

Color in Context: Three Angles on Contemporary Colorism

Sociology of Race and Ethnicity
2021, Vol. 7(3) 289–303
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DOI: 10.1177/23326492211012532
sre.sagepub.com



hephzibah v. strmic-pawl, Vanessa Gonlin,¹
and Steve Garner²

Abstract

Colorism is a form of discrimination based on skin tone wherein people with light(er) complexions are advantaged over those with dark(er) ones. In this review, we define key terms, explore colorism as an individual and structural phenomenon, and identify some predominant themes in the existing scholarship on colorism. We review three case studies of contemporary uses and ramifications of colorism in order to encourage scholars to engage with this important field. These case studies are skin tone's impact on U.S. politics, "transraciality," the appropriation of skin tone, and finally, the global skin lightening industry. While the first two are mostly focused on the United States, the third enables an appreciation of the global dynamics of colorism, and links back to the national and regional contextual politics of skin tone.

Keywords

Colorism, skin-tone stratification, racial hierarchy

Colorism forces us to think about phenotypical distinctions, cultural representations, and material outcomes, all at the same time, de facto binding these three elements. Colorism, also known as "skin tone stratification" (Keith and Herring 1991) or "shade-ism," is a hierarchical social valuing of skin tones on a spectrum along which the lightest is the most cherished. Research shows that those with light(er) skin complexions and dark(er) skin tones experience distinct tangible outcomes on factors such as education, income, and criminal justice, to name a few. Colorism has afflicted societies for nearly as long as racism but has received far less attention in sociological research. And, like racism, it is rooted in White superiority, but colorism distinctly explains how discrimination operates along the skin-tone spectrum and how this discrimination manifests within and across racial groups. In comparison to racism, the relative lack of investigation into the consequences of colorism likely stems from two factors: (1) the significance of race and racism and how the strict racial lines in many societies can overshadow the dynamics of skin tone stratification, and (2) the intraracial dynamics of colorism, wherein communities of color

participate in discrimination within their own racial group, which can make this conversation a sensitive one to expose. Yet while these factors are important to acknowledge and discuss, we see a need for more attention to be paid to the complex ways that skin tone shapes discrimination.

Although research on colorism needs to expand upon a host of issues, in this feature review we home in on the three pertinent areas of politics, transraciality, and the skin lightening industry and with a focus on how colorism is both structural and individual as well as contextual in nature. Each one of these areas is a pressing contemporary conversation: in the political arena we have seen a renewed focus on politicians of light(er) skin tone, particularly with the recent election of Vice-President

¹Department of Sociology, University of Georgia

²School of Social Sciences, Cardiff University, UK

Corresponding Author:

hephzibah v. strmic-pawl, Department of Sociology,
Manhattanville College; 2900 Purchase Street, Purchase,
NY 10577

Email: hvsp@mville.edu

Kamala Harris; the discussion around transraciality is of increasing concern as more people either come forward or are exposed (particularly in academia) as “transracial,” and this performance is one embedded with implications of how skin-tone is being made malleable to suit one’s desires; and, there is revived attention on the skin lightening industry as beauty companies, the health industry, consumers, and media battle out the meanings that are conveyed via the marketing of a light complexion. Each of these issues raise questions that should engage us as scholars of race and ethnicity relating to power relationships, the micro and the macro, and the enduring capacity of race to animate and refresh hierarchies and to engage people located on every part of Patricia Hill-Collins’ (1990) matrix of domination in some aspect of a struggle. We largely center these conversations on research done in the United States because recent developments in politics and transraciality have occurred there, but we recognize the problem of colorism is a global concern. We begin this article with a brief overview of colorism as a concept, and we close with implications for how skin tone stratification continues to shape status and outcomes, and how we, as scholars and activists, should most usefully and productively engage with these topics in the future.

AN OVERVIEW OF COLORISM

In 1982, Alice Walker coined the term “colorism” to refer to the light-skin privilege among Black communities (Norwood and Foreman 2014). Evelyn Nakano Glenn (2009:166) defines it as “the preference for lighter skin and social hierarchy based on skin tone,” while Cedric Herring (2004:3) states that it is “the discriminatory treatment of individuals falling within the same ‘racial’ group on the basis of skin color.” Kathy Russell-Cole, Midge Wilson, and Ronald Hall (2013:27) use the term “color-class hierarchies,” defined as the:

social, economic, and political societal framework that allows skin-color differences, such that along a continuum of possible shades, those with the lightest skin color enjoy the highest social standing, and those with the darkest skin color are among the poorest.

Colorism operates along two interconnected pathways: (1) interracial and intraracial judgments, and (2) relative perception of skin-tone. To the first point, colorism manifests both interracially—between racial groups—and intraracially—within a racial group. Both of these pathways function on

individual and systemic levels. Interracial colorism is most often exhibited by Whites who prioritize the interests of people of color with a light(er) skin tone, either by showing a preference for a particular individual who is of a lighter complexion or a general preference for a racial group perceived as light(er). For example, Whites demonstrate preference in employment for individuals with light(er) complexions over others with dark(er) complexions, but they also exhibit preference for Asians with light(er) skin tones over Blacks with light(er) skin tones (Glenn 2009; Norwood 2014; Russell-Cole et al. 2013). Yet while colorism is clearly evident *between* racial groups, much of colorism research focuses on how it manifests *intraracially*. Within racial groups, skin-tone stratification is observed via the preferential treatment afforded to those of light(er) complexions. For example, Blacks with light(er) complexions are seen as more beautiful, intelligent, and generally as having a higher social status (Norwood 2014; Wilder 2015). This classification of “intra” versus “interracial” colorism is often how the scholarship makes a meaningful distinction in how colorism operates; yet we should also recognize that this classification can be problematic. It does not capture how it affects those who identify as multiracial and therefore belong to multiple groups, and it does not account for the messiness of determining what counts as “within a racial group.” Moreover, while an intraracial valuing of lightness is imposed on people of color by people of color, it is also important to note that the emphasis on and desire for this lightness exists because of the racial hierarchy that Whites impose and control (Glenn 2009; Hunter 2005; Norwood 2014; Russell-Cole et al. 2013; Telles 2009).

Colorism operates via the meanings attached to “light” skin. Yet what is “light” versus “medium” versus “dark” is a complicated evaluation based on relativity. One person’s label of “light brown” can be another person’s “medium brown,” or lips can be seen as “thin” by one person but not by another. Moreover, perception of complexion and features can be mediated by other factors such as age, class status, occupational status, nationality, gender, religion, or even dress and fashion (Davenport 2016; Glenn 2009; Selod 2018). Perception also varies by racial group and region of the world; “dark” is not the same in African American communities as it is within Filipino communities, and colorism does not operate the same in the United States as it does in the Philippines. Furthermore, while colorism research often focuses on the discrimination those with dark(er) skin tones receive, sometimes those with light(er) complexions are discriminated

against out of a disdain for the cultural valuing of light complexions. In this vein, it is important to note that colorism can be bidirectional, wherein dark(er)-skinned BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and other Person of Color) are more likely to experience a host of negative economic, social, educational, health, and criminal justice outcomes compared to light(er)-skinned peers (Glenn 2009; Goldsmith, Hamilton, and Darity 2006; Hamilton, Goldsmith, and Darity 2009; Hannon 2014; Hebl et al. 2012; S. Jha and Adelman 2009; Johnson and King 2017; Monk 2015), while light(er)-skinned BIPOC often feel their racial authenticity and allegiance challenged (Hunter 2005; Norwood 2014; Stephens and Fernández 2012).

Historical Origins of Colorism

Colorism, via colonization and imperialism, is largely rooted in the global spread of White supremacy where being “White” and “light” meant one had the social standing, political standing, and economic standing to be at the top or, at least, the opportunity to be upwardly mobile. A hierarchy based on skin color reified a social, political, and economic structure that benefited the colonizer so that higher status was associated with lightness and lower status was associated with darkness (Chavez-Dueñas et al. 2014; Darity, Dietrich, and Hamilton 2005; Stephens and Fernández 2012). We provide a brief historical overview of colorism in three regions, the United States, Latin America, and Asia, to give a snapshot of how colorism originated across the globe.

In Black American communities, colorism stems from plantation slavery; White slave owners strategically introduced a color-based hierarchy to divide enslaved Africans (Hunter 2005). Lighter-skinned enslaved Africans were seen by Whites as closer in proximity to Whiteness, and thus seen as more intelligent and more beautiful than their darker kin. Enslaved people with light(er) complexions received tangible benefits such as working indoors rather than toiling in the fields and, at times, opportunities for education (Hunter 2005; Norwood 2014). However, skin tone did not change the status of “slave” and light(er) skinned women were often used for the sexual entertainment of house guests, a practice that indicates colorism has worked bidirectionally (disadvantages due to darker- and lighter-skin) for centuries.

The practice of colorism was similar for the progeny of consensual and non-consensual relationships between Europeans and Latin American indigenous peoples. Throughout Latin America,

colonial societies tended to promote Whites at the top of the social and economic hierarchy, mixed-race peoples in the middle, and indigenous peoples and enslaved Africans at the bottom (Hunter 2005; Keith and Monroe 2016). However, what differed in Latin America was the promotion of “mestizaje” or a “Whitening project” that encouraged race mixing in Latin America; this promotion of racial mixing has led to a contemporary hierarchy with less rigid racial distinctions and more color-conscious labels such as blanco, negro, mulatta, moreno, and mestizo¹ (Chavez-Dueñas et al. 2014; Telles 2018). Societies that have such color-conscious hierarchies are called pigmentocracies. Edward Telles, René D. Flores, and Fernando Urrea-Giraldo (2015), in a study of eight Latin American countries, observe significant evidence of such pigmentocracies by finding a direct and strong correlation with skin tone and educational attainment, a correlation that was more evident by skin tone than by census ethnoracial identities.

Preference for light(er) skin is also prevalent in Asia where class status is ubiquitously associated with a light complexion. In most Asian societies, in contrast to other regions, the origin of light skin valorization comes not from a desire to be White but from a desire to distance oneself from the perception of being a lower-class laborer who had dark(er) skin because of laboring in the sun (Rondilla and Spickard 2007). China and Japan have a long history of using products to make themselves look more pale, which was associated with beauty and purity. Yet currently Western ideals of beauty are mixed with Asian colorist preconceptions so that pale skin and “Western” features such as round eyes and thin lips are considered the ideal. In India, an interaction between the pre-existing caste system and British imperialism resulted in a color-caste hierarchy wherein the upper caste was seen as descendants of light-complexioned Aryans and the lower caste was seen as descendants of darker complexioned Dravidians (Norwood and Foreman 2014). Colorism in Asia continues to have a significant hold and is particularly evident via popular culture and the beauty industry that is organized around light/White skin and “Western” facial features.

Contemporary societies are a long way from these origins of light skin valorization, but colorism has remained. Although colorism is largely rooted in the racism of global White colonization and enslavement, it now exists as a phenomenon that is not reducible to racism. Richard D. Harvey, Kira Hudson Banks, and Rachel E. Tennill (2014:201) argue that

while connected in their origin, racism and colorism are not dependent upon each other for their modern existence. Thus, a decrease or even annihilation of racism does not preclude the existence of a colorism problem, since colorism can exist independent of an intergroup context.

POLITICS: ELECTING SKIN-TONE

The power of politics and the power of colorism are intertwined. In the United States, a quick registry of politicians of color indicates the consequences of colorism. In the 1800s, Black politicians who made a name for themselves were largely of a light(er) complexion such as Hiram Rhodes Revels (Senator MS), Jefferson Franklin Long (Representative GA), and P.B.S. Pinchback (Gov LA). The trend hasn't shifted much since then; for example, in recent times, Deval Patrick (Gov MA), Doug Wilder (Gov VA), and David Paterson (Lt Gov, Gov NY) are all of a lighter complexion. This pattern is also seen with light(er) complexion multiracials including Catherine Cortez Masto (Senator NV), Tammy Duckworth (Senator IL), Barack Obama (President), and Kamala Harris (Vice President) (Lemi 2020; Lerman, McCabe, and Sadin 2015). When Barack Obama became the first Black President, it was not lost on scholars of race, nor the actors in the political sphere itself, that he is of a mixed-race background and of a lighter complexion.

It seems politicians themselves understand that voters register "dark" with "negative." McCain was criticized for using darker images of Obama in negative campaign advertisements, and Hillary Clinton also came under scrutiny for a similar measure when many believed her ads about Barack Obama were created to make him look darker (Weaver 2010). A pattern of electing politicians with light(er) complexions and the manipulation of skin-tone in campaigns show how colorism is embedded in the political system. The following broad review of the current scholarship shows a deepening understanding of the interactional effects of colorism and politics.

Candidate Election and Skin-tone

Research has long shown that Black voters believe in a fundamental "linked fate," that is, they perceive their individual status as connected with the collective fate of Blacks as a racial group (Lerman et al. 2015). Research has suggested that race is still an overruling factor when Black voters make a decision about a political candidate (Hochschild and Weaver 2007; Lerman and Sadin 2016; Seltzer

and Smith 1991). Yet, recent studies that have paid explicit attention to skin tone show that complexion does matter—in how voters feel about a candidate and in their likelihood to vote for a candidate. Much of the research on colorism and politics has centered on Black politicians and/or Black voters.

Vesla Weaver (2010) looked for possible bias in relationship to skin tone by having White participants respond to various scenarios that included White candidates, Black candidates with light complexions, and Black candidates with dark complexions. In a scenario of a White candidate running against a Black candidate, Weaver found that self-identified liberal Whites prefer the candidate with a darker complexion, but the opposite preference (for the lighter candidate) occurs among conservative Whites. However, in the scenario where there was a Black candidate with a light complexion running against a Black opponent with a darker complexion, White respondents showed more voter support for the candidate with a light complexion and saw this person as more intelligent, more experienced, and more trustworthy.

Other researchers have posed a similar question but with a focus on Black voters rather than White voters. Camille D. Burge, Julian J. Wamble, and Rachel R. Cuomo (2020) varied a candidate's skin tone and gender to see how complexion matters. Interestingly, they found that Black voters overall prefer candidates with darker complexions, a preference that remains consistent across gender; Black women candidates with dark skin are seen as more favorable than those with light skin. Burge et al. (2020:1600) suggest that skin tone is used as an indicator of racial allegiance; they state,

this article reveals how important a perceived connection to the Black community is to Black voters . . . these results are not to say that lighter-skinned Black candidates are unable to garner success with Black voters but rather that, because their skin color suggests an experiential difference from many Black people, they may have to do more than their darker counterparts to show their connection to the Black community.

Danielle Casarez Lemi and Nadia E. Brown (2019) refined attention to skin tone among Black respondents even more so by combining hair and skin-tone in the study. Hair style, especially for women of color, mediates how skin tone is received so that "hair texture is laden with value distinctions, such that hair can alter the significance attached to skin tone—making a lighter-skinned Black woman 'Blacker' or a darker-skinned Black

woman more ‘assimilated’ into Whiteness” (2019:265). In assessments of a Black woman candidate with a dark complexion and natural hair, both Black men and women respond negatively to the candidate, but Black women also said they would vote for her. Black women also perceived this candidate as more liberal, but Black men saw her as more conservative. For Black women voters, the researchers suggest that even though natural hair may provide negative impressions, voters also may believe that a candidate with more Afrocentric features will represent their interests (2019:286). This important research concerning the interaction between hair and skin tone reveals the need for more studies to take into account hair and other phenotypic traits in conjunction with skin tone.

Other studies have paid attention to how skin-tone interacts with policy views and political orientations of the voter. When Amy E. Lerman et al. specifically looked at the case of a growing contingent of self-identified conservative Black Democrats, they found these voters not only strongly tend to prefer a Black candidate to a White candidate but also a darker-skinned Black candidate to a lighter-skinned Black candidate (2015:54). These voters perceive that a darker complexion is linked to a more conservative stance on social issues; although, they did not find the same attention paid to skin tone among liberal Black voters. Vincent L. Hutchings et al. (2016) focused their research not on specific candidate elections but on policy preference among Blacks with varying skin tone complexions. They found that Blacks with darker complexions were more likely to support increased welfare spending and government support services, and they were also more likely to support race-based policies such as Affirmative Action. This finding shows that not only does the skin tone of the candidate matter but also the skin tone of the voter, thereby suggesting a need for further research on the interactive effects of skin tone among voters, candidates, and political orientation.

Manipulating Skin-tone

As stated earlier, politicians and their campaigns seem to be acutely aware that skin-tone of candidates matters and have gone so far as to manipulate skin-tone in campaign ads. In an effort to document the real effects of such a political tactic, some research has evaluated voters’ perceptions of actual candidates. Using photos of Obama and McCain, Solomon Messing, Maria Jabon, and Ethan Plaut (2015) examine how negative advertisements correlate with darker skin-tone and how people respond to such ads. They found that, indeed, the darkest

images of Barack Obama appear in the most negative, stereotypical consistent advertisements (2015:52). Adding to this finding, this research shows that even though Obama is often perceived as a “counter-stereotypical exemplar” of a Black politician, respondents still perceived the ads where Obama appeared dark as unpleasant, and the ads could activate negative stereotypes about Blacks (2015:57–59). In a related study, Eugene M. Caruso, Nicole L. Mead, and Emily Balcetis (2009) showed participants doctored photographs of Obama and McCain. Again, results revealed that those who agreed with Obama chose a lightened photograph while those who disagreed with him chose a darker photograph. Thus, even when real candidates were used, respondents would lighten the picture when they agreed with the candidate and darken the picture when they disagreed with the candidate.

Multiraciality Candidacy and Skin-tone

The specific case of multiracial candidates or multiracial voters adds to the complexity of colorism and politics. Biracial candidates are often not only of light(er) complexion but are also seen as straddling two racial worlds and having contrasting ideologies to their monoracial counterparts. There is also the problem of biracials with light(er) complexions not being received as “authentic” as their monoracial counterpart and therefore not politically trustworthy. Danielle Casarez Lemi (2020) surveyed White, Black, Asian, and Hispanic respondents on their perception of a candidate who was presented as either monoracial or multiracial. Lemi found that overall, respondents prefer a same-race multiracial candidate when the other option is an outsider monoracial candidate; for example, Hispanics prefer a Hispanic/White candidate compared to a White candidate. Non-White respondents also have a preference for specific multiracial candidates: Black respondents prefer a Black-Hispanic candidate, Asian respondents prefer an Asian-White candidate, and Hispanic respondents prefer a Hispanic-White candidate.

On the voter side of the equation, there are also pressing questions on how multiracial voters may differ from their monoracial counterparts in policy attitudes and/or likelihood to vote for candidates. Natalie Masuoka (2017) finds that multiracial Whites and multiracial Latinxs tend to be more liberal than their monoracial counterparts and that multiracial Blacks tend to have similar views as monoracial Blacks, thereby suggesting that having a part minority racial background continues to shape political attitudes. Lauren D. Davenport

(2018) has similar findings in her analysis of attitudes on racial issues such as support for Affirmative Action and control of gun sales among Black-Whites, Asian-Whites, and Latinx-Whites. Davenport found that Black-White self-identifying multiracials tend to hold the same views as monoracial Blacks, Asian-Whites self-identifying multiracials tend to have similar views as mixed Asians who identify as Asian, and Latinx-White self-identifying multiracials tend to be more conservative than monoracial Latinxs. On other social (nonracial) issues, multiracials tend to be more progressive than their monoracial counterparts. The case of multiraciality and colorism in politics does not always overlap, but for the many instances where it does more research into how skin-tone shapes multiracial candidates and multiracial voters is needed.

Implications

Research shows a confluence of factors are shaped by skin-tone: candidates' stances, likelihood to vote for a candidate, perception of a candidate, and voters' political attitudes. As the White dominant hold on politics begins to loosen, the question of how colorism is infused into the political arena becomes one of increasing interest. In the United States., both the Latinx population and multiracial populations are rapidly growing; Deb Haaland just became the first Native American to hold a cabinet secretary position, and Andrew Yang became the first Asian American man to run for president. As politics is the formal representation of power, we look toward more research in this area.

TRANSRACIALITY: APPROPRIATING SKIN-TONE

Many might see the display of colorism in politics as influencing electoral outcomes, but a manipulation of skin-tone occurs with the appropriation of it in the recent phenomenon of "transraciality." Transraciality is the term given to people, most often Whites, who change their outward appearance, such as tanning their skin, modifying their hair, and choosing dress/fashion, to change their racial identity. Although colorism most often focuses within and across communities of color, we now need to consider the implications and ramifications of skin tone that is darkened by people who are born White. We tie in racial passing, transracial versus transgender identity analogies, and the phenomenon of Blackfishing to provide necessary nuance to the

conversation of benefits ascribed to and harm caused by asserting a transracial identity.

Passing

The act of "passing" as a different racial group has historical roots but, in contemporary practice, differs dramatically from its historical application. During Jim Crow, BIPOC, and in particular Black people, passed as White in order to obtain benefits within a racial hierarchical system. The need to pass in order to receive the economic and social benefits reserved for Whites sometimes required Blacks to relocate across state lines (Valdez and Valdez 1998) and disavow any connection to their biological families, fearing that they would be discovered and killed for their transgression. However, more common forms of passing involved lighter-skinned Black people with Eurocentric features occasionally passing as White to gain entry into racially exclusive establishments (Daniel 1992), but overall maintaining a Black identity and community. While the ability to pass meant that lighter-skinned Black people had advantages in a colorist society, the majority of people who could pass elected not to.

The decision not to pass as White continues in the contemporary Black community. In fact, Nikki Khanna and Cathryn Johnson (2010:394) note a reversal in contemporary passing strategies, with Black/White biracials now "passing" as Black in order to fit in with Black peers, avoid a White stigmatized identity, and obtain advantages associated with affirmative action. Importantly, Khanna and Johnson (2010) explain someone who views themselves as biracial yet asserts a Black identity is passing, while someone who sees themselves as Black and presents a Black identity is not passing because their self-presentation is in line with how they understand their racial identity. In this way, lighter-skinned Black people work against colorist ideas of separating Black peoples, and rather, focus on sharing a collective Black identity.

Lighter-skinned Black people passing as either White or Black is distinct from the contemporary phenomenon of people born with a White identity who pass as BIPOC. The latter concept often involves appropriating others' culture(s) for personal advancement. The majority of transracial people, at least those seen in the media, tan their skin and curl their hair to present a BIPOC appearance. This emphasizes the idea that light skin and straight hair is associated with Whiteness, and that BIPOC and especially Black culture can be imi-

tated and appropriated for individual gains regardless of the repercussions to these communities.

Contested Legitimacy of Transracial Identities

Transracial identities are frequently compared to transgender identities. Transgender refers to people whose gender identity and/or gender self-expression differ from the sex they were assigned at birth. If gender can be different from that assigned at birth, can race be different as well? (Arter 2015) Scholars debate whether both of these socially constructed identities and forms of asserting and maintaining systemic power may be fluid. While some researchers describe the transgender identity discourse as opening up a conversation about racial fluidity (Brubaker 2016) and providing a useful metaphor for understanding the transracial experience, scholars also assert that the rhetoric of “transracial” identity coopts this term from and removes visibility from transracial adoptees’ experiences and minimizes the experiences of transgender individuals, whose lives often include vulnerability to violence and death (Tran and Johnston-Guerrero 2016). As we continue forward with this work, scholars may consider the implications and ramification of these multiple approaches when conducting research.

Transraciality is also not to be confused with racial fluidity, which can involve the shifting of racial identity over time. Racial fluidity refers to multiple aspects of race (e.g., racial identity, observed race, phenotype) that may change with time and contextual factors. The fluidity of racial identity is an internal process that is shaped by external factors, such as peer groups and perceived levels of acceptance (Campion 2019; Roth 2016). Racial fluidity may be connected to shifts in appearance in terms of clothes and hairstyles, but generally does not involve changing one’s skin color.

Cultural Appropriation and Personal Gains

Rachel Dolezal, a former college professor who was outed as “White” in 2015, is perhaps the most well-known contemporary example of someone with a transracial identity. Importantly, Dolezal did not just assert a Black identity. She also tanned her skin and wore hair weave that resembled naturally curly Black hair or wore different types of braids associated with Black hairstyles. In dismissal of her asserted Black identity, opponents shared younger pictures of Dolezal as a pale White woman with blonde hair and compared these to more recent photos of her with tan skin and curled hair (see

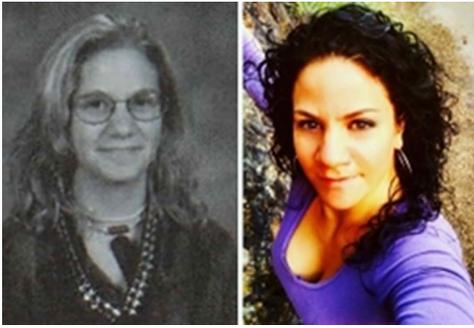


Picture 1. Rachel Dolezal, before (right) and after (left) moving from a White to a Black identity.

Picture 1). Thus, skin color and hair texture is used in transraciality to assert ideas of what it means to be White or Black.

Darkening skin tone to assert a Black identity goes against the typical colorism narrative that lighter skin has advantages compared to darker skin. However, Dolezal and other transracial individuals tend to darken their relatively pale skin to appear as lighter-skinned BIPOC. Thus, colorism may work in their favor, influencing the types of opportunities available to them as perceived lighter-skinned BIPOC. When “transracial” people darken their skin to appear as lighter-skinned BIPOC, this could add to the questions of racial legitimacy of lighter-skinned BIPOC. Jessica Krug, former professor at George Washington University in African and Latin American studies, has a previously close friend Hari Ziyad who attests to this, stating he accepted her asserted identity because “I had already been granting [biracial family members] so many allowances to move through Blackness unquestioned,” yet recognize “people less ambiguously Black than I was . . . questioned how much space light-skinned and biracial people took up in our community” (Ziyad 2020). Alternatively, the fact that many transracial individuals are initially accepted as their asserted racial identity could indicate a general public acceptance of lighter-skinned BIPOC as racial minorities, and thus a continuation of the one-drop rule (Khanna and Johnson 2010).

The legitimacy of a transracial identity is hotly contested, especially as it has been used for personal gain. For example, Dolezal took the role as Spokane, Washington, National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) President under the assumption that she was Black. Krug, depicted above in Picture 2, requested to be sent money for her emotional labor as an Afro-Latina from the Bronx, as shown in the screenshot



Picture 2. Jessica Krug, before (left) and after (right) shifting from a White to an Afro-Latina identity.

displayed in Picture 3. Satchuel Cole, an Indianapolis social justice activist, changed their name, asserted a Black identity, and increased their activism, having leadership roles in multiple social justice programs (Black Indy Live Staff 2020; Dorn 2020). On the one hand, transracial individuals are aligning themselves with and fighting on behalf of marginalized communities. On the other hand, transracial people often obtain opportunities intended for people who were born BIPOC and use their interpretation of BIPOC community needs to advance these communities in ways they see fit. Transraciality builds on cultural appropriation, often in the name of activism. Darkening one's skin tone to "pass" as BIPOC presents opportunities to people who were born White to obtain the limited leadership roles intended for BIPOC, access BIPOC spaces, and find community with BIPOC.

While there is speculation that transracial individuals obtain the benefits of a BIPOC identity without having to experience racial discrimination, there is a dearth of scholarship regarding their experiences (the exceptions being Dolezal's (2017) autobiography and Krug's (2020) manifesto). While research could be done into these individuals' lived experiences, from a sociological standpoint it may be more telling to question our contemporary racial structure. How much racial justice advocacy could be done as a White ally versus as a transracial BIPOC? What racial identity boundaries are crossed, shifted, or maintained (Brubaker 2016 discusses this)? How do transracial individuals' asserted identities challenge, shift, and/or reify our understanding of colorism? Finally, underlying these questions is the key concern: how are our current racial and skin color hierarchies reinforced rather than challenged?



Picture 3. Facebook message of Jessica Krug requesting payment for her labor as a woman of color.

Blackfishing

There is an important distinction between transraciality and Blackfishing, a related phenomenon that includes darkening one's skin color but keeping one's racial identity (Jackson 2018). Beauty influencer Emma Hallberg, depicted in Picture 4 below, identifies as White and provides YouTube tutorials on how she darkens her complexion multiple shades. More famously, celebrities accused of Blackfishing include Kim Kardashian, Kylie Jenner, and Ariana Grande (Grande is shown below in Picture 5 standing next to and with skin almost the same shade as Nicki Minaj, a Black female performer), all of whom identify as White but deeply tan their skin so that it is multiple shades darker than their natural skin color.

We see a trickle-down effect into civilian life, with people emulating the makeup tutorials of Blackfishing influencers, which means Blackfishing influencers make money from representing their idea of Black culture without having to experience life as Black women. As Reni Eddo-Lodge (2018) explains, "They want our bodies without the struggle. They want the rhythm without the blues." White celebrities, influencers, and civilians, may see themselves as appreciating BIPOC, especially Black, culture; imitation is a form of flattery. Often, in reality they are appropriating BIPOC cultures without knowing or appreciating the histories behind



Picture 4. Emma Hallberg before (left) and after (right) applying makeup that darkens her skin multiple shades.

cultural choices and practices (e.g., wearing indigenous headdresses at Coachella music festival).

There is a deficit of academic scholarship on Blackfishing (a couple exceptions are Balanda 2020; Bass 2020). Though cultural appropriation is far from new, the specific phenomenon and phrasing of “Blackfishing” to reference White influencers darkening their appearances while maintaining a White identity is discussed in predominantly non-academic settings and appears to be largely overlooked in scholarship. However, Eddo-Lodge (2018) asserts that instead of continuing to emphasize the appropriative nature of Blackfishing, we should recognize that Blackfishing puts forth Whites’ caricatures of Black bodies. She emphasizes that, in addition to tanning skin and wearing weaves, Blackfishing involves White women presenting “ideal” “Black” female body types—thin waist, wide hips, large breasts and butt (and, though not mentioned by Eddo-Lodge, lighter skin)—a media lauded combination that is not actually the norm for most Black women. Thus, Eddo-Lodge argues that conversations about Blackfishing should shift to those of dismantling negative, often internalized, stereotypes of Black women’s bodies.

Implications

As highlighted in this section, “passing” as White has historical roots while “passing” as BIPOC is a more contemporary phenomenon. Skin tone is often darkened in order for someone who was born identified as White to “pass” as BIPOC (e.g., transracial) or to keep a White identity but be adjacent to Blackness and benefit from Black culture without experiencing anti-Black racism (e.g., Blackfishing). While the majority of scholarship on transraciality focuses on the Black-White binary and passing as or being adjacent to Blackness, this is just one aspect of colorism. Upholding lighter skin over darker skin is pervasive across racial communities and across countries.



Picture 5. Ariana Grande (left) standing next to Nicki Minaj (right) during a performance.

SKIN LIGHTENING: MARKETING SKIN-TONE

Practices that (re)produce racialized physical differences are the basis of a gigantic international industry, involving some of the largest transnational corporations in the world, such as Procter and Gamble, Unilever, L’Oreal, and Shiseido. “Skin lightening,” “Whitening” or “bleaching,” depending on which term you prefer to use, is a multibillion-dollar global industry that revolves around racism and colorism. Estimates of the industry’s value suggest that it will reach upward of \$12 billion per year by 2027.² There is a growing social science literature on this topic, a much larger medical corpus, and a huge amount published on how to concoct such products (including patents), partly work that is done in university laboratories by university scientists (Mire 2012). In this review linking strands of thought and practice on contemporary colorism, the skin lightening industry thus requires our urgent attention.

The industry normalizes consumer choice enabling women to be the “best version” of themselves.³ However, we argue here that given that the “best” version is always a lighter one, that skin lightening equates to an enactment of white supremacy on (mainly) women’s bodies: an enactment that commodifies and marketizes colorism in an unparalleled way. Race and racism have always been about power and the combination of culture and bodies rather than the body alone (Garner 2017). As it has its own contextually specific

practices and discourses, skin lightening uniquely embeds the cultural within the materiality of race, and the material within the “culturality” of race.

Once we begin talking about skin lightening, we should note that there are other areas of body modification, namely forms of cosmetic surgery, that also assume partly racialized forms. Based on her study of surgical guides in the United States, Alka Menon (2017:611) argues that

development of distinct, ethnic ideals in cosmetic surgery represents the biological construction of social difference in an example of categorical alignment, linking variation in human physical types to social and cultural identities such as race and gender and conversely, taking popular notions of race and gender and giving them physical form.

There is plenty to learn from studying cosmetic surgery, and some data produced by the national professional associations is in the public domain.⁴ Here, however, we focus exclusively on skin lightening, because of its proximity to colorism, the global nature of skin lightening platforms, and the public health risk it poses.

A Postcolonial Frame

Frames through which skin lightening has been analyzed are quite discipline-specific and have resulted in a siloed literature with three principal branches; medical; sociological; and public health. The fundamental theoretical position in the sociological work on skin lightening locates it as part of a gendered postcolonial legacy organized by Whiteness (Glenn 2008; M. R. Jha 2015; Tate 2016). Case studies on Africa (Blay 2011; Pierre 2008), dominate, with other geographical clusters, for example, on Jamaica (Charles 2007; Hope 2009). Yet little empirical work has been published, for example, on the Indian subcontinent or its diaspora (Malik 2006; Sahay and Piran 1997), whereas the longstanding caste-colourism and its intersection with Whiteness is a major theme (Thappa and Malathi 2014). Indeed, secondary analysis of local cultural practices and their articulation with their specific colonial legacies comprises the substance of this literature.

Consumer Choices

A degree of consistency emerges from empirical studies being done across Africa on consumers of skin lightening products, in terms of patterns of use and rationales (Ahmed and Hamid 2017; Kpanake et al 2010; Lewis et al. 2010). People engage in

skin lightening to satisfy their desire for a more successful presentation of self, which in the context of “pigmentocratic societies” (Tate 2017) means a lighter version. In addition to a focus on removing effects of sun and skin blemishes to produce a paler and smoother skin, Yaba Blay’s (2009) respondents told her that relatively lighter skin, permitted, (1) access to particular social networks, (2) facilitated the performance of particular social identities, (3) enabled the performance of “modernity,” (4) ignites heterosexual (male) desire, and (5) boosts marriageability/“husband maintenance.”

Indeed, product advertising draws a compelling and seductive line between lightness of skin tone, untainted complexion, heterosexual popularity, and civilizational advance. It is more than a century since the famous Pears soap advert in which a Black child is scrubbed to remove his Blackness/barbarity, yet the trope of cleaning as a civilizing mission appears to have retained its allure. Recent examples are of a Chinese advert where a man is placed in a washing machine—an update of Pears (Tsoi et al. 2016)—and the revelation of a focus on lightening women’s genitalia (Hanrahan 2012), which could not be explicit enough about that line being drawn. Yet these types of discourse are only newsworthy when they provoke controversy, while the mundane and relentless discursive drip-feeding of “pigmentocratic” visual advertising continues, facilitated by the relentless use of euphemisms such as “brightening,” “cleaning,” and “glowing” (instead of Whitening). Such imbalances of power and their resulting representations, compounded by the versions of “lighter-is-better” discourse that some members of communities of color also engage in, results in ever-increasing numbers of people pursuing harmful practices.

Skin Lightening as a Public Health Issue

Much of the scholarship on skin lightening is published in specialist medical and public health journals. This stream goes back decades and explores the negative health outcomes of skin lightening (Del Giudice and Yves 2002; Findlay and De Beer 1980). However, there is now also medical/public health work on other geographical areas like the Middle East (Al-Saleh et al. 2012) and Latin America (Peregrino et al. 2011). This work identifies detrimental medical outcomes caused by exposure to skin-lightening products containing mercury and/or hydroquinone. These cover both skin diseases and a raft of other impacts on internal organs and functions of the body, including “impaired wound healing and wound dehiscence, the fish odor syndrome,

nephropathy, steroid addiction syndrome, predisposition to infections, a broad spectrum of cutaneous and endocrinologic complications of corticosteroids, including suppression of hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal axis” (Olumide et al. 2008:344).

While the medical literature identifies the numerous deleterious health effects of skin lightening, the principal point to understand is that the distinction between “legal” and “illegal” does not correspond to the one between harmful and harmless. Local regulations identify limits to toxins that can be included in products, but the objective of a successful skin lightening agent is to suppress melanin production, which is unhealthy in itself. It weakens the skin’s capacity to protect other organs (Pollock et al. 2021; Street et al. 2014). Moreover, long-term application of legal substances such as corticosteroids is also harmful, even if they are legal and, within prescribed limits, safe. Dominic Sagoe et al. (2019:41) conclude that due to its global prevalence, “the practice of skin bleaching should be an issue of global public health concern.” This is a serious warning, even without addressing the numerous potential psychological issues (Charles 2011).

Expanding the academic reflection on skin lightening as a technology of control, we could think of skin lightening as a most profound manifestation of racism. The existing scholarship is already rich and theoretically engaging. Yet the scope of scholarship could also be expanded without abandoning these original historical and cultural sociologies, informed as they are by feminist, anti-racist and postcolonial ethics and sensibilities.

The following two directions are promising:

1. A focus on skin lightening as a transnational industry, with White supremacy—as an engine of racialization—as a part of that focus, rather than only ever the consumers of products. Skin lightening corresponds to a classic division of labor, with high-end functions performed in the Global North and often dangerous low-end functions plus dumping, in the Global South. Stakeholders include universities, regulators, and very large corporations. Amina Mire (2012, 2020).
2. Capturing and amplifying the counter-discourse and praxis of those confronting the skin lightening industry.

Discourses of resistance have existed for a long time. Yet such discourses have considerable challenges to overcome. Normative colorism has generated “shame” scripts (Tate 2016, 2017) and a

“critique of pigmentocracy” that Shirley-Anne Tate (2017) identifies as driving Black women’s engagement with bleaching. There are now several dominant campaigns in the battle to win young women’s minds: the Indian “Dark is Beautiful” campaign⁵ set up in 2009 by Women’s Worth, India; “Dark is Divine” that began in Pakistan in 2013⁶ and now works in other South Asian countries; the Instagram campaign #unfairandlovely, initiated by students of color at University of Texas-Austin in 2016; and the Beautywell project⁷ established by Public health researcher Amina Adawe in Minneapolis. Such projects aim to shift attitudes and practices by providing alternative frames through which to understand skin lightening.

Implications

For sociologists interested in race and ethnicity, and indeed for sociologists interested in the interface between structure and agency; globalization; health; identity; and inequalities, power and nationalism, skin lightening is a subject waiting to be “sociologized.” The academic work done so far demonstrates that skin lightening harnesses colorism and has constructed an industry on updating and maintaining a legacy of colonial domination through technologies of control of women of color. There is resistance to these technologies, and scholars can contribute to amplifying it.

LOOKING FORWARD: FUTURE RESEARCH ON SKIN TONE

Throughout this colorism overview we focused on politics, transraciality, and skin lightening as three pressing issues that have become more apparent in the contemporary landscape. And, although, we didn’t have space in this article to discuss the many other significant consequences of colorism, we recognize the important work that has also been done regarding colorism and health, criminal justice, income, education, marriage, and global culture, to name a few. Much has already been done by scholars to illuminate how the micro-level experiences of colorism are impacted by macro-level societal structure. Yet much more work and attention must continue on this important topic. In particular, we note three overarching areas of research that are needed: measurement of colorism, intersectional nature of colorism, and global expansion and interaction of colorism. First, we need more investigation of how to best measure colorism as perception of “light” and “dark” are inherently perspective based. It is difficult to prove the existence of something without verifiable,

agreed upon measurements of it. Researchers such as Mary E. Campbell et al. (2020), Angela R. Dixon and Edward E. Telles (2017), and Harvey et al. (2014) have already done some important work in creating and modifying skin-tone and colorism scales, and we look forward to more work in this area. Second, we seek more intersectional work done on colorism as “color” shapes and is shaped by a range of other structures of oppression such as classism, sexism, hairism, and fatphobia and also religion, age, geographic region, and other sociodemographic factors. Third, we need a deeper understanding of how meanings attached to color and consequences of colorism are rooted in a global exchange. Some researchers have discussed regional and global comparisons in how colorism is discussed and experienced, but the majority of work has focused within specific countries. To better understand the global and interconnected nature of colorism, it may be beneficial to consider transnational experiences and hierarchies through comparative work and an analysis of a global culture of colorism.

As sociologists, we see the fundamental harm of colorism is based on the hierarchical nature of color, and therefore, we must question how colorism impacts or fits into the racial hierarchy that places White at the top and Black at the bottom. The anti-Black basis of colorism works to reify the current racial hierarchy. By rewarding lightness and penalizing darkness, those who more closely approximate Whiteness continue to receive benefits. This clear pattern suggests that colorism is, at its root, about anti-Blackness and therefore still a race-based problem. Yet as noted earlier, many scholars suggest that, though intimately tied, colorism and racism are independent of one another. We see some examples of colorism diverging from the pattern of racism: we see many Black people who could “pass” as White choose to assert a Black identity, we see celebrities lightening their skin-tone while still maintaining a strong person of color identity, and, we see the manipulation of skin-tone in the presentation of transraciality and Blackfishing. Such practices challenge racial rigidity and the long-held practice that White is better. What does it mean for the racial hierarchy currently operating, if lightness/Whiteness is not always seen as better? Yet how effective is this resistance if darker skin continues to be associated with negative outcomes, and, what does this mean for our social structure?

Should we make space for the study of global color spectrums, alongside that of Du Bois’ color line? The power dynamics associated with a skin-tone spectrum is an issue with which we must continue our research and activism.

NOTES

1. Though technically many of these labels focus on colors (i.e., blanco meaning White, moreno meaning brown, negro meaning Black), there are often negative connotations and stereotypes associated with “negro” and positive connotations with “blanco.”
2. Global Industry Analysts (2021) predict that the market will be worth US\$12.6 bn by 2027.
3. It is still primarily women who use the products, even if men have been identified by some producers as a potential market to grow.
4. The American Society for Plastic Surgery (<https://www.plasticsurgery.org/>); and the Aesthetic Society (<https://www.surgery.org/media/statistics>) publish annual statistics for surgeries carried out by registered practitioners in the United States, some of which are broken down by gender and “ethnicity.”
5. <https://www.darkisbeautiful.in/>.
6. www.darkisdivine.com.
7. <https://thebeautywell.org/>.

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AUTHOR BIOGRAPHIES

Hephzibah V. Strmic-Pawl is an Associate Professor of Sociology at Manhattanville College. Her research and teaching focus on race and racism, often with a focus on multiraciality.

Vanessa Gonlin is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Sociology at the University of Georgia. Her research focuses on racial identity(ies), interracial relationships, and colorism.

Steve Garner is Senior Research Fellow in the School of Social Sciences at Cardiff University, UK. He works on racism, and has published widely on this topic in various European and American contexts.