

The Future of Colorism Science: Interdisciplinarity, Families, and Intervention

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Abstract

In this Introduction to the Special Issue entitled “New Directions for Research on Colorism Across the Lifespan for Research in Human Development,” we offer suggestions for extending colorism science to several areas. In particular, we recommend that researchers continue to advance interdisciplinary and multimethod studies, as this has contributed important knowledge about colorism to date. Moving forward, we suggest that researchers investigate colorism within families and in developmental periods, such as infancy and childhood that have received relatively limited attention compared to adulthood. We also encourage efforts to developing programs and policies that eradicate colorism.

Keywords: colorism, skin color.

The Future of Colorism Science: Interdisciplinarity, Families, and Intervention

We are excited to present the Special Issue entitled “New Directions for Research on Colorism Across the Lifespan for Research in Human Development.” Here, we recognize that colorism relates to systemic inequalities operating at multiple levels, such as societal, interpersonal, and individual, and define the construct broadly to include differential treatment within and between racial/ethnic groups based on skin color. Collectively, the Special Issue papers contribute to new ways of thinking about how individuals experience colorism. These perspectives extend across contexts (e.g., variation across historical times, school and community settings) and racial/ethnic groups and consider layers of group dynamics, systemic inequalities, and identity intersections. The papers reflect multiple methodologies and disciplines, such as sociology, psychology, human development, and measurement, advancing scholarship about colorism in several key areas. Reece (2023) provides a historical perspective about the experience of colorism among African American adults and the role of policies in perpetuating skin color bias. Centeno, Bayazitli, Purnell, Bravo, and Mello (2023) report on the interpersonal encounters with colorism among Latinx adolescents and the association between colorism with developmental outcomes. Khan, Nguyen, Branigan, and Gordon (2023) illustrate the major instruments used to assess colorism and how they may differ by skin color among adults. Commentaries by Hunter (2023) and Cunningham (2023) provide a broad overview of the field and underscore the critical need to conduct additional research on colorism. In this Introduction, we offer suggestions for extending colorism science to several areas. In particular, we recommend that researchers continue to advance interdisciplinary and multimethod studies and in doing so investigate colorism within families and turn to developing programs and policies that eradicate colorism.

Interdisciplinary and Multimethod Research. We were delighted to represent multiple disciplines in this special issue, yet space prevented us from fully reflecting the wider array of fields that have examined colorism and can contribute to future interdisciplinary studies. In addition to psychology and sociology, these fields include color science, biology, physical anthropology, dermatology, craniofacial surgery, history, political science, economics, business, media studies, journalism, public health, and prevention science. For instance, anthropologists have studied centuries of colorism around the globe, including being among the first to use color science based instruments to document diverse skin colors within and across societies around the world (Jablonski, 2021). Dermatologists assess skin color in relation to risk for skin cancer, craniofacial surgeons for reconstructive surgeries, and the cosmetics and technology industries create devices to serve such fields. Whereas innovations in skin tone matching can support human well-being, these innovations can also contribute to and reinforce colorism. One recent review points to skin lightening as a global public health issue, for instance, whereby individuals' health is compromised through products marketed to reduce the darkness of their skin (Pollock et al., 2021).

Marshaling this breadth of disciplines is needed to fully document and dismantle colorism. Human development scholars are well equipped for such interdisciplinary work, drawing on models such as Spencer's Phenomenological Variant of Ecological Systems Theory (PVEST; Spencer, 1997; Cunningham et al., 2023). PVEST accounts for the multiple contexts and timelines enveloping development. Reflecting ecological systems theory, individuals develop within networks of kin, friends, and family who are part of broader work, school, and religious communities that are in turn situated within cities, parishes, states, and countries, all of which progress through time experiencing changes at various clock speeds determined by

internal and external processes and events. Phenomenologically, meaning making is individualized, shaped by intersectional identities including genders, sexes, races, ethnicities, and classes that reflect the powers and oppressions of broader societies as well as the agency of individuals to resist and reshape these societies.

Colorism operates at each of these levels and timestamps, and scholars can embrace interdisciplinarity to more deeply co-create new understanding of colorism that motivates and informs its dismantling. Historians, political scientists, and sociologists for instance, are well equipped to document when, why, and how events occurred that serve as local, national, and global turning points that amplify and alter colorism. Political sociologists Eduardo Bonilla-Silva and David Dietrich (2011), for instance, documented how white responses to two events, Hurricane Katrina and the election of Barack Obama, each reflected color-blind racism. The identities and positionalities individuals bring to such events—i.e., their physical location, their age, sex, genders, race-ethnicities, and economic resources— shape the meanings they draw from them and how such events alter their development, including in terms of their personal experiences with and perceptions of societal levels of colorism. Scholars studying communications and marketing also can collaborate with developmental scholars as they document how individuals navigate the many messages about skin color surrounding their daily lives, including in social media, as well as when and why social movements to alter messaging have greater and lesser success and what leads companies and consumers to alter the messages they send and receive (e.g., reducing the prevalence of lighter skinned models; Akinro & Mbunyuza-Memani, 2019; Baumann, 2008). Such understandings can support development of sustainable interventions in public and private messaging, to complement the kinds of individual programs and broader policy changes discussed in the next section. All such approaches may

best affect social change when informed by multiple theoretical perspectives and using mixed and participatory methods that engage those experiencing a phenomenon as co-creators and that document phenomena through both quantifying representative statistics and centering lived experiences.

Colorism and Family Science. More than ten years ago in a review of research on families of color, Burton, Bonilla-Silva, Ray, Buckelew, and Freeman. (2010) stated that “in a multicultural society that is shifting in numbers and potentially in the distribution of power, researchers must be mindful of the roles that racialized systems and differentiations based on skin color play in families’ lives.” (p. 454). Among the many recommendations for researchers, they highlighted how family science could illuminate new knowledge about colorism. Using critical race theory, they proposed that family dynamics could be associated with children’s skin tone as are other individual characteristics, such as gender and birth order. The charge to integrate colorism into family science was also asserted by Scott, McDermott, Harris, Johnson, Pinderhughes, and Spencer (2021) when presenting the Phenomenological Ethnic-Racial Socialization Conceptual Model as a framework for understanding how skin color contributed to the racial/ethnic identity development of African American and Latinx youth, building on the PVEST model discussed in the prior section. In this multidimensional model, youth’s skin color (phenotype) is conceptualized to intersect with other identities (e.g., race/ethnicity, gender, and sexual orientation) and is predicted by developmental processes, family adaptive cultural systems, and ethnic-racial socialization. Such models continue to be braided with conceptualizations from other disciplines (e.g., Roth, 2016; Rosario et al., 2021).

Despite the calls for the integration of colorism and family science made by leaders in the field (Burton et al., 2010; Scott et al., 2021), there has been relatively little empirical research

that addresses colorism among families. Notable exceptions exist that provide useful models for future research. For example, Landor et al (2013) conducted a longitudinal study with African American adolescents and their primary caregivers. Skin tone was measured by trained coders from videotapes and ranged from very light skin to very dark skin. Findings indicated that families had preferential treatment toward children based on skin tone and that this association differed by gender. Darker skin males reported receiving higher quality parenting than did lighter skin males, whereas the opposite pattern was shown for females. Another illustration of the family dynamics of colorism comes from a young adult in a qualitative study with African Americans who stated: “My mom is always trying to get me to use products to lighten my skin color...She sees that other people look at darker as a bad thing, [and] she doesn’t really want me to go through that stereotype” (Wilder and Cain 2011, p. 588). However, perspectives about skin color within families are nuanced, as demonstrated by a participant in research with Brazilian and Columbian youth “I wish I were Black like my father. I want to have a Black child...I really value Blackness” (Harris, 2023). Nevertheless, there still remains a gap in our understanding of how colorism processes exist within families. Key questions about colorism within families include the following: What messages, values, and ideas do children learn from their families about skin color? How are parenting practices informed by skin color? How do parents talk about skin color with their children and adolescents? How do adolescents internalize familial expectations about skin color?

Understanding colorism within families also warrants consideration of development. Families are likely to parent and socialize their offspring about skin color differently across childhood and adolescence based on the unique qualities of each developmental period. However, there are varying degrees of evidence that delineate how colorism is experienced at

these stages. As indicated by Cunningham (this issue) and Adams, Kurtz-Costes, and Hoffman (2016) in a review of the research on skin tone bias among African Americans across the life-span, a major limitation of the extant literature about colorism is the relative emphasis on adulthood versus childhood. Conducting research about colorism with infants, young children, and primary school-age will require creative assessments and developmental conceptualizations. For instance, the seminal Clark and Clark (1950) “doll” study prompted later research documenting the Black preschool children can recognize societal stereotypes associating white skin with positive attributes while not internalizing the feelings in relation to their own self-esteem (Swanson, Cunningham, Youngblood, & Spencer, 2009). More recent research has taken advantage of digital images to identify the development of in- and out-group stereotyping from preschool to middle childhood (Pauker, Xu, Williams, & Biddle, 2016). Research that aims to illuminate age patterns in colorism will benefit from using mixed methodologies together with interdisciplinary perspectives that integrate developmental theory with the rich work already completed about colorism by such disciplines as sociology.

Notwithstanding the work that is needed about colorism within families, developmental issues, and effective measurement strategies, there is already a preponderance of evidence showing how pervasive and deleterious colorism is for psychological wellbeing (e.g., Adams et al., 2016), socioeconomic status, including educational attainment, employment, and income (e.g., Monk, 2021; Telles, 2014), and preferential treatment of immigrants based on skin color (Diallo, 2022; Marcelo, 2022). Thus, it is critical that researchers turn their attention to the creation of programs and policies that aim to eradicate colorism. Already, there are researchers developing technologies that use virtual reality to reduce implicit bias and racist responses among police officers (Farrell, 2021). Efforts to prevent and reduce colorism may also find it

useful to draw from interventions that have effectively reduced the effects of racism on academic outcomes (e.g., Taylor & Walton, 2011). In order to develop mechanisms that intervene colorism, new lines of discovery will need to be addressed. For example, what do teachers need to know about colorism that will ensure students prosper academically regardless of skin color? What do healthcare providers need to know about colorism so that everyone is treated equally in emergency rooms regardless of their skin color? What do police officers need to know about colorism to prevent violence against darker skinned individuals? To address these questions, national data about skin color and colorism will be needed to document the differences in lived experiences across settings, including schools, hospitals, and the judicial system based on skin color.

In short, colorism remains a vitally important topic of inquiry and developmental scholars have much to offer in documenting its impacts and advancing programmatic and societal change toward its eradication.

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