Perceptions of and Preferences for Skin Color, Black Racial Identity, and Self-Esteem Among African Americans

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The purpose of the present study was to examine the role of skin color (i.e., lightness–darkness), as it pertains to racial identity development theory and self-esteem among 113 African American college students of various skin colors. Findings revealed that the sample preferred skin color of a medium tone, rather than exhibiting self-preference for either lighter or darker skin tones. There was also a significant relationship between one’s perceptions of and preferences for his or her skin color and the skin tones idealized by others (e.g., opposite gender, family). Lighter skin color was positively related to higher levels of racial identity attitudes (immersion/emersion); the more satisfied darker skinned individuals were with their skin color, the lower their self-esteem, and gender differences existed in perceptions of others’ preferences for skin color. Implications of this study for providing therapeutic clinical services and fostering the healthy psychological development of African American men, women, and children are discussed.

The significant role that skin color plays in the lives of African Americans has been debated in the social-science literature for over 60 years. Historical and contemporary literature reveals that the skin color of African Americans has exerted powerful and persistent influences on societal attitudes toward and treatment of Blacks, within both White and Black cultures (for a review, see Neal & Wilson, 1989; see also Breland, 1998a, 1998b; Harvey, 1995; Hughes & Hertel, 1990; Jackson, 1979; Okazawa-Rey, Robinson, & Ward, 1986; Porter, 1991).

During the era of slavery, light-complexioned Blacks, often the offspring of the White slave owners and enslaved Africans, were given preferential treatment via assignment to housework in stark contrast to darker skinned Blacks, who were

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usually assigned to outdoor, hard-labor tasks (Keith & Herring, 1991; Sandler, 1994; Scales-Trent, 1995). Even with the abolition of slavery, a skin-tone stratification persisted wherein lighter skinned African Americans operated in a generally higher socioeconomic stratum than did their darker skinned counterparts.

In part because of the privileges and positive connotations associated with light skin, preference for this skin color has persisted in the values passed on to multiple generations of African Americans. The "Black is Beautiful" movement of the early 1960s was instrumental in working to destroy the stereotypes associated with varied shades of skin, yet it was not entirely successful. Indeed, "Even though the 'Black is Beautiful' movement . . . sought to eradicate some of the negative notions associated with color consciousness, the phenomenon persists" (Breland, 1998, p. 297). Further, for many African Americans, varied aspects of facial features, including nose broadness, lip thickness, and hair coarseness have been used separately and jointly with skin color to make within-race distinctions (Grier & Cobbs, 1968; Gwartney, 1980).

Skin Color

Skin color has many different levels of symbolism for African Americans, and there exists a preponderance of colloquial (both positive and negative) terms used to describe their various shades of skin. These terms include skillet blonde, coal black, tar baby, and blue-black to describe dark skin; and red, red-bone, high yellow, and light bright to describe light skin.

While many dark-complexioned African Americans view their skin color proudly, others are ambivalent and view their blackness as a "mark of oppression" (Kardiner & Ovesey, 1951). Conversely, many light-complexioned African Americans have been belittled because they do not look "black enough" (i.e., their phenotypes are more typical of those associated with European Americans than those associated with African Americans; Sandler, 1992-1993; Scales-Trent, 1995).

Given the long history of the salience of racial physiognomy in American society and the mixed signals that continue to emanate, implications for self-concept development have received substantial scientific scrutiny. Research on skin-color preferences dates back to the 1930s when doll studies (e.g., Clark & Clark, 1940, 1947; Horowitz, 1936, 1939) concluded that self-hatred and group rejection were typical of Black psychological functioning. Issues such as skin color; conflicts over other physical features; and the presence of anger and hostility toward themselves, Whites, and other Blacks have been among a number of social artifacts and presumed social behavioral indicators of Black self-hatred. The Black self-hatred theory has been the focus of more research studies in the area of Black self-concept (Hopson & Hopson, 1992). However, there has also been a body of research that has contributed to raising doubts about the aforementioned findings, indicating instead that ideas regarding racial self-hatred were
grossly exaggerated, and suggesting that African Americans generally have positive self-concepts and may consider racial attitudes as separate and distinct from self-concept (Baldwin, 1979; Brand, Ruiz, & Padilla, 1974; Cross, 1985, 1991; Spencer, 1984). Despite substantial research regarding the affect-laden meanings attached to skin color and racial physiognomy, surprisingly few studies have examined these factors directly in relation to racial identity development theory.

Racial Identity

According to a culture-specific model of racial consciousness development in Black Americans, Cross (1995) hypothesized a cognitive developmental model of racial identity in which it is proposed that as racial identity evolves, Blacks progress through a sequence of five stages (pre-encounter, encounter, immersion-emersion, internalization, and internalization-commitment). Cross suggested that Blacks begin their development at a stage called pre-encounter. This stage is characterized by dependency on White (not Black) society for definition and approval; attitudes are anti-Black and Eurocentric in nature. The encounter stage is entered when one has personally challenging experiences with White society. This stage is marked by feelings of confusion and an increasing desire to become more aligned with one's Black identity. The immersion-emersion stage follows the encounter stage and is characterized by a period of pro-Black or Afrocentric, anti-White feelings. One is absorbed in the Black experience and completely rejects the White world. Immersion-emersion is followed by the internalization stage, during which one has grasped the fact that both Blacks and Whites have strengths and weaknesses. In addition, one's Black identity is experienced as a positive, important, and valued aspect of self. One's attitude toward Whites is one of tolerance and respect for differences. Along with this level of internalization comes an achievement of pride and security in the Black race and identity. The internalization-commitment stage follows internalization. The primary distinction between the two stages is that internalization-commitment reflects a behavioral style characterized by social activism, and internalization reflects one's level of cognitive development. Cross and others (e.g., Helms, 1990; Parham & Helms, 1985b) have recommended that internalization-commitment be considered the second mode or phase of the internalization stage because of the difficulty in distinguishing motivation from behavior. With this latter view in mind, internalization behavior may involve participation in social and political activities designed to eliminate racism or oppression, regardless of the race of perpetrators and victims. Table 1 summarizes Black racial identity attitudes and characteristics.

The Present Study

Racial identity model studies and supporting studies of Cross and others (Carter, 1984; Carter & Helms, 1987; Cross, 1985, 1987; Cross, Parham, &
Table 1

Summary of Black Racial Identity Attitudes and Characteristics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Black racial identity attitudes</th>
<th>Characteristics</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Preencounter</td>
<td>Dependency on White not Black society for definition and approval; attitudes are anti-Black and pro-White</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Encounter</td>
<td>Marked by feelings of confusion and an increasing desire to become more aligned with one's Black identity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Immersion-emersion</td>
<td>Characterized by a period of pro-Black, anti-White feelings; one is absorbed in the Black experience and completely rejects the White world</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internalization</td>
<td>One has grasped the fact that both Blacks and Whites have strengths and weaknesses—in addition, one's Black identity is experienced as a positive, important, and valued aspect of self; one's attitude toward Whites is tolerance and respect for differences; along with this level of internalization comes an achievement of pride and security in his or her race and identity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internalization-commitment</td>
<td>Reflects a behavioral style characterized by social activism; internalization reflects one's level of cognitive development</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note. Derived from Carter (1991).*

Helms, 1991; Helms, 1993; Parham, 1993; Parham & Helms, 1981, 1985a, 1985b; Ponterotto & Wise, 1987; Smith, 1982) suggest that Blacks in different stages who hold differing racial-identity attitudes have responded differently to their sociocultural environments. Racial identity attitudes represent a psychological orientation that reflects one's personal reaction to his or her psychosocial experiences, and appear to be associated with various behavioral, affective, and cultural predispositions.

Robinson (1992) examined skin color in specific relation to racial identity development theory. Findings revealed that pre-encounter attitudes were negatively correlated with skin-color satisfaction for males and females, and immersion-emersion attitudes were positively correlated with light- and dark-skinned subjects' desire for darker skin. Overall, African Americans were more satisfied than dissatisfied with their skin color, with no meaningful difference between men's self-rated skin color and their preference for women's skin color.

The rationale for the present study is to address two major shortcomings of previous research in this area. First, the study is designed to actually measure
psychological variables of Black racial identity, rather than inferring them from reference group orientation. Second, this study is designed to incorporate the use of a standardized measure for skin-color assessment, rather than dolls or pictorials as were used previously. It should be noted that a unique, more realistic and precise procedure (adapted from Bond & Cash, 1992) was used to assess skin-color perceptions and preferences; that is, one that more accurately reflects the diversity of skin tones and controls for the effects of other domains, such as facial features and hair texture.

The aforementioned rationale supports the two established fields of inquiry for the present study. First, the authors were interested in examining the role of skin color (i.e., lightness–darkness) as it pertains to racial identity development theory (Cross model) and self-esteem among African Americans of various skin colors. Second, the researchers were interested in ascertaining the influence of gender differences and the significance of family and peers on self-perceptions of skin color. Specifically, the authors hypothesized that racial identity would be highly correlated with skin-color satisfaction, preferences, and self-esteem; that gender differences would exist with regard to skin-color satisfaction; and that family and peer perceptions of skin color would influence participant self-perceptions of satisfaction with and preference for skin color.

Method

Participants

Participants for this study were 113 (46 men, 67 women) African American undergraduate and graduate students attending colleges and universities in the Northeast. Participants ranged in age from 17 to 41 years ($M = 22.05, SD = 4.68$; Table 2).

Measures and Procedure

A personal data sheet (PDS) was used to solicit demographic information and to investigate personal characteristics (e.g., perceived skin color). Respondents were asked to indicate, by checking one of five categories (black or almost black, dark, brown-skinned, light, and white or almost white), their perceived skin color, as well as that of immediate family members and closest friends. As traditional indicators of socioeconomic status, respondents were asked to provide information about their parents' educational and occupational status.

The Racial Identity Attitude Scale (RIAS-B), adapted by Parham and Helms (1981) from Hall, Cross, and Freedle's (1972) Q-sort items, was used to assess four of the stages in Cross' (1971) Negro-to-Black conversion model. The scale consists of 50 items to which subjects responded using a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Parham and Helms
Table 2

Demographic Characteristics of Study Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristic</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>Men</th>
<th>Women</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sex</td>
<td>113</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean age (SD)</td>
<td>22 (4.7)</td>
<td></td>
<td>23 (5.0)</td>
<td>21 (4.0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grade completed</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Freshman</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>16.8</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sophomore</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>25.7</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Junior</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>30.1</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Senior</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>23.9</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graduate</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2.7</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Socioeconomic status</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lower class</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1.8</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Working class</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>31.9</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle class</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>41.6</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Upper middle class</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>15.9</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. N = 113. Data were collected for a total of 124 subjects; however, 11 subjects were omitted from the sample because of missing data (whole scales). A dash indicates that a percentage calculation is not applicable.

reported internal consistency reliabilities of .67, .72, .66, and .77 for the pre-encounter, encounter, immersion–emersion, and internalization attitude scales, respectively.

Skin color was assessed using the Skin Color Questionnaire (SCQ; Bond & Cash, 1992). Three skin-color items were administered to participants. The first SCQ item was “How satisfied are you with the shade (lightness or darkness) of your own skin color?,” response alternatives ranged from 1 (extremely dissatisfied) to 9 (extremely satisfied). The second item was “Compared to most Black people, I believe my skin color is . . .,” responses ranged from 1 (extremely light) to 9 (extremely dark). The third item was “If I could change my skin color, I would make it . . .,” response alternatives ranged from 1 (much lighter) to 9 (much darker), with 5 anchored as exactly the same. The three SCQ items are designed to assess skin-color satisfaction, self-perceived skin color (light–dark), and ideal color, respectively.

A second skin-color assessment was the Skin Color Assessment Procedure (SCAP; adapted from Bond & Cash, 1992). A set of 4-in. x 4-in. (10.16-cm x 10.16-cm) color squares of nine “black” skin colors was administered in several
specific, instructional contexts. The author selected the color tones previously
selected by Bond and Cash from a standardized color system (Pantone Matching
System, PMS; Gitter, Mostofsky, & Satow, 1972). The PMS catalogues hundreds
of colors and hues used as a standard in the printing industry. The skin colors that
ranged from 1 (very light, cream colored) to 9 (very dark, ebony) were as fol-
lows: PMS #4685, PMS #155, PMS #466, PMS #1385, PMS #145, PMS #471,
PMS #168, PMS #469, and PMS #462. Previous pilot research (Cash & Duncan,
1984) with African Americans established the highly reliable light-to-dark ordi-
nality of these tones.

The nine skin-color blots were randomly positioned and numbered on an off-
white, 20-in. × 30-in. (50.8-cm × 76.2-cm) poster board. Participants were asked
to choose the color that most resembles their actual facial skin color; the color
that they would most prefer; the color that they believe their opposite-gender
Black peers find most attractive; and the color that they believe is admired most
by their same-gender Black peer group; and finally, within their family. The two
skin-color self-ratings (SCAP self-rating, 9-point SCQ) correlated significantly
(r = .63; Bond & Cash, 1992).

Self-esteem was measured using the Rosenberg (1965) Self-Esteem Scale
(RSES). The RSES has a Gutman scale coefficient of reproducibility of .92, indi-
cating good internal consistency. Two studies of 2-week test–retest reliability
showed correlations of .85 and .88, indicating excellent stability (Rosenberg,
1981). The RSES correlates significantly with other self-esteem measures, such
as the Coopersmith Self-Esteem Inventory (Simmons, Rosenberg, & Rosenberg,
1973).

After responding to the PDS, RIAS, SCQ, and the RSES, each participant
was presented with a color wheel (SCAP). Participants’ choices were always
made 2 ft (60.96 cm) from the color wheel, and they were not allowed to touch
the colors for direct comparisons with the skin. Colors on the wheel were pre-
sented in random order. Two researchers rated each participant’s facial skin color
(unbeknownst to the participant) as he or she responded to the SCAP.

Results

Validity of Skin-Color Ratings

The acceptable interrater reliability of the judges’ 9-point ratings of partici-
pants’ skin color was indicated by a reliability coefficient of .90. Mean experi-
menters’ ratings correlated well with participants’ SCAP self-ratings (r = .72,
p < .001) and participants’ SCQ light–dark self-ratings (r = .68, p < .001). The
two self-ratings also correlated significantly (r = .66, p < .001). Thus, the levels
of congruence among the two self-ratings and the judges’ ratings reflect the con-
current validity of these indexes of color. Participants were divided into three
groups based on the experimenters’ ratings. The three skin-color groups were
light (rating 1 through 3; N = 20), medium (rating 4 through 6; N = 30), and dark (rating 7 through 9; N = 63).

Main Analyses

Regarding overall group characteristics, no significant differences were found for the participants on the variables of self-esteem or racial identity. Specifically, an ANOVA was computed to examine the difference in the means on the RSES total score among the three skin-color groups. The results indicate that the groups did not differ in self-esteem. Further, correlations revealed no significant relationships between the SCAP items and self-esteem for any of the skin-color groups or the sample as a whole. In addition, of the four subscales derived from the RIAS-B (pre-encounter, encounter, immersion-emersion, and internalization), no significant differences in the mean scores for the subscales of the RIAS-B were found for the light, medium, or dark skin-color groups.

Self-Perceived, Self-Preferred, and Others' Idealized Skin Color

Table 3 contains the means by skin-color group and the results of ANOVAs to test differences between the three skin-color groups on self-perceived, self-preferred, and others' idealized skin color on the SCAP. The groups differed significantly in their self-perceived, self-preferred, and opposite-gender ideal ratings. To examine the relationship between perception of skin color and preference for skin color as it pertained to self, opposite gender, peer group, and family, Pearson correlations were conducted. The hypothesis that perceptions of and preferences for skin color (dark and light) would be related to the family, same-gender, and opposite-gender ideals was partially supported. For the dark skin group, self-perception of skin color was significantly related to self-preference \( (r = .64, p < .0001) \), as well as family \( (r = .36, p < .01) \) and opposite-gender ideals \( (r = .34, p < .01) \). In addition, for the dark group, self-preference of skin color was significantly related to family \( (r = .36, p < .05) \) and same-gender ideals \( (r = .26, p < .05) \), but not to opposite-gender preference. There was a significant relationship between perceptions of and preferences for skin color and others' ideals, but only for the dark skin group. The only significant relationship for the light group was between self-perception and family ideals \( (r = .38, p = .01) \). ANOVAs were computed on the three SCQ items to examine differences between the three skin groups. The groups differed on all three items (Table 4).

Pearson correlations were also computed between skin color on the SCAP (perceived and preferred) and the three SCQ items. Regardless of shade, a significant relationship was found between self-perceptions of skin color and skin color compared to other Blacks \( (r = .67, p < .0001) \); between preferred skin color and skin color compared to other Blacks \( (r = .38, p < .0001) \); and between preferred skin color and changing one's skin color \( (r = .22, p < .05) \).
Table 3

**Self-Perceived, Self-Preferred, and Others’ Idealized Skin Color on the SCAP for Three Skin-Color Groups**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SCAP</th>
<th>Total (N = 113)</th>
<th>Light (n = 20)</th>
<th>Medium (n = 30)</th>
<th>Dark (n = 63)</th>
<th>F(2)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Self</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceived</td>
<td>5.35 (1.94)</td>
<td>3.05 (1.36)</td>
<td>4.70 (1.44)</td>
<td>6.38 (1.52)</td>
<td>47.58**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preferred</td>
<td>5.77 (1.77)</td>
<td>5.10 (1.97)</td>
<td>5.30 (1.44)</td>
<td>6.21 (1.75)</td>
<td>9.18*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others’ ideal</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opposite gender</td>
<td>4.19 (2.39)</td>
<td>5.30 (2.05)</td>
<td>4.20 (2.23)</td>
<td>3.84 (2.48)</td>
<td>7.14*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Same gender</td>
<td>4.88 (2.47)</td>
<td>5.70 (2.27)</td>
<td>4.63 (2.40)</td>
<td>4.73 (2.54)</td>
<td>2.72*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family</td>
<td>5.10 (2.09)</td>
<td>4.95 (2.34)</td>
<td>4.82 (1.98)</td>
<td>5.27 (2.07)</td>
<td>1.39</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* Ratings were made on a 9-point scale ranging from 1 (extremely light) to 9 (extremely dark). SCAP = Skin Color Assessment Procedure (adapted from Bond & Cash, 1992).

*p < .05. **p < .01.

Table 4

**Perception of and Satisfaction With Skin Color in Three Skin Groups**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SCQ</th>
<th>Total (N = 113)</th>
<th>Light (n = 20)</th>
<th>Medium (n = 30)</th>
<th>Dark (n = 63)</th>
<th>F(2)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Satisfaction(a)</td>
<td>7.88 (1.59)</td>
<td>7.10 (1.97)</td>
<td>8.23 (1.28)</td>
<td>7.95 (1.54)</td>
<td>6.78*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Compared to other</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blacks(b)</td>
<td>5.32 (1.59)</td>
<td>3.68 (1.34)</td>
<td>4.73 (1.39)</td>
<td>6.11 (1.20)</td>
<td>42.67**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Change skin color(c)</td>
<td>5.46 (1.36)</td>
<td>5.70 (1.38)</td>
<td>5.63 (1.16)</td>
<td>5.30 (1.27)</td>
<td>7.44*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* SCQ = Skin Color Questionnaire (Bond & Cash, 1992).

\(a\)Ratings were made on a 9-point scale ranging from 1 (extremely dissatisfied) to 9 (extremely satisfied). \(b\)Ratings were made on a 9-point scale ranging from 1 (extremely light) to 9 (extremely dark). \(c\)Ratings were made on a 9-point scale ranging from 1 (much lighter) to 9 (much darker).

*p < .05. **p < .01.

**Skin Color and Black Racial Identity**

To examine the relationship between perceptions of and preferences for skin color and Black racial identity, Pearson correlations were computed. Results
indicate that for the light skin group, there was a significant positive relationship between skin-color preference and racial identity \( (r = .58, p < .01) \). In addition, the data indicate that lighter skin color was positively related to the immersion–emersion stage of racial identity.

**Skin Color and Self-Esteem**

Significant relationships were found between the three SCQ items and the RSES total score. For both the dark group and the total sample, a negative significant relationship was found between satisfaction with skin color and self-esteem \( (r = -.28, p < .05, \text{ and } r = -.19, p < .05, \text{ respectively}) \). The results indicate that for dark-skinned male participants, the more satisfied they were with their skin color, the lower was their self-esteem.

**Gender Differences**

Men’s and women’s responses differed significantly only with respect to their perceptions of opposite-gender, same-gender, and family ideals. There were no significant differences in their self-perceptions and self-preferences for skin color.

Men and women did differ significantly in their ratings of others’ ideal skin color. Specifically, the means in Table 5 reveal that men indicated more often that opposite-gender peers and family prefer darker skin than did women, whereas women indicated more often that same-gender peers preferred darker skin than did men.

Correlations among the five SCAP items were computed to examine the relationship between perceived skin color and preferred skin color by gender. Results indicate that among women, perceived skin color was positively related to self-preferred skin color and family ideal \( (r = .58, p < .001, \text{ and } r = .63, p < .01, \text{ respectively}) \). The findings suggest that the skin color that women in the sample perceived their skin color to be was significantly related to the color they preferred, and the color they perceived to be admired in their family.

The mean differences by gender were computed for the three SCQ items. However, no significant differences were found. Correlations indicated that, for both men and women, there was a significant relationship between perceived skin color and skin color “compared to other Blacks” \( (r = .56, p < .0001, \text{ and } r = .72, p < .0001, \text{ respectively}) \). For women, there was a significant relationship between preferred skin color and skin color “compared to other Blacks” \( (r = .58, p < .0001) \). For men, there was also a significant relationship between preferred skin color and changing one’s skin color \( (r = .35, p < .05) \). The results indicate that for both men and women, their self-perceptions of skin color were associated with their perceptions of their skin color as compared to other Blacks. On the other hand, only men’s preferred skin color was related to their ideal or “what
Table 5

Means on the SCAP for Men and Women

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SCAP</th>
<th>Men (n = 46)</th>
<th>Women (n = 67)</th>
<th>U</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Self</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceived</td>
<td>5.59 (1.90)</td>
<td>5.18 (1.97)</td>
<td>1355.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preferred</td>
<td>5.70 (1.94)</td>
<td>5.82 (1.66)</td>
<td>1482.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Others’ ideal</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opposite gender</td>
<td>4.98 (2.52)</td>
<td>3.66 (2.15)</td>
<td>1075.5**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Same gender</td>
<td>4.11 (2.32)</td>
<td>5.40 (2.44)</td>
<td>1083.0**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family</td>
<td>5.80 (2.03)</td>
<td>4.64 (2.00)</td>
<td>992.0**</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note. N = 113. Standard deviations are presented in parentheses. Ratings were made on a 9-point scale ranging from 1 (extremely light) to 9 (extremely dark). SCAP = Skin Color Assessment Procedure (adapted from Bond & Cash, 1992). U = Mann Whitney U test to compare men and women within the three skin color groups. **p < .01.

they would change their skin color to be”; that is, men who preferred darker skin color chose a darker skin tone as an ideal.

Correlations between SCQ and Black racial identity revealed a significant negative relationship between “changing one’s skin color” and pre-encounter attitudes ($r = -.31, p < .05$) and a significant positive relationship between “changing one’s skin color” and internalization attitudes ($r = .33, p < .05$) among the men in the sample. In addition, there was a significant positive relationship between “changing one’s skin color” and encounter attitudes for both men and women ($r = .29, p < .05$, and $r = .24, p < .05$, respectively). Therefore, the only significant relationships found were with respect to “changing one’s skin color,” and not in skin color perception or satisfaction with skin color.

For men, darker skin-color preference was related to lower pre-encounter attitudes and to higher encounter and internalization attitudes. For women, darker skin color ideal was related only to higher encounter attitudes.

No significant gender differences in self-esteem were found. Correlations were computed to examine the relationships between skin color (perceived and preferred on the SCAP) and self-esteem by gender. No significant relationships were found. Correlations were computed between the three SCQ items and self-esteem by gender. The only significant relationship was a negative one, for men only, between satisfaction of skin color and self-esteem ($r = -.29, p = .05$). In other words, men who reported satisfaction with their skin color scored lower on the self-esteem items.
Based on the data reported previously, it appears that family ideals may be associated with how a sample of African Americans perceive their skin colors across skin-color groups. A number of striking findings emerged from the present investigation. Primarily, the results indicate that the African Americans in the sample preferred skin color of a medium tone and did not show a preference for light skin. This finding was true, regardless of the individual participant's skin color. While this finding is consistent with the belief that brown skin or "somewhere in between" is the hue most desired by African Americans (Goering, 1971; Martin, 1964; Robinson & Ward, 1995), it contradicts the wealth of literature that has found African Americans exhibiting preference for either a lighter or darker skin tone. Even when gender was considered, men and women did not differ significantly with respect to self-perception of and self-preference for skin color.

It is important to note the differences in the present findings that starkly contradict recent findings by Bond and Cash (1992). Bond and Cash confirmed the existence of personal ideals of lighter skin color in a sample that consisted only of African American women. However, much like the Bond and Cash findings, in the present study when responses to others' items were analyzed, a lighter skin-color preference among women and a darker skin-color preference among men was revealed. Men in the sample indicated that they believed the opposite gender found darker skin most attractive; the same gender found lighter skin most attractive; and their family members found darker skin most attractive. Conversely, women in the sample responded that they believed the opposite gender found lighter skin most attractive; the same gender found darker skin most attractive; and their family found lighter skin most attractive. While these findings reveal perceptions of others' ideals, rather than one's own, they provide support for the hypothesis that there may be a preference for lightness in women and darkness in men. This is not surprising in light of historical and contemporary evidence (Mays, 1985; Neal & Wilson, 1989; Warner, Junker, & Adams, 1941) that while light-skinned women have been considered a "prize," this color-conscious standard does not exist to the same degree with respect to male attractiveness (i.e., darker skin color is tolerated more in men than in women). In addition, Breland, Collins, and King (2001) suggested that the perceived dark skin ideal for men may be linked to historical associations that linked darkness with masculinity and virility. In general, the men and women in the sample demonstrated congruence with respect to perceptions of the opposite gender's ideals.

The present findings indicate that there is indeed a relationship between self-perceptions of and preferences for skin color, and one's perceptions of others' ideal skin color. Specifically, in the present study, darker skinned individuals' perceptions of and preferences for their dark skin color were significantly related to the skin color that they felt was idealized by their family and opposite-gender
peers. For lighter skinned individuals, perceptions of and preferences for their light skin were related only to skin colors that they felt were idealized by family members. These findings reveal the importance of family ideals, regardless of skin color. Regardless of how one's skin color compares with that of peers, being the "light child" or "dark child" within a family may carry special significance, either favorable or unfavorable. The aforementioned findings further support the idea that the family ascribes or projects roles, expectations, and acceptance onto an individual based on appearance (Boyd-Franklin, 1989, 1993; Comas-Diaz & Greene, 1994).

Skin Color and Black Racial Identity

The data indicate that self-perception of lighter skin color was positively related to immersion-emersion attitudes. That is, lighter respondents had significantly higher pro-Black/anti-White attitudes (an idealization of Blackness and a denigration of Whiteness). While the present findings contradict the authors' prediction that perceptions of and preferences for lighter skin color are significantly related to lower levels of Black racial identity attitudes (e.g., pre-encounter), the present findings are not unreasonable, given racial identity development theory and its psychosocial correlates.

These findings might be explained best in terms of the psychological issues associated with immersion-emersion attitudes. That is, immersion-emersion is clearly an emotionally volatile and distressing status. It seems to be related to a single-mindedness and an emphasis on Black issues and concerns. An individual begins to invest in the Black experience, although the journey is fraught with intense self-examination, tension, and anxiety. Thus, as a group, the lighter skinned respondents in the sample may feel a need to overcompensate for their "lack of color" or not being "black enough" and therefore would be clearly invested in a predominantly Black world view. The intense emotional quality makes this an uncompromising level of racial identity development.

Robinson (1992) found immersion-emersion attitudes to be correlated with light subjects' desire for darker skin. Thus, lighter respondents in the present study may perceive their lightness or "white" skin color as a negative attribute and, thus assume predominantly separatist views in order to assist them in resolving their racial identity conflicts.

Skin Color and Self-Esteem

The authors' hypotheses that perceptions of and preferences for darker skin color would be positively related to higher levels of self-esteem, whereas perceptions of and preferences for lighter skin would be positively related to lower levels of self-esteem were not supported. These findings also contradict research
by Ward and Braun (1973), who found a "black" preference to be associated with higher self-esteem scores.

Surprisingly, however, the present study found that the more satisfied darker skinned male individuals were with their skin color, the lower was their self-esteem. This finding, while not predicted, suggests incongruence between self-esteem and satisfaction with skin color. This possibility is not unreasonable when one considers the denial and conflict many African Americans face with respect to color consciousness. First, this finding possibly suggests an equating of satisfaction with acceptance. If this is the case, one can accept his or her skin color but not necessarily like it (i.e., be satisfied with it), hence the compromised self-esteem. Thus, darker skinned respondents may be expressing an acceptance of rather than satisfaction with their darker skin. Furthermore, their satisfaction may exist on an intellectual level, while the emotional inner conflict still exists. This is understandable, given the horrific history that dark or black skin has had in this country. Have darker skinned individuals convinced themselves that their color is acceptable, but not resolved the internal emotional conflict?

Second, this finding could be explained in terms of darker skinned individuals' perceptions of others' ideal skin color. That is, dark-skinned individuals in the sample felt "satisfied" with their skin color, but felt that others (Blacks and Whites) continue to perceive them in a way that negatively affects their global sense of self. This finding suggests that projective defenses may be operating and may result in a compromised sense of self. Indeed, darker skinned individuals' perceptions of and preferences for their dark skin were significantly related to the skin tones that they felt were idealized by both their family and the opposite gender. Dark-skinned individuals in the sample may be reporting that they are satisfied with their dark skin, but that their family or opposite-gender peers are not. Given the importance attributed by darker skinned individuals to family and opposite-gender peer ideals, it would be understandable if their self-esteem was compromised and lower self-esteem resulted. Dark-skinned individuals may be insecure about their satisfaction with their skin color, particularly if they perceive that their family or opposite-gender peers do not prefer their skin color.

Significantly more men than women in the present study who were satisfied with their skin color scored low on the self-esteem items. This finding raises an important question. Namely, is this low sense of self among these African American men indicative only of conflicts with complexion, or overall experiences of Black males in the United States (i.e., the lower value placed on Black males in this society)?

Clinical Implications

The present study emphasizes the role of the African American family in predicting the importance and impact of skin-color variations in individuals. Thus, in clinical interventions, it may be important to inquire about skin-color variation
within a family. Discussing the connections between physical attractiveness and feelings of self-worth constitutes an essential aspect of therapeutic inquiry. Therapists may need to raise the issue of skin color because many clients are not aware of how this issue affects them. Moreover, if the therapist raises the issue, the client is given permission to explore what might be perceived as a therapeutic taboo or racial secret (Boyd-Franklin, 1989).

The clinician needs a sense of the extent to which family members have internalized the dominant culture's standard, as well as how family members were treated regarding their own physical appearance. By employing cognitive restructuring techniques (Meichenbaum, 1985) with clients, negative beliefs and ideas regarding Black attractiveness may be replaced with more positive attitudes, perspectives, and images. The use of role-playing and mirroring can also help clients to understand that rejection of black skin represents a rejection of self, family, and heritage (Harvey, 1995).

Young children are developmentally inclined to treat people based on their character, rather than on the color of their skin. However, as they grow older, this quality is lost to many of them as they learn some of the racial bigotry of previous generations. Therefore, it is important to help Black parents to reexamine their parenting practices and the messages (subtle and not so subtle) that they transmit to their children about their physical "deficits." Young children, given their cognitive and emotional immaturity, are predisposed to pick up on these negative values and to internalize them (Wright, 1998). Whatever the particular technique employed by the clinician, the ultimate goal of therapy should be that an individual begins to realize that acceptance of skin color may lead to empowerment of self, family, and community.

Limitations of the Present Study

One limitation of the present study is that the role of social desirability was not directly addressed. Given historical and contemporary evidence, the author predicted that a "White" or lighter ideal was most socially desirable. However, does social desirability alter when considered within the African American community, rather than society at large? For example, the skin color most socially desirable within the African American community may be brown or medium toned (as this study suggests). Thus, African Americans' responses to skin color may vary depending on the situation or context. In addition, the resistance (implicit and explicit) experienced in conducting this study and perhaps even the experimenter's own skin color and gender may have had an impact on the responses of participants.

Future Research

Conclusions by researchers that Blacks misidentify their skin color, lack a sense of racial identity, and have negative self-concepts rest heavily on intergroup
comparison paradigms and ignore the importance of intragroup differences. It is important that research on this issue continues to consider the role of individual-difference variables as mediating and moderating influences. Additional research is needed on how the personal and emotional meaning of one's skin color, as well as other physiognomic attributes, may be related to one's racial or ethnic identity. Still too little is known about skin-color perceptions and preferences in relation to racial identity development theory.

The majority of studies continue to infer, rather than measure, Black identity. In addition, one must go beyond the simplistic idea that Blacks automatically suffer from low self-esteem because White society devalues Blackness. The present study's surprising and unpredicted finding that the more satisfied darker skinned individuals were with their skin color, the lower was their self-esteem reflects the complexity of this issue. In addition, multidirectional social and developmental issues relevant to African Americans must be analyzed to gain greater understanding for significance of skin tone. Finally, additional research is needed on how to more accurately assess skin color. It is important to note that color is not unidimensional. Using a multidimensional approach (both light–dark dimensions and hue) would result in more accurate ratings, and perhaps reveal that more than one dimension is relevant to skin-color perceptions and preferences.

References


