

Presented at the Annual Conference of the
Association of Black Psychologists
July 31- August 5, 2008, Oakland, CA

Ethnic Identity, Skin Tone, and Self-Esteem of Black Adolescent Girls



Shatina D. Williams, BA
University of Wisconsin-Madison

Kimberly D. Hamilton, MS
University of Wisconsin-Madison

Alberta M. Gloria, PhD
University of Wisconsin-Madison

Abstract

This study examined the differences in perception regarding skin tone, ethnic identity, and self-esteem of 98 Black adolescent girls. Self-report measures were used to differentiate perceptions and attributions of light-, medium-, and dark-skinned individuals. Differences in self-reported skin tone perception were indicated between light- and dark-skinned and between medium- and dark- skinned adolescent girls. By educational group, differences in skin tone perception were only indicated for those girls thirteen and older. Ethnic identity and perception of skin tone significantly predicted self-esteem.

Please do not quote or cite without author's permission

Skin Tone and Black Adolescent Girls

- Skin tone has been used to differentiate and ascribe social values and self-worth for African Americans (McAdoo, 1988; Ross, 1997; Russell, Wilson, & Hall, 1992).
- The relationship of skin tone and psychological factors are particularly important to understand as Black youth develop identities influenced by sociohistorical and sociocultural factors (Aris & Moorehead, 1989; Averhart & Bigler, 1997; Breland, 1999).
- Black youth are socialized in a cultural environment that often denigrates and devalues Black people in general (Aries & Moorehead, 1989; Parham, 1989; Rotheram & Phinney, 1987) and Black women in particular (Bond & Cash, 1996; Greene, 1991; Perkins, 1996).
- Color stereotyping and color biases intensify the difficulty of identity formation for racial and ethnic minority youth (Spencer & Markstrom-Adams, 1990).
- Black youth often internalize the negative messages and stereotypical images they learn about others and apply them to themselves (Johnson, 1991; Matabane & Merritt, 1996; Perkins, 1996).
- The need to consider racial and ethnic identity is particularly important given the difficulties to develop positive identities by members of historically marginalized groups (Myers et al., 1991).
- How Black females feel about themselves is particularly relevant as their specific needs and strengths are often ignored and devalued (Myers, 1989; Greene, 1994).

Purpose of Study

- Understand if the issues of skin tone in Black adolescent girls is still relevant.
- Understand how skin tone affects self-esteem, ethnic identity, and self-satisfaction.
- Bear witness to the perceptions Black adolescent girls have of Black adolescent girls of similar and different skin tones.
- Reveal variables that could be used to enhance self-esteem and self-satisfaction in Black adolescent girls.

Participants

- 98 Black adolescent girls self identified as Black ($n = 59$), African American ($n = 37$), and biracial ($n = 2$).
- The average age was 12.89 years ($SD = 1.67$), with girls ranging in age from 10 to 17 years.

- Participants in grade 5th to 7th are considered educational Group 1 and 8th to 11th grade considered educational Group 2.
- Over half ($n = 54$) of the student participants reported their skin tone as medium, followed by light ($n = 22$), dark ($n = 15$), and very light ($n = 7$).

Instrumentation

The survey packet included a demographic sheet, specific questions regarding skin tone, and three standardized instruments assessing ethnic identity, skin color, and self-esteem. The demographic sheet assessed general descriptive information (e.g., age, grade level, race/ethnicity, and self-identified skin color) and perceived skin tones of parents.

Multi-Ethnic Identity Measure (MEIM; Phinney, 1992). The MEIM assessed ethnic identity search and commitment and feelings and reactions to one's ethnic identity. The measure includes two scales, the Ethnic Identity (EI) Scale (14 items, .70) and the Other-Group Orientation (OGO) Scale (6 items, .48) and three subscales, Affiliation and Belonging (AB, 5 items, .73), Ethnic Identity Achievement (EIA, 7 items, .59), and Ethnic Behaviors and Practices (EBP, 2 items, .32). All items are based on a 4-point scale ranging from 1 (*Strongly Disagree*) to 4 (*Strongly Agree*), with higher scores indicating higher ethnic identity.

Skin Color Questionnaire (SCQ; Bond & Cash, 1992). The SCQ is comprised of three questions (items) that assessed skin color satisfaction, self-perceived skin color, and ideal skin color. Each item was analyzed as a separate question. Each item is based on a 9-point scale ranging from 1 (Extremely Dissatisfied; Extremely Light; Much Lighter) to 9 (Extremely Satisfied; Extremely Dark; Much Darker).

Rosenberg's Self-Esteem Scale (Rosenberg, 1965). A widely-used scale in psychological and educational research, the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale measured self-acceptance and self-esteem. All 10 items are based on a 4-point scale ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 4 (Strongly Agree). Cronbach's alpha was .76 for this study.

Adjectives about Skin Tone. Designed specifically for this study, students were asked about their perceptions of individuals who are light-, medium-, and dark-skinned. From a list of twenty adjectives (10 positive and 10 negative) participants were asked to circle those words that they believed described a light-, medium-, and dark-skinned person. The adjectives were based on the previous research related to skin tone descriptives (e.g., Averhart & Bigler, 1997; Parrish, 1946; Perkins, 1996; Porter, 1991).

Results

- Respondent were more likely to ascribe positive rather than negative stereotypes overall (Refer to Table 1).

- Light-skin tone respondents ascribed more positive associations for light- and medium-skin tone people and negative associations to medium- and dark-skin tone people (Refer to Table 2).
- Medium-skin tone respondents ascribed more positive associations to describe all skin color types and negative associations to darker-skin tone people (Refer to Table 2).
- Dark-skin tone respondents were more likely to ascribe positive adjectives to all skin color types and least likely to ascribe negative adjectives overall (Refer to Table 2).
- Most of the negative adjectives from light- and medium- skin tone participants were used to describe darker-skinned individuals (Refer to Table 1).
- Dark-skinned respondents ($M = 6.86$, $SD = 2.03$) were least satisfied with their skin tone than medium- ($M = 7.98$, $SD = 1.43$) and light-skinned individuals ($M = 8.23$, $SD = 1.34$). The lighter the skin tone, the more satisfied the respondent was with their skin tone.
- The lighter the skin tone, the higher the level of affiliation and belonging ($r = -.22$, $p \leq .05$).
- The younger the educational group ($M = 8.26$, $SD = 1.36$) was more satisfied with their skin tone than the older educational group ($M = 7.52$, $SD = 1.66$).
- The younger the educational group ($M = 5.52$, $SD = 1.99$) was more likely to report they had darker skin tone than the older educational group ($M = 4.46$, $SD = 1.62$).
- Ethnic identity accounts for 16% of the variance in self-esteem.
- Ethnic identity and change in skin color accounts for 21% of variance in self-esteem.
- Changes in skin color accounts for 5% of variance in self-esteem.
- Affiliation and Belonging and changes in skin color accounts for 25% of variance in self-esteem.
- Affiliation and Belonging accounts for 20% of variance in self-esteem

Table 1: Frequencies by Total and Skin Tone Groups

<u>Adjective</u>	Light		Medium		Dark	
	<u>N</u>	<u>%</u>	<u>n</u>	<u>%</u>	<u>n</u>	<u>%</u>
smart	47	75.8	54	87.1	50	80.6
pretty	43	69.4	45	72.6	34	54.8
insensitive	9	14.5	10	16.1	13	21
mean	10	16.1	18	29	20	32.3
offensive	14	22.6	12	19.4	16	25.8
superior	7	11.3	10	16.1	9	14.5
dirty	11	17.7	10	16.1	18	29
pleasant	24	38.7	26	41.9	24	38.7
inferior	4	6.5	6	9.7	8	12.9
hardworking	29	46.8	38	61.3	35	56.5
ugly	13	21	14	22.6	20	32.3
dumb	13	21	12	19.4	20	32.3
poor	8	12.9	11	17.7	10	16.1
sensitive	24	38.7	31	50	22	35.5
rich	11	17.7	15	24.2	13	21
attractive	27	43.5	31	50	22	35.5
lazy	22	35.5	20	32.3	23	37.1
clean	38	61.3	49	79	42	67.7
unattractive	9	14.5	7	11.3	20	32.3
friendly	42	67.7	51	82.3	38	61.3

Table 2: Frequencies by Skin Tone Group

Adjective	Overall Light	Overall Medium	Overall Dark	Light-skinned Participant			Medium-skinned Participant			Dark-skinned Participant		
				Light	Medium	Dark	Light	Medium	Dark	Light	Medium	Dark
Smart	47	54	50	13	16	15	26	30	27	8	8	8
Pretty	43	45	34	14	14	9	24	26	21	5	5	4
Insensitive	9	10	13	5	5	6	4	5	7	0	0	0
Mean	10	18	20	3	6	6	5	9	11	2	3	3
Offensive	14	12	16	4	6	5	10	4	9	0	2	2
Superior	7	10	9	3	3	3	4	7	6	0	0	0
Dirty	11	10	18	4	5	7	6	5	10	1	0	1
Pleasant	24	26	24	8	9	8	13	14	13	3	3	3
Inferior	4	6	8	2	2	4	2	4	4	0	0	0
Hardworking	29	38	35	11	11	9	16	22	20	2	5	6
Ugly	13	14	20	3	7	7	8	6	12	2	1	1
Dumb	13	12	20	3	2	6	8	8	12	2	2	2
Poor	8	11	10	2	5	5	5	5	5	1	1	0
Sensitive	24	31	22	10	9	8	12	19	11	2	3	3
Rich	11	15	13	5	5	5	5	9	7	1	1	1
Attractive	27	31	22	9	8	9	15	20	11	3	3	2
Lazy	22	20	23	5	7	7	14	9	13	3	4	3
Clean	38	49	42	14	15	12	21	28	23	3	6	7
Unattractive	9	7	20	4	3	0	5	4	14	0	0	1
Friendly	42	51	38	14	14	9	22	30	24	6	7	5

Discussion

The darker-skin tone participants may have desired to buffer the negative psychological consequences of others' perceptions while simultaneously engaging in negative self-evaluation.

Being a valued participatory member of your ethnic group plays a role in developing positive self-esteem

By reporting adjectives that were evenly distributed (both positive and negative) may have demonstrated a self-protective strategy by the darker-skin tone participants, acting as a buffer to negative self stereotyping.

Light-skin tone participants had higher levels of affiliation and belonging, perhaps allowing them to secure a more positive identification with Blackness.

Even though darker-skin tone participants may not overtly express their ascription to negative stereotypes, the idea that darker-skin tone is valued less than light- and medium-skin tone types was conveyed.

Light-skin tone participants are self-assured in their skin tone and medium-skin tone participants may strive to buffer negative attributions by over-emphasizing positive qualities of themselves.

The older educational group may have attempted to buffer negatively ascribed stereotypes by recategorizing their status within the skin tone range.

By perceiving oneself to have a lighter skin tone, the participants may work towards an image that would create a more valuable race and ethnic identity.

Levels of affiliation and belonging are more apparent as age progresses and there may be a desire to support and maintain a social system that values their race and ethnic identity

Conclusion

It can be inferred that skin tone by itself does not account for self-esteem yet the variation in ethnic identity coupled with skin tone have a greater effect on self-esteem than either variable alone. It is also essential for Black youth to explore their ethnic identity in the face of prejudice, discrimination, and structural barriers (Adams, Gullotta, & Montemayor, 1992). For Black youth, self-identification is not only essential but a feeling of strong commitment to the group is imperative.

References

- Adams, G. R., Gullota, T. P., & Montemayor, R. (Eds). (1992). Adolescent identity formation. "Ethnic Identity in Adolescence: Process, Context, and Outcome.
- Aries, E., & Moorehead, K. (1989). The importance of ethnicity in the development of identity of Black adolescents. Psychological Reports, *65*, 75-83.
- Averhart, C. J., & Bigler, R. S. (1997). Shades of meaning: Skin tone, racial attitudes, and constructive memory in African American children. Journal of Experimental Child Psychology, *67*(3), 363-388.
- Bond, S., & Cash, T. F. (1992). Black beauty: Skin color and body images among African-American college women. Journal of Applied Social Psychology, *22*, 874-888.
- Breland, A. M. (1998). A model for differential perceptions of competence based on skin tone among African Americans. Journal of Multicultural Counseling and Development, *26*(4), 294-311.
- Greene, B. (1991). Sturdy bridges: The role of African-American mothers in the socialization of African-American children. Women and Therapy, *10*, 1-33.
- Greene, B. (1994). African American women. In L. Comas-Diaz & B. Greene (Eds.) Women of color: Integrating ethnic and gender identities in psychotherapy (pp. 10-29). New York: Guilford Press.
- Johnson, L. A. (1991) Objective news and other myths: The poisoning of young Black minds. Journal of Negro Education, *60*(3), 328-341.
- Matabane P., & Merritt, B. (1996). African Americans on television: Twenty five years after Kerner. The Howard Journal of Communications, *7*, 329-337.

- McAdoo, H. P. (1988). Transgenerational patterns of upward mobility in African American families. In H. P. McAdoo (Ed.), Black families (pp. xx-xx). Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Myers, H. F. (1989). Urban stress and mental health in Afro-American youth: An epidemiological and conceptual update. In R. Jones (Ed.), Black adolescents (pp. xx-xx). Berkeley, CA: Cobb & Henry.
- Myers, H. F., Speight, S. L., Highlen, P. S., Cox, C. I., Reynolds, A. L., Adams, E. M., & Parham, T. A. (1989). Cycles of Nigrescence. The Counseling Psychologist, 17, 187-226.
- Parrish, C. H. (1946). Color names and color notions. Journal of Negro Education, 5, 13-20.
- Perkins, K. R. (1996). The influence of television images on Black females' self-perceptions of physical attractiveness. Journal of Black Studies, 22, 453-469.
- Phinney, J. S. (1992). The Multigroup Ethnic Identity Measure: A new scale for use with diverse groups. Journal of Adolescence, 13, 156-176.
- Rosenberg, M. (1965). Society and the adolescent self image. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Ross, L. E. (1997). Mate selection preferences among African American college students. Journal of Black Studies, 27 (4), 554-569.
- Rotheram, M. J., & Phinney, J. S. (1987). Introduction: Definitions and perspectives in the study of children's ethnic socialization. In J. S. Phinney & M. J. Rotheram (Eds.), Children's ethnic socialization: Pluralism and development (pp. 10-28). Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications.

Russell, K., Wilson, M., & Hall, R. (1992). The color complex: The politics of skin color among African Americans. New York, NY: Doubleday.

Spencer, M. B., & Markstrom-Adams, C. (1990). Identity processes among racial and ethnic minority children in America. Child Development, 61, 290-310.