

Colorism Among Black Women

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Received: July 29, 2020; **Published:** August 31, 2020

Abstract

Colorism is not a phenomenon that is only restricted to the United States of America. Globally, the color of one's skin has been tied to skin privileges. For example, in Africa, Asia, and Latin America the sale of skin bleaching cream is a multimillion-dollar industry due to the skin hierarchy that exists. The lighter one's skin, the more accepted they are within various social circles. Thus, women who are striving to be socially accepted will use skin bleaching creams in order to achieve the desired look.

White or light-skinned individuals are often viewed as superior compared to dark-skinned people who are viewed as inferior. This dichotomy of superior vs. inferior and white or light-skinned vs. dark-skinned can be referred to as colorism, which is a term that won't be found in the dictionary. Alice Walker, a poet, is given credit for coining this term in the early 1980's. She used the term colorism to delineate skin tone preferential treatment among Black individuals within their community.

Specifically, this article will take a look at the role and implications of colorism among Black women in society. The goal is to try to provide an understanding of how colorism is defined, the psychological impact it has on dark-skinned Black women and coping strategies that can be useful for the effects of colorism.

Keywords: *Skin Tone Discrimination; Color Struck; Color Discrimination; European Standard of Beauty; Shadiness; Internalized Stereotypes*

Colorism is different than racism even though they are often used interchangeably by many. Colorism entails people being treated differently due to the color of their skin, whereas racism is unfair treatment due to the racial/ethnic group a person belongs. The color of one's skin automatically is associated with a particular racial or ethnic group. Thus, there are times when people are speaking specifically about race and will refer to people based on their skin pigmentation. As a result, the terms colorism and racism can often be discussed in similar social contexts.

Alice Walker, an author, poet, and activist is given credit for coining the term colorism. In 1983, she discusses it in her book *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens*. Alice Walker described colorism as preferential treatment that is bestowed to people but is based solely on their skin color. Light-skinned people are considered to be the most favored, whereas dark-skinned people are said to be the least favored.

Even the terminologies used to describe light-skinned versus dark-skinned are incredibly different. A light-skinned person is viewed in a more positive light such as beautiful, trustworthy, nice, and smart, whereas a dark-skinned person is viewed in a more negative light, such as being less attractive, sneaky, untrustworthy, and unintelligent. Due to the labels being placed on both light-skinned and dark-

skinned people, society often treats them according to these stereotypical labels. Not only has society accepted these labels as factual, but the Black community has also accepted them as their reality.

Thus, once people begin to accept and internalize what other people's perceptions of them are, it impacts how they see themselves. This can either elevate or depreciate one's self-esteem or self-concept depending if what is being said is positive or negative. Furthermore, dark-skinned Black women are seen as Jezebel and hypersexual, resulting not only in the world seeing them in a degrading way but also others within their community.

The origins of colorism, a form of discrimination, can be traced back to chattel slavery. The slave master would rape and brutalize Black women which led them to giving birth to his children. The lighter skinned children were given special treatment by being allowed to work in the master's house and were referred to as house servants. The darker skinned Black women were made to work in the field, in the brutal hot sun, doing the back-breaking task of picking cotton and were called field slaves. As a result, there was division among the slaves. It was obvious that the light-skinned slaves received better treatment, such as having better living accommodations, clothes, food and access to learning reading and writing.

Now, it must be made clear, slaves who worked inside the slave master's house were not treated as part of his family. Yes, in many ways they were protected from the atrocities field slaves encountered. Field slaves were given leftover food and clothing and had meager living accommodations, while also forbidden to read and write.

Therefore, one could not help but think that if you were light-skinned you were better and if you were dark-skinned you were not. There was such a stark difference in the treatment of the same race of people. All this stems from the fact that the slave masters would treat the light-skinned slaves better than the darker ones. Light-skinned slaves were even sold at a higher market value than dark-skinned slaves. There was even a myth stating, "The lighter you were the better you were".

Differential treatment among Blacks based on their skin tone was still perpetuated even long after chattel slavery had ended. Blacks who were considered the "upper crust" would administer the comb, door, or paper bag test in order to admit Blacks into certain churches and establishments within the Black community. The comb test was used to pass a comb through a Black person's hair. This test was designed to measure the kinkiness of their hair. Straight hair was preferred over kinky hair. Therefore, the straighter a Black person's hair was the more accepted they were. Thus, if the comb was able to go through their hair without getting stuck, they were allowed to become a member of particular social circles. On the other hand, the door test entailed an organization painting a door a certain shade of brown and if the Black person who was entering the door was darker than the color of the door, they would not be allowed to be a part of the organization. A similar sort of test was done with the paper bag test. If a Black person was lighter than the paper bag, then they were given membership, whereas if they were darker than the bag, they would be denied. Moreover, there was also a society created in the Black community known as the Blue Vein Society, a social club that only allowed Black people to be admitted if their skin tone was light enough to make the veins under their arms visible. As can be seen from these tactics that were carried out within the Black community, light-skinned Black people were considered to be better than dark-skinned Black people, resulting in members of the Black community who were darker to feel more isolated and alienated. Thus, it is important to understand the root causes of division in the Black community in order to grasp the systemic impact it still has in the Black community even until this day.

In order to give further insight to the impact colorism had on the Black community, two psychologists, Drs. Kenneth and Mamie Clark, conducted a research study with Black children known as the doll test in the 1940's. The children were shown two dolls: one white and the other black. The children were asked a variety of questions such as: Which doll is the ugly doll? Which doll is the nicer color? Which doll is the bad doll? Which doll is the pretty doll? The results of the study were astounding, because it illustrated that the majority of the time, the Black children selected the White doll over the Black doll. The White doll was consistently associated with the positive attributes

of being smart, nice, pretty, and clean. The Black doll was associated with derogatory attributes such as being ugly, dirty, dumb, and bad. Though these dolls were identical and had the same clothing, but only differed in their skin color, reveals why this study was so significant. This study simply demonstrated how White or lighter skin is attributed to positive things in life such as being good, right, beautiful, clean and smarter. On the other hand, being Black or dark-skinned is associated with negative and damaging words such as being ugly, dirty, a cheater, criminal and dumb.

The questions that one must ponder is where does Black children get these negative self-images of themselves and how are they perpetuated by society? Additionally, what are the short and long term psychosocial impacts from childhood to adolescence to adulthood?

Early childhood perceptions, if not corrected, can have a prolonged damaging impact on how Black people see themselves.

There was a children's nursery rhyme which went like this:

"If you're black, stay back;

If you're brown, stick around;

If you're yellow, you're mellow;

If you're white, you're all right".

Thus, one can clearly see that if children are socialized early on in their lives that the color of their skin is seen negatively, then there is no reason to believe they would see themselves in a negative light? Before the 1954 Supreme Court case, *Brown vs Board of Education*, research illustrated that Black teachers in segregated school districts were impregnated with the idea that Black light-skinned children were better than Black dark-skinned children. The teachers would automatically select the light-skinned children to lead the plays, be selected in pageants, and be called on in classroom discussions. As can be concluded, there was even preferential treatment within the school districts among the light-skinned Black children being shown favoritism over the dark-skinned Black children.

Indeed, there is significance of early childhood socialization by having dark-skinned Black girls see themselves early on in a positive manner. This type of behavior can be reinforced by making sure we provide dark-skinned Black girls with toys and educational materials that illustrate them in a positive fashion.

In addition to socializing Black children in a positive manner, it is important to also discuss how the media plays a huge role in creating images of White standards of beauty as the norm. As a result, Black women are often striving to meet these criteria in order to be accepted among their peers in various social groups. Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs expressed one of humans needing to feel love and accepted. Of course, the opposite of this is feeling rejected, alone, and isolated. This can lead to a person feeling depressed and unacceptable. Historically, dark-skinned Black women were not seen as beautiful. Even when someone wants to tell a dark-skinned woman she is pretty, the conversation goes something like this- "for a dark skinned girl, you are pretty." Although this is meant to be a compliment, the implications are clear that dark-skinned women are not naturally beautiful, and this individual is an exception to the rule.

In addition to the media, the beauty industry often chooses a lighter-skinned woman to model, be in a video, and be selected for a pageant over a darker skinned Black woman. All of this is based on how Western culture define and see beauty. Thus, the goal when selecting a Black woman is to choose one that closely resembles that of a White woman. Usually, she is of lighter skin complexion with White features, such as a pointed or round nose and straight hair. Thus, dark skinned Black women's economic empowerment is being impacted simply because of the shade of their skin.

The profound impact of colorism is not only seen in the media and beauty industry, but also in the music industry. During 1929, Fats Waller composed a classic jazz song "What Did I Do to Be So Black and Blue," which was interpreted by Louis Armstrong as a conversation about a lonely, dark-skinned woman's inability to attract men because of the complexion of her skin.

Cold empty bed, springs hard as lead
Feel like old Ned, wished I was dead
What did I do to be so black and blue?

Even the mouse ran from my house
They laugh at you, and scorn you too
What did I do to be so black and blue?

I'm white inside, but that don't help my case
Cause I can't hide what is in my face

How would it end? Ain't got a friend
My only sin is in my skin
What did I do to be so black and blue?

This jazz song clearly describes how this Black woman sees herself and the only sin is her skin. It might appear to be a bit melancholy. Unfortunately, the reality of colorism and treating dark-skinned Black women inhuman is extremely sad.

Colorism is residual of colonialism by giving homage to the European standard of beauty and White supremacy, while at the same time dehumanizing and devaluing dark-skinned Black women the same opportunities to advance because of their skin tone. Even though dark-skinned Black men are also likely to experience unfair and differential treatment due to their skin pigmentation, it is still much more prevalent among darker skinned Black women. Dark-skinned men are often given accolades for being dark. They are seen as attractive and more sexually desirable. Thus, they are more likely to be a star in the movie industry and featured in many more commercials than dark-skinned Black women. However, we are starting to see more dark-skinned women play more prominent roles in Hollywood, such as in *Black Panther* and *Queen and Slim*.

Taken together, colorism has a tremendous impact on dark-skinned Black women, by leaving deep seated psychological wounds which often scar them for life if they are unable to seek professional help. The lighter skinned privileges and sense of entitlements that women reap as result of their skin tone has far reaching effects. The advantages consist of many light-skinned women being hired and giving better paying jobs as compared to darker skinned Black women. Moreover, there was even a time when Black women were looking for employment, they indicated on their application they were light-skinned Black women to ensure they were not hired as a cook or maid. This can also be seen in marriage. Light-skinned Black women are deemed as more attractive and sociably accepted by society. This leaves darker skinned Black women to be least likely selected as a marriage partner. As a result, dark-skinned Black women's marriageability rating is less. More emerging research has even shown where dark skinned Black women are more likely to be seen as a criminal and/or given harsher jail sentences compared to lighter skinned women. Taken together, it is easy to see up close and personal how the differential treatment among dark-skinned Black women is profound in contrast to light-skinned Black women.

Overall, dark-skinned Black women's mental wellness can often suffer from low self-esteem and low self-concept due to being least likely selected for marriage and more likely targeted as a criminal. Therefore, it is no surprise that dark-skinned Black women are facing

higher rates of unexplainable sadness, anger, depression, and suicidal ideation.

Below are some strategies to assist with coping with colorism:

1. Encourage daily affirmations that affirm who they are as a person. It is important for Black women to say positive things such as, "I am Black and beautiful", "I am Black and I am proud".
2. Engage in more education by having open conversations concerning colorism. This should not only happen in the Black community but across all ethnic and racial backgrounds.
3. Ensure colorism is integrated into multicultural education.
4. Continue to conduct research that can lead to policies to illustrate that colorism is a real issue and impacts all areas of Black women's lives.
5. Redefine a more inclusive standard of what it means to be beautiful.
6. Engage in more projects like "The Beautywell Project" where individuals worked diligently to obtain 23,000 hand signed signatures that were personally delivered to Amazon. This resulted in Amazon removing their bleaching products with high levels of mercury.
7. Advocate for proper representation of all women in mainstream media.
8. Ensure companies have hiring practices that are not dictated by the color of one's skin. This would enhance the employability of dark skinned people.
9. Watch movies and read poetry and spoken words to create critical conversations about colorism. Please see example below.

50 Shades of Blackness

By

Dr. Linda J. M. Holloway

Black as the night, no you do have to show your white teeth to be alright.

You are jet Black, and I love you just the way you are.

You see the absence of light is darkness. But your pitch blackness is what makes me sing- twinkle, twinkle, little star, you are undeniably gorgeous just the way you are.

Shades of brown-snicker chocolate, Hershey bar, and smooth mocha. Girlfriend, you know who you are. Yes, they call you "Brown Skin Girl." You move in the world like you just don't care.

You say I am in the middle. I am not too dark nor am I too light. I am good. I am a just around the way girl from the hood.

I love the skin I am in.

But I hear your cries; if only I was just a little lighter. So, I bleach my skin to achieve the colonized, westernized, and Hollywood standard of beauty.

I want to be accepted. I wanted to be a part of the movement, with fist clinched in the air shouting, "Say It Loud. I am Black and I am proud!".

Ole my country tis of thee. Ole thee I sing, sweet land of liberty; will you accept me? I am your child.

Light skinned girls, sometimes called "white girls", "yellow bone," or "redbone." I too am Black. Just because I am lighter than you does not mean I am not Black. I am just a different shade of Black. No, I did not have to pass the paper bag test, nor did I have to struggle with the comb being pulled through my hair.

My blackness is my birthright.

I refuse to prove to you, you, and you that I am Black. I say it loud that I am Black, gifted, and proud!

I am not here today to challenge you about your blackness, but I am here to celebrate who you are.

Black is beautiful. Yes, you are Black and beautifully made, no matter your shade.

To my brothers and sister across the diaspora, we all are 50 shades of blackness. Black and beautifully made.

"Black Ever After"

<https://youtu.be/5a-1ssaz8YY>.

Colorism is not just a dark skinned Black women problem. It is a social issue that has been deeply entrenched in our society. It has and continues to be psychological damaging to dark skinned Black women. To demonstrate just how much it is embedded in our society, let's use an example- chicken. The white part of the chicken is considered the healthiest and often is more expensive, whereas the dark part is considered the least healthy and is often inexpensive. It is these subtle message(s) in our society which can lead to everyday racial micro and macroaggressions toward dark skinned Black women, leaving them feeling hurt and unloved in many areas of their lives. Bringing awareness to the impact colorism has on dark skinned Black women is extremely relevant to the counseling profession. It imperative that therapists are properly trained to work with dark skinned Black women and their everyday challenges of having to cope with colorism trauma.

Suggested Readings List

- Chesnutt Charles Wadell. *The Wife of His Youth* (1989).
- Golden Marita. *Don't play in the Sun: One woman's Journey Through the color complex*. Anchor, United States (2005).
- Morrison Toni. *The Blues Eye* (2007).
- Nyong'o Lupita. *Sulwe* (2019).
- Tademy Lalita. *Cane River* (2001).
- Wallace Thurman. *He Blacker the Berry: A Novel of Negro Life* (1929).

Movies, Films, Documentaries about Colorism:

- Dark Skinned Girls
- Light Skinned Girls
- No Shade
- Girls Like Me (2005)
- ABC 20/20 Colorism (2007)
- A Question of Color (1993)
- Skin (2008)
- The Skin Quilt Project (2010)
- Shadeism (2010).

Disclosure

This article has not been published elsewhere, nor has it been submitted simultaneously for publication elsewhere. It does not constitute a conflict of interest for the author.

Volume 9 Issue 9 September 2020

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