

# From Psychology of Race to Issue of Skin Color: Western Trivialization and Peoples of African Descent

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## ABSTRACT

In the aftermath of Western colonization is the trivialization of skin color as significant issue in the psychology of peoples of African descent. Although social scientists use race as a key factor in elucidating and understanding human social conditions, skin color and its impact on the social and psychological disposition of people of African descent have been understudied. Oblivious to the implications of skin color, their attempts to comprehend stereotypes, discrimination, and various behavioral and psychological phenomena are an exercise in futility. Given the declining significance of race and the increase in interracial unions, a new approach is warranted. Thus, if, in fact, Western psychologists are to understand and treat individuals of African descent, a perspective must be employed, which addresses the importance and significance of skin color in the lives of said people.  
*Keywords:* Psychology, race, people of color, skin color.

## RESUMEN

Una de las consecuencias de la colonización occidental es la trivialización del color de la piel como una cuestión significativa en la psicología de los descendientes de africanos. Aunque los científicos sociales emplean la raza como un factor clave en el estudio de las condiciones humanas y sociales, se ha estudiado poco el color de la piel y su impacto sobre la disposición psicológica y social de los descendientes de africanos. Si las implicaciones del color de la piel se dejan al margen, los intentos por comprender los estereotipos, la discriminación y los diversos fenómenos psicológicos terminan siendo un ejercicio de futilidad. Dada la importancia decreciente del concepto de raza y el incremento en las uniones interraciales parece necesaria una nueva aproximación al estudio de estas cuestiones. Por tanto, si los psicólogos occidentales quieren comprender y tratar a los individuos con ascendencia africana, deben hacerlo desde una perspectiva que atienda la importancia y la significación del color de la piel en estas personas.  
*Palabras clave:* psicología, raza, gente de color, color de la piel.

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Western perceptions of African peoples play a significant role in how issues that directly affect them are studied and the importance given to those issues in the field of psychology. Given the power relationship between Europeans and Africans, such perceptions are dictated by Western ideology and epistemology and as a consequence, issues that are important to Africans become devalued (Hall, 1995). Thus, the Eurocentric framework becomes the guidepost for understanding and interpreting African behavior and what is deemed important to study. Western civilization has experienced significant diversification of its population and more recent research has begun to question the utility of the Western perspective in understanding African people. Given the power relationship between psychologists of African descent and Europeans and the impact of Western psychology, many African psychologists continue to perceive the origin and urgency of African social problems via alien Western perspectives. To some extent, then, the Western perception of African issues is enabled by psychologists of African descent themselves having submitted to Western domination by their reference to race and silence on skin color (Robinson & Ward, 1995). Such a position further limits the African psychologist and obscures the saliency of skin color among Westerners and Africans, particularly darker hued Africans. Given the utility of African psychologists in African communities, a reassessment of social problems experienced by African peoples would benefit from a less Western perspective that considers the social realities of African and other non-European peoples.

Thus, the purpose of the present paper is to examine the issue of skin color in lieu of race as the most salient and defining characteristic of Western civilization. As noted, the focus of this paper is less upon the relevancy of race and the manifestation of social problems associated with race (i.e., crime, litigation, stereotypes and other quality of life issues), but it seeks to advance the importance of understanding skin color in the social and psychological lives of people of African descent. The central theme is the heretofore unchallenged validation of the Western race concept that has trivialized skin color and further victimized in various ways those of African descent worldwide.

#### WESTERN ORIGINS OF THE SKIN COLOR MYTH

In the dawn of Western civilization and prior to the slave trade, documentation of the attitudes toward African skin suggests that there was less significance placed on skin color. Greek references, however, are informative, particularly when they are scrutinized within the context of color. By virtue of historical record, it is possible to examine the early Greek norms for beauty and their implications for dark-skinned African peoples. The combined Platonic, Lucretian, and Ovidian assumptions of the classical norm image suggest a distaste for extremes (i.e., too light or too dark). The main characters in classical poetry seem to prefer their own skin color to that of the extremely light-skinned Germans and of the dark-skinned Africans (Snowden, 1983). In the aftermath, like all people, in their expressions of aesthetic preference, the Greeks used themselves as the ideal. Little mention is made, however, that there were Europeans, as well as Africans, who did not meet the Greek norm image. This omission allows for

an emphasis upon dark skin that distorts the original view of African peoples today.

In some early Western cultures, there were those who extolled the beauty of dark skin and did not hesitate to do so publicly. Herodotus, the first known among Westerners to express an opinion about the physical appearance of Africans, described them idealistically (p. 57). Others put their feelings about dark skin into poetry. Such was true of Philodemus. In reference to a certain Philaenion, short, black, with hair more curled than parsley and skin tender than down, concludes: "May I love such a Philaenion, golden Cypris, until I find another more perfect" (p. 77). Still, another named Asclepiades praises the beauty of the dark-skinned Didyme. The poem continues: "Gazing at her beauty I melt like wax before the fire. And if she is black, what difference to me? So are coals when we light them, they shine like rose-buds" (p. 77). Another named Theocritus contends that those who refer to his Bombyca as sunburned should know that, to him, she is "honey-brown and charming and adds that violets and hyacinths dark but are the first flowers chosen for nosegays" (p. 77).

Citizens of Greek civilization maintained narcissistic norms for skin color. In referring to such norms for judging beauty, Harry Hoetink applied the terms "somatic norm image." He defines somatic norm image as "the complex of physical (somatic) characteristics which are accepted by a group as its ideal," pointing out that each group considers itself aesthetically superior to others (p. 76). To illustrate the somatic norm image, Hoetink makes reference to an African creation myth. According to such a myth, the African perceives himself as perfectly cooked while the European is underdone due to a defect in the Creator's oven. As a result, Europeans had to be fashioned from clay. The early Greeks would have noted that the norm for human skin color varied. The Greek Philostratus thus remarked that Indians esteemed "white" less than "black" because, he implied, "black" was the color of Indians (Norton, 1993). As a matter of consequence, beauty among the world's various populations is an extension of the self image. Only when populations are oppressed in the wake of power differentials will groups internalize ideals alien to their own.

#### RACE AND THE WEST

Race as crux of Western civilization is a function of the Western status quo. Race is defined as any different variety of human beings distinguished by physical traits, phenotype, blood type, or a distinctive group of people sharing a geographical space. Assumptions of African inferiority, extended from the Atlantic slave trade necessitated race as the most salient vehicle of human categorization (Hasenbalg, 1995). Thus, the end of slavery and Western colonization in Africa, Asia, and the Americas did not permit Africans to sit as equals amidst their Western counterparts. Peoples of African descent and the issues which most affect their lives have not been accorded the attention merited by circumstances. As pertains to trivialization of African issues in psychology, said peoples who reside in the West remain oppressed in all areas of human activity (Welsing, 1991). Consequently, the concept of race, associated with the Western perspective, has become central in the lives of African peoples despite their devastation by skin color (Agier, 1995). Furthermore, psychologists of African descent and other

psychologists of color who aspire to succeed in Western societies have blindly submitted to Western domination by all but dismissing skin color as relevant despite the pain it causes them (Atkins, 1992).

As a function of Western civilization, race has been consistently portrayed on the basis of inferiority as if racial identity were the demarcation of different species. In the aftermath is a belief that the only significant elements of humanity are members of Caucasian race groups. Negroid race groups (i.e., African descent and Mongoloid) are assumed less capable of intelligence and/or civilization. In fact, social issues in the West and elsewhere influenced by Western domination extends beyond the various categories of race. Seldom discussed are issues on the basis of skin color associated with brutalities directed at the post-enslaved including colonized African peoples. As a legacy of slavery, the impact of skin color can be witnessed by any visitor to the West including the Americas, the Caribbean, Europe, etc. (Bagley & Young, 1988). The varied skin tones of these descendants of African slaves and the racial hierarchy based specifically upon the hue of skin, or the degree to which it approximates that of their European colonizers, are evidence of the significance of skin color. However, because race has been couched in "science" by Western psychologists, skin color has by default been scientifically subjugated.

Sustaining ignorance pertaining to so-called race is the fact that, while it is a Western concept, Westerners remain uncomfortable in public discussions about race. Race is a complex and deeply divisive concept they would rather avoid at all costs, even though it is endemic and deeply woven into the fabric of Western society. Ironically scientists, psychologists, social workers, educators, and others continue to make race-based assumptions about the various groups in ordering society (Hernstein & Murray, 1994). The same psychologists who discourage race discussions in polite conversations regard it as a fundamental issue in discussions about poverty, education, crime, music, sports, sex, intelligence, etc. They ignore "radical" anthropologists, biologists, and geneticists who question the biological significance of "race." As a result, society is further confused by pseudo-science and the contradiction it prolongs. Ultimately, more questions about the validity of race complicate an already complex issue, which carries it further from the minds of polite conversationalists for fear they will be perceived as ignorant or, at worst, racist.

In order for psychology to move beyond the impediments of race, it must comprehend the implications of Western civilization for African descended peoples. Included are an understanding of its obsession with race and characteristic features, the political culture, and how it evolved to present day status. No doubt, the common racial views embraced by the West during the slave trade era differ from those held by many today (Rabinowitz, 1978). However, that difference should not presume that a more liberal and enlightened perspective will prevail either into the long term or immediate future. Conflicts might very well amplify, particularly in an era of increasing diversity brought about by more tolerant immigration policies and a reduction in the proportion of Europeans in Western societies (Hacker, 1992). If not attended to, the consequences will threaten the sanctity of Western civilization as an unprecedented experiment in nation building.

## STRUCTURAL AND SOCIAL INFLUENCES OF SKIN COLOR

For psychologists of European decent, and their African intellectual prodigy, race is the most fundamental and defining issue of social problems. Despite rhetoric to the contrary that posits a color-blind society as the ultimate ideal in the West, skin color is the determining factor for quality of life vis-à-vis groups and individuals (Loury, 2000). The evidence is inherent to the extent of race consciousness conveyed by skin color, which residents of Western nations exhibit in their norms, values, institutions, and social space. For example, segregation in housing, churches, workplace, and social gatherings until recently was accepted as norm in an effort to prevent African peoples from aspiring and reaching their life goals. By means of race, extended from skin color, they were destined to the most trite of circumstances and penalized if attempted to do otherwise.

In the West and elsewhere, persons of African descent remain constantly aware of their skin color in all matters of public affairs. Vilification has contributed to the victimization of such persons as a racist stereotype who cannot conform to the skin color norms of mainstream Western society (Hall, 1992). Hence, in comparison to Caucasians, African descended peoples having darker skin are, more often than any other racial, ethnic, gender, social/culture group, falsely accused of being active participants in criminal activity (Hosenball, 1999). Given the power of Western media to impose and to monitor norms, such victimization may keep those who are otherwise ordinary law abiding citizens under perpetual police surveillance.

The constant stresses of oppression experienced by persons of African descent should come as no surprise because it permeates law enforcement policies. For example, the state of New Jersey in the U.S. eventually admitted that the State Police targeted darker-skinned motorists for drug searches along the New Jersey Turnpike (Staples, 1999). These tactics, while unethical, were common in Russia, where the KGB recruited members of the community to spy on its citizenry. In New Jersey, law enforcement has recruited motel workers to spy on dark-skinned patrons who speak Spanish, a language associated with dark-skinned Negroid and Mongoloid groups. In New York, law enforcement denies the use of "racial profiling," but a story in Crain's New York business raises serious questions (Staples, 1999). The newspaper interviewed twenty professionals of African descent who all gave detailed accounts of their experiences with "racial profiling," having been singled out and humiliated by police, usually for driving expensive cars.

In maintaining the status quo it is popular in the West to dismiss as trivial the complaints of African descended males directed at law enforcement officers. Many regard such complaints as a function of what author Norman Podhoretz once described as "paranoid touchiness" (Staples, 1999). But recent police assaults—one fatal—on two African immigrant males in New York City forms a distinct contrast between perception and reality (Fried, 1999). By contrast, it permeates media as a major force in the trivialization of skin color despite apparent litigation in Western courts of law. The significance and impact of skin color not only affect relations between Europeans and Africans, but they also have implications for relationships between individuals of African

descent.

A prominent case of skin color litigation was brought by African Americans in that of Walker versus the Internal Revenue Service (IRS). This case was tried in the Atlanta Federal District Court in 1989. The plaintiff, a light-skinned, African American woman, worked as a permanent clerk typist in the IRS's Atlanta office. Her supervisor was Ms. Ruby Lewis, a dark-skinned African American. Employees of the office in which the plaintiff and the defendant worked were predominantly African American. In fact, following her termination, the plaintiff was replaced by another African American. According to the record, the working relationship between the plaintiff and the defendant was strained from the very beginning, since approximately November of 1985. The plaintiff contends that the defendant singled her out for close scrutiny and reprimanded her for many things that were false or unsubstantial because of her light skin. In summation of expert testimony by Dr. Ronald E. Hall, the court determined the plaintiff's case to have merit. At conclusion of the trial, the federal court ruled in favor of the IRS. Charges were deemed poorly documented, and Walker's claims of skin color discrimination could not be supported by witness testimony. However, it was allowed that skin color discrimination could exist between African Americans, although perhaps the case before the judge was not the best test of the issue (*Walker v. IRS, 1989*).

As pertains to Latinos of African descent, the U.S. District Court of the District of Columbia litigated a case of the dark-skinned Felix versus the lighter-skinned Manquez in 1981. Both plaintiff and defendant were employees of the Office of the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico in Washington, D.C. (OCPRW). The plaintiff alleges that the defendant did not promote her on the basis of skin color discrimination. At trial, the plaintiff introduced the personnel cards of twenty-eight of her former fellow employees. She testified that among them, only two were as dark or darker in color than she. All other employees in the office, according to the plaintiff, were light-skinned. In summation, the court determined that the plaintiff was not promoted in grade for legitimate business reasons, having nothing whatever to do with her skin color (*Felix v. Manquez, 1981*).

In a more recent case brought by litigants of African descent on the island of Puerto Rico, the U.S. District Court of the District of Puerto Rico litigated Felero versus Stryker in 1998. Falero, the plaintiff is a dark-skinned male while Rigoberto, the corporation defendant, is a light-skinned male. The plaintiff claims he was terminated from his job because of his dark skin. Rigoberto contends that Falero did not establish that he was replaced by someone not within the protected class. He further stated that the plaintiff's job had not been filled by anyone but admits one of his areas of work was assigned to another employee. Thus, direct evidence of skin color discrimination was lacking. However, the inability of African descended peoples to prevail in a Western court of law should not imply that the issue of skin color discrimination is without merit. Regardless of outcome, the mere filing of litigation makes obvious the significance of skin color as an issue among African descended and other Western people of color.

After spending several months in Puerto Rico collecting skin color data, Hall (2000) concluded that skin color is in fact significant to both status and identity. This finding is in direct contradiction to the contentions of Zastrow and Kirst-Ashman (2001). What's more, according to James Baldwin, the root of Western difficulty is directly

related to skin color (Robinson & Ward, 1995). The significance and implications of skin color become even more critical among African descended people who are of mixed Caucasian heritage (i.e., biracial), such as actress Dorothy Dandridge who committed suicide. Reviews of the literature on biracial children and suicide indicate that these children experience a great deal of difficulty due to the color of their skin. Many may find themselves not fully accepted by the Black community and, although lighter, shunned by the White community. But as Hall (1995) notes, the issue of skin color has never been subjected to rigorous debate by psychologists because it does not conform to the standards of Western perspective. The factual existence of skin color litigation, suicide, etc. is then alienated from the knowledge generation process.

Subsequently, Hall's (1992, 1995, 2000, 2001a, 2001b) work regarding skin color and his refusal to submit to Western domination is all but totally unknown in the psychology community. Longres (1995), on the other hand, is a Latino who aspires to success via Western domination and understands well the implications. Therefore, Longres (1995) and other scholars of color, in particular those who have studied racial identity, have found little need to acknowledge the association of skin color with status. Thus, many exclude the mere mention of skin color in their articles or texts. Accordingly, the impact of Western domination upon psychology remains potent in that, after sixteen years following Zastrow and Kirst-Ashman's (2001) abovementioned works, skin color in their human behavior texts is omitted. Consequent to this trivialization process, race has been erroneously validated as the standard by which African peoples are both assessed and differentiated.

Although race and identity have received some attention in the psychological literature, a cursory review of Western research attests to a lack of attention to skin color as an issue significant to African people. According to one database 1977-2001, twelve articles have been published on "skin color" in a quarter century. In leading journals, skin color has been totally ignored in that time-period, accommodating Western perspective. In leading textbooks, such as *Human Behavior in the Social Environment* by Zastrow and Kirst-Ashman (2001), the issue of skin color as pertains to African peoples is omitted from their index and the 300-plus pages of lexis that comprise the work in toto. The fact that both authors are of European descent cannot be dismissed as irrelevant to their Western perspective. While they may be cognizant of critical issues, they, as authors, determine the priority of what reaches publication. The information disseminated then determines the realities of psychology. What is omitted otherwise ceases to exist. These omissions are tantamount to the most blatant distortion of facts, hence Western trivialization.

#### PSYCHOLOGICAL IMPACT OF SKIN COLOR

A group of peoples' concept of what is beautiful is derived from a cultural assumption of what is ideal for its respective culture. Given the hegemony of European and Western culture, Eurocentric ideas of what is beautiful have been pervasive throughout the globe, in particular in the case of Western dominated women (including Indian, East Asian, Filipino, Latino, and African). A common practice among native African women

who aspire to maximize their marital potential is the act of skin bleaching. Skin bleaching involves the utilization of various chemicals to reduce the melanin content in their skin making them lighter. Research into this activity revealed the potential damaging effects of various bleaching concoctions fortified with dangerous additives, such as mercury. Members of the African medical community contend that women who suffer from damaged kidneys are a result of the mercury present in bleaching crèmes (Opala, 2001). What's more are major health risks to unborn fetuses of women who bleach their skin. This is due to the affinity of mercury to the human brain. All too often, offspring exposed to mercury during gestation risk severe and/or significant brain damage. Until recently, such information was ignored in the sale of beauty products by Western interests in countries such as Kenya. In the aftermath markets, were flooded with toxic skin bleaching products which were then sold to African women specifically to Westernize their physical appearance (Opala, 2001).

The psychological impact and significance of skin color among people of African descent cannot be overstated. The devaluing of darker skin and its impact on children's development have been tabled all throughout American scholarly and lay literature (Ellison, 1952; Grier & Cobbs, 1968; Thomas & Sillen, 1972; Clark & Clark, 1947; Horowitz, 1939; Kardiner & Ovessey, 1951). This devaluing of African people and the color black is pervasive throughout Western culture and is transmitted through the language and symbolism of the culture as a whole (Murray & Mandara, 2002). For example, as Black children begin to read and develop language skills, they soon learn that black is associated with everything negative (i.e., black cat, black mail, black ball, black knight), and white is associated with everything good, clean, and pure (i.e., Snow White, white knight, white lie). Black children who internalize these negative stereotypes and use the White community as a point of social comparison are at higher risk of developing a negative self-concept. Empirical support for this relationship was found in the landmark doll studies by Clark and Clark (1947) and Stephenson and Stewart (1958), which supported the notion that African American children, who preferred White dolls, suffered from low self-esteem and wished to be White. More contemporary assessments by Cross (1985), Semaj (1985), and Spencer (1984) each found that some Black children, when given a choice, did not like being called black and preferred lighter skin to that of darker skin, even though they considered themselves part of the Black community. Given the significance of skin color, how children perceive themselves, and that self-concept is associated with psychological wellness, further investigation into the salience of skin color in the psychological lives of Africans is warranted.

#### A NEW APPROACH

Although, as posited, skin color is a significant issue in the psychological and social lives of Africans, particularly in the West, psychologists engaged with African descended peoples must be cognizant of their own bias about color and what it conveys to the client (Allen-Meares, 1995). The psychologists' position on skin color is relevant to setting the tone of the practice environment (Longres, 1990). Whether or not the clinician accepts skin color as a significant issue in the social and psychological lives



of its clients, it will impact practice nonetheless. Hence, the psychologist who acknowledges skin color may be inclined to overlook dysfunction in certain beliefs and practices, particularly if there is color commonality between practitioner and client. Conversely, the psychologist who rejects skin color will view the same issue as trivial when it is not. Those who reject skin color may further unintentionally minimize its role among African descended peoples for many of whom it is critical. Subconsciously by their behavior, psychologists suggest skin color is irrelevant or otherwise not appropriate as a social issue. Therefore, those who both endorse or reject skin color must be vigilant that their personal belief systems do not cause injury or harm.

Lastly, the ability to accurately perceive, conceptualize, and interact with African and African descended peoples is a necessity in a rapidly changing and complex world. In order to enhance harmony and reduce the threats of trivialization by Western domination, psychologists and other concerned citizens must acknowledge that all groups have assets, capacities and strengths that should be affirmed and reinforced (Sontag, 2001). Since many of these assets, such as cultural technologies, are derived from cultural legacies, Western psychologists in particular must increase their knowledge base considerably. Otherwise, their lack of education could contribute to the extinction of facts that might ultimately prove beneficial to world peace, understanding, and harmony. Furthermore, at a time of increased contacts between various populations, Western psychologists are confronted by issues and perspectives which did not require intellectual consideration in the past (Shatz, 2001). They are thus challenged to develop creative treatment strategies less confined to Western bias. Additionally, journal editors, book publishers, and other affiliates of the "fact" manufacture industry must be actively receptive to the consideration of alternative views. That consideration must remain aloof from Western domination to sustain the integrity and prestige of psychology as a profession.

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