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# The Psycho-Social Impact of Colorism Among African American Women: Crossing the Divide

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**THE PSYCHO-SOCIAL IMPACT OF COLORISM AMONG AFRICAN  
AMERICAN WOMEN: CROSSING THE DIVIDE**

**PROFESSIONAL DISSERTATION**

**SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY**

**OF**

**THE SCHOOL OF PROFESSIONAL PSYCHOLOGY  
WRIGHT STATE UNIVERSITY**

**BY**

**LAUREN A. FULTZ, Psy.M.**

**IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE  
REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE  
OF  
DOCTOR OF PSYCHOLOGY**

**Dayton, Ohio**

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**WRIGHT STATE UNIVERSITY**  
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July 31, 2013

I HEREBY RECOMMEND THAT THE DISSERTATION PREPARED UNDER MY SUPERVISION BY **LAUREN A. FULTZ** ENTITLED **THE PSYCHO-SOCIAL IMPACT OF COLORISM AMONG AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN: CROSSING THE DIVIDE** BE ACCEPTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF PSYCHOLOGY.

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## **Abstract**

This study was designed to examine how colorism affects African American women. The phenomenon of colorism is not exclusive to African American women, but the manifestations on this group are diverse, and the effects are unique. Previous research has shown that the experience of colorism is pervasive within the Black community and that most Black women have been, either culturally or personally, affected by intra-racial discrimination. This body of work used a focus group to investigate the experiences of African American women that were categorized according to their self ascribed skin tone group. It specifically explored skin tone bias as a three-tiered variable in terms of intra-racial dynamics. The findings suggest that women of different hues have unique experiences based on their skin tone, and that these experiences influence how they feel about themselves, and how they interact with others. This research should inform the clinical work of future clinicians engaging with this population. It will hopefully stimulate critical discussions within academic forums that would promote further research and better understanding of this group's dynamics.

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I am because WE are.



## **THE PSYCHO-SOCIAL IMPACT OF COLORISM AMONG AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN: CROSSING THE DIVIDE**

### **Aim and Purpose**

Intra-group racism based on skin tone within the African American community is a pervasive form of discrimination, but it is rarely discussed openly. Almost every African American has an anecdotal story about colorism and is aware of its impact, but they are rarely given forums to discuss their collective experiences. These discussions, if they do occur, are more likely to take place in an informal or “behind closed doors” discussion. The present study will seek to bring that discussion to the light and examine the impact of colorism on African American women in their own words. Due to the covert nature of colorism discussion on the black community, many Caucasian Americans, including therapists are unaware of the intra-group discrimination that occurs. Parham, White, and Ajamu (2000) discuss the need for the field of psychology to be aware of the specific needs of African Americans. As a group, they have unique issues that may manifest in therapy. One such issue that requires more investigation is colorism in the black community.

Much of the research that has been done on racism focuses on inter-group racism, usually between the majority group and other minority groups. Of the subset of research that discusses intra-group racism, the impact on both light and dark skinned women and men has been investigated. The research has found that African American women tend to have more psychological effects from colorism than their male counterparts. It has also

shown that both light and dark skinned African American women experience discrimination based on skin tone, but the discrimination manifests in different ways. There are negative associations with being seen as either “too light” or “too dark” (Hill, 2002; Elmore, 2009; Wilder, 2010). This type of discrimination has resulted in tangible effects on the self esteem of African Americans, especially women. Dark skinned African American women, however, are especially vulnerable as stigma associated with darker skin creates more risk factors for body dissatisfaction (Elmore, 2009). Very little of the existing research includes the classification of brown skinned, or investigates the experience of medium toned women.

The goals of this dissertation research are three-fold: to investigate colorism as a phenomenon occurring within everyday settings and interaction; to place Black women’s voices and experiences at the center of analysis; and to produce culturally relevant knowledge about how African American women interact and feel about themselves and other members of their group. This information should inform recommendations for personal empowerment and social change. It should also illuminate group dynamics among African Americans, suggest therapeutic treatment goals, and provide topics of interest for culturally competent mental health care.

### **Definitions of Terms**

The terms Black and African American will be used interchangeably throughout this study when referring to light and dark skinned individuals who have two parents that identify as African American.

## **Background on Colorism**

Intergroup racism between Whites, as members of the dominant cultural group in the United States, and African Americans is a problem that has been studied by many investigators (Banks and Grambs 1972; Parham, White, and Ajamu, 2000; Asante 2005). Various studies have illustrated how racism affects psychological outcomes related to educational opportunities, achievement, psychological well-being, self-concept, and identity formation. Dobbins and Skillings (2000) demonstrate that racism affects the faulty identity perceptions of both the dominant group and non-dominant group. Their work also highlights how African Americans, being a group that is discriminated against, have created adaptive and maladaptive ways of responding to the discrimination often associated with racism. Critically, racism is such a powerful force that its negative effects operate as an oppressing force both within same race dynamics as well as cross racial dynamics (Burton, Bonilla-Silva, Ray, Buckelew, Freeman 2010; Glenn 2008; Glenn 2009)

In other articles on racism, Dobbins and Skillings (1999) discuss the issue of “color symbolism” which is the use of color to convey psychological meaning about what is positive or negative in many pre-colonial and postcolonial societies. For example, “angel food” cake is white and “devil’s food” cake is brown. Similarly, the “market” is good but the “black market” has a negative connotation and represents an underhanded and illegal means of trade. Thus, cultures assign value judgments to different hues that

can and have been linked with the color of one's skin in American society. Fears (1998) describes colorism as a bias based on the symbolic meaning of skin tone. Skin color and other cultural expressions are subject to color symbolism, and are used to designate that which is positive from that which is negative in culture. Within American post-colonial culture, darker skin has more negative associations. Brown (1998) and Clark (2007) assert that there are tangible drawbacks to having a darker skin tone in the black community and that colorism impacts African Americans in virtually every relevant domain. Said differently, colorism has been shown to negatively impact not only adults, but children and adolescents of both genders. Intra-group racism based on color is present in many cultures around the world and has a similar negative impact as other cross racial forms of racism. Intra-group racism within the African American community is a cause for concern as it affects self-concept, well-being, and overall life outcomes (Burton, 2010).

Within the African American community, colorism is a manifestation of internalized racism that affects both men and women. However, previous research suggests that internalized racism affects men and women, in different ways. African American males have been shown to be impacted by colorism; however the studies have shown that African American women are more likely to have an impact on self concept and self-esteem. In particular, several studies have explored the impacts of colorism on both light and dark skinned women (Anderson & Cromwell 1977; Elmore 2009; Fegley, Spence, Goss, Harpalani, & Charles 2008) in which it has been established that both groups experience discrimination based on their color. However, research demonstrates

that dark skinned women are more likely to have negative impacts on self esteem (Hughes & Hertel 1990; Keith & Herring 1991; Thompson & Keith 2001).

In domains that especially affect women, such as perceived attractiveness and mate selection opportunities, it is asserted by some researchers that a competitive dynamic has developed that has created an animosity between skin color groups. This dynamic is said to have its roots in the color symbolism associated with slavery and has been propagated in the community through internalized racialism ever since. It is presumed that this form of internalized racism and sexism has caused a division within the race, for both genders, but especially for women. As a result, power and privilege are crucial parts of the discussion on color discrimination. Similar to inter-group racism, the implication is that one group has power, privilege, and advantages over another. For a group of African American women, this is a result of not only racism, but the system of patriarchy as well. The color symbolism that traditionally associates darker skin with negative connotations is a consequence of living in post-colonial American society. The perception of attractiveness as a means of social capital for African American women has been innately related to their skin tone has its roots in patriarchy and devaluing the power and potential of women.

Of the research that has examined the impact of colorism on African American women, each of them has investigated light and dark skinned women separately. The current study attempts to compile a list of common experiences of African American women, and to discover patterns on interaction between women when discussing the impact of colorism on their lives. Although many researchers have looked at the impact of colorism on both light and dark skinned men and women, no study has brought women

of different hues together to examine their perceptions of each other. The current study seeks to investigate the experience of colorism for African American women of different hues, and explore the dynamic that might be created when African American women are brought together to address the age old taboo subject of colorism.

## **Literature Review**

### **Historical Context**

Colorism in America is a historical problem, rooted in slavery. It manifests in societal constructs and affects the ways in which African Americans view themselves and forms their identities. For many African Americans, color bias also informs how they interact with other members of their group. The perpetuation of colorism is the result of internalized racism and the impact of the majority culture on African Americans' perceptions of themselves. Russell, Wilson, and Hall (1992) assert that there is a color gap in privilege in the black community, and that it has historical roots in the mixed race sexual relationships of slaves and their masters. These unions created color imbalances/discrepancies, and a distance in privilege between lighter and darker skinned Africans in America. This social distance was compounded by the ideology of white supremacy that European colonists brought, which included the association of Blackness with primitiveness, lack of civilization, unrestrained sexuality, pollution, and dirt. (Glenn, 2008, p.284) Thus colorism is a phenomenon that deserves study and analysis, as it has impacted the internalization of century old racist practices.

Being conscious of one's color is a reality in the African American community. Glenn (2008) describes color consciousness in the African American community as a legacy of slavery, because the offspring of white men and slave women were accorded better treatment than "pure" Africans. Slave owners considered dark skinned people to be

better suited for harsh outdoor field work and their own, inherently lighter children, to be suited for house slave work. This furthered the perception that lighter skinned slaves were more intelligent and better suited for indoor work as servants and artisans. Lighter skinned African Americans were also more likely to receive at least basic education and in turn were afforded more opportunities. They went on to form the first free Black communities and were better prepared to survive outside of field work and share cropping. Many light skinned African Americans were able to achieve higher education. “After the civil war, light-skinned African Americans tried to distance themselves from their darker-skinned brothers and sisters, forming exclusive civic and cultural organizations, fraternities, sororities, schools, and universities (*Russell, Wilson, and Hall 1992, 24-40*)” (Glenn, 2008, p. 287).

Lake (2003) outlines the history of colorism in America beginning with its origins in slavery. Similar to many other authors, she identifies the beginnings of color consciousness in the inter-race sexual acts of masters and their slaves. With the birth of “mulattoes” in America, she identifies challenges in motherhood, in family systems, and division in the community. Lake uses this backdrop to enhance the understanding of the good hair-bad hair dissention in the Black community. She describes hair as a manifestation of color consciousness in America. She also details methods that women have gone through to overcome “kinky” hair from Madame C.J. Walker’s methods for straightening hair to current techniques in adding extensions. The author identifies the underlying theme as the belief in the Black community that whiteness is the standard of beauty; therefore, lighter skin and longer, silkier hair were preferential, even between siblings. The author also demonstrates that internalized racism has created negative



associations for African American women with traditional African features. The author also describes the extent to which Black women go through to remove those features which have garnered stigma in American society at large, but specifically within the Black community.

Fears (1998) described colorism as a pattern of interaction in which light skinned African Americans rejected Blacks who were darker, and the subsequent reaction in which darker skinned Blacks criticized their light skinned counter parts for not being “black enough”. She elaborated on the attitudes and beliefs associated with lighter skin, including the perception of light skinned Blacks as more intelligent and more attractive because their skin tone and hair texture more closely resemble Whites. Banks and Grambs (1972) highlight the impact of inter-group racism on African Americans and their self concept. They assert that racial prejudice has historically, and still, has a massive impact on the self concept of Black people. The authors also assert that racial socialization begins in childhood and impacts the future development of black children. If inter-group racism carries such an impact, it lends itself that intra-group racism would have a similar impact on racial identity and self-concept.

Akbar (1984) describes color consciousness as a psychological effect of American slavery. He defines color consciousness as the “unnatural assignment of mental or moral traits based upon physical skin color (p. 35).” In this work, he presents colorism as a “ghost” of slavery that haunts the African American community and contends that this deeply ingrained idea continues to persist in the culture. He describes an “unnatural equation” of traditionally Caucasian features with beauty, intelligence and authority and maintains that this belief is still relevant today. He also remarks that a disproportionate

number of professional, educated, and “so-called ‘beautiful’” African Americans have prominently Caucasian features. Throughout his exploration on the impact of slavery on the perceptions of African Americans, Akbar attempts to refute the widespread belief of inferiority related to darker skin. However, this disadvantaged and highly prejudicial view of darker skin tones and features still affects the Black community and manifests currently in a number of ways.

### **Discrimination**

Colorism quotes

*“Don’t play in the sun. You’re going to have to get a light-skinned husband for the sake of your children as it is.”*

(Glenn 2009, p. 25)

*“If you’re white, you’re right.  
If you’re yellow, you’re mellow.  
If you’re brown, stick around.  
If you’re black, get back.”*

(Maddox 1998, p.1)

Unfortunately, many African Americans have grown up hearing comments similar to these. This kind of socialization continues to perpetuate internalized racism and has affected the community by causing physical, psychological, emotional, educational, financial, and relational impacts on its members. Despite the one sided nature of the above comments, the impact of colorism can negatively impact people of any skin tone. Regardless of the lightness or darkness of skin, the experience of colorism has affected the majority of the members in this culture in some way. Cunningham (1997) describes a feeling of not belonging that many members of this group feel due to both intra and intergroup discrimination. Both light and dark skinned individuals experience prejudice

or discrimination not only from the majority culture, but also from within their own group. The discussion on “good vs. bad hair” is a concept that has sparked many discussions, fights on playgrounds, and a series of movies and books that address the issue. Light skinned individuals specifically wrestle with the history of having “some white in them” and what that means during their racial identity formation.

Cunningham (1997) specifically explores the experiences of light skinned African American women. The author found themes of feeling different than their friends, being influenced by what their families taught about color, and having been impacted by color variances within the family and the social composition of the neighborhood. Their skin tone also affected their choice of friends, produced differing experiences in adolescence, impacted their perceived identity by whites, and reflected encounters of blatant racism. Hughes and Hertel (1990) discuss the impact of colorism on multiple aspects of African Americans lives. It has been shown to impact mate selection, life chances, perceived self worth, attractiveness, and overall self esteem. The large body of research on African American women and colorism reflects the findings that Black women, rather than Black men has been shown to be impacted more heavily by colorism. Although light skinned Black women also suffer intra-group discrimination, Hughes and Hertel suggest that, “Afrotypic Black women have suffered most of the negative reactions while light complexioned, Eurotypic Black women have benefited the most (p. 30).” The implication of these studies is that the impact of colorism in the Black community is pervasive and universal, but that it most severely impacts women with darker complexions.

## **Developmental Etiology and Impact**

The following studies examine the effect of color discrimination during the period of adolescence. They differ from other studies on colorism in two notable ways. First, they explore the developmental effects of intra-racism. Secondly, they include a third category: brown or medium skin toned African Americans. In 1977, Anderson and Cromwell investigated the preferences of sixth grade students concerning skin tone. The students demonstrated high group identification by endorsing the "Black is beautiful" concept, which was a popular mantra at the time. Skin color preferences in the group, however, still tended in the direction of lighter skin. Their investigation found that some unity existed in the Black community surrounding the "Black is Beautiful" movement as the authors found evidence for positive group identification within the African American students. However, evidence of negative perceptions of blackness was found as well. The respondents associated darker skin with more negative attributes. The sample of sixth grade students preferred lighter skin tones and had more positive associations with lighter skin and light brown skin tones. When positive characteristics were evaluated by the group, light-brown was most highly endorsed. However, when negative characteristics were evaluated, the poles were more likely to be selected (i.e. very light and very dark skin tones). Within these extremes very dark, or black, was associated with negative characteristics more than lighter skin. The authors argue that, "Active skin color discrimination among Negroes should be dealt with and combated on a conscious level rather than 'pretending it does not exist.' This intra-racial discrimination may be a greater force against a 'positive blackness' concept among Negroes than the 'negative blackness' attitudes presently held in the white society" (p. 87).

Fegley, Spencer, Goss, Harpalani, and Charles (2008) discuss the impact of this group's perceptions of their bodies on how they perceive the world. The authors go on to describe how skin tone is a part of one's perception, and that it plays an important role during specific developmental periods like adolescence. During adolescence we become more aware of our bodies and our level of satisfaction can create consonance (a cohesive sense of self) or dissonance (a discrepant sense of self). Adolescents also come to understand race as a permanent fixture about themselves and become more aware of overt and subtle forms of both racism and colorism. The authors found that when comparing actual skin tone to an ideal or desired skin tone 1.) Adolescents with lighter skin were just as likely to be in the consonant group as the dissonant group; 2.) Adolescents in the medium skin tone group were more likely to be in the consonant group than their peers; and 3.) Adolescents with darker skin tones were more likely to be in the dissonant group than their peers. Similar to several other studies, brown or medium toned adolescents are more satisfied overall with their skin tones than either group at the extreme. This study demonstrates that regardless of skin tone, African Americans have differing experiences related to the hue of their skin.

Elmore (2009) echoes the process of meaning making that happens during childhood and adolescents. She explored a variety of developmental theories and then assessed how colorism would impact children in each level of development. The study was designed to investigate the impact of colorism on skin tone preferences, perceptions of skin tone, and identity in school age children. The author found that skin tone does have an impact on identity formation in African American adolescents. These students perceived those with lighter skin to receive preferential treatment from teachers, and the

brown or medium toned students had the highest levels of satisfaction with their skin tone. This speaks to the long lasting and lifelong impact that colorism has on developing adolescents, who then grow into impacted adults. Although there are a variety of resilience factors that kids can develop to help them cope with this discrimination, the more negative the experience is for the child, or group of children, the more likely they are to have negative life outcomes as adults and incongruent senses of self.

### **Racial Identity Formation**

Parham et al. (2000) argues that achieving identity congruence in the face of racist and oppressive elements represents a significant challenge for most African Americans. This chapter illuminates the obstacles that impede the development of identity congruence in African Americans. The authors assert that each African American should both consider and be able to answer three essential questions: “(1) Who am I?; (2) Am I who I say I am?; and (3) Am I who I ought to be?” They argue that when the core system of a Black personality is nurtured developmentally and in various situations through personal and institutional support systems, African Americans are able to achieve a full expression of basic traits (beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors) that create pride and a sense of connection with African cultural heritage. However, when that nurturance is not adequate or consistent, African Americans may struggle in developing their racial identity. But what happens when this support and affirmation is not given? For dark skinned individuals, this dissonance develops through ridicule and subjugation of their skin tone by those around them. When instead, one’s identity is constantly questioned and denigrated, as it tends to be for both dark and light skinned individuals, African

Americans struggle with incorporating skin color and healthy self esteem into their self concept.

Cunningham (1997) focused specifically on light skinned African Americans and the process of racial identity development for that group. She recruited participants based on their experience of colorism (i.e. not feeling black enough, being perceived as white, etc.). Her study explored the dynamics of racial identity formation in light skinned African Americans who had been mistaken for another ethnicity at some point in their lives. She examined the personal and subjective experiences this group and detailed the common themes. She found that people in this group experienced discrimination from the dominant culture, but they also faced discrimination from within the group.

One respondent, remembering the prejudice that occurred within her own family, asked, 'Why worry about White people being racist, we'll do it for ourselves.' Several others noted this particular brand of separatism: 'It was my people who didn't accept me,' and 'I was left on the outskirts' were among the comments made about being left out. This sense of exclusion has its roots in the origins of racism, but its result has been to fracture the relationship between lighter and darker Blacks. (p.398)

The authors words here highlights the challenges that light skinned African Americans experience during their racial identity development and understanding of themselves. Common themes included feelings of invisibility, not belonging, the effects of white racism, and the experience of color discrimination from other African Americans. The implication of this research is that light skinned African Americans have negative

experiences as a result of their skin tone that might cause further distance and dissention between light and dark skinned women.

Cunningham goes on to discuss the variety of challenges that light skinned women encounter. Although “passing” for white does not have the same benefits that it did during the time of segregation, the option is still available to many light skinned people. The advantages they have been afforded has caused resentment within the black community. This author illuminates the negative side of passing, in that it undermines the identity of an African American with lighter skin by creating a perception that light skinned African Americans have a lower level of identification with the black community. It also creates a space for racist comments to be exchanged, when they might not have if the African American had been identified as such. When a light skinned Black person is mistaken for a white person in an environment with other white people, those who engage in racist comments or jokes forces the light skinned person to either confront or ignore the comments. Their identity is likely to be challenged regularly, not just by the dominant culture, but also from those within their own group. This creates a unique place of “not belonging” for this sub group and can leave them feeling very isolated.

Both light skinned and dark skinned blacks must wrestle with the fact that one can look White but be Black. The research on racial identity focuses specifically on lighter skinned African Americans in relation to the dominant culture. A possible reason for this is the tendency to ascribe people into categories based on their appearance. Lighter skinned African Americans can have more ambiguous phenotypic traits, and are then likely to be incorrectly classified. Banks and Grambs (1972) assert that this classification can occur regardless of skin tone, and can cause difficulty in identity



development. According to Banks and Grambs, “A person in our society validates his identity through evaluations of ‘significant others (p. 7).” However, the average Black American, either light or dark skinned, has never been able to establish social or self-identity that is comparable in terms of social valuation to that of the white majority. The ideal self in American has been made synonymous with Caucasians (Banks and Grambs 1972, p. 7).” These experiences, for most African Americans, begin from an early age. African Americans are, therefore, likely to have specific needs in therapy relative to their experience of colorism.

### **Life Outcomes**

Keith and Herring (1991) explored the relationship between achievement and skin tone. They argued that skin tone can more significantly limit both opportunity and achievement than more salient factors like age, sex, or income. Skin color can also be a more consequential predictor of income than even parental socioeconomic status. The authors demonstrated the disparities between those with lighter skin and those with darker skin. The results showed a positive correlation between lighter skin and higher educational attainment. The data also showed that darker African Americans are almost twice as likely to be a laborer or machine operator as their light skinned counter parts. Conversely, lighter African Americans are almost twice as likely as their darker counterparts to be in a more professional occupation. The results also clearly demonstrated that both individual and family income increased as skin became lighter. In domains of education, income, and vocation, lighter complexioned African Americans had a significant advantage. This disparity is measurable in other areas as well. Klonoff and Landrine (2000) investigated darker complexioned individuals’ rates of hypertension

and found that darker complexioned African Americans are more likely to experience racist events and are more likely to develop hypertension. The implication is that lighter skinned individuals have better health outcomes in some domains.

Keith (2009) describes the intimate familiarity that African American women have with discriminatory phrases based on their color. She argues that complexion, along with other Eurocentric features have been accorded higher status both within and outside the African American community, and that those with more Afrocentric features have historically been devalued. This ranking has created the perception of those with lighter skin as more attractive and more intelligent. A person with a lighter complexion, then, is likely to have been afforded advantages in areas of status and achievement, but also in psychological aspects such as self-worth, perceived attractiveness, and overall quality of life. Conversely, darker skinned African Americans had been shown to have been negatively impacted in education levels, occupation status, and overall income. It should be noted that blacks of all hues are likely to face obstacles to advancement or achievement, but those with darker skin might generally experience more difficulties than their lighter counterparts. The results of this study did show, however, that for higher income women, skin color was less influential in self evaluation, implying that women who are perceived to be unattractive learn how to compensate in other ways (i.e. achievement).

### **Media Representation**

Fears (1998) investigated how both light and dark skinned African American women are represented in media images. Much of the research that has been done concerning African American women in media representations has been concerned with

their character themes, the roles they represented, or their absence in certain advertisements all together. Previous research that did involve colorism found that lighter skinned women, or women with more Eurocentric features, were more likely to be featured in editorial photos and advertisements from the 60s through the 90's. Despite the revolutions and social unrest at the time, advertisements still tended to favor lighter, more Eurocentric features and models. The author found that the more current images of black women in editorials tended to represent a balanced view of African American women, including both light and dark skinned women. However, she also found that although representations tended to be more balanced in editorials, descriptors such as "pretty, lovely, and beautiful" were substantially more likely to be paired with images of lighter, more Eurocentric looking women. The author goes on to suggest that editorials, newspapers, and magazines were significantly more likely to depict more balanced images than any other media, including print advertisements and television commercials.

Conrad, Dixon, and Zhang (2009) explored the impact of rap videos on the body image of African American women. Rap videos, and media images in general are more likely to contain images of idealized African American women, who tend to have lighter skin (Keenan 1996; Akbar 1984; Wilder 2009). Conrad et al. demonstrated that African American women with weaker levels of ethnic identification were more likely to have a less positive body image, more body dissatisfaction, more drive for thinness, and more bulimic action tendencies. The implication is that images containing idealized women have an impact on satisfaction with one's own body image in some African American women. Dixon and Maddox (2005) investigated news watchers' perceptions of suspected criminals based on skin tone. They found high correlation to darker skin with perception

of danger of the perpetrator and sympathy for the victim. The darker the perpetrator who was shown in the news story, the more discomfort the news watchers reported feeling. The implication is that the association between dark skin and dangerousness, as well as many other negative constructs, is still prevalent in American society and continues to be perpetuated by media outlets.

### **Attractiveness**

In the discussion on the impact of colorism on African American women, the issue of perceived attractiveness is unavoidable. Despite the other factors that affect both light and dark skinned women, the constructs of attractiveness and desirability are central. Unfortunately, the current literature does not distinguish issues unique to LGBT populations, and the following literature review is written from a heterosexual perspective. Hunter (2002) found that light skinned women have better life outcomes, higher income, and spouses with higher social status. Russell, Wilson, and Hall (1992) candidly discuss the historical and social discord created by ascribing standards of beauty to those with lighter skin and what is considered to be the “inevitable resentment” that develops. *The Color Complex* explores the tension that develops between African American women of different shades and highlights the complexities of this relationship within family, dating, and social contexts. The historical perception of women with lighter complexions as more attractive to men still pervades the African American culture and has an impact on how both light and dark skinned women view themselves. According to the Keith (2009), “colorism affects both genders, but the complexion hierarchy is more central in the lives of women than men (p. 26).” In a society where

whiteness of skin is highly valued as a dimension of beauty, dark skinned African American women are at a disadvantage.

Glenn (2008) suggests that one way of conceptualizing skin color is as a form of symbolic capital that affects, if not determines, one's life chances. The relation between skin color and judgments about attractiveness affect women most acutely, since women's worth is judged heavily on the basis of appearance. For example, men who have wealth, education, and other forms of human capital are considered "good catches," while women who are physically attractive may be considered desirable despite the lack of other capital (p.282). This article approaches mate selection from a heterosexual perspective and illuminates the methods by which women around the world have suffered discrimination and sought to change their appearance to increase their social capital. The author outlines the experience of colorism in multiple areas around the world including: South Africa, North America, India, East Asia, and Mexico. Essentially, the desire for lighter skin is present in several countries around the world, but it is especially prevalent among young, educated, urban women in America. The author goes on to explain that media images have increased women's desire to lighten their skin, and that this has created a lucrative market for companies who create skin bleaching products.

Hill (2002) investigated gendered aspects of colorism to determine if the perception of attractiveness pervaded across genders in African Americans. The majority of the research done on colorism and African Americans has been primarily concerned with women, especially when measuring the perception of attractiveness. Distinguishing his study from previous research, the author examined perceptions of attractiveness for both males and females based on skin color. He found a significant relationship between

lighter skin and higher perceived attractiveness in African American women. Of the five hues of women that were shown to participants, the lightest category was rated the highest in perceived attractiveness. For African American men, the second lightest, or “light brown” hue was rated as most attractive. The results showed that skin color was the second strongest predictor of attractiveness to members of the opposite sex, second only to weight. This research demonstrated the impact of skin tone on perceived attractiveness. It also demonstrated a preference for lighter skinned women in mate selection by African American males, which might contribute to animosity and competition within the cohort of African American women.

### **Mate Selection**

Coard, Breland, and Raskin (2001) investigated the perception of one’s skin tone desirability in mate selection for African American men and women. This study demonstrated that African American men believe their female counterparts prefer men with darker skin, regardless of what their own skin tone was. Conversely, African American women in this study expressed a belief that their male counterparts preferred lighter complexions in companions. This belief emphasizes the residual effects of gender and color dynamics that were perpetuated in slavery. The darker male is perceived to be more sexual, more aggressive, and the lighter female is perceived to be more attractive and more desirable. One interesting implication of this study is that the opposite gender did not actually prefer the light or dark skinned companion respectively. The tendency for both genders was a preference for a medium or brown toned partner. The perception of potential mate preferences was flawed for both genders. The implication is that women who do not fit into the category they believed potential mates preferred (those with darker

skin) are at a higher risk for suffering from low self esteem. This demonstrates one reason why darker complexioned African American women are more likely to suffer from low self esteem than their lighter counterparts.

Parks and Woodson (2002) described the impact of historical, societal, and familial perpetuation of colorism on dark skinned women. They demonstrated the continuation of this discrimination through preferential treatment of those with a “good” hair texture and lighter complexions. The authors contend that light skin color “has become a criterion for the attainment of prestige within the African American and Euro-American communities (p.250).” They cite research which demonstrated that light skinned individuals fare better economically, financially, and vocationally. The authors go on to connect skin tone to preferential mate selection in the African American community. The significantly disproportionate ratio of available black men to women is highlighted and used to illuminate the difficulty in being selected as a mate for dark skinned African American women. This causes significant numbers of African American women to be single longer, and the authors suggest that this may be a relevant concern for African American women in therapy. They go on to suggest therapeutic implications and interventions for African American women facing struggles with mate selection.

### **Self-Esteem**

While many dark complexioned African Americans view their skin color positively and consider it a source of pride, Coard et al. (2001) suggests that others are ambivalent and may view their blackness as a “mark of oppression”. Conversely, many light complexioned African Americans, who are regarded as more attractive, have been belittled because they do not look or act “black enough”. Thompson and Keith (2001)

explain that issues of skin color and physical attractiveness are closely linked. Because expectations of physical attractiveness are applied more heavily to women across all cultures, stereotypes of attractiveness and color preference are more profound for Black women. This has led to an impact on overall self esteem in African American women based on their perceptions of the evaluations of others. Thompson and Keith go on to discuss the impact of limited opportunities on the self-efficacy of both dark skinned African American men and women. The authors found that skin color was a more accurate predictor of perceived self-efficacy in men, and self-esteem in women. The results demonstrated that clinical populations of dark skinned African American women tend to have problems with self-worth and confidence. The study also found that Black women expect to be judged on their skin tone, and women who identify as dark skinned have more negative expectations of how they will be perceived. The long term impact of this skin tone bias is another way in which frequent color discrimination can have an impact on one's self-esteem.

Falconer and Neville (2000) investigated overall body satisfaction of African American female college students. They found that there is a correlation between skin tone and body satisfaction. Dissatisfaction with one's color lead to dissatisfaction with one's overall appearance, regardless of other features (i.e. weight or ethnic identification). The author implies that higher internalization of the external standards of beauty causes women to be more critical of their bodies over all (i.e. hips, lips, and thighs). The composition of the sample, on average, perceived themselves to be light skinned. The results indicate that light skinned African American women may have impacts on self esteem due to self comparison with societal norms of beauty, either other



light skinned African American women (in-group) or Caucasian women (out-group). The impact on African American women is an issue that may be a relevant concern in therapy. Parker (2008) suggests that the impact of colorism is so profound on black women that special consideration should be given to it in therapeutic interventions. The author proposes that colorism should be considered in order to increase cultural competence and effectively intervene with this population.

### **Similar Previous Studies**

The research has shown that colorism has a negative impact on members of the African American community. It also identifies African American women as an especially vulnerable population, although women of different hues have been shown to have different experiences of that in-group discrimination. Much of the research references the negative impact of colorism on dark skinned African American women; however, there are several studies that have investigated the negative impact of colorism on light skinned African American women as well. Many of the studies have also looked at either light or dark skinned women separately and made inferences about the impact on both groups from the results. Some of those studies have done quantitative analyses of light and dark skinned women's experience. Only a handful of the studies on colorism have sought to do a qualitative or mixed study. Pearson-Tammell (2010) is one such study. She conducted interviews with 10 self identified dark skinned African American women to determine the extent to which colorism had an impact on self esteem and the resiliency factors that were able to help some women maintain self esteem in the face of discrimination.

The present study differs from previous research in several ways. It will include groups of light, brown, and dark skinned women, exploring three-tiered model of color stratification as opposed to the binary structure traditionally associated with colorism. It will consist of a group discussion rather than an interview format and it will bring the

three groups together in discussion rather than conducting single group processes. The current study will also utilize a qualitative design through which, the group discussion will provide the data. Chiefly, it will seek to identify themes or shared experiences of women of different hues. The design of the study allowed the investigator to find themes in the discussion by having the members of each group convey their experiences to the others. Through the process, the findings should also make an observation of how the women interact with women who are from a different hue, if at all.

Wilder (2009) stated that through a focus group method of data collection, the researcher allows participants to “feed off of each other”, building upon and reacting to the responses of others. In addition, focus groups are a quick and easy way to get at data. They can be assembled on a relatively short notice, making them flexible and efficient. Because of the open-response format, focus groups can produce vast and varied amounts of information (Wilder, 2009, p. 41). The discourse on colorism continues to be important because for so many years, it was marginalized and clandestine which created economic inequality, dictated romantic partner choices, and shaped socialization of children. Group forum discussion is then crucial to bring light to this important issue. The focus group forum is then the ideal method to bring about group discussion on shared experiences. Research also shows that there are unique challenges that are created for African American women when they perceive themselves to be less attractive, or to have less privilege and power, than their peers. Similarly, an animosity or tension has the potential to develop toward those considered to be in the preferred group. The present study seeks to decrease tensions between groups to allow for open dialogue about each woman’s experience.

Wilder (2009), conducted a pilot study to research how women of varying skin tones would interact with each other. After conducting the pilot focus group in April 2005, it became apparent that women who possessed similar skin tones felt more comfortable sharing their experiences with each other as opposed to a mixed group of women who had varying skin tones. For instance, if a dark-skinned black woman made a derogatory comment about a light-skinned woman, the woman with the lighter skin tone was less apt to feel comfortable and likely to become less vocal during the focus group session. The same reasoning applied in the reverse case (light skinned comment to dark skinned discomfort). To gather the data she needed, Wilder made the focus groups as homogenous as possible. The present study is methodologically different in that it intended to explore the various ways, and the extent to which, African American women are impacted by colorism through observation of interaction between the groups. In order to accomplish that aim, the present study brought these groups together in order to examine the interaction between the light and dark skinned women. This group is also unique from any other study of its kind in that it included a third group: brown or medium toned Black women.

Morgan (1997) writes, “The hallmark of focus groups is their explicit use of group interaction to produce data” (p.2). The focus group has several advantages over individual interviews, one of which is expected to be an explicit investigation on the experience of colorism, but it should also create the opportunity to reflect on interaction styles when women of different hues talk about color. This method was expected to be especially impactful according to Wilder (2009), because Black women have historically gathered together in family groups, churches, and other places to share stories and to help

each other cope with the multiple oppressions of race, class, and gender. These groups also serve as a domain to give space and voice to the *collective memory* of black womanhood. She asserts that collective memory shapes identity, interaction, and experience. Focus groups, therefore, are “an ideal method in getting at both the individual and collective experiences of black women” (Wilder, 2009, p. 42).

## **The Current Study**

The following is an analysis of divergent and convergent discourse and rhetoric around the area of color discrimination. The belief is that power differences created within group privilege based on color would produce perceptions and apperceptions of the out group. This study is designed to investigate the groups' self-perceptions, and their perceptions or misperceptions of the out-group.

As a medium toned African American woman in her mid-twenties, I am not exempt from experiences of colorism or perceptions of the other groups. My identity as a brown skinned woman has shaped my understanding of race and the politics of skin tone in the African American community. Having friends and family members of varying hues, I have engaged in many informal discussions on colorism, privilege, and discrimination. I have also experienced both discrimination and privilege based on my skin tone. I was eager beginning this project to have women speak from their own experiences, not only to add to the body of literature, but also to increase my own understanding of issues around skin tone bias. The research team for the current study included three women of different hues, who gave their perspective on the data and assisted with note taking and coding of themes to control for potential researcher biases. The following data represents the experiences of the participants to the best of our ability to capture it.

## **Methods**

This study is designed to investigate the experiences that African American women have around discrimination based on their color. It is hypothesized that participants would have similar experiences as women and as African Americans, and that experiences would be relatively similar within same hue groups. The participants were also expected to have differing experiences between groups, as their experience of colorism is likely to have impacted them in different ways. This study examined how African American women of different hues have understood themselves and women of different hues. Previous research has shown that skin tone affects self perception. It also shows that self-perception affects relations with others. The current study will seek to investigate how experiences of skin tone bias affects relations with others. The skin tone of the participants is then the independent variable. Self perception is a moderating variable. The dependent variable, or the construct being investigated, are the experiences of each group and the effect skin tone has on group interaction or the process of relating to members of the out-group, which is expected to be influence by their own experiences of colorism.

In order to encourage dialogue on their own experiences, reduce potential defensiveness, and facilitate interaction with the other groups, the participants were asked to engage in an activity to express personal experiences that were especially impactful. It was expected that the women would give voice to their varied experiences, interact during this exercise, and gain a greater understanding of the out-groups (either light, brown, dark skinned women). The women in the study then participated in a focus group discussion to elaborate on their experiences. The focus group method employed a group

process that generated and encouraged expression and interaction between groups. It was designed primarily to investigate what the differing experiences of colorism have been, and then secondarily to explore how African American women talk about their experience of colorism through group interaction.

**Procedures.** This qualitative study brought together a sample of six African American women of different hues to give voice to their experiences of colorism. The women engaged in an exercise designed to reduce potential defensiveness and to elicit their experiences of discrimination based on skin tone. They were then asked to engage in a group discussion on their experience.

**Population.** Participants: A sample of six African American female college students who attended a large, Midwestern, predominately white university attended the study. Up to 14 participants volunteered, but eight of them withdrew before the group discussion. The ages of the participants ranged from 24 to 40. They all currently live in the Midwest, but several were originally from other parts of the country. The group broke down so that there were two women in each category (light, brown, and dark skinned). Inclusion criteria required the women to self identify as African American and to have parents that both identify as African American. This inclusion criteria was set specifically as such because the effects of colorism on bi-racial women, Latina, Asian, Indian, African, and first generation immigrants vary greatly and were beyond the scope of this research. Participants must have also been age 18 and up, as not to confound with data on adolescents.

Although the participants were a convenience sample, certain controls were either coincidental or built in to the group as a result of the selection pool and the requirements



of the study. The group consisted of all women, who identified as African American, and had two parents who identified as African American. They also had attained a certain socioeconomic status, as they were all college educated. Most of the women had at least a Bachelor's degree; others were in pursuit of an undergraduate degree. This group then also represents a certain level of education and presumed intelligence. All of the women in the group were able-bodied as well. As far as skin tone, the researcher controlled for color variation to some degree by ensuring all hues were represented. Lastly, variation in the skin tone of the group leaders and note taker were built-in controls to facilitate discussion.

***Recruitment.*** In order to recruit participants, the primary investigator approached Black organizations on campus (i.e. BSU, NPHC, NAACP, African American Studies majors) to recruit potential candidates for this study. (Advertisement can be seen in Appendix A) The advertisement included the researchers e-mail address and interested participants were asked to e-mail the researcher in order to participate. This method of recruitment was designed to help protect the anonymity of the participants as it would not require a public sign-up sheet. The interested participants then filled out the Demographic questionnaire (Appendix B) by Wilder (2009), and return it by e-mail. This was to ensure that all groups were adequately represented for the study.

This study required IRB approval due to the use of human subjects. The participants were informed that their responses in the group would be confidential. They received an explanation of that confidentiality before the process began (see Appendix C). Each participant was required to sign an Informed Consent to participate in the study. The members of the group were given the opportunity to withdraw from the study after

reviewing the activity for the day and the foreseeable risks associated. The informed consent statement, (Appendix C) detailed the purpose of the study and included other factors required by IRB. To ensure the anonymity of the participants, they were given pseudonyms for all collected records and written material. The group was audio and video recorded to assist with transcription. A note taker was also present to help facilitate the recording process. Any notes that could identify the participants were destroyed once the data had been collected, coded, and sanitized. The note-taker and co-facilitator assisted in transcription of the activity and the condensing of themes. Students were referred to the Wright State University Counseling and Wellness Center and another local community mental health for follow up care.

*Activities.* Participants were given a brief introduction to the discussion and reviewed the informed consent form as a group. After each participant signed the form, the group was given instructions on how to complete the diversity walk. During the diversity walk, the participants that identified with each group (light, brown, and dark skinned women) walked approximately 5 yards across a classroom, turned to face the remaining participants, and told the other group the words, names, or phrases that they never wanted to hear again related to their skin tone. During this time, the group who was listening was to remain silent (Directions given to the group can be found in Appendix D). The goal of the activity was for voices to be heard; therefore dialogue was not permitted. The women should then have been able to speak their truth based on their own experience, with the knowledge that no one could interrupt or contradict their truth. They were also given the ability to speak until they felt heard, with the understanding that people would hear it in different ways based on their own variables.

After the exercise, participants sat down with the interviewer for a semi-structured focus group discussion on what they had experienced. The questions in Appendix E were used to facilitate discussion. The last 15 minutes of the discussion were set as a debriefing for the members of the group. They were also offered a chance to speak with the interviewer privately afterwards to discuss any lingering issues. The group was also given ground rules for the discussion to ensure that people continued to feel comfortable during experience.

The discussion questions were chosen to address the experience of the activity on the three levels. The first was an emotional level, and the women were asked to reflect specifically on what they were **feeling** during the exercise. The next level was **reflection**, so the women were then asked to comment on the process of participating in the diversity walk. The last level addressed the **action** or change mechanism. The women were then asked what action they, or women that looked like them, needed to take. The goal of this exercise was to assess the impact of Colorism on the participants and their perceptions of the “other” through discussion of their experiences and interaction with the out-group. This multi-layered approach to discussion allowed for more open communication.

**Design.** The design for collecting the qualitative data is below. To facilitate discussion the facilitator took the group apart (divided them by skin tone) for the activity, and then put the group back together for the discussion. As a result, several subgroups were created.

A	B/C
B	A/C
C	A/B

A-B-C
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The single letter groups represent a skin tone group (A=light, B=brown, C=dark). The groups were separated from the others, one at a time, during the diversity walk. The resulting participants created different subgroups. They are important to note as the make-up of each subgroup is appeared to have different experiences and different stimulus values. Once the participants reassembled as a large group, the dynamics of group A-B-C were created and explored.

There were two theme levels that were examined during the discussion:

1. Within group convergent and divergent themes
2. Between group convergent and divergent themes

Said differently, common themes for group A, B, and C were assembled separately. Then those themes were contrasted against themes from the other groups. It was expected that members of the same group would have some experiences in common, and that their experiences would differ to some degree, despite the fact that they identified with the same skin tone group. It was also expected that the experiences between groups would be different, but that there would also, and more importantly, be some overlap or shared experiences across groups. The focus group discussion should have also pulled out, or affirmed themes from the diversity walk activity, and further illuminated how the groups interact with each other.

## **Findings**

To determine the findings, the raw data was first coded by the primary investigator and the transcriptionist. Three themes were pulled from the data for each group and are listed below. A structure analysis of the process was informally conducted and is also discussed below.

**Coding of Responses.** Using the transcription of the activity, the raw data was coded using the constant comparison method as described by Glazer and Strauss (1967). Each statement, line by line, was compared to the statement immediately preceding and following by asking questions like “What is this statement about?” and “How is it different from the previous statement?” This method produced a summary of responses that are displayed in Appendix G. Responses of the group were coded by theme. Through the process of repeatedly examining the data, statements were placed into one of the broad theme categories, and highlights are discussed below. Transcribed discussion will not be published to maintain the anonymity of the participants.

**Themes.** There were a varying number of themes that were specific to each group. However, the sample size was too small to pull out divergent themes within groups. The convergent themes within groups are presented here:

### ***Group A themes***

- Achievements reduced or devalued due to complexion and perceived attractiveness, resulting negative assumptions made about character
- Desire to be seen as an individual and not a stereotype
- Relationships with significant others affected by skin tone

### ***Group B themes***

- Feeling ambiguous or unclassified
- Playing the “peacemaker” between light and dark skinned friends
- Desire to be lighter or darker at different points

### ***Group C themes***

- Feelings of being unattractive or invisible
- Beauty/attractiveness being determined by complexion - “Pretty for a dark skinned girl”
- Childhood trauma around color – taunted at school, physically assaulted based on color

### ***Group A-B-C themes***

#### ***Convergent themes between groups.***

- Mate selection moderated by skin tone
- Interpersonal relationships affected by color bias
- Feeling invisible

***Group analysis.*** The group discussion was meant to process the diversity walk activity. A review of the group video and transcriptions allowed affirmation and repetition of diversity walk themes. It also allowed observation of group interaction styles. 3 themes were noted:

- Impact of colorism on self (self-esteem, personality characteristics)

- Impact of colorism on peers (perceptions of the “other”)
- Impact of colorism on relationships (group identification, treatment/interactions with others, responsiveness from family members)

There were also several interaction patterns that emerged during the discussion. The first is that through observation of the focus group’s physical structure, it was noted that although the participants were no longer required to group by skin tone, they sat close to the women who shared their same skin tone. Another important observation is that the participants made multiple references to childhood experiences, implying that discussions on colorism evoke earlier experiences, which are likely to dictate or mediate how women in this group felt about and interact with people from the out group. The participants were also willing and open in speaking to their own experience of color bias or discrimination. They spoke candidly about their biases and perceptions of the members of the out group, despite the perception of animosity or tension between groups, indicating that the exercises was effective in reducing group tension and personal defensiveness. During the group discussion, every woman that participated in the group had an emotional reaction, reinforcing that colorism and skin tone discrimination have profound impacts on one’s emotional and psychological well-being. Specifically, pain was a common theme, and usually centered around mistreatment of themselves or someone close to them. It should be noted that the experience of pain associated with skin tone bias was not unique to any one skin tone group.

## **Discussion and Limitations**

This study utilized a small sample of women to represent the greater experience of African American women. Despite the small sample size, it will, no doubt, provide useful information to clinicians who service African American women. It should also encourage further research into areas of intersecting diversity variables. This study highlighted the unique experiences and patterns of interactions between women of different hues. Overall, the results showed that African American women have unique experiences based on their skin tone, but also that their experiences as women of color were similar in many ways. The group also demonstrated that their experiences have influenced how they have interacted with women of different hues throughout their lives. Based on the findings of this study, it appears that African American women do interact with members of the out-group in ways that reflect their own personal experience of colorism. It can also be suggested that skin color and messages about skin color influence how women see themselves.

### **Group A**

The women in this group had varied experiences, but their overall experience included three themes. The first is that their achievements had been reduced or denigrated due to their complexion or perceived level of attractiveness. As a group, they felt that



people made assumptions about their character, based solely on their complexion. They also reported feeling animosity from their darker skinned counterparts, which has influenced the way they relate to both dark and light skinned African Americans and people of other races. The women in this group also desired to be seen as individuals and not as a stereotype. They wanted the group to understand that although some women born with similar phenotypic traits utilize them as a form of social capital, not all women with lighter skin act that way. There was a point for the members of this group where they began to resent their “socially desirable” features, as the perception of those features had an impact on their relationships with significant other (friends, romantic partners, family members). Women in this group also reported that they have been racially misclassified (Bi-racial, Hispanic, Caucasian) at some point, or had their racial identification questioned based on skin tone.

### **Group B**

This group has frequently been excluded from the literature and in the discussion on colorism in general. The group members expressed that they have often felt ambiguous or unclassified, as if they didn't belong in a discussion on color, as if their experiences didn't count. They remarked on the difficulty of not having a voice on such an important issue, and being delegated to playing the “peacemaker” between friends or family members because they were able to see both sides of the debate. This group reflected that they either felt caught in the middle or invisible in issues of color bias, which was invalidating to their own experience. These feelings of ambiguity often lead to the desire to be darker or lighter at different points in their lives. In a certain sense, being a medium skin tone has been considered a “safe” shade of brown, as it does not garner

the same animosity that exist at the poles. However, the women in this group reported often feeling helpless, especially when they were witness to the discrimination within their own families. This does not mean, however, that they were exempt from discrimination. This group reported being the recipient of slurs about their skin tone from lighter counterparts, a feeling of distance and rejection from their darker counterparts, and having uniquely unsatisfying experiences in mate selection.

### **Group C**

The themes of the group of darker skinned women most closely the findings in previous literature. The primary theme for this group was feeling unattractive or invisible. These women expressed that their reality has demonstrated society's susceptibility to color symbolism, and that it does indeed have an effect on the psyche and relationships of women with darker skin. For these women, they reported that their beauty or attractiveness was often mediated by their complexion. They also reported experiencing a "strike system" within which, they felt the need to mediate their color with positive characteristics (i.e. hair length, hair texture, body size). During the discussion, the women in this group repeatedly stated the commonly heard backhanded compliment "You're pretty for a dark skinned girl." Each woman was able to reflect on her own experience of colorism and recalled specific childhood trauma that was associated with color. This group also responded with a noticeable amount of affect. The women in this group acknowledged the effects on their self-esteem and self-perception as they matured. Despite the societal messages they received, another common experience is that they were validated at home, and felt that they had developed a healthy and complete view of themselves as adult women.

## **Between Group**

The between group themes were especially illuminating in the understanding of African American women's experience of colorism. Each of the participants remarked that the awareness of color discrimination or bias begins early in childhood and the painful feelings associated with that (namely the experience of feeling different). The group also agreed that the catharsis this exercise provided was helpful in examining issues each thought they had "gotten over." Many of the experiences they described were painful or had an emotional attachment. Through this discussion came the realization that colorism is not a dead issue, either personally or in society. The group remarked about color competitions at HBCU's (awards for lightest and darkest skin), light skinned parties, and the use of bleaching creams. The group also identified family members who were "color struck", or who had specific biases based on color. Almost every woman identified a younger family member that was currently being affected by colorism, even if it were just by seeing them compared to family members of different hues, and giving preferential treatment to children with lighter skin.

There were a number of reflections that the group members made during the group discussion. The group also had several reactions to the process itself. The first, and most widely held reflection, was to be seen as a unique individual, and not be defined by skin tone. They were also able to identify ways that they themselves, or people close to them, had been color struck (having an aversion to or preference for lighter skinned people). Another common realization throughout the groups was the unawareness of the issues of the other groups. Women of lighter and darker hues reflected that they didn't know much about the struggles or discrimination that the out-groups had faced. The

women had a back and forth exchange about their experiences, very likely trying to explain that each group experiences pain. Although the medium skin tone group was relatively quiet when compared to the other two, there was an acknowledgement that brown skinned women have unique challenges. Another common experience that the group of lighter and darker women reported was the impact of the actual action of walking across the room, having been physically separated, and looking back at a presumably hostile group that looked very different than them. Group A and C remarked that they came into the discussion “ready to fight” or ready to defend their experience; however, the diversity walk allowed a wall to come down and gave them the opportunity to see the other groups’ perspective.

The group was asked to reflect on their feelings and reactions to the exercise, but they were also asked about what actions they felt like they might take, or would be able to take as a result of this discussion. They described the resiliency factors they had each developed, and the healthy and unhealthy ways they had coped with their childhood trauma (choosing friends based on color, mistreatment of others based on color, and empowering and supporting younger family members). Many of the women noted the importance of therapy to address potential childhood trauma. There was also a desire to be an advocate for darker skinned women who have may have less power and privilege in society. During the discussion, they found unity through their experiences of inter-group racism. One way in which the women began to take action is by the process of actually engaging with women they considered different from themselves. They also took the initiative to directly ask the out-groups “has this been your experience?”, and they did so with a genuine curiosity, interest, and respect. Overall, as black women, of any shade,

they consider themselves to be survivors as being a minority in this culture comes with its own set of challenges.

In an attempt to increase self-efficacy and empowerment of this group, they women were asked to self identify as light, brown, or dark skinned. Allowing the women to self identify was crucial to the process of speaking from their own experience, as arbitrarily dividing the group or giving an objective measure of skin tone would not have reflected their experiences. It is also likely to have perpetuated the experience of being labeled and put into a box that the women expressed. Creating three groups was also a crucial part of this experiment, as the brown or medium toned women has unique experiences which deviated in specific ways from the other groups. Most importantly, the division into three groups identified difficulties and discrimination across color groups, and demonstrated that Black women, regardless of skin tone, have experiences of discrimination. What the women described as being most enlightening from the exercise was that being Black encompasses all shades. There was also an acceptance of bi-racial people, with the understanding that they may have different experiences. The end result of the group discussion was “feeling heard” and the belief that we to have more discussions like this to address issues of color bias because “hurt people hurt people.”

Some observation about the group experience from an observer perspective may be also important to mention as part of this discussion. Many of the women remarked that hair is elemental in their perception by others. Another underlying subject was the reported abuse that children suffer based solely on skin tone. Both light and dark skinned women reported that they were physically assaulted at some point in their lifetime based on their skin tone. For the dark skinned women especially, having familiar negative

comments reflected back to them from group A evoked emotion and resentment, which they identified dating back to childhood taunts on the playground. Each group of women described their feelings toward the out-group as “coming from a real place of hurt.” Many of the women also remarked that in order to engage in this activity, they had to overcome a fear of being attacked by the out group. Significant animosity was present, especially between the light and dark skinned groups. One notable observation was the frequent reassurance that the disdain they sometimes feel is not against all light or dark skinned women respectively. Rather, the anger or frustration is pointed at society for assigning color symbolism, and not allowing them to be the beneficiaries. This interaction strongly suggests the need for culturally competent therapist to be aware of issues of colorism in different communities in order to effectively intervene with their minority clients. As each group reported some form of trauma or discrimination, the need for therapeutic interventions is not limited to any particular hue.

Some limitations of this study include the small sample size and use of a convenience sample. The women who volunteered to participate in this study are likely to highly identify as African American or black because they were recruited from organizations that promote African American values. A measure of racial identification would have been useful to assess level of racial pride and or salience of racial factors. Another limitation of the group, again in regards to the sample, is that this group of Midwestern students may not represent the level of skin tone discrimination that is likely to be more salient in the southern parts of the United States. There may also be very different experiences of colorism in southern, eastern, or western parts of the county. This study may have also benefitted from an objective scale of skin tone, such as a color scale,

to assist in group identification. However, the idea behind the study was to have women self identify and discuss their own experiences, and not those of their assigned group.

The group was initially designed to be larger, to provide a more representative sample. However, the smaller group facilitated a deeper discussion and allowed all voices present to be heard. Speaking to a smaller group is also likely to have allowed for a more open discussion, as some people are uncomfortable in larger groups. To address the sample size, it is only possible to speculate as to why many of the women who expressed interest or signed up for the study did not attend. The follow up question is then, what is it about the six women that did show up that caused them to be interested in this topic? Future research may look into level of racial identification or experience of discrimination as a mediating factor for participation in this type of research. The following are suggestions for the small sample size, but are purely speculative.

### **Difficulty in Recruitment**

I anticipated that recruiting for a topic that was so interesting and important to me would be easy. However, recruiting participants came with certain challenges. Without the ability to debrief or do random sampling of women who chose not to participate, I can only speculate as to the difficulty. One hypothesis is a desire in our society for immediacy of results and discussion. I found that people were willing and eager to have this discussion during the recruitment process, but did not eventually show up for the discussion. They may also have been more interested in a quick chat in the moment, than a long discussion at a later date. Another speculation is that people might think they know what the topic is, but they actually may not. Many people assume that “light skinned” or

“dark skinned” issues are not about them. Other theories involve a form of “white guilt”, or guilt associated with having privilege, that may occur in lighter skinned African Americans. This may be a reason that more light skinned women did not respond to participate in the study.

The research has shown that self-esteem is tied to skin tone in Black women and this type of group may have felt too threatening to the sense of self that many young women have. They may have felt that their life experience have not and would not have been valued or validated. Therefore, they avoided the potential negative impact on their self-esteem by denying to participate in such a group. Several of the participants admitted that they came to the group expecting to argue or to defend their position. This misconception could have been intimidating or threatening to some people and might have kept them from engaging in the discussion. Moreover, the themes and the corresponding group analysis demonstrate that the roots of colorism in sometimes traumatic childhood experiences may have made this topic too painful for some people to discuss. Further speculation leads to the theory that black people experience internalized racism so pervasively, that it prevents them from having discussions about the colorism, its historical origins, or its perpetuation in society through sexism and patriarchy. As a result, women of different hues may not to want to interact in a mixed group forum about this topic.



## **Future Directions**

Future studies should seek to first and foremost, expand the understanding of intra-group racism among African American women. They might also extend the research to include other groups that were excluded for the purposes of this study, including African American men, bi-racial women, women who have emigrated from African countries, and African American women from different regions of the country (the south, south west, west coast, east coast, etc.). Future studies might also include older women who may have a more fixed sense of self, or who were raised in a more racially segregated time to gain insight into their experience. As the topic of colorism is not just an issue for African American women, future works could address populations in other countries and include women of different nationalities.

**Appendix A**  
**Advertisement**

**A Research Study on the Psycho-Social Impact of Colorism on African American Women**



**Are you an African American woman?**

**Have you ever heard stereotypes about light skinned or dark skinned women?**

**Are you interested in a discussion on those issues?**

**If so, please respond to Lauren Fultz at [Fultz.27@wright.edu](mailto:Fultz.27@wright.edu) to be part of a research study about how colorism has impacted you. This forum will provide the opportunity to discuss your experiences, and to hear how colorism has impacted others. The discussion will take place at the Dunbar Library on xxday, xx/xx/2013 from noon to 4pm.**

**This research project is a requirement for graduation from the  
Wright State University: School of Professional Psychology**

## Appendix B

### Demographic Sheet (Taken from Wilder, 2009)

- Pseudonym/Alias:
  
- How would you describe your skin tone?
  - Very Light
  - Light Brown
  - Medium
  - Dark
  - Very Dark
  
- What year were you born? 19\_\_\_\_\_.

## Appendix C

### Informed Consent Form

#### Wright State University: School of Professional Psychology

Title of Project: The Psychological Impact of Colorism Among African American Women:

Crossing the Color Divide

Principal Investigator: Lauren Fultz, Psy. M.

Participant's Printed Name: \_\_\_\_\_

I invite you to take part in a research study on Colorism in the black community, which will take place at Wright State University. The study will seek to investigate the impact of colorism on African American women and to examine the interaction styles between women of different skin tones. You are being asked to take part in this research study because you are an African American woman who volunteered for this project.

#### Procedures

As a participant you will be asked to engage in an exercise where you list stereotypes that you feel have applied to women like you. You will then be asked to sit down for a discussion with other African American women to talk about the experience of the exercise. If you agree to take part in this study, your involvement will last approximately 4 hours.

#### Discomforts and Risks

This study involves a level of personal disclosure. The subject matter has the potential to create some psychological discomfort for some of the participants. Participation is completely voluntary, and you are free to withdraw at any time with no penalty or loss of benefits. If you have questions about this research study, or have any distress related to this research to report, you can contact the researcher Lauren Fultz at (937) 775-4300. For follow up care after, participants can also contact the Counseling and Wellness Services on the Wright State at (937) 775-3407. If you have general questions about giving consent or rights as a research participant in this research study, you can call the WSU IRB at (937) 775-4362.

#### Confidentiality

Any information about the participants obtained from this study will be kept strictly confidential and the participants will not be identified in any report or publication. The study will be both audio and video recorded, and a note taker will be present as an observer to assist in transcribing the tapes. Only pseudonyms will be recorded. All data collected will remain in the possession of

the primary investigator and will be destroyed once the project is complete. Persons who may assist in transcribing or coding will only have access to participant pseudonyms to ensure anonymity.

### **Cost and Compensation**

There is no cost for the participants associated with this study. There will also be no monetary compensation for participation in this research study. However, refreshments will be provided after the focus group discussions.

### **Consent**

I am free to refuse to participate in this study or to withdraw at any time. I understand that if I decline to participate in this study, there will be no adverse consequences.

My signature below means that I have freely agreed to participate in this investigational study.

---

Signature of Participant

Date

## **Appendix D**

### **Instructions for the Diversity Walk**

The entire group is to stand at one end of the room. One subgroup will be called at a time (women who identify as light, brown, and then dark skinned). The walkers are the talkers, and are the only group that is permitted to talk at that time. They will respond to the question “Tell the group words or phrases that you never want to hear again about your skin tone.” The group will express things they have heard or been associated with that they would not want to hear again. When they have finished, the listeners will repeat back what they have heard. When they have finished repeating back what was said, the talkers will be given the opportunity to clarify what they have said, or affirm that they have been heard and that it has been accurately reflected by the larger group. If they have not felt heard, the listeners will again attempt to repeat back what they have heard until the talkers feel satisfied. The talkers will then be asked to walk back across the room and join the larger group. This process will repeat until each group has had a chance to speak and to be heard.

## **Appendix E**

### **Discussion Questions**

1. Are there any feelings that are left over that might get in the way of having this dialogue?
2. When reflecting back on what was said, what reactions did you have? Include the feelings you experienced during the walk.
3. Has this discussion led you to believe there is action that you, or women who look like you, need to take?

## Appendix F

### Summary of Responses by Group in the Diversity Walk Activity

<b>Group A Response Summary:</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Slurs related to slavery</li><li>• Feeling different than their peers</li><li>• Achievements being minimized or devalued</li><li>• Assumption that looks have mediated success rather than effort or competence</li><li>• Experience of having potential mates express their interest in specifically based on skin tone</li><li>• Being disliked by darker skin women based only on skin tone</li><li>• Comparison to white women (i.e. “white girl”, “black blond”)</li><li>• Color divide within families</li><li>• Jokes/words that describe skin tone in a negative manner (e.g. “light bulb”, “light skinned bitch”)</li><li>• Comparison to food (“caramel”, “peanut butter”, “Oreo”)</li><li>• Assumptions of bi-racial or multi-national identity</li><li>• Character traits associated with complexion</li><li>• Feeling categorized or put in a box</li></ul>
<b>Group B Response Summary:</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Too dark to be considered light skinned/not light enough</li><li>• Comparison to light skinned counterparts – not matching up</li><li>• Comparison based on the color composition of people in the immediate environment</li><li>• Comparison to lighter baby pictures</li><li>• Pressure to become lighter (by staying out of the sun or getting lighter in the winter)</li><li>• Complexion really doesn’t count or isn’t relevant in the discussion of light/dark skinned issues</li></ul>



- Ambiguity: not too dark, not too light
- Being considered “average”
- Difficulty being classified/not belonging/not matching their peers
- Playing the fence or the peacemaker between light and dark skinned friends
- Ability to see both sides of the light skinned/dark skinned debate
- Being selected by mates due to being an acceptable hue of brown
- Limited mate selection due to preference for light/dark skinned counterparts
- Derogatory terms (i.e. “doo doo brown” “dirty red” “dirty light skinned”)
- Negative comments about hair texture
- Not looking as if they are part of their family (“are you adopted?” “why don’t you look like your cousins?”)
- Feeling of disappearing in crowds/groups of light/dark women
- Desire to be lighter or darker at different points in life, especially in comparison to significant others (family members)
- Feeling invisible/unclassified/less of a person\*\*
- In between peacekeeper invisible, average, desire to be one or the other, in the middle of arguments or fights, feeling the need to chose a side\*\*

#### **Group C Response Summary:**

- Attractiveness being mediated by skin tone (e.g. “You’re pretty for a dark skinned girl”)
- Discouragement from wearing bright colors
- Derogatory names (“blacky”, “tar baby”, “African”, “blurple”, “midnight” “12:01”, “(jet) black”)
- Assumption of African Immigration
- Natural/Curly hair is less attractive/worth changing based on hair
- Strike system - 3 strikes (AA, woman, dark skinned)
- Need to do things to compensate for dark skin – having longer hair or an attractive (shapely) body
- Food analogies (e.g. “chocolate” “cocoa”)

- Impact of troubling statistics
- Devaluation of skin tones
- Downplaying of darker skinned persons experience (e.g. “It’s all the same, we’re all black”)
- Feeling like an experiment in dating
- Feeling “less than”
- Acknowledgement of lower self esteem/questions of perceived attractiveness
- Assumptions by others that they are not related to certain family members
- Lack of access to products: make up, hair product, etc.
- Being told that they are not beautiful – being considered an “exception” by people who think they are pretty
- Being considered “exotic”
- Feeling invisible (not in media, not having products to match skin tone)
- Mistreating siblings and peers who were darker, based on skin tone

## **Appendix G**

### **Summary of Responses by Group in the Group Discussion**

#### **Group A**

- Feeling judged based on appearance/feeling put on display
- Resentment from friends and family members
- Being discriminated against as a justification for being black/not feeling black enough
- Not having good experience being at a higher privilege level – “higher end of the totem pole”
- The dark skinned girl isn’t the only one singled out
- Moderated friendships because women are afraid that they are going to steal partners
- Assertion that personal characteristics are more important than looks\
- Men of various races expecting light skin women to be complicit in the derogation of darker skinned women
- Not knowing if a man is into you for you or for your socially acceptable features
- Associations with dark/black/and ugly
- Had to fight because people assumed she was soft
- Assumption that they are stuck up/shallow/promiscuous
- Acknowledgement of having more privilege in society – “I was born this way and did not ask for this privilege, so why is there such animosity toward me?” Feeling of still being put in a box or labeled – although there is more privilege associated, but there are still drawbacks, still pain.
- Hates/resents fitting into a stereotype – not feeling able to just be herself. – long hair as a point of contention with members of the out group
- Didn’t want to be separated or stereotyped
- Misperception that darker skinned women have a stronger and undesirable body odor

#### **Group B**

- Feeling singled out, open dialogue coming back to childhood feelings and maltreatment (regardless of color)

- Feeling invisible
- Being in the middle of intra-racial conflict
- Wanting kids to be a certain complexion – wanting to change their own complexion
- Revelation that it's lonely at the top, and being put in a box/being labeled is bad.

### **Group C**

- Feeling like a minority within the race
- Being singled out
- Being separated and scrutinized as painful (in all groups)
- Hearing reflection during activity as creating painful association to childhood experiences
- Differential treatment of younger children based on their color
- Reaction formation – aggressive, defensive, bold as a response to feeling invisible
- Assumption that lighter skinned women had no problems and did not experience discrimination (Hearing the pain of group A for the first time)
- Childhood trauma around color – taunted at school, physically assaulted based on color
- Cannot be acceptable to society, resulting in a sense of powerlessness
- Used phrases like “light bright” and “pretty caramel” and made generalizations to all lighter skinned women
- Association with lighter skin when possible “I was lighter before I got sick”; “I consider myself milk chocolate”
- Defenses HIGH – laughter and discomfort

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