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The Influence of Skin Color on Heterosexual Black College Women's Dating Beliefs

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Abstract

Black women's skin color perceptions were identified utilized qualitative methods. The primary goal was to identify the relevance of these perceptions on their understandings about dating preferences and related beliefs about appropriate scripts using a Black feminist thought framework. Twenty- eight self- identified Black women attending a large university in the southeastern United States were interviewed for this study. Lighter- skin was perceived as being more attractive, and associated with four themes about dating: (a) positive personality traits, (b) increased value in dating contexts, and (c) sexual appeal to men. Therapeutic considerations for addressing skin color concerns with Black female clients, including addressing within group differences and validation of skin color values, are addressed.

Keywords

BLACK WOMEN; SKIN COLOR; THERAPY; ATTRACTIVENESS; SEXUALITY; DATING

As men assign disproportionately greater importance to how a woman looks rather her personal qualities in dating contexts (Feingold, 1990; Montoya, 2008), phenotypic traits serve as an important symbolic tool used to evaluate racial/ ethnic minority women's physical attractiveness (Hill, 2002a; Hunter, 2005). Further, the meanings associated with skin color are also used to frame ideas about Black women's personalities and behavior expectations (Hill, 2002b; Okazawa-Rey, Robinson & Ward, 1987; Stephens & Few, 2007). These directly affect their self-esteem, self-identity, and interpersonal relationship dynamics, issues that commonly arise in therapeutic situations with Black female clients.

Numerous narratives have suggested that this is due to historical stereotyping of darker skin Black women as hypersexual, hostile, and emasculating partners (Durik et al., 2006; Niemann, Jennings, Rozelle, Baxter, & Sullivan 1994; Sengupta, 2006; Weitz & Gordon, 1993), while kindness, popularity, attractiveness and socially desirability have been associated with lighter-skinned Black women (Baumann, 2008; Maddox & Gray, 2002; Nasser-McMillan et al., 2006; Stephens & Few, 2007). These skin color beliefs influence dating partnership preferences. For example, research has shown a partiality among Black men toward Black women with lighter- skin (Hunter, 2002; Stephens & Few, 2007). However, few studies have examined how these skin color perceptions and preferences are related to beliefs about Black women's personality and behavioral expectations, in which are instrumental in shaping dating partner preferences.

This study contributes to the existing research on Black skin color by first identifying how a group of college aged Black women gave meaning to their own skin color through the development of symbolic social meanings. As this phenomenon is informed by ideas of power, gender, race and sexuality, this research seeks to contextualize these Black women's unique experiences within a Black Feminist approach to knowledge creation (Hill Collins 2000; Stephens & Phillips, 2005). Second, we examined how these meanings influence perceptions of males' skin tone preferences and evaluations of Black women's personality via dating preference development. By recognizing why males' perceived and actual evaluations are so influential, we are able to identify the ways in which skin color in an engendered phenomenon that not only benefits males, but helps maintain dominant ideas about race, gender, and sexuality (Hill Collins 2000; Stephens & Phillips, 2005). Finally, we discuss the implications of this phenomenon for therapists and clinicians working with college aged Black women.

Literature Review

Labels such as *high yellow* or *red bone* (near white skin) to *blue black* (very dark skin) highlight the institutionalization of differential skin color messaging within some Black communities in the United States. Although prior research has found that skin color is an important form of social capital for Black women (Bond & Cash, 1992; Hunter, 2003; Hunter, 2003; Hunter, 2007; Wade, 1996), few studies have examined how it informs dating preferences development in Black communities

Black Feminist Thought & Dating Scripting Theory

It is important to identify a theory that reflects Black females' social location and that of others with whom they come to give meaning to their skin color. For these reasons, Black feminist thought (BFT) has been identified as an appropriate framework to integrate with dating scripting theory to explore these phenomenon. Whereas traditional theories offer frameworks that are flexible enough to fit realities of any group's development, Black feminism is more specific in its integration, validation, and centering of Black women's unique realities (Few, Stephens & Rouse-Arnette, 2003). It rejects the notion of universal laws of behavior, favoring idiosyncratic approaches by focusing on individual functioning, goals, and meaning within Black female realities. The historical, economic, political, and social experiences that have shaped others' and our own perspectives of who and what Black women represent are central in Black feminism. They analyze the meanings, social rules, values, and motives that govern action in a specific context (Comstock, 1982). Human action and interpretations are considered historical by-products of collective experience. As a field of inquiry that emerged from both feminist and critical race theories, BFT validates the experiences of Black women in the creation of knowledge. Dating script theory serves as the foundation for illustrating the application of BFT.

Dating scripts are important to examine as they serve as mental structures for understanding how individuals organize ideas of appropriate dating behaviors experiences (Simon & Gagnon, 1984). As frameworks of dating role expectations, scripts create norms regarding appropriate behavior that are expressed and maintained through their usage in social contexts. Prior research indicates that scripts are instrumental in the creation of a belief system, developing a set of attitudes, and outlining prescriptions for dating behavioral expectations that not only influence individuals' evaluation of their "role" in a social interaction, but also have an impact on others' perception and evaluation of an individual's role (Simon & Gagnon, 1984). This reciprocal process of knowing takes place because people develop a sense of meanings through social interactions and exposure to messaging within continually changing cultural and social contexts (Longmore, 1998).

When specifically considering dating preferences and scripting processes, it is important to identify cues for shaping understandings and beliefs about appropriate behaviors. Visual cues are particularly powerful as they bring to mind past knowledge or previous experience. Research has shown that when individuals meet people they immediately draw upon visual cues to place that person into certain symbolic categories of understanding (Longmore, 1998). In dating research, for example, perceptions about an individual's gender (Alksnis, Desmarais, & Wood, 1996; Ross & Davis, 1996; Rose & Frieze, 1993) and sexual orientation (Alksnis, Desmarais, & Wood, 1996; Ross & Davis, 1996; Rose & Frieze, 1993) have been found to inform beliefs about dating partnerships and predict behavioral interactions. However, few studies specifically address the role of skin color in shaping beliefs about dating scripts. Further, the relevance of these skin color beliefs on the gendered distribution of power in male-female relationships and racialized gender-stereotypes influencing Black women's experiences in dating contexts is often ignored (Hill Collins, 2000). This void in the research is problematic, given prior research has shown skin color beliefs are useful for identifying the meanings and values Black women give to race, ethnicity, and beauty in the context of general sexuality (Celious & Oyserman, 2001; Hall, 2002; Maddox & Gray, 2002; Stephens & Few, 2007; Stephens, Phillips & Few, 2009). Using an integrative approach that includes BFT and dating script theory to guide the identification of factors shaping Black women's subjective skin color and dating preference will directly address this void in the dating script development literature.

Values given to Skin color—Black women gain knowledge of skin color values early in life via observational learning. When children see others treated better or worse based upon having lighter or darker skin, particularly within their own family unit, they internalize these skin color messages (Celious & Oyserman, 2001; Hill, 2002a). Over time, these messages lead to a preference among Black populations for lighter- skin colors over darker skin colors (Bond & Cash, 1992) such that Blacks with lighter- skin have reported better occupations, higher incomes, and educational opportunities than those with darker skin (Hall, 2005; Maddox & Gray, 2002; Wade, 1996). For example, studies have found Black high school students attribute intelligence, attractiveness, popularity and general greater social successes to their peers with lighter- skin (Anderson & Cromwell, 1977; Bond & Cash, 1992; Stephens & Few, 2007). Further, Atkinson, Brown, Parham, Matthews, Landrum-Brown, and Kim (1996) found the skin color of Black female clients' skin color influenced the clinical judgments of psychologists. Black psychologists rated lighter-skinned Black clients as more attractive and held more positive feelings toward them, while white psychologists endorsed more severe mental disorders for the Black clients with darker skin. Understandably, the valuing of skin color affects social interactions and socio-economic experiences within Black communities; darker-skinned Blacks are more likely to face greater barriers to achievement when compared to lighter-skinned Blacks (Maddox & Gray, 2002).

Skin color and dating experiences—One context where there is a body of research examining skin color's influence on Black women's interpersonal experiences is dating. Prior research has consistently shown that lighter- skin Black women are viewed as more attractive and successful than darker-skin Black women even when economic status is considered (Brown, 1998; Hill, 2002a; Thompson & Keith, 2001; Wade & Bielitz, 2005). In addition, lighter-skinned women are more likely to marry men with higher social (i.e. community leaders, athletes) or economic status than are darker-skinned women (Bond & Cash, 1992; Hunter, 1989; Neal & Wilson, 1989; Russell, Wilson & Hall, 2005; Wade & Bielitz, 2005). Researchers have asserted this occurs because lighter-skinned women are perceived as honorable and attractive, and, therefore, are perceived as more desirable

marriage partners (Parmer, Arnold, Natt & Janson, 2004; Russell, Wilson & Hall, 2005; Wade & Bielitz, 2005).

It should be noted that gender is of particular importance when considering Black women's dating preferences and, in turn, enacted scripts. While there are some findings indicating a preference for lighter-skinned Black men (Esmail & Sullivan, 2006; Hall, 2005), when socioeconomic status is controlled, darker-skinned Black men have the same likelihood as lighter-skinned Black men to have higher status wives and be viewed as sexually attractive (Hall, 2002; Hunter, 2003; Okazawa-Rey, Robinson, & Ward, 1987). According to researchers, this double standard in dating preferences and scripting beliefs occurs because men are less likely to be judged by their physical appearance than are women leading to differing emphasis on and valuing of skin color (Celious & Oyserman, 2001; Esmail & Sullivan, 2006; Hill, 2002a; Parmer, Arnold, Natt & Janson, 2004).

Clearly, there is a need to understand specific skin color values, and how these values shape behavior scripts a through reciprocal messaging between Black women and potential partners. Unfortunately, few studies have specifically examined the ways in which evaluations of Black women's personalities are influenced by skin color perceptions and shape dating preference development. To address this, our BFT approach recognizes that men and women have the potential active agents in the (rec) construction of their skin color belief processes and personal lives. Thus, this study not only identifies Black women's subjective meanings about skin color, and how these beliefs may influence their understandings about dating preferences and related beliefs about appropriate scripts, but also offers suggestions for individual level and interpersonal change.

Method

As this study sought to identify Black women's subjective skin color and dating experience beliefs, scripting theory guided this qualitative study. Embracing a feminist tenant that realities are socially constructed through individual or collective definition of the situation, we chose to use a qualitative approach. This method of data collection allows for a rich and detailed examination of the processes by which individuals and groups construct meaning, as well as a description of what those meanings are. This approach also allows for the validation of Black women's subjectivity and knowledge creation, an essential element of feminist research methodologies (Few, Stephens, & Rouse-Arnett, 2003; Hill Collins 2000; Stephens & Phillips, 2005). Further, researchers exploring the various dynamics that shape sexuality, race, and gender interactions have noted that qualitative methodology is particularly useful for gathering rich descriptive data, particularly among racial/ethnic minority women (Few, Stephens, & Rouse-Arnett, 2003; Hill Collins 2000; Poran, 2006; Stephens & Phillips, 2005).

Participants

Twenty-eight women recruited from a psychology courses at large Hispanic serving Institution in Miami, Florida; these women resided in an urban center and attended a university where over 60% of the population identified as Hispanic. As psychology students, they each earned extra course credit for participating in research studies. Criteria for registering for this study included self-identifying as Black, heterosexual and between the ages of 18 and 24. Informed consent was given through the signing of a letter of acknowledgement approved by the University's Institutional Review Board. We choose to interview Black college women because individuals at this stage of the lifespan often seek intimate partnerships, and students have access to a large pool of potential mates (Nelson et al., 2007; Stephens & Few, 2007).

Procedures

Two qualitative data collection techniques were used: 1) semi-structured individual interviews, and 2) skin color chart self-identifications. These sources of data were collected in order to compare the data and to confirm emergent themes and inconsistencies in the data. In addition, participants completed a demographic questionnaire so they could self-identify their race, ethnicity, nationality, and place of birth; these were placed in a sealed envelope opened by the data analysis team.

A questioning route provided a framework for developing and sequencing a series of semi-structured, yet flexible questions. One research assistant, self-identifying as Black, conducted the interviews in a university conference room at a time selected by the participant. After reading the Institutional Review Board approved letter of consent and completing the demographic questionnaire, the women providing a pseudonym to use during interview and for identification in the transcriptions. The interview began with focused questions about skin color values in the context of dating. A questioning route provided a framework for developing and sequencing a series of semi-structured, yet flexible questions. Some questions included, "Tell me how you racially or ethnically define yourself, and particularly as a woman within that group? What does it mean to have your skin color in terms of being physically attractive and dating? Would your relationship options or partner availability options change if you were three shades lighter or three shades darker?" Probes were prepared for each question to elicit further information from the participants if the responses given were not comprehensive or failed to provide understandable information. Interviews were audio taped, and had durations of 15 to 65 minutes.

Drawing upon elements of Falcon's (1995) skin color identification methods, the women selected their perceived and actual skin colors from three charts containing 18 skin shade samples. The three charts were digitally created from varying dark to light shades of three cosmetics companies' makeup color charts. Designed so that women can choose liquid or powder foundations that match their skin color, the shades on these charts include different coloring types (such as warm and cool versions of a single skin color). Each chart contained eight, two-inch circular color samples. While the lightest colors were primarily on the first chart and darkest colors primarily on the third chart, ranges of color were integrated across all charts; this ensured that all skin color charts shared six of the same skin color options. Participants first selected a color they thought most closely resembled their skin color. Then, they held their wrist to the chart and selected the color they felt matched their skin color; both selections were noted by the interviewer. The interviewers also recorded in their notes the skin color chart number they felt most closely matched the participant; this was done for comparison purposes with the participants own choice of color. Participants were asked to explain and reflect on their skin color chart choices as part of the interview process.

Throughout this process, the interviewers made notes about participant-researcher interactions and salient issues that emerged through the interviews. Participant-researcher interactions, body language, subsequent interview questions, and outlines of possible categories, themes, and patterns were also included in these interviewers' notes. Finally, the interview transcriptions were read three times by researchers who did not conduct the interviews; they made notes identifying and highlighting key themes and points that were raised. Pseudonyms selected by the participants were used to identify their voices.

Data Analysis

Principles of the constant-comparative method (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) were used to guide data analysis in study. Four stages of the constant-comparative method guided the data analysis process in this study: (a) simultaneous data collecting and analysis; (b) sorting and

creating categories (selective coding) based on researcher interpretation of emerging patterns and themes from the data; (c) generating hypotheses from the data and testing hypotheses with further data collection; and (d) using theoretical memos in the analysis, integration, and delineation of existing multiple relationships between categories. Drawing upon BFT, socio- historical knowledge about Black women's skin color in the United States informed the development of coding schemes relevant to Black women's dating and physical attractiveness beliefs as they related to skin color. The coding process, which served to categorize the qualitative data and describe the implications and details of these categories, involved the study investigator (DS) and four undergraduate research assistants (RAs), two of whom conducted interviews.

DS and two RAs who had not conducted the interviews began with open coding, also known as generative coding. Individually, they developed categories of concepts, and themes that emerged from the data. Broad categories identified at this stage include skin color beliefs, physical attractiveness, and dating preferences. DS and the two RAs began the identification of coding cues by writing in the left margins of their own copies of the transcripts directly across from the relevant statements. They worked individually as this was "open" process. This ensured an exploration of the data takes place without prior assumptions shaping about what might be discovered. Through this line-by-line process, key thoughts of the participants and voids or inconsistency in statements are highlighted.

After completing the open coding process, DS and all four RAs moved into selective coding to systematically codes with respect to the core concept of skin color beliefs. Together, we condensed and recategorized those thematic classifications identified in the open coding by reflecting on the connections within categories. By examining between categories and subcategories, we were able to deepen the theoretical framework underpinning our analysis. Prior research and the body of literature examining Black women's skin color beliefs, personality perceptions, and dating attitudes were integrated into this process were integrated into this process to devise core categories relevant to Black women's experiences.

Once these coding techniques were completed, the transcripts were further triangulated with the researchers notes (which were made after each interview and during analysis), and participants' skin color chart selections to confirm and disconfirm data trends. DS and four RAs reflected on the hypotheses generated through discussions noting the similarities and differences in these analyses. This type of triangulation serves as an important part of the validity claim in qualitative studies (Creswell, 1998). Codes and the relationships between these codes identified by DS and the RAs allowed for the moving of analysis from the descriptive stage to a more theoretical one (Glaser, 1978).

Results

Present findings provide descriptions of skin color, dating and physical attractiveness beliefs shared by a heterogeneous group of Black college women in the southeastern United States. Qualitative analysis of the data suggests the following three major themes about skin color: From this, three significant themes that emerged from the data analysis are presented here: 1) skin color self-perceptions, 2) skin color perceptions influence on attractiveness beliefs, and 3) perceptions of males' skin color preferences.

Participants

The study participants came from diverse Black subgroups. In total, participants reported six familial nationalities including African American (N= 7), Jamaican (N= 8), Haitian (N= 11), Trinidadian (N= 1), and Antigua (N= 1). The majority (N= 23) were born in the United States; only one participant had lived more than 5 years abroad.

Although their sexual and dating experience varied, all had some level of dating experience. The women reported an average of three non- sexual dating partners in a lifetime and an average of two sexual partners in a lifetime. At the time of data collection, nine reported having been dating someone for six months or longer, six had been dating someone for less than six months, two were dating two or more men at the time, and eleven were dating not dating anyone exclusively.

There was general congruency between the interviewers and women's skin color identifications. All the women and interviewers selected skin color shades from the dark to midrange skin color charts. None of the women perceived themselves as being on the skin color appearing to have fair or pale options. However, when compared the interviewers' and women's selections on the skin color chart, three women were perceived as being significantly lighter by the interviewer.

Skin color perceptions

Across all women, there was consistency in their perceptions of their own skin color values. Although six familial countries of origin were reported all the participants choose to frame their skin color experiences within the context of the United States. The majority (N=26) reported that skin color was an important issue at some point in their lives; both women, feeling it was important, shared a story about how they came to give meanings to their own skin color.

Kim: I know we would compare our arms growing up- my sisters and my cousins. We would compare to see who was lightest, who was darkest. I know that my mom would tell us sometimes to stay inside so we wouldn't get too dark [from the sun]. It was little things said all the time.

Sheniqua: You know, it wasn't said right out- but kind of you knew that everyone noticed [you skin color]-it was one of the first things you noticed- no one told me right out. Here at school, at home, on television- you know, it's always there even without saying anything.

Faith: Not that I have had an issue with [my skin color] but, ok, when I was little, my sisters used to tell me I was adopted as a joke because I was the lighter one. And now when people meet my parents- because my parents are like darker, my mother and my father are way, way darker than me- they won't believe that my mother is my mother.

Lissette: I have got a lot of time people have told me that I have nice skin. Like 'Oh, you light skinned and of course you have an advantage.'

When looking at the skin chart reports, all the women selected colors from the two pages appearing to be the darkest. When asked if they would prefer to be three shades lighter or three shades darker than their current skin color, 21 of the women stated they would prefer to be three shades lighter.

J. J: I would probably prefer if I were three shades lighter, not darker. I would be prettier- to other people- I guess, if I were lighter.

Beyonce: But my color is all right, like, it's all right. I guess- like a caramel kind of tone.... so I know that people don't really like dark, dark [skin]. So I get treated okay. Women are touchy about [skin color issues] but I'm in the middle so didn't have problems.

Skin color was also found to influence the ways in which women perceived they were treated by other people. When asked if they had experienced differential treatment in

settings they interacted in regularly over the in the past 12 months (e.g. school, work, social group), 21 women reported they had felt their skin color influenced how another person behaved toward them on at least one occasion.

Maria: It's like at work there are only two of us [Black women]. Sometime I feel like they play her against me- like she's darker so she's the field slave and I'm the house slave- that's how a [co-worker] said it. It's kind of true- not obviously but in the back of their mind, right?

Joan: In my lab- the teacher always mixes me up with the other [dark skin] girl, Julia. He doesn't say anything bad or anything but it's really obvious he did it all semester. But then she never confuses us with [other Black classmate] because she's really light [skin color]. And there are only three of us Black girls in the class! And Tria and I sit together- I know Julia, but don't know, know her well. But he one time told [other Black classmate] he thought she was Hispanic, so he probably doesn't see her as one of us because she's so light.

Researcher: What did that say to you- how did you take that?

Joan: Like I'm different. I stood out as different but not seen as different from Julia. And we look nothing alike.

Skin color's influence on dating preference and scripting cues

All women were familiar with behavioral descriptors related to beliefs about Black women's skin color in dating contexts. Specifically, lighter and darker skin colors were associated with specific scripts for sexual behaviors used to predict dating interactions. According to 26 participants, dark skin had negative connotations for Black women in dating contexts. According to these participants, Black women – and darker-skinned Black women in particular – were perceived as having unpleasant personalities; these assumed personality traits decreased a Black woman's likability and her ability to be a good, supportive partner.

Patricia: [Dark skinned women] make a bad dating partner...Like don't go there, don't marry that type. Ok, because a lot of [people] have said and they really believe that black skinned women are offensive and act stuck up. And they think they are all that.

Nene: Well, expectations as in like why you are on TV, why you all ways have an attitude. Like the darker you are the meaner you are.

Ronnie: I mean when it comes to dating [darker-skinned women] are perceived as being crazy. Well, in my opinion you know they view us as being freaks. Yeah adventurous- and we're not yellow (*laughs*). Yeah, not yellow even with our skin.

In contrast, 17 participants reported that women with lighter- skin were more likely to be stereotyped as having more socially acceptable personalities and achievements. The descriptors of their perceived personalities were more positive, engaging, and attractive.

Dyana: You see you automatically think that [lighter-skinned women] are sweeter and nicer, which is kind of crazy because I know- and there is no difference. But you sort of believe the stereotype and think [lighter-skinned women] are just nicer. And if they aren't nicer it's because they are snobby because they are smarter and richer.

In addition to influencing perceptions of women's personalities, skin color beliefs were also seen as influencing how others gave meaning to Black women's sexuality via dating script expectations. For example, sexually immoral and lascivious terms- including freaky, wild, and sexy- were used to describe beliefs about scripts associated with darker- skin.

Sheniqua: Girls- like the ones who are on the darker side. Like my shade or darker, [people] say we tend to be freakier in bed (*laughs*).

Franny: Bright skin- you know lighter girls are like good girls... they are like seen as sweet girls. They aren't as sexual... but then they are viewed as sexy- right? But that don't make sense. But the darker you get the further you get from that. It gets like the bad girl, wild in bed.

Maggie: Like 'Chocolate is sweeter or bitter?' You've heard that? Well... like chocolate color women- or darker women... they're a sexy dessert or can leave a bad taste.

It should be noted, however, that only six participants specifically stated that lighter-skinned women were not as hypersexualized as darker skinned women. The remaining participants spoke of darker-skinned women in comparison to lighter-skinned women but did not make statements indicating lighter-skinned women were not sexualized.

Perceptions of men's dating preferences

These beliefs about skin color were reinforced by these women's perceptions of what men found physically attractive. Only one participant felt that men would be attracted to her dark skin color. In contrast, 27 participants reported that women with lighter- skin are viewed as the more attractive and, in turn, were more likely to be approached by Black men.

Rihanna: I know that, a lot of [Black] boys they find it more attractive to be with a light-skinned girl.

Lissette: [Black men] don't like dark girls. They like light-skinned girls.

Franny: Because people think that the darker you are... men think really dark, close to dark, like really black, that midnight black is ugly.

While these women generally held positive attitudes about their own skin color varied, the majority indicated that a different dating script would be utilized by men if their current skin color changed. These women reported that males' beliefs about skin color played an important role in for determining if a woman would be approached, asked out, or even considered as a potential partner.

J. J: If you are lighter- skin --like lighter than even me—you'll get asked out a lot more. Even if you're not as pretty [as a darker skin woman], you get more dates because [men] ask you out more. Just because you've got light skin.

Rihanna: If I were darker-skinned then they may not be attracted to me but then they might also see me as like easier to talk to. They won't have any doubt that they can hit on me if I were darker. They figure I'd just be happy to get attention.

Mary: I mean guys wouldn't really pay attention to me if I were dark skinned or whatever. They will probably look at you but they won't... I don't think they would give you a second look.

Karla: I think more men would be attracted to me [if lighter]. Especially if my face was clear and light; they would look at me and notice me. I think if I was that [lighter] complexion I think it would change the way men look at me.

Nicole: But you know the majority of the men that I have seen they tend to... like if there is a contest between me and this other girl who is 3 shades lighter, the girl who is 3 shades lighter than me would get more attention [from men] than me.

Kim: Other people would like, like [white men] would come to me opposed to who all ready comes up to me now. Like opposed to darker skin people coming up to me

it would be, if I were lighter toned, it would be lighter tone people coming up to me. I think if I were lighter more people would come up to me.

Discussion

The findings here support prior research examining Black women's attitudes toward and feelings about skin color; when compared to lighter- skin colors, darker skin color was more of a liability for Black women in dating contexts (Hall, 2002; Hill 2002a, Hunter, 2007; Stephens & Few, 2007). Darker skin was also more likely to be negatively described in terms of perceptions of women's personality, sexuality, and interpersonal interactions. While these findings are informative, a further contribution of this study to the existing literature pertains to the importance of skin color in dating script belief development and perceptions of sexuality in emerging adult Black populations. Frameworks of male desires and their influence on shaping dating interactions were also identified. We explore the implications of these findings below.

Skin color self perceptions

Although the women in this study were from diverse Black cultural and ethnic backgrounds, there was little diversity in their attitudes regarding skin color's influence on dating scripts. We assert this occurred because the women primarily reported experiences they had within an American context. The questions asked focused on experiences during adolescence and emerging adulthood, a period in the lifespan when all women resided in the United States.

As was found in prior research on the importance Black women give to skin color, the majority of the participants (93%) made statements highlighting the importance of skin color in their lives; all women stated that it was an issue that they thought about. Their narratives described the experiences, and related feelings that shaped the meanings they give to their skin color and self- identity.

If given a choice, most of these women (N = 21) would prefer to be three shades lighter than they currently were; none wished to be darker. As was found in previous research, these feelings have been influenced by treatment varied from sources; they reported experiences that illustrate the devaluing of darker skin in social, education, and familial contexts (Robinson & Ward (1995). Underlying these messages was a belief that lighter- skin individuals are more likely to be evaluated positively, particularly during appraisals of women's physical attractiveness. The narratives clearly support research showing that Black women's self-evaluations of skin color directly affect their psychological well- being (Brown, 1998; Hill, 2002a; Hunter, 2002, 2003, 2007; Parmer, Arnold, Natt, & Janson, 2004; Wade, 1996; Wade & Bielitz, 2005).

Skin color's influence on dating preference and scripting cues

The Black college women in this study reported that stereotypes about skin color influenced dating script development. Specifically, the symbolic meanings given to varied skin colors influenced others' perceptions of Black women's personality and interpersonal behaviors. For example, light or "red" skinned Black women were not perceived as have negative personalities in comparison to those Black women with darker or "black berry" skin. Darker Black women were thought of by the majority of the participants (N= 26) as having "ugly" and undesirable personalities. Similarly, the participants believed members of other racial/ ethnic groups and Black men also viewed darker-skinned Black women negatively when compared to those with lighter- skinned. While the women in this study did not agree with these perceptions, they noted that descriptors like "hostile", "harsh", "mean," "loud," "rude," "bitchy," "aggressive" and "crazy" were used to frame dating script frameworks

about darker skin Black women. In contrast, lighter- skin women were described by the study participants as “sweet,” “nice” and “timid”. “Stush” and “sididdy” (African American youth slangs for acting stuck up) were also used to characterize lighter-skinned women; however, these terms were tied to an assumption of lighter- skinned women’s confidence in their attractiveness.

These within-group level distinctions illustrate the skin color tensions that the research has noted continues to occur among diverse Black women. Maddox and Gray’s (2002) study of college students’ attitudes toward Black women showed that darker-skinned women were more likely to be viewed as unattractive, unintelligent and lazy when compared to lighter-skinned Black women, all traits used in partner assessment processes. As traits associated with darker-skinned women are deemed as less desirable than those associated with Black women, researchers assert that men are less willing to view darker-skinned women as potential partners (Niemann et al., 1994; Rose & Frieze, 1993; Wade & Bielit, 2005). This builds upon on prior distinctions found between Black and White women’s personality traits attributions. For example, Weitz and Gordon (1993) found the top three traits used to describe white women were intelligent, materialistic, and sensitive. In contrast, Black women were most often characterized as loud, talkative, and aggressive (Weitz & Gordon, 1993). Similarly, West (2004) noted that Black women are often perceived as “hostile tongue-lashing nag who drives men away and bullies everyone” (p. 282). Unlike White women, “loud”, “antagonistic”, “unmannerly”, and “more likely to express disgust with others” were other descriptors used to describe Black women (Durik et al., 2006; Niemann et al., 1994). Differentiating Black women’s personality from those of White women’s reinforces their positions as individuals standing on the margins of society, clarifying its boundaries (Hill Collins 2000; hooks & Manning 2000). This socially constructed framework of Black verses White women further relies on the continued production of the racist/sexist myth that Black women are not and do not have the capacity to be sexually innocent (Celious & Oyserman, 2001; Childs, 2005; Stephens & Phillips, 2003). These cross- cultural divisions have influenced the psyche of Black populations and created a system of skin color beliefs and values that informed within group social hierarchies and interpersonal relationships as is evident through the present results and prior research (e.g. Hill, 2002a; Hunter, 2002, 2003, 2007; Parmer, Arnold, Natt, & Janson, 2004; Wade, 1996). By continuing to reproduce these same divisions between lighter and darker skinned Black women, the same hierarchical stereotypes based upon physical attractiveness and partner competition beliefs is maintained.

Beyond general dating script assumptions, skin color also informed specific sexual script behaviors beliefs. The participants noted that Black men use term like sexually “freakier” and “adventurous” to describe of darker-skinned women’s sexual behaviors. The stereotyping of lighter-skinned Black women occurred as well, but to a much lesser degree (N= 6). This negative sexualization of Black women’s sexuality via skin color illustrates the continued application of historical stereotypes of Black women's sexuality-. the sexless Mammy, the oversexed Jezebel, the disagreeable Sapphire, and the emasculating Matriarch (Sengupta, 2006; Stephens & Few, 2007). There content has changed little, yet remains as damaging as they inform the development of sexual identities and interpersonal processes of Black women and those with whom they interact.

Perceptions of men’s dating preferences

Consistent with prior research (Esmail & Sullivan, 2006; Hunter, 2007; Robinson & Ward, 1995; Ross, 1997; Stephens & Few, 2007; Tummala-Narra, 2007), the women in this sample believed that skin color values directly influenced Black males’ partner selection processes. The majority of the women in this study (N= 26) felt skin color was an important symbol men used to evaluate and select potential partners. Ninety-six percent of these participants

perceive dark-skinned Black women as unattractive to Black men, while those with lighter-skin are the most desirable. For example, when asked about the implications of having a skin color three shades lighter than their current skin color, 26 of these emerging adult women all agreed that they would receive positive responses from Black men. In contrast, having a skin color three shades darker decreased the number of Black men who would approach or view them as attractive.

Other studies have also found that Black men view lighter-skin Black women as more attractive than those with darker skin (Bond & Cash, 1992; Hall, 2005; Hill, 2002a; Stephens & Few, 2007; Thompson & Keith, 2001; Wade & Bielitz, 2005). These beliefs about Black male skin color preferences are important for understanding dating script development, given men place greater value than women on physical attributes --particularly skin color-- in dating contexts (Ross, 1997). Thus, women seeking a partner may feel that it is important to meet Black men's skin color dating preferences and scripting expectations (Ross, 1997; Stephens & Few, 2007; Wade & Bielitz, 2005). Those women that are unable to meet these have a lowered self-esteem. Although skin color by itself does not account for changes in Black women's self-esteem, it does become a powerful tool in framing ideas about who they are and how they should be treated (Bond & Cash, 1992; Hall, 2005; Hunter, 2007; Maddox & Gray, 2002). We know that negative self-esteem can decrease a Black woman's ability to resist verbal, sexual, and emotional abuse in dating relationships (Bell, Goodman, & Dutton, 2007; DiClemente et al, 2005). This engendered reality is particularly important to consider as research has shown that skin color is an important predictor of self-esteem and self-efficacy for Black women but not Black men (Thompson & Keith, 2001). Thus, Black women with negative perceptions about their own skin color attractiveness may be more likely to experience unhealthy dating interactions and negative sexual health outcomes.

Application to therapeutic interventions

As research has clearly shown that race and gender-based factors (e.g. socialized gender roles, power in relationships and society, and physical attractiveness values) affect Black woman's skin color experiences, it seems natural to apply a BFT lens when examining therapeutic interventions with this population. Through clinical processes, therapists have the opportunity to validate, center and integrate Black women's realities as it relates to skin color. By focusing on individual functioning, goals, and meanings- all elements of BFT- therapists can help Black female clients recognize the influence of skin color on their sense of psychological well-being, educational attainment, income status, and social capital beliefs. Our findings indicate that several therapeutic issues must be considered, including 1) identifying skin color values, and 2) negotiation of intimate relationship messages. We now explore these issues sequentially below.

Identifying skin color values

Skin color values can have an immediate impact on the ability for therapists to connect with his/ her client upon first meeting. Each person has their own "skin color story" informed by multiple unique cultural factors that are sometimes used as cues for understanding commonalities and differences. As Tummala-Narra (2007) noted, the client and therapist often both use skin color to identify racial heritage and related beliefs, which are important factors in determining if a client engages in the counseling process. For some therapists and clients, skin color discussions can be uncomfortable, given the psychological and social implications of talking about "race" related issues. This reinforces the fact that anxieties continue to exist around the discussion of race-informed issues in therapeutic settings (Hall, 2002, 2005; Tummala-Narra, 2007). Therapists must overcome this uneasiness given prior

research indication that skin color can have a significant impact on Black women's psychological well-being.

Further, therapists own skin color beliefs can inform their own ability to accurately address their clients' needs. In a study examining Black and White therapists' attitudes toward Black female clients, Atkinson et al (1996) found that their perceptions of their clients' race influenced their interactions and diagnosis. Although no relationship was found between client skin tone and primary diagnosis or treatment recommendation, white therapists were more likely to view Black clients as less likely to benefit from therapy and less physically attractive (Atkinson et al., 1996). Further, White therapists more strongly endorsed severe mental disorder diagnoses for the client when compared to Black therapists. Clearly, it is imperative that therapists of all racial and ethnic backgrounds "do the work" required to recognize their own skin color and race assumptions, consider their expressions of these judgments, and be open to comfortably explore issues about skin color values with their clients (Hall, 2005; Hill, 2002b; Stephens, Fernandez & Richman, 2011).

Therapists must also recognize that not all Black women feel that skin color is a significant issue in their lives. Several studies, including this one, have found that many Black women were generally satisfied with their skin tone and only raise concerns in response to others' attitudes (e.g. Bond & Cash, 1992; Childs, 2005; Hill, 2002a; Stephens & Few, 2007). Further, some Black women view their skin as a source of racial pride and a stronger Black identity. Studies have shown that in some Black communities, having a skin color that is viewed as too light can also have negative meanings (Rockquemore, 2002; Stephens & Few, 2007). A dark skin color may be viewed as more "real" or may be seen as providing more authentic community membership, whereas a lighter- skin color may be seen as less "pure" (Hall, 2005, 1995; Rockquemore, 2002; Wade, 1996). For these women, skin color may be significant, but not viewed negatively. In fact, skin color may be a source of empowerment and essential to their self-esteem within contexts that provide positive responses to their appearance.

Further, some women who appear as having dark skin may not identify as having the same skin color concerns raised by other Black women in the research. For example, some women may have different perceptions of their skin color than an outside observer; this is particularly true among ethnic Hispanic populations. In fact, studies have found that darker-skinned Hispanics¹ in the United States avoid identifying as being labeled "Black" for fear of experiencing discrimination or prejudice (Fears, 2002; Fernandez & Richman, 2011), going so far as to cognitively view their skin color as being much lighter than it is (Fears, 2000; Fernandez & Richman, 2011). In a survey of Hispanics, Falcon (1995) found that 58% identified as racially White and 4% as Black; the remaining 38% as mixed race. However, when interviewers recorded their own perceptions of each respondent's skin shade ("very light," "light," "medium," "dark," or "very dark"), 31% of those respondents that self-identified as White and 55% of those that self-identified as mixed were recorded as being "dark" or "very dark" by the interviewers (Falcon, 1995).

Clearly, there is significant diversity in skin color identification across Black communities, indicating differing skin color meanings exist in varied contexts. For therapists, suggesting the relevance of skin color when addressing dating experiences in therapy would be a useful

¹We recognize that there is a debate between the use of the terms Hispanic and Latino. The term Hispanic was created by the United States government to identify people "who speak, are affected by or are Spanish- like" (Suro, 2006), and is viewed by some as a pejorative term. It is incorrectly used to also identify other non- Spanish speaking nationalities such as Brazilians; this lack of cultural appropriateness is one of the critiques raised about the term Hispanic. However, as the present study was conducted in an urban center where the majority of residents primarily self-identify as Hispanic, we use this term in the present manuscript when speaking about those living in the United States.

way to open the door for discussion; but assuming its centrality could be problematic. It is important to follow the client's line of discussion, exploring its meanings, values, and impact on psychological well-being before rushing in with assumptions about skin color's importance to a Black female client (Few, Stephens, & Rouse, 2003; Hill, 2002b; Neal & Wilson, 1989). As such, therapists should draw upon a feminist approach to therapy, which strives for a collaborative relationship. While it is accepted that the therapist knows more in terms of psychology, the client knows more about herself. The client is the expert on her skin color beliefs and values; that knowledge is as critical as the therapist's skills in developing a successful therapeutic relationship.

Similarly, not all therapists are comfortable discussing issues so closely aligned with race, or avoid skin color as a topic for fear of racializing their client. For example, research consistently finds that there is still a level of discomfort around the discussion of race-informed issues in North American therapeutic settings (Hall, 2002, 2005; Tummala-Narra, 2007). Therapists must consciously address this concern, if applicable, as they may miss-out on being able to identify factors significantly influencing Black female clients' psychological well-being.

Negotiation of intimate relationship expectations and options

It is important that therapists recognize the role and influence of familial and community messages about dating partnerships when working with Black college women in therapy. The goals or concerns that brought them to therapy cannot be viewed in isolation from these powerful influences dating values. Primarily due to greater pressure from their family and broader community to marry Black men, Black women were the group least likely to endorse marriage outside of the race (Celious & Oyserman, 2001; Parmer, Arnold, Natt, & Janson, 2004). Thus, despite perceiving Black men as not being attracted to darker skin, Black women might find it difficult to seek out other partners. Further, they may feel obligated to continue to seeking a Black mate in order to please familial expectations, despite a fear of rejection due to their skin color. As part of the therapy process, therapists must also help clients negotiate these messages about appropriate partners even if the women express concerns about men's attitudes toward their skin color. Recognizing the significant influence of the sources of dating partnership messages, helping the client navigate these familial and cultural values around may be the primary work of the therapist

Despite historical community and familial dating message trend, in reality, many Black women are dating men of other racial and ethnic groups. Although they are the group least likely to date interracial, research has shown a significant increase in the number of Black women dating men of other races over the past (Childs, 2005; Yancey, 2002). A primary reason cited for choosing to date men of other races is a concern regarding Black men giving greater value to white standards of beauty including skin color and, in turn, white women (Childs, 2005). Thus, these women are finding an alternative way to address skin color biases within the Black community. However, this often means that they are dealing with broader racial and skin color issues, including racism and cultural values conflicts (Levin, Taylory & Caudle, 2007; Thompson & Keith, 2001; Yancey, 2002). Thus, meanings about skin color differ in these relationships may be more complex than concerns about gradations of skin tones. Recognizing this growing trend, practitioners should be clear about the dating preference and related skin color values held by their Black female clients, particularly when addressing concerns about self-esteem- interpersonal relationships, or sexual health.

Strengths and Limitations

Though our findings offer new information about the influence of skin color on Black women's dating script beliefs, some study limitations must be acknowledged. First, clearly it

would be imprudent to assume that these experiences are applicable to all groups of Black women. For example, the women in this study attended a large university located in a racially/ ethnically diverse urban center. Future investigations may wish to explore the meanings and values given to skin color in dating scripts among Black college women who live in communities with either smaller or significantly larger Black populations and do not attend post-secondary institutions; this would allow for a more comprehensive identification of diversity or commonalities in opinions. Ideally, future studies would include more diverse samples of Black women, including Afro-Caribbean, Afro- Latino, lesbian/ bisexual/ transgendered. This would provide even more detailed information about dating scripts, highlighting even more within group differences and common values.

Despite these limitations, our results contribute to the existing body of mental health literature examining color beliefs in Black populations in the United States by showing that skin color plays a significant role in the development of dating script frameworks. By examining these skin color perceptions, we can move from just acknowledging their values and meanings to challenging how Black women and others may use it to shape beliefs about who Black women are and what they are capable of doing. Clearly, beliefs and frameworks about Black women's skin color must be "re- written" in ways that challenge the racist and sexist, socially constructed realities projected upon them. However, Black women must lead this action-based approach, occurring at individual, interpersonal, and institutional levels, so that a sense of personal power combined with an ability to affect others will lead to social and interpersonal change in skin color beliefs. Only then can socio- historical developmental changes in the creation and maintenance of Black women's skin color frameworks, and their influence on dating scripts truly begin.

Conclusion

In the present study, we specifically examined the ways in which Black college women ascribe meanings and values to skin color, and, in turn, how these shape dating script development. One of the most meaningful results from our study reveals that the socio- historical beliefs about skin color continue to influence dating script beliefs among young Black women. Lighter- skin is still perceived as most desirable and is still viewed as attractive to potential partners. Similarly, our data support prior research findings that show dark skin is neither attractive nor enviable. Overall, these findings validate that Black women do contend with distinctive physical attractiveness values. These, in turn, contribute to the maintenance and usage of racially unique dating script beliefs.

The influence of skin color beliefs on dating script development are important to examine given skin colors' impact on Black women's psychological outcomes. Future research should consider the accuracy of these perceptions in dating contexts and the long-term implications of utilizing these beliefs. For example, Brown (1998) asserted that dark-skinned women who must cope with a larger society's messages as well as individuals in her own community that say they are not attractive would continue to experience negative psychological outcomes. Similarly, lighter-skinned women may feel a degree of uncertainty in their dealings with men who may not be able to see beyond their bias about skin color and relate to them as people (Okazawa-Rey, Robinson, & Ward, 1987).

We suggest that, by understanding the continued significance given to skin color in dating contexts, new frameworks for understanding racial/ethnic dating script development and self-perceptions among Black populations are identified. Further, as this knowledge has emerged from the voices of Black women, it provides a new point of validation in future research processes. This knowledge helps us derive better understandings of, and identify ways in which to bring about change in the stereotypical evaluations of Black women's skin

colors. Further, this knowledge should contribute to the to alter the subordinated and oppressed position of women, by empowering Black women to be active agents in the construction skin color values in their social world and personal lives (Hill Collins, 2000; Stephens & Phillips, 2005). This would be particularly useful for therapist working with Black female clients on issues related to self-esteem, interpersonal relationships, and sexual health issues.

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