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Skin Tone Preferences in African American College Students: Directions for Future Research

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Abstract
In its original form, this paper was the introduction to a research proposal for a second-semester, freshman Experimental Psychology course. Instead of including the entire proposal here, I review past research and propose empirical questions regarding the role of skin tone on different aspects of life in African American college students, especially mate selection. Historically, people of color have come to expect discrimination regarding skin tone to come from people of a different race, but discrimination also occurs within the African American community. The issue increases in complexity considering the potential discriminations that may accompany selecting a mate. This literature review explores skin tone preferences in regards to self-esteem, mate selection, and university selection within the African American population.

Current research has shown that an individual’s self-esteem may be altered by other people’s perception of their skin tone. In addition, there are several external factors that may influence an individual’s skin tone preference, especially for college students. These may include the environment in which the individual was raised, family, and friends. The type of university an individual attends (e.g., a Historically Black College or University (HBCU), or a majority White university) might play a major role in social interaction, self-esteem, friendship selection, and mate selection. Skin tone is a very complex subject. The idea that a lighter skin tone is still privileged today is a topic that is currently relevant and deserves empirical attention.

Key Terms: Mate Selection, Self-esteem, Skin Tone, Type of University

People of all races have different skin tones, which makes everyone unique. A person’s skin tone is the most visible physical feature and it is also the feature that is enduring and difficult to change (Thompson & Keith, 2001). Hair can be straightened with the assistance of chemicals, the appearance of eye color can be changed with color contacts, and nose shape can be altered with cosmetic surgery. Skin tone is a prevalent issue within the African American community. African American students today consider skin tone a legitimate concern because an individual’s skin tone is an important determinant of educational and occupational attainment (Hughes & Hertel, 1990; Keith & Herring, 1991). For example, imagine an African American teenager who learns that she did not receive a job position because the company was seeking a certain image that she did not fit. One study notes that the effect of race on earnings of lighter and darker Blacks is as great as the earning difference between Whites and Blacks (Hughes & Hertel, 1990). An interview-based survey by Goldsmith, Hamilton, and Darity (2006) that began...
in 1992 found that mean hourly wages increase as skin tone lightens. Dark-skinned Blacks earned $11.72 per hour, moving up to $13.23 for Blacks with a medium skin tone, while light-skinned Black reported an hourly pay of $14.72 (Goldsmith et al., 2006). In addition, people use skin tone to form impressions and make judgments about others. For example, a Caucasian may be interested in dating an African American male, and her parents approve because the male has a very light complexion.

In today’s society, not only do African Americans have to worry about issues such as prejudice, racism, racial profiling, and negative portrayals from other races, but also they are also concerned about judgments from other African Americans. Many wonder if people have a skin tone preference when looking for a boyfriend or girlfriend. If so, how much importance is placed on skin tone and how much is placed on other qualities such as personality or compatibility? Would a dark skinned male be hesitant to approach a lighter skinned female in fear of rejection, simply because of his complexion? Do students at an HBCU place more significance on skin tone than students at a majority university?

The Importance of Skin Tone

The issue of skin tone, specifically for the African American community, is one that pre-dates the Civil Rights era. According to Keith and Herring (1991) it is known that during slavery, lighter skinned African Americans were treated better and essentially favored over darker skinned African American slaves. This favoritism occurred because lighter-skinned Blacks were more aesthetically appealing to Whites, and Whites believed that lighter-skinned Blacks were more intelligent than darker-skinned Blacks (Keith & Herring, 1991). Hunter (2002) states that the entire idea of having a more fair skin tone is privileged in the African American community. This favoritism certainly does not go unnoticed. As a result, darker skinned African Americans feel penalized for their ethnicity (Keith & Herring, 1991). The lighter skinned slaves realized their advantage was based on their skin tone and their children have come to realize the advantage as well.

Future research should investigate if older generations have the same point of view concerning skin tone as younger generations. Today African Americans seem to have a more open point of view regarding skin tone. For example, between 1960 and 2002, the number of interracial marriages increased from 157,000 to 1,674,000 (Joyner & Kao, 2005). Future research should examine how this increase was affected by skin tone preference and race.

Understanding the history of African Americans is crucial in understanding what presently occurs in reference to skin tone. Today, some people are stuck in what is referred to as a “slave mentality.” This previous conception that a lighter complexion may be favored over a darker skin tone has been passed down from previous generations is apparent in modern culture. For example, think about the high school junior who is told to be a “Pharmacy Tech” instead of working towards her goal of being a Pharmacist because of her skin color. This is very likely to have an affect on the way she feels about herself, which is why it is important to consider the things that possibly can be affected by differing complexions. One aspect of life that skin tone affects is a person’s self-esteem.
Self-Esteem and Skin Tone

Self-esteem is an important aspect to consider when addressing skin tone within the African American community because an individual’s self-worth may be related to their skin tone. According to Harvey, LaBeach, Pridgen, and Gocial (2005), African Americans with a desirable skin tone who are perceived as attractive by other African Americans may demonstrate high levels of self-esteem. Contrarily, African Americans with a less desirable skin tone who are perceived as unattractive by other African Americans might demonstrate lower levels of self-esteem.

Skin tone and its relationship to self-esteem are different for each gender within the Black population. The issue of self-esteem and how it is affected by skin tone seems less important for African American males, compared to females (Hill, 2002). The reason for this might be associated with the way that boys are socialized into Western society. It has been found that males and females differ in emotional expressiveness (Balkwell, Balswick, & Balkwell, 1978). As a consequence of this, even if males are affected by differences in complexion, they might be more inclined to conceal these feelings, which may be why the research implies that skin tone is less important for men. Additionally, Hill (2002) states that lighter skinned African American women are seen as more feminine and attractive, which stems from the European concept of the beauty of light skin, slim bodies, and straight hair. Thompson and Keith (2001) found that darker skinned African American women’s self-esteem is lower than lighter skinned African American women. This might be because a lighter skin tone is seen as more attractive by individuals in the African American community, so these individuals may be treated favorably over other skin tones, resulting in an elevated self-esteem. When individuals with a darker skin tone notice this advantage, they may feel inferior and have a lower self-esteem. In essence, skin tone differences are not as important for men as for women, and these differences have a negative affect on the self-esteem of darker skinned women.

Skin Tone Preferences and Environment

When you take a look at someone, their skin tone might be one of the first things that you notice given that it is one of a person’s most obvious physical characteristics. Since a wide variety of skin tones exist, it is understandable that people may prefer some skin tones over others. Skin tone preferences are prevalent within the African American community. Hill (2002) observes that a person who expresses unconscious skin tone preferences is deemed socially unacceptable. For example, others may think badly of a person that has a subconscious aversion to dating people with a darker skin tone and then expresses this preference.

Researchers such as Ross (1997) and Hughes and Demo (1989) have concluded that skin tone preferences are formed in several ways. One way a preference is formed is through the community a person is raised. The preference for a light skin tone may be related to the amount of minorities the person had in their community. For instance, Ross (1997) states that a person’s predisposition towards lighter skinned people was decreased if they lived in an environment with a large amount of minorities. This may be because they learned at a young age that a variety of skin tones and complexities exist and that everyone should be treated equally.

During childhood and adolescence, an individual does not have much control over what type of environment in which they are raised. Whether an environment is predominantly Black
or White is under the control of parents or guardians. Once individuals grow older and graduate from high school, they can pick their own environment that they would like to be in during their college years. Of course, the environment in which individuals are raised may influence their preference regarding the type of environment in which they would like to attend college. Whether the individual chooses a predominantly Black population at a HBCU or a majority White population is bound to produce very different experiences. For example, academic performance and social interaction issues affect African American students that do not attend HBCUs. According to Cureton (2003), African American students who attended primarily Black primary and secondary schools and chose to attend predominantly White universities are asked to adjust into an unfamiliar environment, which could cause additional stress and pressure upon the students. On the other hand, African-Americans who attended majority Black primary and secondary schools who attend predominantly Black universities do not enter a new cultural environment. Race-related stressors for African American students, including the adjustment to predominantly White universities are significant predictors of psychological well-being. (Neville, Heppner, & Thye, 2004).

The type of university an African American student attends also affects self-esteem and friendship selection. Admission into college can be a stressful process in itself, but it can be even more stressful for African American students applying for admissions into a predominantly White institution. According to Sedlacek (1999), Black students may have a lower self-esteem if the institution accepts the student on the basis of “lower standards” compared to White students. By attending a predominantly African American university, students have the freedom to choose their friends without placing a lot of emphasis on their race (Harvey et. al, 2005). If an African American attends a predominantly White university, there will obviously be a smaller African American population. On the other hand, an HBCU will provide an opportunity for African-American students to place less emphasis on race, but essentially more emphasis on skin tone (Harvey et. al, 2005). For example, an African American male pursing a romantic partner at an HBCU would have less a choice between a Caucasian and African American female and more a choice between a dark skinned and light skinned female.

Dating is an issue that everyone encounters while attending college, regardless of whether it is an HBCU or a majority White university. When there is more of a variety of skin tones (such as at an HBCU), there is an opportunity to place more importance on skin tone when choosing a mate, as reported by Harvey et al. (2005). For example, African Americans at a predominantly White university may prefer to date people that are similar to themselves, a preference previously termed “homogamy” by Hughes and Hertel (1990), but the selection of African Americans is more limited than it would be at an HBCU.

Future research should explore the relationship between environment in which students are raised and the subsequent emphasis on skin tone in dating. For example, do individuals who were raised in a majority White community and now attend an HBCU place more or less emphasis on skin tone when looking for a mate? How does the upbringing of an individual who was raised in a majority White community differ from someone who was raised in a predominately Black community in relation to mate selection?
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**Mate Selection and Skin Tone**

Research has demonstrated that skin tone preference plays an important role in mate selection for males and females, especially among college-aged students (Ross, 1997). Selecting a mate is often a complex task that involves time and commitment. Hughes and Hertel (1990) discuss the idea that people often look for a mate with similar characteristics. Some of these similar characteristics include race, skin tone, background, socioeconomic status, and religion. On a similar note, an individual’s family and friends may have an influence on who individuals date by urging them to date people they consider acceptable (Hughes & Demo, 1989). For example, some parents may not allow their children to date outside of their race or religion. They may look down upon the relationship if their son or daughter is dating someone who has a darker complexion than theirs. This may be because of certain attributes they associate with different complexions or based on their personal experiences. Friends’ comments such as, “I can’t believe you are dating him/her; you can do much better than that,” may discourage someone from pursuing a relationship in which they are genuinely interested.

In mate selection, skin tone may be associated with advantages and disadvantages among African American women. It can be concluded that darker skinned African American women are at a disadvantage when it comes to marrying a high-status man, while lighter skinned African American women have the advantage (Hunter, 2002). Physical attractiveness is related to gender differences in mate selection. According to Ross (1997), men are more concerned with the physical attractiveness of a female while women are more concerned with the potential future success of the male. One can infer that this idea of potential success can affect one’s self-esteem. For example, a lighter skinned male may feel more confident going to a job interview knowing that he may have a better chance of being accepted for the position over a darker skinned male, so he may have a higher self-esteem.

Self-esteem is an important aspect to consider when discussing skin tone and dating in regards to the Black population. For instance, if a female is looking for a mate that will be extremely successful, a male’s self-esteem can be lowered if he feels as though he will not be able to live up to these expectations. The concept of homogamy brings about new ideas concerning skin tone preference and self-esteem. Self-esteem may be affected by homogamy if a person is rejected simply because his/her skin tone is not similar to the other person’s. For example, a darker skinned male may feel hesitant approaching a lighter skinned female in fear that he is not good enough for her, almost as if they are on two different playing fields. He may decide not to approach her in fear of getting rejected, which could ultimately lower his self-esteem.

Future research should investigate if individuals are attracted to mates that resemble one of their parents, either by physical traits or personality traits. For example, do people look for someone who has a similar skin tone of their parents in hopes of approval? Similarly, would a lighter skinned female feel more comfortable introducing her new love interest to her light skinned parents knowing that they all have skin tone in common? How much importance is placed on skin tone and how much is placed on other qualities such as personality or compatibility? For example, is skin tone weighed more heavily in comparison to personality or compatibility in a potential mate?
Conclusion

Skin tone is a very complex and multi-faceted subject, spreading across various aspects of life. The majority of the discrimination that takes place within the African American community stems from the way that individuals were treated in the time period pre-dating the Civil Rights era. This literature review investigated the issue of skin tone preferences, self esteem, mate selection, and types of universities affecting African American students. Future research should investigate if older generations have the same ideas concerning skin tone as younger generations. How does the upbringing of an individual who was raised in a majority White community differ from someone who was raised in a predominately Black community in relation to mate selection? Another important question would investigate whether individuals who were raised in a majority White community and now attend an HBCU place more or less emphasis on skin tone when looking for a mate. Finally, how much importance is placed on skin tone and how much is placed on other qualities such as personality or compatibility? In conclusion, the topic of skin tone is steadily evolving and will be relevant for years to come.
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