The Beauty Ideal: The Effects of European Standards of Beauty on Black Women

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Black women are particularly vulnerable to the effects of European standards of beauty, because these standards emphasize skin colors and hair types that exclude many black women, especially those of darker skin. Using a social work lens, this article explores the black woman's internalization of European beauty standards through family, peers, the media, and society, and the related outcomes of this internalization on self-perception, academic achievement, sexual behavior, employment, marital status, and mental health. A review of the research indicates that European standards of beauty can have damaging effects on the life trajectories of black women, especially those with dark skin, primarily in the form of internalized self-hatred. Suggestions are made for social work practitioners to address the effects of these internalized European beauty standards among black women through programming and clinical practice.

"What shall I tell my children who are black? Of what it means to be a captive in this dark skin. What shall I tell my dear ones fruit of my womb, of how beautiful they are where everywhere they are faced with abhorrence of everything that is black...?"—Margaret Burroughs, 1968

Kenneth and Mamie Clark published one of the earliest studies on the effects of skin color and self-perception among black children (Clark & Clark, 1947). This study, now referred to as the "Doll Test" (ABC News, 2006) and made famous by the landmark case of Brown v. Board of Education, illustrated how black children were negatively affected by European standards of beauty (Russell, Wilson, & Hall, 1992; Taylor, 1999). The European beauty standard is the notion that the more closely associated a person is with European features, the more attractive he or she is considered; these standards deem attributes that are most closely related to whiteness, such as lighter skin, straight hair, a

thin nose and lips, and light colored eyes, as beautiful (Taylor, 1999). In 2005, 58 years after the initial study, Kiri Davis, a 16-year old student, recreated the experiment in a video documentary. Her findings suggest that the negative effects of these racialized standards of beauty are still pervasive today (ABC News, 2006).

The detrimental effect of these European beauty standards on black women is a societal issue that is often unaddressed on a multisystem level. Black women today are subjected to incessant messages about European ideals of beauty through family, peers, partners, the media, and larger society. If young black women stand in contrast to what society dictates as attractive, they may find it difficult to grow to accept themselves. As a result, the internalization of racialized beauty standards can perpetuate into a lifelong, intergenerational culture of self-hatred (Hunter, 1998). The research discussed in this article serves as a guide to recognize and identify how these standards of beauty can negatively affect the life course of black women, the context in which the impact is felt, and the implications for social work practice and policies.

The "Doll Test"

Clark and Clark (1947) conducted an experiment with 253 black children between the ages of three and seven at nursery and public schools in Arkansas and Massachusetts. The children were shown two identical dolls, one black and one white. Approximately two-thirds of the children indicated that they liked the white doll better, in spite of their own skin color (Clark & Clark, 1947). When Kiri Davis recreated this experiment in 2005, her results showed that 16 of the 21 preschool-aged black children involved in the experiment still chose the white doll (ABC News, 2006). When asked to show the doll that "looks bad" (ABC News, 2006, para. 12), one subject—a black girl—chose the black doll, but when asked for the doll that looked like her, the girl first touched the white doll and then reluctantly chose the black doll (ABC News, 2006).

Between 1947 and 2005, the findings of the doll study did not change, suggesting that this internalization of self-hate among black children based on European beauty standards still exists and has not been adequately addressed. A closer look at the literature indicates that this self-hatred permeates throughout the life course, is passed through generations of black women, and is rooted in early childhood interactions with both the immediate environment and the social sphere (Robinson-Moore, 2008).

Family Context: Outcast by Kin

As a primary component of a child's early and immediate environment, family is often the biggest influence on a child's life. Family helps shape a child's ideals, including what is deemed acceptable or unacceptable in terms of beauty (Bronfenbrenner, 1993; Hutchinson, 2007). Raskin, Coard, and Breland (2001) asked college students in the northeast, between the ages of 17 and 41, about the effect of skin color on their racial identity. The findings showed a significant relationship between one's attitudes toward his or her own skin color and the skin color that was idealized by their family members. While lighter skin was positively related to higher levels of pride in racial identity, darker-skinned individuals reported lower self-esteem (Raskin et al., 2001).

School Context: Assimilation for Success

The educational system reinforces the messages surrounding skin color that are learned within the family and further encourages young black girls to internalize beauty standards that emphasize lighter skin. Umberson and Hughes (1987) found that people deemed attractive by society are given more professional and social opportunities from childhood through adulthood, thus giving lighter-skinned black women greater access to success than darker-skinned black women. If society rewards lighter-skinned black women with more opportunities, dark-skinned black women may be set up for failure from childhood (Robinson-Moore, 2008).

Socio-cultural standards of beauty and attractiveness play a significant role in academic achievement. Holcomb-McCory and Moore-Thomas (2001) investigated the links between skin color and school engagement and found that black adolescent females whose hair and skin color were most unlike those of white females were often alienated from others at school and in social settings. This social isolation resulted in lower levels of academic achievement and higher high-school dropout rates among black adolescent females (Robinson-Moore, 2008). The lower levels of academic achievement among darker-skinned black girls can ultimately lead to reduced employment outcomes as adults, illustrating how skin color alone can shape the life trajectory of black girls and women (McAdoo, 1997).

Media Context: Shades of Risk

In addition to the beauty standards perpetuated by the family and education system, the media also play a significant role in furthering these standards. Gordon (2008) notes that black children are particularly vulnerable to media portrayals due to their higher rates of media consumption. In a sample of 176 black girls ages 13 to 17, Gordon (2008) examined associations between the amount of media that black girls' consume—particularly media containing sexual images—and their focus on beauty and appearance. Gordon (2008) found that black girls strongly identified with black music and television and that hair texture and skin tone were central in many of the girls' descriptions of the images that they were shown. The study's results suggest that exposure to and identification with portrayals of black women as sex objects contribute to the emphasis that black adolescent girls place on appearance in their own lives (Gordon, 2008). Townsend, Thomas, Neilands, and Jackson (2010) found a positive relationship between stereotypical images of black women, racialized beauty standards of light versus dark skin, and sexual risk, such as early onset of sexual intercourse or unprotected sex (Townsend et al., 2010). These studies suggest that black girls with darker skin may be more vulnerable than their lighter-skin peers to negative messages from the media about

their physical appearance and attractiveness, which can lead to long-term risky behaviors.

Employment Context: Hired by Hue

After a childhood of potential academic challenges and internalized negative self-perceptions derived from familial and media messages, a darker-skinned black woman reaching adulthood faces significant barriers to her employment prospects if she is deemed less attractive and inferior to a lighter-skinned black woman (Robinson-Moore, 2008). Black women who do not meet the established standards of European beauty are more likely to be unemployed than those who have more of the preferred European physical characteristics (Robinson-Moore, 2008). Aschenbrenner (1975) studied black families in Chicago and found that poor women were more likely to have darker skin than women of higher economic status. Similarly, Umberson and Hughes (1987) found that attractiveness bias "interacts with employment status" (p. 231), because attractive people are more likely to be hired and given further opportunities to obtain higher employment and education. Thus, if lighter skin is considered to be most attractive, then darker-skinned black women may be more likely to be under-educated, under-employed, and poorer than lighter-skinned black women (Robinson-Moore, 2008), which can have significant negative implications throughout the life course.

Spousal Status: The Color of Matrimony

In addition to employment, romantic relationships can be another major area of black women's adult lives that are affected by European standards of beauty. Social work theory dictates the importance of human beings forming intimate and loving relationships; failure in intimacy results in loneliness and isolation, which may be prevalent for black women of darker skin (Hutchinson, 2007). Ross (1997) explored the relationship between skin color and the dating preferences of black college students and found that males were more likely than females to prefer dating and marrying people with light skin.

Similarly, Raskin et al.'s (2001) study analyzed the effect of skin color on college students' racial identity and dating preferences and concluded that lighter-skinned black women are considered a "prize" (p. 2271) among black men who recognize that there are economic and social advantages to having a light-skinned wife, such as greater social acceptance and subsequent employment outcomes (McAdoo, 1997). In general, men of any skin color with higher socioeconomic status are more likely to marry a light-skinned woman (Hunter, 1998). Darker-skinned black women, as a result, are the least likely of all black women to be married (Robinson-Moore, 2008) and thus the least likely to have the economic security of a two-income household, further exacerbating the previously addressed negative economic effects of their poor employment prospects. Raskin et al. (2001) did not specifically address non-heterosexual couples, so further research would be required to address the skin color preferences of individuals of other sexual orientations.

Psychological Outcomes: The Ripple Effect

The negative effects that European beauty standards can have on employment and marital status can translate to the poor mental health of black women in adulthood. The social work lens aims to help people alleviate stress by understanding the impact that multiple oppressions can have on one's life (Hutchinson, 2007; NASW, 2012). The combination of lower academic achievement, fewer employment opportunities, and limited marital options, compounded by familial and media-perpetuated messages, can lead to both a negative self-perception of the darker-skinned black woman and difficulty coping with the outcomes she can expect for her life course. Hall (1995) summarizes the long-term mental health issues that black women may encounter. Because black women, especially dark-skinned black women, deviate furthest from European beauty standards, they are more likely to experience self-hate, distorted body image, depression, and eating disorders (Hall, 1995). They are also likely to suffer feelings of inadequacy and report emotions of anger, pain, and confusion toward traits such as skin color and hair. Many black women

carry this internalized shame and self-hatred of their appearance from adolescence into adulthood. Ultimately, these internalized feelings can be significant risk factors for depression in black women (Hall, 1995).

Keith, Lincoln, Taylor, and Jackson (2010) evaluated the direct and indirect effects of skin tone and discrimination on depressive symptoms and suggested a link between discrimination and emotional well-being that is especially salient for black women. Due to their physical attributes and associated socioeconomic factors, such as employment and income, black women are at a greater risk for emotional difficulties, as they may experience more stressful conditions depending on their skin tone. Depressive symptoms related to internalized feelings about skin tone may ultimately depreciate feelings of self-worth over the life course of black women (Keith et al., 2010).

Implications for Social Work Practice

A review of the research suggests that, based on the preferences demonstrated by their family, peers, potential partners, employers, and greater society, black women today may still feel pressured to choose the white doll. The individuals affected most are the dark-skinned black women who deviate furthest from European standards of beauty. Society's acceptance of European standards of beauty at the expense of those who do not meet them can have pervasive and devastating consequences for dark-skinned black women throughout the life course. How can professionals in the social work field recognize and address the dark-skinned black woman, who is grappling with repressed self-hatred?

The research suggests that oppressive beauty ideals are ingrained into the institutional racism and sexism of American culture. Adjusting policies at the national and state level are necessary to address this issue at a macro level, and social workers in administrative and policy-focused positions can play integral roles in this work. Yet, because this issue is so entrenched in the communities of these black women, much of the work must be accomplished by social workers on the ground level through pro-

gramming and clinical practice.

Clinicians and program administrators who work with black women should be aware of the risk factors that these women face across their life course and should be educated on the available resources designed to serve this population. Social workers are trained to recognize the forces within dominant culture and society that affect the thoughts, feelings, and behaviors of marginalized individuals and should use this knowledge through their work with this population (Cooper, 1998).

There are programs currently in place, such as The Beautiful. Project (The Beautiful. Project, 2012), Black Girls Rock! Inc. (Black Girls Rock, Inc., 2012), and Sisterhood Agenda (Sisterhood Agenda, 2012), that are geared towards the self-knowledge and self-development of black girls. Black Girls Rock! Inc. is a nonprofit youth empowerment organization established to promote the arts through mentorship and leadership development, and encourage a dialogue about the ways women of color are portrayed in the media (Black Girls Rock!, Inc., 2012). The Beautiful. Project uses photography and reflective workshops to give young black girls an opportunity to confront both positive and negative portrayals of black girls and women in the media and in their communities, and seeks to influence the way black girls see the world and the way that the world sees black girls (The Beautiful. Project, 2012). *Sisterhood Agenda is a nonprofit* that *empowers women and girls through sisterhood, self-knowledge, self-development, and self-esteem (Sisterhood Agenda, 2012).* There is a necessity for more programs such as these that recognize the unique needs of this population and focus on attending to these needs through dialogue and empowerment.

On a direct practice level, social work clinicians working with young black female clients should create a therapeutic relationship that provides positive reinforcement and helps these young women to realize their beauty and to value their own self-worth by using a strengths-based empowerment approach (Paniagua, 2005). Empowerment is an important approach to therapy with clients from any racial background, but it is especially important in the case of black clients because of the long history of oppression experienced by members of this group.

In the assessment and treatment of black women, it is important for the clinician to discuss possible racial differences between the client and clinician, explore the client's level of acculturation to the European beauty ideal, and to avoid offering generalized explanations for problems. Incorporating family counseling may be useful in exploring the role the client's family plays in managing the issue (Paniagua, 2005). It is important that the therapist avoid any suggestion (either stated or implied) that the client likely comes from a disorganized, unstable, and psychologically unhealthy family. This stereotype does not take into consideration the extent to which factors such as the involvement of the extended family, nontraditional roles of family members, strong religious orientation, or strong emphasis on the value of education, may be strengths of a black family. Therapists should emphasize these strengths to encourage and support their client's participation in therapy (Paniagua, 2005).

It may also be important to include religious institutions in this process, because for many black women, religious communities are an important part of the extended family. The involvement of religious communities may be particularly important in treating black women, because they tend to be more involved with religious and spiritual activities than black men and view these communities as a source of economic and emotional support (Paniagua, 2005).

Empowering dark-skinned black women with these programs and interventions can help reinforce the notion that all black skin tones should be part of the established beauty standard. Through addressing the young black women's negative self-perception and how it affects an individual's daily life, social workers may be able to decrease the risks that these young women face across the life course and promote positive life outcomes and self-development.

Conclusion

Clark and Clark (1947) and Kiri Davis demonstrated that the internalization of racial beauty standards is a societal problem that begins in childhood and has a significant impact on the self-

perception and self-worth of black girls and women throughout the life course. Not only are black women negatively categorized by society for both their gender and race, but they can also be subjugated within their own communities. This article aims to bring awareness to an issue that, if properly addressed, could positively affect the life trajectories of young black women. The self-hatred of black women based on European beauty standards is not commonly acknowledged in social work conversations or practice. Black women need to be empowered so that they can protect themselves against the negative messages that they receive from their environment. Social workers have a unique opportunity to bring voice to their clients, break the cycle of internalized self-hatred in the black female community, and help create a new definition of beauty.

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