewed as objects of affection and that dark skinned men are viewed as strong and virile. Many participants shared that popular media personalities of African American women include very light women like actresses Halle Berry and Vanessa Williams, while popular media personalities of African American men include very dark skinned males like actor Wesley Snipes and model Tyson Beckford. The sentiments of multiple participants were expressed by one focus group member who stated that regarding music videos, "...the only dark girls you ever saw were the ones dancing in the background. It was never the girl that the guys were chasing." Further, many of the female African American participants shared that they were accustomed to seeing movies, advertisements and television programs that only showcased dark skinned African American men. As one participant put it, "when you look at the black man today, it's a chocolate hunk and so they're [the media] pushing it now." If dark skinned men and light skinned women appear to be sought after as objects of affection, what might this mean for light skinned African American men and dark skinned African American women. Findings from the focus groups reveal that, at least for African American women, dark skinned group members are left with emotional scars based on being overlooked for their lighter skinned counterparts (Hunter, 1998). Previous research has addressed this populations briefly (Boyd-Franklin, 1991), but further research is certainly warranted to understand the effects of these occurrences on light skinned African American women, and dark and light skinned African American men.

It is worth noting that most participants were initially reluctant to say that color consciousness exists within the African American community. It is possible that the presence of a white research assistant at the focus group meetings contributed to apprehension about sharing on this topic. It is also possible that the sample was reluctant to discuss intraracial discrimination

possible that many African Americans who seek counseling may be aware of these stereotypes and that these stereotypes may have or have had negative effects on their psychological well-being. Culturally competent counselors and psychologists must be prepared to address these within group experiences with a strong knowledge base regarding color consciousness and the potentially devastating effects engendered due to its intragroup origins.

With regard to dating and romantic relationships, an interesting trend emerged. Almost universally when discussing opposite sex preferences for skin tone, the African American male participants in the group stated that men they knew (not they themselves, but friends, family members, etc.) preferred very light skinned women with specific hair textures (i.e long and Eurocentric). Interestingly though, 2 of the 12 men in the study openly professed an affinity for light skinned women at some point in their development yet denounced it as a present-day occurrence. Conversely, the African American women in the groups reported self and other (friends, family members, etc.) preferences for very dark skinned men. Many of these women shared that they, "wanted someone who was darker because they associated darker with being stronger, a lot stronger and stuff". These findings are partially supported by the findings on the quantitative skin tone measures. Although the means for the men and women's perceptions of opposite sex preferences were in the medium range and not statistically different, female respondents reported that they perceive African American men to desire women with a lighter color ($M = 5.22$), while men stated that they perceive African American women to like men with a darker ($M = 6.12$) color.

The researchers believe that this finding might speak to the possible correlations between media portrayals of African Americans and internalized preferences for opposite sex partners. Specifically, the participants in this study explained that the media portrayed African American

when interracial discrimination occurs so frequently in their lives. Indeed, it was often necessary to redirect the participants in this sample to the topic of color consciousness among African Americans as it frequently drifted to racism and discrimination suffered at the hands of European Americans. The authors hypothesize that some of this may be residue from the powerful and lasting effects of the black solidarity created by the civil rights movement. Indeed, as one-fourth of the sample grew up in this period of time ($n= 10$) with the remaining participants being the children of people who grew up in this time period, it is possible that they learned the message of racism as a heinous evil and to not “air dirty laundry” by discussing the topic of Black on Black discrimination.

Some additional findings that warrant discussion are not necessarily focused on color consciousness, but are more associated with the life experience of being African American. Recall that for all respondents there was a negative moderate correlation between their current incomes and their parents completed levels of education. Since a majority of the participants were college graduates, and a significant number possessed graduate and professional degrees, it is possible that a message of subsequent generations doing better than those that came before them, has been passed down. This notion is frequently discussed in the literature addressing African American families (Boyd-Franklin, 1991; Sue and Sue, 1990). In addition, the moderate relationship that emerged between participants' ethnic identity strength and completed levels of education speaks to the importance of being rooted in one's own culture as a buffer against racism and discrimination. Indeed, many participants stated during the focus groups that they used their strong sense of who they are as African Americans to help them make sense of and deal with the racism that they experience regularly. This is an important finding for counselors who work with African Americans in that, given the current zeitgeist regarding the importance of

assessing ethnic identity as an integral part of the counseling relationship (see Helms, Carter, and Parham), it is essential that counselors who encounter African Americans with a strong ethnic identity incorporate this piece into any racism/discrimination interventions. Finally, it appears that African American mothers, at least for the participants in this sample, have done a good job of transmitting messages of ethnic pride and strength to their children. As noted, the participants in this sample demonstrated strong ethnic identities and these identities were moderately associated with their mothers' levels of education. Again these findings appear to reiterate previous findings in the literature that speak to the important of education and ethnic pride among African Americans (Sue and Sue, 1990).

Limitations and Future Directions

One of the most salient limitations to this study is the volunteer sampling procedure employed. It is possible that those individuals for whom the issue of skin tone is salient were the ones most likely to agree to participate in the focus group. Therefore, this group may have devoted more thought to this topic than other African Americans. As such, their opinions may not be reflective of the general population, but more so of those African Americans who are well versed and educated on this topic in general. A second limitation to the study has to do with the skin tones of the African American investigators and assistants. As both African American data collectors are very dark skinned, it is possible that their presence was an impediment to the participants' ability to speak freely and to answer in an honest manner on the measures. Indeed, it is possible that the participants did not want to offend these researchers by being more frank in their discussions of darker skinned African Americans. Future research might include separating focus groups by gender and skin tone and matching these groups with moderators who reflect the

compositions of the groups. Such methods might assist future investigators in eliciting more rich and multi-layered themes of color consciousness.

Regarding other future directions for research in this area, it is possible that given the African American women's reported attributions for African American men and African American men's reported overall lower levels of self-esteem, future research may want to explore the pervasiveness of these ideas separately and as they interact. For example, research might examine the nature and extent of African American women's stereotypes of African American men. In addition, future investigators might study the extent to which African American men are aware of the perceptions that African American women have of them and how these perceptions affect their (men's) psychological well-being. In addition, it will be important to assess the extent to which skin tone is a factor in differential family treatment. Such research can greatly contribute to the literature on ameliorative interventions for use with African American families.

Finally the extent to which the media influences African Americans use of skin tone as a factor in selecting friends and romantic partners is an extremely worthwhile research area. This work can be especially useful for children and adolescents who are developing ideas regarding how they perceive themselves and others.

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Table 1.

Means and Standard Deviations on All Variables for Participants in the Study

	MEAN	SD
PHINNEY (Ethnic identity)	3.64	.29
SCQ1 (Satisfaction)	7.92	1.57
SCQ2 (perceived skin tone)	5.31	1.67
SCQ3 (idealized skin tone)	5.78	1.31
SCAP1 (actual skin tone)	6.41	1.87
SCAP2 (preferred skin tone)	6.72	1.81
SCAP3 (opposite sex pref.)	5.78	1.31
MOMEDUC	15.77	2.94
DADEDUC		
EDUCLVL	17.97	2.34
RSES (Self-esteem)	37.70	3.37
INCOME	44,135	28,600
AGE	31.56	12.15

* Note: The ranges for responses on the SCAP and SCQ were 1 - 9;

Table 2 Means and t Value from the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale

Rosenberg	Men (11)	Women (26)	t
Mean	35.3636	38.6923	2.22
SD	4.822	1.892	

Note: $p = .048$



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Signature: <u>Allice M. Breland</u>	Printed Name/Position/Title: <u>Allice M. Breland Ph.D. ASSISTANT PROFESSOR</u>
Organization/Address: <u>444 ERICKSON HALL EAST LANSING, MI 48824-1024</u>	Telephone: <u>517-353-4324</u> FAX: <u>517-353-6393</u>

