The Association of Black Psychologists

ON DARK GIRLS

Introduction

"...the capture of the mind and body both is a slavery far more lasting, far more severe than conquest of bodies alone..." *Ayi Kwei Armah, Two Thousand Seasons "(p.33)*

Black women have been assaulted—physically and psychologically—for centuries—since we were involuntarily brought to the colonies as enslaved labor *(Blackmon, 2009)*. Whereas Whites were glorified *(Fairchild, 1988)*, portrayals of Black women (and men) were vicious. We were cast as morally and intellectually inferior to White men and women, sexually perverse, and spiritually bankrupt *(cf. Fairchild, 1995)*. Viewed as sub-human, we were victims of physical and sexual abuse, social discrimination, and psychological tyranny.

And still we rise! We never fully gave in to the lies and misrepresentations; but generations of abuse do take a toll and has affected us as individuals, families, communities, and a people. *Dark Girls* gives us an opportunity to take a soul-searching look at the effects of racism on the self-image of Black women personally and collectively, particularly as it relates to complexion, so that where healing is needed, we can heal; where our tools for resilience and defying the lie protected us, we can lift them up for celebration and increased use.

In the conversations that ensue from *Dark Girls*, we can choose to take this occasion to heal; to no longer simply demonstrate resilience to the assaults and lies about Black women, but rather, we can as Blackmon *(2009; p. 3)* stated chose to "...counter [our] realities of violence and discrimination by envisioning the Black female community as a collective of unique agents working toward a common goal of liberation" *(Blackmon, 2009, p. 3)*.

Viewing *Dark Girls* presents an opportunity. Not everyone will have the same reaction. Not everyone will identify with all of the issues, images, and concerns. However, we can all take out time to reflect deeply, rethink where we stand on these issues, and support each other.

What You May Not Know About Colorism

Definition

Colorism is skin color stratification *(Okazawa Rey, Robinson, & Ward, 1987)*. It is " a form of oppression that is expressed through the differential treatment of individuals and groups based on skin color. Typically, favoritism is demonstrated toward those of lighter complexions while those of darker complexions experience rejection and mistreatment...." *(Jackson-Lowman, 2013)*

Colorism is one expression of internalized racism. After hearing racist stereotypes and attitudes, a time comes when these are adopted as truth—internalized — and believed by those on the receiving end of the lie. A heavy price is paid by all members of the Black community.

"Colorism is a persistent problem for people of color in the USA. Colorism, or skin color stratification, is a process that privileges light-skinned people of color over dark in areas such as income, education, housing, and the marriage market. Colorism is directly related to the larger system of racism in the USA and around the world. The color complex is also exported around the globe, in part through US media images, and helps to sustain the multibillion-dollar skin bleaching and cosmetic surgery industries." *(Hunter, 2007, p.237)*

Historical Roots

In the US, colorism has roots in European colonialism *(Jordan 1968)* and plantation system of enslaved African Americans *(Stevenson 1996)*. The American enslavement system operated as a form of White domination that rewarded those who emulated Whiteness culturally, ideologically, economically, and aesthetically *(Hunter, 2007)*. Four central figures emerged out of the racist antebellum representations of Black womanhood: the "inept domestic servant" (the mammy), the domineering matriarch, the sex object (the Jezebel), and "the tragic mulatto" *(Morton, 1991)*. While White women were idealized as all things virtuous (piety, deference, domesticity, passionless, chastity, clean and fragile), Black women were cast as primitive, lustful, seductive, physically strong, domineering, unwomanly and dirty *(Mgadmi, 2009)*.

The color caste system established in the antebellum period was reinforced through various laws. In 1622 we saw the first miscegenation law in Virginia *(Russell, Wilson, & Hall, 1992)*. Also in 1662 a Virginia law declared that mixed children born to enslaved women would share the legal status of their mother. Thus, the children that the White enslavers had with captive women were defined as enslaved. However, they were often provided more favorable roles within a plantation; thus enacting the colorism hierarchy.

After the Civil War, the divisions created during enslavement led to divisions based on differences in skin color, hair texture and physical appearance *(Jackson-Lowman, 2013, p. 158)*. These early laws and practices took root and eventually influenced several parts of Black life.

Social groups such as the Bon Ton Society *(Washington, D.C.)*, and the Blue Veins *(Nashville)* had strict admission standards based on color *(Russell et al., 1992)*. Neighborhoods made up of primarily lighter-skinned African Americans emerged in cities like Chicago, Philadelphia and New York.

Black churches were not exempt. Some were designated specifically for lighter-skinned African Americans and even the break of the Colored Methodist Episcopal Church *(C.M.E.)* in 1870, from the African Methodist Episcopal Church *(A.M.E.)*, was based on skin color issues.

The 20th century witnessed the "paper bag test" and the "comb test" by color conscious churches and some social organizations to enforce rules for lighter-skinned membership. Membership was denied if your skin was darker than the paper bag, or if the comb might snag in your hair. Some churches painted their doors light brown; a signal to those who were darker than the door that they were not welcome. Still other churches hung a comb at their doors signaling that only those with hair textures more like Whites were welcomed *(Jackson-Lowman, 2013)*.

Our educational institutions were, sadly, not exempt. Black preparatory schools and historically Black colleges and universities such as Wilberforce, Howard, Fisk, Atlanta University, Morgan, Hampton, and Spelman were known to discriminate against darker-skinned African Americans *(Russell et al., 1992)*.

Psychological, Mental Health, Familial, and Community Effects of Colorism

Some may consider the issue of colorism overblown in the 21st century. Research reveals, however, that people, inside and outside of the Black community continue to give meaning to complexion and that this has significant impact on a number of life opportunities. The effects of colorism may be observed in Black women's self-perceptions, ethnic identity, relationships, men, mate selection, family dynamics, educational and occupational outcomes, income levels, and mental and physical health *(Hunter, 2007; Jackson-Lowman, 2013)*. Although more positive images and role models for African American women are beginning to emerge, the stereotypes emanating from slavery simply mutate with time, creating newer versions of the same theme that continue to influence the sense of self of Black girls/women *(Collins, 1992; Townsend et al., 2010)*. Below are a few more examples of the nefarious effects of colorism.

Self Esteem: Colorism can affect how you see and feel about yourself, how you treat yourself, and your actual behaviors in various situations. Skin color is associated with self-esteem for some Black women where having a darker skin tone is associated with lower self-worth *(Thompson, 2001)*. Sadly, this occurs in both adults and youth. A study that examined skin color in the lives of 123 African American adolescents (aged 11–19 years) found complexion to be related to self-esteem, but the study also brought additional complexity to the issue. Students who self-reported as "lighter" or "darker" had lower levels of satisfaction with their skin color than did students whose skin color was classified as "somewhere in between" *(Robinson, & Ward, 1995)*.

Perceptions of Beauty: Skin tone can affect how we are judged by other Black people. This has been found for example in attractiveness ratings assigned to Black women *(Hill, 2002)*. Because appearance is often central in the evaluation of women, the effect of colorism on self-esteem and well-being is stronger for African American girls and women compared to males *(Thompson & Keith, 2001)*. Adolescent girls and women are at greater risk of self-objectification reinforced through constant societal messages and media images emphasizing the physical appearance of women and girls. For African American girls, self-objectification may appear as a preference for physical characteristics they believe will be judged more favorably (i.e., lighter skin, longer hair, keen features, fine hair texture, etc.). This may pose a particular risk for African American girls who may not conform to this standard. Wingood et al. *(2002)* for example, found that African American girls, who judged their physical appearance negatively, felt they had less personal control over condom use and choice of sexual partners. African American girls who adopt standards consistent with "colorism" may judge their physical appearance too harshly and may adopt risky behaviors to be seen as sexually attractive/desirable *(Townsend et al., 2010)*.

Economic Opportunity: Skin color affects education and income for African American women. Skin color has also been found to be related to the education level of an African American woman's spouse. Lighter-skinned women are not more likely to be married than their darker-skinned counterparts, but are likely to marry higher status spouses *(Hunter 1998; Udry et al. 1971)*. Lighter-skinned job applicants tend to benefit from the halo effect of physical attractiveness *(Etcoff, 2000)*; attractive people are viewed as smarter and friendlier *(Mulford, 1998)*. Skin color discrimination affects who gets the job, pay, and success on the job *(Keith and Herring, 1991; Hunter, 2002)*.

Education: Similar patterns of inequality based on skin color stratification have been found in school settings *(Murguia & Telles 1996)*. Hughes and Hertel *(1990)* found that the education gap between Whites and Blacks was nearly identical to the education gap between light-skinned Blacks and dark-skinned Blacks. Consequently, they suggested that colorism plays as significant a role in the lives of African Americans as race does. Student achievement can be influenced by teacher expectations grounded in colorism (the expectation that light-skinned students are smarter, more academically prepared, from better families, and better behaved than their darker skinned students *(Murguia and Telles 1996)*. In addition, light-skinned parents may be treated differently by teachers and principals and students of color also sometimes hold in higher esteem lighter-skinned peers assuming they have greater beauty, intellect, and social status *(Craig 2002; Leeds 1994; Robinson & Ward 1995; Torres 2006)*.

Risk Behaviors: Internalizing colorism attitudes can contribute to higher sexual risk and substance use behavior, by African American girls *(Lowman-Jackson, 2013; Townsend et al., 2010; Wallace et al., 2011)*.
For example, Wallace, Townsend, Glasgow, & Ojie's *(2011)* study of 272 African American adolescent girls found that girls who endorsed a standard of beauty consistent with colorism reported higher levels of substance use *(Wallace, et al., 2011)*.

Skin bleaching is another important risk behavior. Throughout the Caribbean, Africa, and in the United States, skin bleaching has several serious and negative health effects including mercury poisoning, permanent thinning of the skin, premature aging of the skin, increased risk of skin cancer, and skin infections. While skin bleaching fell out of favor in the US after the Civil rights movement, in many other parts of the world skin (including Africa, the Caribbean, Central and South America, Asia, and India) bleaching is reaching new heights *(Hunter, 2007)*.

General Bias: Colorism is fairly pervasive among Black people world-wide and among other ethno-cultural groups (e.g., Mexican, Filipino, Vietnamese, Saudi, Brazilian, Japanese, and Indian people to name a few). Forty-eight percent of African Americans completing an on-line survey showed an anti-Black bias *(Nosek, Greenwald & Banaji, as cited by Tummala-Narra, 2007)*. Further, the issue of colorism cuts both ways with negative consequences for both light and darker skinned Black people. The ethnic legitimacy or authenticity of lighter skinned Blacks is sometimes questioned or challenged while those with darker-skin tones are seen as more ethnically authentic *(Hunter, 2007)*.

Continual exposure to stereotypes can result in self-stereotyping *(Sinclair, Hardin and Lowery, 2006)*. Essentially a person begins to behave in ways consistent with various stereotypes. Since the identity of African American girls may be influenced by the volume of negative media depictions of African American women, their identity may include remnants of negative stereotypes which can devalue their sense of their beauty and damage their self-esteem *(Stephens & Phillips, 2003)*.

The Diaspora: People of African ancestry in the US, the Caribbean, Central and South America, Africa, and other parts of the globe continue to suffer from internalized colonialism/racism, which may affect relational decisions such as: mate selection, notions of inferiority, perceptions of beauty, and social class distinctions *(Gaines & Ramkissoon, 2008*). This is not just a US phenomenon. For example, the Jamaican population is over 90% persons of African ancestry, yet continued privileging of lighter skin color is common. It is not uncommon for Caribbean children to be socialized that White and lighter skinned playmates are preferable *(Fanon, 1967)*. Implicit and explicit messages are provided that Whiter features are preferred in mate selection *(Gaines & Ramkissoon, 2008)*. These messages are consistent with the booming market and availability of skin bleaching products in Africa and throughout the Caribbean *(Christopher, 2003; Also see The Jamaican healthy campaign: "Don't Kill the Skin")*. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), Nigeria has the world's highest percentage of women (77%) using skin-lightening products. In Togo the estimates hover around 59%. Colorism exists within communities of African ancestry across the world.

Our Resilience Despite the Onslaught

In the midst of colorism, we are not without tools to protect ourselves and we have utilized these tools very effectively. This is what can be called our resilience factor. Resilience is the positive capacity of people to exhibit positive behavior and cope with stress, adversity or trauma *(Luthar & Cicchetti, 2000)*. Resilience also aids in resistance to future negative events. In this sense "resilience" corresponds to cumulative "protective factors" and is used in opposition to cumulative "risk factors." Resilience is a "hardiness" and "resourcefulness" that equips individuals and communities to not be harmed-- emotionally and psychologically--by things like colorism.

Communities play a huge role in fostering resilience. Resilient communities have three 3 characteristics: 1) the availability of social organizations that provide an array of resources to community members; 2) a consistent expression of social norms so that community members understand what constitutes desirable behavior; and 3) opportunities for children and youth to participate in the life of the community as valued members *(Benard, 2004)*. To offset and decrease colorism, we must ensure these factors are present in our neighborhoods and community settings.

Basic practices can be put in place in neighborhoods and communities, schools, the media, and in the home to foster positive images for the young, thus changing the negative effects of colorism *(Gopaul-Mc.Nichol, 1988)*. One effort being launched by The Association of Black Psychologists, in conjunction with the Community Healing Network, are Emotional Emancipation Circles (EECs). EECs are community-based gatherings of African Americans working together to Defy the Lie of Black inferiority and Embrace the Truth of Black Empowerment. These self-sustaining community gatherings seek to promote resilience and resistance to colorism.

Teaching our children about their history and cultural heritage is another important way to promote resilience and offset the negative effects of colorism. Teaching Black history (a global history and a history that includes the pre-enslavement period) can build a sense of ethnic identity and self-concept that serves a protective function *(Townsend, et al., 2010; Wallace et al., 2012)*. However, a strong identity may not be enough to reduce the risks of colorism. Other things need to also be in place including teaching critical thinking skills to critically analyze the societal messages and instances of discrimination and racism associated with colorism.

HOW CAN WE HELP OUR DAUGHTERS ACROSS THE COLOR SPECTRUM COUNTER THE LIE AND REALIZE THEIR INNER AND OUTER BEAUTY?

Cultural Tools for Combating Colorism

Within the cultural heritage of people of African ancestry, character plays a prominent role in the assessment of beauty. As one African American proverb suggests: "Beauty is as beauty does." A single monolithic standard of beauty is untenable; it makes no sense. Nature, with its phenomenal diversity, provides a model of the range and variety that beauty may assume. Thus, a lily is no more beautiful than a rose; an oak tree no more beautiful than a palm tree; and an opal no more beautiful than a pearl. Each is beautiful in its own right and each has unique value and plays a special role in nature.

Beauty in an our cultural context meant, "being beautiful first and foremost in your actions toward others. Thus, from a traditional African perspective, no one is inherently beautiful. Beauty is dynamic and contextual. Worth and value are assessed on the basis of what you do. What you do is a reflection of your character and contribution to the community. That is the source of your true beauty, not your mere physical appearance. These values can be re-instilled and made salient in for our children, families, and communities.

Another useful cultural tool is cultural armoring. Townsend and Thomas *(2013)* discuss the role of community armoring through the influence of "othermothers" in the socialization process of African American girls. They equate the roles of othermothers to those of biological or "bloodmothers" *(Collins, 1997 in Townsend & Thomas, 2013)* and Othermothers and sister circles can be important vehicles for sharing critical lessons about confronting oppression with the younger generation. Having done their own self-reflection and discernment about colorism, racism, and sexism, they can offer guidance and protection to Black girls unprepared to deal with the negative messages propagated about African American womanhood.

Natural activities can serve as bonding time and teachable moments. For example, Lewis *(2013)* discusses the racial context that permeates the lives of African American women in their role as mothers. The hair-combing ritual between African American mothers and their daughters is a strategy that can influence the quality of the attachment between mother and daughter and shape the daughter's attitudes about her racial features. She suggests that the hair-combing interaction is an optimal time for instilling positive attitudes about racial heritage through storytelling and verbal exchanges supported by comforting and affirming physical proximity.

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The Significance and Role of the Community

The saying, "It takes a village to raise a child" really means – it takes a village. We do not raise children in isolation. The community should and does have a role. Community is the foundation from which our individual lives take shape, our families thrive, and our dreams become realities. It is the tangible source from which all else is possible, including self-esteem and well-being for our daughters. The more opportunities for meaningful participation in a community, the better off its people will be. The African proverb, "a single tree that is left to endure the force of a windstorm is liable to break" is a lesson for what we must do to address the issues raised in *Dark Girls*.

What community activities, resources, and role models do we have available for our daughters to emulate, to turn to, to reinforce values, and to use as a training ground to test out their emerging sense of themselves?

If these resources do not exist, then it is our job to create them. The talent to do so is there: the next door neighbor, the college student home for the summer, the community organizations, the local libraries, the parks and recreation centers, the churches, and the national Black organizations are starting places. Cooperation and empathy are necessary parts of our human existence. In other words, we need community as much as we need air and water.

Some Initial Tips for Resisting Colorism

- Significantly reduce the amount of time you spend viewing television, particularly shows that reinforce Eurocentric notions of what is beautiful.
- Never say: "She's pretty to be so dark:" or "she probably thinks she's cute because she is light-skinned". Such remarks are not only uncomplimentary, but they reinforce the idea that complexion matters, that being dark-skinned is unattractive, and that people generally base their self-concept on their complexion.
- Be on the alert for favoritism in the treatment of children in the family, social circle, classroom, or church. This is harmful to children across the spectrum of skin color.
- Recognize the potential negative effects of colorism that presumably favors lighter skinned children. Issues of acceptance, identity, bullying etc. may be as likely to occur for them. The positive stereotypes associated with complexion are no more helpful than the negative ones.
- Never put anyone down or tease them about their skin color.
- Cease using color names such as "high yella", "redbone," and referring to people as "Black and ugly" as if being "Black" automatically indicates that one is also "ugly."
- Surround yourself with images of African people from different ethno-cultures and contexts—walls at home, in your workplace, in the school, at the church etc.
- Buy magazines that present positive images of people of African heritage.
- Read books and stories about the significant contributions that people of African heritage have made to children.
- Challenge friends and family members who make negative racial remarks. In particular, we must censure the use of the Nword *(Fairchild, 1987)*.
- Insist that educational curricula, K-12 and college levels, include courses on African /African American history and literature. Such courses should include the contributions of ancient Africans to science and math.

Pulling it All Together

Harrell & Bond *(2006)* argued that three approaches to life are important for overcoming the debilitating influences of colorism and internalized racism:

- informed compassion is a process for learning about others that is open, respectful, and caring;
- and our capacity to change is requires multiple levels of analysis to understand the negative effects of colorism; and
- empowered humility recognizes the strength and power that comes from a healthy humility in relation to our sisters, mothers, daughters and friends.

Women of African ancestry are encouraged to ask themselves questions such as:

- "Who am I identified with?"
- "Who do I compare myself to?"
- "How might colorism have affected me?"
- If colorism hasn't affected me or I have grown beyond it, how did that happen and how can I share that with other Black women and girls?"
- "Do I identify with or emulate a particular subgroup of my community"?
- "Are there ways that I am colluding with the maintenance of colorism"?
- "Are there any other specific issues where I can feel myself being triggered emotionally"?
- "Have I projected any of my negative expectations on other women or community members?" and
- "Are there any stereotypes or prejudices in how I interact with myself and others?"

It is critical for various biases to be identified and explored for their potential influence in the development and implementation of strategies to confront and challenge colorism *(Harrell & Bond, 2006)*.

Generations old, skin color continues to shape the lives of Black women and the Global Black community. It took generations to be put in place but it does not have to take generations to be dismantled. "As long as the structure of White racism remains intact, colorism will continue to operate" *(Hunter, 2007)*.

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