THE BLEACHING SYNDROME AMONG AFRICAN WOMEN (OF COLOR): A QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS

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ABSTRACT

Light skin as somatic ideal is a universal precedent of the Bleaching Syndrome. The objective of this study is to determine the impact upon women of color. Participants for the study consisted of 18-24 year old dark-skinned women enrolled as full time college students. A qualitative method was utilized consisting of two focus group sessions to determine if participants idealized light skin and thus incur the Bleaching Syndrome. Following the review of verbal data by the principle investigator results indicated that women of color in fact idealize light skin and hence incur the Bleaching Syndrome. In conclusion, African women (of color) must aspire to more conducive, somatic ideals to escape the pathological influences of the Bleaching Syndrome.

Keywords: Skin Color, Women Of Color, Somatic Ideal, Bleaching Syndrome, Western Culture

1. INTRODUCTION

Akin to the emergence of Western culture the idealization of light skin is an increasingly salient phenomenon. Said phenomenon has precipitated a desire on the part of non-European women including African women (of color) for light skin. In the aftermath race as traditional Western social construct is less relevant. The lesser relevancy of race is a demonstration of the significance of skin color. The impact of light skin having evolved as the Western feminine ideal is exacerbated by the social connotation of masculinity among men (Mahalingam, 2007; Kim, 2006; Mahalingam & Jackson, 2007). Consequently, African and other women of color who aspire to alien concepts of beauty are then amenable to risks both physiological and psychological. It is clear that Psychology cannot remain informative and comprehensive if continually subsumed by increasingly extraneous racial nomenclature (McCabe, 2009; Cassel, 2004). Hence, in the current era, it is imperative to consider re-evaluation with ontological depth. Succinctly put, comprehensive research in an era of increasing diversity will require significant modification of demographic issues vis-à-vis the Bleaching Syndrome (Hou & Wu, 2009).

The existence of the “Bleaching Syndrome” is historically rooted in the old “beauty” creams and folk preparations used by African-Americans to make their skin lighter (Hall, 2003a). According to Webster (Mish, 2009) “bleach” is a verb that means to remove color and in the case of the Bleaching Syndrome to make one otherwise “white.” A “syndrome” consists of a grouping of symptoms i.e.: behaviors that occur in conjunction and make up a
recognizable pattern (Mish, 2009). These literal definitions refer to the Bleaching Syndrome as having three basic components. They consist of the following: perceptual according to internalized ideals; psychological according to reactions to those ideals; and behavioral according to the “bleached” ideals acted upon. Each comprises a chronology that is motivated in the case of skin color by assimilation. For African women (of color) the Bleaching Syndrome begins with what they perceive about their skin not irrelevant to identity. Their acceptance of an alien ideal is not compulsory but merely a part of the assimilation experience. Unlike for those having light skin, this causes conflict. Emotionally, the negative implications of dark skin having been internalized by African and other women of color create obstacles for self-esteem and preferred quality of life. To reduce psychic conflict and simultaneously assimilate and/or embrace idealized alien standards of Western beauty African women (of color) make a conscious decision to value light skin at the expense of dark. It is manifested in their utilization of bleaching creams despite potential health risks (Hall, 2001). Thus research questions posed by this phenomenon include the following: Do African women (of color) idealize light skin; Do African women (of color) incur the Bleaching Syndrome. The objective of this paper is to address the aforementioned in reference to alien ideals vis-à-vis somatic norm image and qualitative analysis.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Assimilation is a critical cognate of identity (Bergner, 2009). African women (of color) who assimilate into otherwise alien environments encounter a host of environmental dynamics irrelevant to women of the dominant population. In the aftermath African women (of color) encounter a different set of factors as pertains to assimilation (Vega & Scribney, 2003). Concepts of assimilation include behavioral assimilation i.e.: acculturation and structural/socioeconomic assimilation.

Structural/socioeconomic assimilation describes the integration of groups into the formal social, political, economic, and cultural institutions of a host nation (Schultz, 2007). It is manifested when people of color begin to participate fully as members of Western societies. Additionally it refers to people of color who have attained socioeconomic mobility and status as in the form of income, occupation, residential integration, etc. commensurate with members of the dominant mainstream population.

Behavioral assimilation and/or acculturation are the most relevant to African women (of color) via Western influence as pertains to the Bleaching Syndrome (Chiswick, 2009). It is manifested in their internalization of Western norms, values, beliefs, and ideals. This may also involve a desire on the part of such women for light skin having internalized Western light skin as the ideal standard of feminine beauty. By this process, African women (of color) may choose to bleach their skin or otherwise alter their phenotype to affect an appearance alien to their own.

The process of manifesting behavioral or structural/socioeconomic assimilation can occur in a linear fashion over time and successive generations. It can also occur in a non-linear fashion where African women (of color) alternate between aspects of their native culture and Western culture sometimes referred to as segmented assimilation. Both instances are derived from the colonial residue of racism (Schuller, Kazoleas & Kawakami, 2009).

Racism, according to Banton (2009), refers to the efforts of a dominant race group to exclude a dominated race group from sharing in the material and symbolic rewards of status and power. It differs from the various other forms of exclusion in that qualification is based upon observable and assumed race traits i.e.: skin color (Goodman, 2008). Such traits imply the inherent superiority of dominant race groups that are then rationalized as a natural order of the human biological universe (Barot, 2006).
The most zealous proponents of racism profess that lighter-skinned Anglo-Saxon/Teutonic peoples are superior to darker-skinned groups including African descent as a matter of fact (Ossorio, 2006). They postulate that Anglo-Saxon/Teutonic peoples alone have been endowed with the capacities necessary to bring about civilization. So-called “advancing civilization” was initially a thinly veiled form of colonial racism devoted to rationalizing the right of Europeans to embark upon a worldwide mission aimed at colonizing non-Europeans (Owensby, 2005). By way of conquest and eventual colonization, Europeans left no domain of the world untouched by their influence. After centuries of Eurocentric domination, the mission to “civilize” non-Europeans has necessitated a universal, almost mystic belief in the power of skin color to elevate or taint in light skin as standard of feminine beauty (Baker & Gingart, 2009). Said standard culminated in what Hoetink referred to as the somatic norm image (Vickerman, 2004).

Harry Hoetink was a Dutch historian and teacher originally from Holland. Most of his professional career was spent in the Caribbean where he was able to observe the native people of color given to British, French, Dutch, and Spanish colonial influences. As per this experience he devised the hypothesis of the somatic norm image to account for African women (of color) who internalized light skin as idealized standard of feminine beauty (Brakke, 2001).

As pertains to the various Western colonies skin color defined the intermediate class among the natives. Any person of color more European in appearance was treated as White; those darker were treated as Black. Hoetink’s fundamental hypothesis is that the same person of color may be regarded as White in the Dominican Republic and “coloured” in Jamaica. This fact is determined by socially based somatic norms. What’s more as the same person of color who may be categorized as a “Negro” or Black in Alabama (United States) can be explained by the historical evolution of social structure in the American South (Golash-Boza, 2006).

Hoetink’s concept of the somatic norm image manages some element of inconsistency given to the colonial influences brought by differentiations between British, French, Spanish and Portuguese colonies. However the fundamental premise of the somatic norm image is plausible in that it firmly establishes that people of color see only what they prefer to see. African women (of color) thus learn from Western culture during childhood that light skin is the preferred standard of feminine beauty to which they must adhere (Bergner, 2009). Subsequently this suggests that they idealize light skin and incur the Bleaching Syndrome by denigrating all but Eurocentric norms.

3. METHOD AND MATERIALS

3.1 Design

Methodology for the current study consisted of a qualitative research design. Said method is primarily an inductive process of comparison whereby in this study patterns emerged from data after the posing of specific questions. The principal investigator then sought to discover any relationships among and/or between variables. The principal investigator did not force any direction of the data but instead served merely as a vehicle of interpretation.

The approach to analysis of the data pertained to skin color themes. The analysis of skin color themes was conducted by the principal investigator who reviewed the data for visual qualities, behavioral characteristics, discourse topics and/or participants’ verbalized concerns.
3.2 Participants and Setting

In an attempt to perform a qualitative analysis of the aforementioned the principal investigator convened two groups of women of color to discuss their ideas about beauty. The first group began at 1PM and terminated at 2:30 PM. The second group began at 3PM and terminated at 4:30PM. Members of both groups which lasted a total of ninety minutes each ranged in age from 18 to 24 years. They were single, fulltime college students who had been born and raised under Western influence. After they signed permission forms they were assured by the author that their confidentiality would be protected to the fullest extent of the law. Once transcribed focus group dialogue was differentiated by the principal investigator noted as “Q” (questioner) and the focus group participants noted as “A” (answerer). The discussions were directed by ten queries which served as measures and consisted of the following: 1) Describe the most beautiful woman you know; 2) What is the most important physical trait for feminine beauty; 3) Describe the woman who most often wins beauty contests; 4) What would you change about yourself to be more beautiful?; 5) Describe what you want your children’s skin color to look like; 6) Do you use bleaching creams or skin whiteners?; 7) Which is the most beautiful: light skin or dark skin?; 8) Which of the world’s women are the most beautiful?; 9) Describe the woman who attracts the most boyfriends; and 10) What country in the world has the most beautiful women?

3.3 Procedure

Once focus groups were adjourned, tape recordings were transcribed to Microsoft Word 7.0 and converted to hard copy. The principal investigator did a preliminary reading of transcripts to facilitate qualitative context of information and search for overall themes and patterns.

3.4 Data Analysis

The raw data was prepared for analysis by processing via a computer program selected by the principal investigator for assistance in the qualitative analysis process. The program yielded a list of query relevant themes recorded during focus group sessions, which were qualitatively interpreted by the principal investigator for their implications. After numerous overview readings of focus group data, the principal investigator was able to identify significant themes and patterns via qualitative analysis. This time-consuming process enabled the data to introduce evidence rather than the principal investigator searching for a predetermined rationale. Qualitative data was accumulated to address each of the ten queries. By utilization of this method of data collection, raw data was converted without modifying the context from which it was extracted. Finally, the data were qualitatively analyzed by the principal investigator to assess the influences upon African women (of color) as per the Bleaching Syndrome and/or idealized light skin.

4. RESULTS

The following were dominant themes as per qualitative analysis relative to each corresponding query.

a) More often light skin characterized the most beautiful women participants knew.
b) Light skin and long dark hair were described as the most important traits.
c) Participants insisted only light-skinned women win beauty contests.
d) Lighter, smoother skin was suggested by most participants to improve beauty.
e) Participants wanted lighter skin for daughters and darker skin for sons.
f) Few participants admitted to using bleaching creams.
g) Light skin by far was described as the most beautiful.

h) Light-skinned Latinas were described as most beautiful of the world’s women.

i) Light-skinned women were described as attracting the most boyfriends.

j) South American countries were said to have the world’s most beautiful women.

With the exception of queries B, C, and E, light skin was regarded as the singular, most consistently dominant theme associated with feminine beauty as per focus group participants. Therefore as per research questions African women (of color) idealize light skin according to focus group participants. Said idealization of alien skin color norms among dark-skinned women suggests they incur the Bleaching Syndrome.

5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Having conducted the focus group sessions and repeated reading of focus group data the principal investigator was able to determine the substantive aspects of discussion as pertains to skin color and feminine beauty. A qualitative, thematic summation of the findings suggests that ideals of feminine beauty are designed to accommodate the Western somatic norm including light skin. Thus, African women (of color) are more often susceptible to the Bleaching Syndrome because said women internalize light skin as ideal despite the fact that it is an alien somatic norm. In the aftermath is neglect of the fact that African women (of color) who are dark-skinned differ from their Western European counterpart. Since beauty standards are likely an extension of power, their aspirations for light skin accommodate the Bleaching Syndrome in the aftermath of power differentials. The resulting Bleaching Syndrome among African women (of color) pertaining to light skin is fully documented in the literature. Pathology includes African women (of color) who seek to beautify themselves in ways counter to physiological and psychological health. Given the power differential between the Western and non-Western populations, most African women (of color) feel unable to bring about changes which results in a source of constant frustration and miscalculation. Regardless of the absence of overt malice, the cultural gap between said interests and women of color who bleach or otherwise aspire to alien somatic norms cannot be ignored. Psychologists committed to the evolution of knowledge are in a position to inform by acknowledgment of the Bleaching Syndrome phenomenon.

Acknowledging diversity, the issue of skin color among African women (of color) has been trivialized by the prevalence of racial constructs. The Eurocentric intelligentsia in Psychology, including those of color who submit to Western dictates, would argue that any accusations of trivialization are little more than disputes between one faction trying to bring about an objective conclusion, and another group, for reasons of intellectual discourse, in opposition. Following the new millennium and an effort to accommodate diversity, this dichotomy is anachronistic. Prior to the emergence of diversity as a valued social concept Psychologists did not generally equate skin color with beauty as pertains to African women (of color). They disagreed about many things, but they shared a commitment to racial constructs in differentiating one group from another. Subsequently Psychologists’ agreement on the trivialization of skin color had not been subjected to intellectual debate. Thus, scholars and others who might have disagreed with racial constructs were relegated to fringes of the academy. What followed is the trivialization of skin color despite its obvious pathological impact upon African women (of color) worldwide.

The facts about African women (of color) leave no doubt as to the significance of skin color in their lives. In business professions, in the arts at the university, and the norms of society it is obvious that most in the West are of a similar mindset among whom, skin color is a less salient issue (Hall, 2003b). Whatever the root of differentiation, be it race, nationality, socialization, or a simple lack of exposure to skin color issues Psychology is rendered less effective.
To educate the public about the significance of skin color among African women (of color) will require an acknowledgement of its existence. It has up to the present been overlooked on the basis of cultural taboos and maintaining polite professional discourse. Some of the taboos include assumed differences which are little more than myth. By disqualifying said myths from polite conversation in fact sustains the difficulty encountered by African women (of color) worldwide.

Acknowledgement of the Bleaching Syndrome minimizes the potential for conflict introduced by the Western somatic norm image. It is increasingly evident that at least among African women (of color) skin color is pertinent to the study of self-image, self-esteem, family dynamics, etc. Its acknowledgement is a necessity in a world fast becoming not only racially indistinct but ethnically and culturally indistinct as well. The subsequent diversity has facilitated assertions on the part of African women (of color) to re-define themselves. Their efforts have validated the importance of skin color as having a direct correlation to their overall well-being. In the aftermath, African women (of color) must aspire to more conducive, somatic norms to escape the pathological influences of the Bleaching Syndrome.

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