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Among African-Americans:
A Case For Affirmative Action

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The recent attack upon Affirmative Action in the workplace demands that merit be the sole criterion of employment. Policies designed to eliminate discriminatory practices are in themselves discriminatory and suggest minorities are inferior. Such suggestions are archaic and simplistic. Each assumes that the workplace operates in a social vacuum when in fact a complex system of cultural norms precedes the influence of merit. For African-Americans color is a predcedent of merit. The present study was undertaken to determine the implications of color in the workplace by analyzing it vis a vis occupational aspiration. Using a sample of African-American college students, it was found that these students aspired to more prestigious occupations correlated with light skin. The apparent pervasiveness of this phenomenon requires it be addressed as an issue for social work and policy formulation.

Within the context of public law: All personnel actions affecting employees or applicants for employment shall be made free from any discrimination based on race, color, religion, sex, or national origin" (Civil Rights Act, 1964). For African-Americans, the issue of color among the various forms of discrimination continues to devastate employees and/or applicants in the workplace. Concern for its influence is frequently subordinated in lieu of race. In a society that values workers for their physical attributes among other criterion, color can then determine an African-American's occupational opportunity through the limit of their aspiration (Hall, 1990a). The objective of this study was to explore the limits of aspiration influenced by color, based upon an empirical analysis.

In a society not totalitarian, certain forms of dominance permeate. Scholars of the behavioral sciences refer to this as "hegemony." Hegemony is characteristic of the West. It is a very subtle —but no less potent—form of domination. In the United States it fosters an "us" against "them" mentality referring to Whites and all non-Whites. This notion of "us" against "them" may be the major component of European culture from which—according to Welsing (1970)—the need to dominate arises. It recapitulates itself at every level of society where the dominant Whites interact with the dominated non-Whites, including the workplace. As a result, the existence of skin color discrimination has been all but denied because it does not fit the "us" objectives of the dominant population. So when the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics reported significant progress for African-Americans in the corporate sector during the 1970's, the findings were immediately refuted by Davis and Watson (Taylor, 1982) who wrote "Black Life in Corporate America." Furthermore, the findings of the Labor Department—based upon its own investigation—were that a faulty methodology had been used to produce grossly misleading results (Taylor, 1982). This revelation occurred in the immediate aftermath of the "Black conscious" movement that would have seemed to have little affect upon the attitude of Whites who remain gatekeepers of the American workplace.

The 1990 U.S. Census reports the mean earnings of adults to be $15,105. For Native American adults it is $11,949; for Hispanics it is $11,219. Lastly, for African-Americans the mean adult earnings are $10,912 (Ramos, 1994). Assuming earnings correlate with occupational prestige, the U.S. Census would then suggest a positive correlation between dark skin and less occupational prestige. Dependent upon the cultural significance of that correlation, the occupational aspiration of African-Americans is put at risk.

According to James Baldwin, the root of African-American difficulty is directly related to color—hence referred to as skin color (cf. B. F. Jones, 1966). This would contradict much of the "Black consciousness/power" rhetoric of the sixties. But as per Hall (1995c) the issue of skin color for African-Americans was never resolved, merely relegated underground. It may affect every phase of an African-American's life, including choice of occupation, earnings, and self-concept (Vontress, 1970). Thus, a well-

known phenomenon among members of a minority group is a rejection of their group membership (Levine & Padilla, 1980). One way to express such rejection is through cultural norms. For African-Americans, this can be manifested by adopting the norms of the dominant group (i.e.,Whites) and valuing these conflicting norms to determine what is a realistic aspirational goal for one's self. Several contemporary examples of the phenomena exist. For males, there is Willie Horton's role in the 1988 presidential campaign (Schram, 1990) and a Boston incident in which an African-American was accused of murdering a White female (Carlson, 1990). Both instances illustrate the willingness of the public to embrace rape fantasies where the culprit is too often dark and male. It has become a psychic aspect of culture in that dark skin is necessarily villainized to insure the sanctity of light skin. It contributes to the fact that African-Americans may be discouraged from certain occupations long before the hiring process begins.

For African-American females similar consequences are played out via the implications of light skin for physical beauty. For example, those characterized by Caucasian features continue to be more highly valued in society regardless of occupational skill or intellect (Neal & Wilson, 1989; Okazawa-Rey, Robinson, & Ward, 1987). It is these discriminatory factors, among others, which past political administrations have attempted to redress.

Because the dominant majority of Americans in the workplace have been of European descent, light skin evolved as the norm (Myrdal, 1944). However, for African-Americans that norm remains an obstacle to their occupational aspiration. The situation is further complicated given the circumstances of miscegenation during the Antebellum (Fanon, 1965). Early on, the light-skinned offspring of the plantation class held a privileged status in the African-American community (Klineberg, 1944). Wealth, poise, and overall appeals were associated with their color (Reuter, 1969). This association is evident by the denigration of dark skin in the historical public exchanges between African-American leaders. In an editorial of the Crisis, an Atlanta University/NAACP journal, W.E.B. DuBois, a light-skinned African-American, labeled Marcus Garvey "fat, black, and ugly," implying that dark features were unattractive (cf. Franklin & Meier, 1982). This was

not a singular incident. A high-ranking official of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) used similar language, referring to Garvey as a "Jamaican Negro of unmixed stock," implying that pronounced African features were not the least complimentary (cf. Garvey, 1986).

The association of light skin with cultural norms meant that it became a vehicle for occupational status, even though light skin among African-Americans was less common than dark (Huggins, 1942). Value-laden terms evolved that reflected the fact, such as high-yellow, ginger, cream-colored, and bronze (Herskovits, 1968). Similar norms were associated with other features, such as hair, which was designated "bad" if it was the kinky African type and "good" if it was the straight Caucasian type. When the term black was used, it inferred something derogatory (Hall, 1990a). The fact is further evident in a listing of nationally prominent African-Americans engaged in prestigious occupations. It was compiled in 1934 by Edward Reuter. Of the 23 listed, 20 were light-skinned males and 1 light-skinned female (Reuter, 1934). The two remaining dark-skinned members of the list consisted of a "preacher," Alexander Crummel, and a poet, Phyllis Wheatly (Reuter, 1934). However, the accuracy of the study was somewhat questionable given that dark-skinned Sojourner Truth was listed as a light-skinned mulatto.

Shortly after "Negro Suffrage" and the Garvey era, overt verbal hostilities regarding skin color largely subsided. The norm of light skin, however, remained intact and actually became more accepted over time (Rose, 1964). On the college campus, it was almost impossible for a dark-skinned student to join a fraternity or sorority. Various social events—such as school dances—required the "brown-paper-bag test" as a condition of admission. Those persons darker than a brown paper bag were assessed a fee before they could be admitted; those lighter-skinned were admitted free of charge (cf. Hall, 1990a).

The issue of light skin for African-Americans continued to be reflected in the ratio of those engaged in prestigious occupations including the professional and managerial (Hertel & Hughes, 1988). When skin color might appear totally irrelevant, African-Americans having light skin were advantaged in the workplace (Poussaint, 1975). Their hold on prestigious positions compared

to the darker-skinned are similar to the numbers of Whites compared to African-Americans in toto. Almost 29% of Whites engage such occupations compared to 27% of light-skinned African-Americans (Hertel & Hughes, 1988). The advantage of having more prestigious occupations was also reflected in the health status of African-Americans assuming better jobs enabled access to better medical care.

In a follow-up of the Charleston Heart Study, one of the researchers was impressed by the lack of hypertension, excellent health, and low mortality rate of the light-skinned participants compared to the general African-American population (Beckett, 1983). In another study of blood pressure Hamburg, Gielberman, Roeper, Schork, and Schull (1978) arrived at similar results. The accuracy of these findings in the African-American community is further reinforced by research pertaining to other ethnics (Bagley, 1988; Banerjee, 1985; Henik, Munitz, & Priel, 1985). In a study of depression, Montalvo (1987) found that the skin color of subjects became progressively lighter as he moved in selecting participants from the more affluent San Antonio suburbs. Their middleclass lifestyle and occupational prestige seemed to directly correlate with their having light skin.

The rhetoric of the 1960s espoused healthier norms in the African-American community (R. L. Jones, 1980). Kinky hair and dark features were heralded as desirable on the campus and in marriage. In retrospect, however, what was practiced did not always coincide with what was espoused. Dark-skinned students could join fraternities and sororities, but there did not appear to be any real progress in the ability of such persons to aspire to and gain prestigious occupations. Still, the issue of light skin was seldom discussed among them publicly.

Perhaps the most telling implications of skin color for the workplace continue to be the beauty standards applied to African-American females in particular. The more affluent of the African-American male population frequently seek out light-skinned females for marriage (Rabinowitz, 1978). The result is a kind of sexual jealousy between dark-skinned females and their light-skinned counterparts. When out with her date, a dark-skinned woman will often go to great lengths to see that nothing transpires between her man and a more "attractive" i.e.:, light-skinned

African-American woman (Hernton, 1965). That physical attractiveness is an obstacle for females and less for males of any color may be due in part to the sexism of society.

In the United States today, African-American females are particularly aware of the impact that skin color may have upon their occupational opportunities (Lerner, 1972; Morrow vs IRS, 1990). According to Neal and Wilson (1989), it has a different psychological affect on females because physical appearance is more important in their lives than is true for males. This attitude is frequently reflected in the occupational culture as well as that of the larger society. Referring to a study involving the politics of skin color, Okazawa-Rey et al. (1987) found that the depiction of African-American females in romance novels often is of characters with Caucasian features. In fact, such females are depicted as a White extreme. In another study Sciara (1983) had earlier found that first-year college students devalued persons having dark skin. Rank ordering of mean scores indicated a strong pattern of negative appraisal assigned to African-Americans who had darker skin, whereas the most highly valued group was that of White females. There is little reason to assume these beliefs would not have an impact upon the workplace and ultimately the occupational aspiration of African-Americans today.

The 1964 Civil Rights act was a failed attempt to redress racial inequality. To compensate for that failure, Affirmative Action was one of a number of policies designed to enable occupational opportunities for racial minorities (Karger & Stoesz, 1990). But Affirmative Action today may be passively enforced by Conservative political administrations. Critics contend that it violates equal protection under the law and sets up a process of reverse discrimination (Wilson, 1980). They further suggest that it will benefit minorities who are not victims of discrimination in the workplace and because of hiring practices punish Whites who are "innocent" of any wrongdoing. Such assumptions are naive and reflect the spoils of power. While true to some extent, the same critics ignore the complex web of workplace issues met by minorities that are not only irrelevant to "innocent" Whites, but in some cases create an advantage (Hiskey, 1990). A culture that values light skin as the norm may be one such example. The objective of this study was then to explore the influence of skin color upon occupational

aspiration vis a vis the workplace. By way of an empirical analysis of the objective, it is hoped that the findings will stimulate further research.

Method

Sample

The sample for this study included 200 African-American first-year college students attending a historically Black college located in south Georgia during the 1988–1989 school year. They were randomly selected from the registrar's roster. The sample as a group had a mean age of 18 years (SD = 0.88). All participants were attending college full-time and classified as regularly admitted students. A self report instrument was utilized for measuring their skin color. This method—instead of an in depth interview—was assumed by the researcher to more accurately reflect the biases of the larger society as manifested by participants.

Measures

A self-report instrument called the Cutaneo-Chroma-Correlate (CCC) was developed by the researcher to assess skin color (a complete copy of the CCC is contained in the appendix). Part C of the CCC assesses the respondent's social environment pertaining to skin color (see Table 1). In scoring a student's responses to the CCC, a rating of lightest was coded as a 5, light as a 4, medium as a 3, dark as a 2, and darkest as a 1.

The self-rating of one's own skin color addressed through item #35 served as the independent variable for this study, whereas the aspirations of occupational status contained in the demographic section served as the dependent variable. It was determined using scores from the Occupational Prestige Scale that ranged from a high of 94 to a low of 34 (Hodge, Siegel, & Rossi, 1964). The entire CCC was pilot tested (see Hall, 1990b) prior to use in this study.

Research Design

The respondents were divided into two groups based on their reported skin color, light vis a vis "lightest" or "light" and dark vis a vis "medium." Those rating themselves as lightest or light

composed the light group (n = 57), whereas those providing self-ratings of "medium" composed the dark group in relation to the light/lightest (n = 117). Those rating themselves as "dark" or "darkest" (n = 26) were not analyzed given the low response. The numerical values of the five possible responses to item #35 ("My skin color is ————") and the occupational prestige scores were used to calculate the correlation between self reported skin color and occupational aspiration. A positive correlation was assumed to suggest an association of light skin with higher occupational prestige.

Results

The mean score (and standard deviation) for part C of the CCC obtained from the light-skinned students was 58.77 (SD = 14.88). The corresponding figures obtained from the dark-skinned students was 53.33 (SD = 16.32). Using a t test, the difference in mean scores between the two groups is statistically significant (t[82] = 1.00; p < .05). Apparently, light-skinned African-American college students aspire to employment at more prestigious occupations compared to their dark-skinned counterpart.

Discussion and Applications to Social Work Practice

According to these data, there is a significant relationship between having light skin and occupational aspiration. This would

Table 1

Correlations of skin color variables with occupational aspiration[a]

Skin color	High[b]	Low[c]	χ^2	C
Light	%30	%25		
			4.18[f]	.1974
Medium[e]	%21	%41		

[a]All p values are two tailed. All variables are scored so that higher values indicate more prestigious occupations.
[b]High = ½ SD above the mean.
[c]Low = ½ SD below the mean.
[d]N = 57
[e]N = 117
[f]p < .05

appear to contradict the Black consciousness rhetoric of the sixties that espoused pride and dignity in being Black—particularly for a sample of respondents born in such an era. It is a reflection of White attitudes toward dark skin. As gatekeepers of the workplace, this is critical for African-Americans. In a culture where light skin has been portrayed as the norm, the scores of light-skinned African-Americans may suggest a psychological advantage or self confidence compared to dark-skinned African-Americans. The aspirations of the dark-skinned respondents may also characterize their reaction to conflicting cultural norms. What this suggests is that not only "innocent" White Americans, but light-skinned African-Americans aspiring to a particular occupation are enabled by their skin color. They may thus seek certain kinds of employment helped by the belief that it is appropriate and expected for them to do so.

African-Americans who have an overall medium skin color are less stigmatized than are the lightest and darkest-skinned members within the group. They may move more freely among the ethnic and are less victimized psychologically (Hall, 1990a). However, their larger numbers within the overall African-American population has not necessarily served them in the workplace because they are defined as dark when compared to the lighter-skinned. Their difficulties may then reflect similar problems experienced by the "dark" and "darkest-skinned" members in relation to Whites.

That skin color has implications for the workplace suggests it also has implications for policy makers. Cultural norms may affect the self-esteem and self-confidence that are two important elements not only for employment but mental health as well. Social problems such as teen pregnancy, generational welfare, and drug abuse may indeed be symptoms of a more deeply rooted inability of some African-American students to aspire to prestigious occupations. When they model the negative images they're exposed to in the media and what they experience personally, the problem recapitulates itself. It has direct implications for the workplace that do not impose upon innocent "Whites." What is more, most skin color issues are conveyed in a Black/White context and a great deal of minority content in the social work curriculum has focused on helping White students become aware of their potential for discrimination in working with African-

American clients. The present data suggest the importance of African-American students' being equally sensitive—given cultural norms—to their potential for discrimination in working with other African-Americans. Social work educators may help all students by adding skin color theories—Bleaching Syndrome, double consciousness, dual perspective, etc.—to the curriculum.

The issue of color also has implications for private practice. Quite apart from possible reverse discrimination in the workplace, it is apparent that light-skinned African-American human service professionals may be more highly sought after subconsciously by social work agencies as more competent. Also, these African-American workers may be subtly predisposed to discriminate against darker-skinned clients.

In conclusion, the present exploratory study suggests areas for future research, education, and training in practice for social work students, practitioners, and Affirmative Action policy professionals. Hitherto unexplored in these fields, light skin color internalized as a norm by African-Americans is a serious psychosocial phenomenon worthy of considerable attention from the entire behavioral science community.

Limitations

Among the limitations of this study that merit major concern was that interpretation of results may have been confounded by the SES of respondents. The entire sample consisted of lower socio-economic African-Americans who lived in the South and whose family depended on some form of agriculture for financial support. Thus, future studies would do well to test a broader sample of the African-American community to facilitate external validity.

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