
The Effects of Internalized Oppression on the Black Community

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Intra-racial color discrimination is a controversial subject within the black community. Some people prefer not to discuss it while others contend skin color bias no longer exists since it is an ugly truth no one wants to readily admit occurs in our culture. Still the truth remains that black people discriminate against each other based on skin color, hair texture, and facial features. This prejudice based on one's skin and features is what's known as a color complex. Traditionally, the complex involved light-skinned blacks' rejection of dark-skinned blacks. However, this complex is not one-sided. The color complex occurs in the form of the dark-skinned spurning the light-skinned for not being "black enough." This internalized oppression is a barrier to progression in the black community and the human race as a whole. This research aims to raise awareness among all races about this internalized oppression and what it has done to the black community.

Introduction

Scholars agree the internalized oppression swimming through the black community seemingly stems from life during slavery (Russell, Wilson, and Hall; Byrd and Tharps). It was believed that white people were superior to blacks. In the white community, there was a consensus that the black body was subhuman and didn't deserve the rights of human beings. The ideology that being white was better than being black became imbedded into the black psyche as a result of this treatment (Eyerman 12).

Miscegenation of white Europeans, Africans, and Native Americans caused a stirring of the gene pool. Through the race mixing different skin tones and features were added into the black community. Generally slaves with lighter skin, due to being descendants of other races, were allotted coveted indoor assignments while dark-skinned slaves typically performed physically grueling work in the fields. It is this favoritism and separation that begins the rift in the black community. Slaves of a lighter shade received a better quality of food, clothing and shelter. Living as a slave, the whiter your skin the better quality of life you'd have. "The whiter the better" ideology was born.

With this philosophy coursing through the community's collective mind, it is understandable how black-on-black color discrimination sprouted. Times during and after slavery, light-skinned people were taught to believe they were better than their darker counterparts and vice-versa. Dark-skinned blacks believed their light skinned brethren were not a part of their

community. Lighter blacks weren't considered black at all. They were ostracized from the black community by their dark-skinned counterparts, as well as, in most cases, by themselves.

The separation now inflicted by black people themselves leads me to investigate the ways the black community was affected by this kind of behavior. I've found that specific attitudes have been adopted in the way blacks view themselves, beauty, relationships.

A majority of blacks perceive straight, silky and smooth hair as best. Hair with a texture similar to that of white, Hispanic, or Asian persons is often the ultimate goal while hair that is coarse and "nappy" is seen as ugly (Byrd). Black people consciously enter relationships with people of different races or with lighter skin to birth children with lighter complexions, "good" hair, and European-like features (Parmer et al.). It is also perceived that people with lighter skin have a higher socio-economic status (Russell, Wilson, and Hall). These social practices and cultural attitudes are the effects of the internalized oppression plaguing the black community.

Nappy Roots: Black Hair

For hundreds of years, it has been taught that white is superior to black. This ideology has been drilled into the black community's collective mind for generations. It is in this teaching that one can understand why the black community suffers from internalized oppression. This oppression is clearly seen through some individuals' obsession with straight and long hair. The straighter and longer black hair is the better because it is closer to European hair; Russell, Wilson, and Hall claim, "The politics of hair parallels the politics of skin color" (82). Beautiful straight hair and intricate hairstyles represent a black woman's standing in the social hierarchy, regardless of whether the hair is hers. Weaves and hair extensions are used to achieve longer lengths of hair.

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Authors Russell, Wilson, and Hall attest that some black people hold straight and long hair in higher regards because it is stylish and manageable (87). However, other scholars agree that the roots of the issue stem from slavery (Byrd and Tharps; Eyerman). During the slave trade, traders shaved the heads of the captured; Byrd and Tharps mark this as the first act to undermine blacks' identity. According to Eyerman, the black identity has formed through our struggles with European society (23). Slave owners required slaves to hide their hair under scarves or straighten their hair with an iron so as not to be offensive to white people. This imposition of culture was eventually accepted and passed along over the generations. The trauma blacks endured during and after slavery have shaped black minds and perspectives on the world. Eyerman and Byrd and Tharps identify slavery as the root of specific views blacks hold and the key to the black identity.

Through the Looking Glass: Black Identity

Black identity like any identity is developed throughout the stages of life. Scholars have explored the process of self-discovery and realization of cultural identity. The authors of *The Color Complex* found the black identity to be "a multifaceted and in some ways nebulous concept" (Russell, Wilson, and Hall 62). According to these authors and Eyerman, black identity begins with self-hatred. Studies conducted in the late thirties and early forties provided evidence of self-hatred in black children as young as three years old. Black children were given the choice of playing with a white or black doll. A majority chose white dolls and claimed they were "nicer and prettier"

(Russell, Wilson, and Hall 63). A later study conducted in the eighties by psychologist Michael Barnes found the same results as the earlier study, where two-thirds of black children chose white dolls to play with.

By the time a black child becomes a teenager, he or she has defined stereotypes about skin color. Scholar Charles Parrish found junior-high students used as many as 145 different terms to describe skin color; “half-white,” “high yellow,” “chocolate,” “red bone,” “dark,” “inkspot,” and “tar baby” being among those. During adolescence, prejudice among blacks most commonly happens and takes the most negative effect on the black child. These children take these experiences and stereotypes and evolve into adults with skewed color views of their own community. This in turn allows them to be easily manipulated by society and the media, in so they develop warped views on the “ideal” black beauty.

Janelle Monae vs. Beyonce: Standard of Beauty

The politics of skin color are the key to physical attractiveness in the black community. Hair, skin, and features that are more European are viewed as the standard of beauty (Parmer et al.). The media shapes and reflects the world in which we live. In media industries, blacks have struggled for a voice and equal representation. In the fields of music, film, and television, a majority of black leading ladies are light-skinned. Some prime examples are super-stars Beyonce Knowles and Halle Berry. However, this is not the case for black men. Dark-skinned men are held in the highest regards when discussing sex appeal. Historically, this has also been the case. In nineteenth century literature, “the Black heroine was typically light-skinned, beautiful, and passive. . . . Black men were usually portrayed as dark-skinned brutes (Russell, Wilson, and Hall 136).

Today’s standard of beauty for men is the typical tall, dark, and handsome gentleman. For women, it is not as clear-cut. Typically, light-skinned women with long hair, curvaceous bodies, and good features are idealized. Scholars address how the cultural standards of beauty associated with facial features, skin color, hair texture and length, and body size are passed down through generations via the process of internalized oppression. It was concluded that with the exception of body size, European facial features, lighter skin color, and fine straight hair continue to be factors in the oppression of African-American families (Parmer et al. 18). If one does not possess these features, they are considered to have “bad” features. Light skin is a standard of beauty often obtained by darker-skinned people through skin bleaching, the process of lightening one’s skin color with chemical substances. Scholar Ronald Hall introduces the bleaching syndrome as a response by blacks in their attempts to be incorporated into a society characterized by cultural dominance.

“Coffee or Cream?”: Relationships

Sexual attraction often begins with physical appearance and every culture appreciates certain attributes over others. Russell, Wilson, and Hall write, “Skin color preferences operate in the same way that a black man who prefers women with light skin and long hair is no different from a White man who prefers women with blond hair and blue eyes” (Russell, Wilson, and Hall 107). Within the black community, skin color preferences are not just personal but sometimes political. In some cases, blacks judge each other on the basis of skin color to determine whether or not they would date and mate with one another. Dark-skinned people view marriage or reproduction with a light-skinned person as an accomplishment. Breeding with someone of a lighter complexion is seen as a step up on the social ladder (Garrod). On the other hand, a light-skinned black with a dark-skinned black is viewed as a downgrade and an attempt to get back to one’s “roots” (Russell, Wilson, and Hall).

Black people consciously start relationships with people of different races or of lighter skin to birth children with lighter complexions, “good” hair, and European-like features (Parmer et al.).

For black people with serious color complexes, mating with another black person is out of the question regardless of skin color. The black gay and lesbian communities are not an exception to the color complexes that affect the way couples pair off. Scholars attribute the increasing interracial trend to a number of factors. According to the authors of *The Color Complex*, one reason black women are dating and mating with other races is due to the shortage of eligible black men with the ratio of women to men being eight to one in urban areas (119).

Colorism is an issue in the black community of which most outsiders are not aware. Blacks don't discuss the topic of colorism among whites so that more of their "dirty laundry" isn't aired out. It's believed that whites will hold the self-inflicted discrimination against blacks and it would become another reason to look down on black people. Others believe white people's ignorance of the situation further fuels racial problems between both groups. It is my purpose to educate black people and others of this oppression so that it can be resolved and we as a human race can progress.

Methods

For my research, I conducted textual analysis of eight scholarly resources ranging from articles, books, and studies. I compared and contrasted the texts looking for the different effects of internalized oppression on the black community and what the scholars had to say as to what the causes of these effects were. I also interviewed black people of ages ranging from 19 to over 60. Those participants that are between ages 19 through 26 I know personally and were interviewed face-to-face. Subjects that were older than 26 years were interviewed by my mother and video recorded. Each subject was asked essentially sixteen questions during the interview. Interviews conducted by myself were a bit more in-depth and conversational than those conducted by my mother. Not all of the participants are from the same geographical area, school, or workplace. Not all of the subjects were of the same culture or gender. This gave my research and studies some diversity in that it looked at people from different backgrounds.

I conducted my textual analysis before conducting my interviews. In doing so I found that the internalized oppression within the black community has had a number of effects on its people. To demonstrate these effects, the interview questions were designed to extract the experiences of the subjects about being black in America and their interactions with other black people belonging to their communities and families. Middle-aged subjects were interviewed because they would seem to have an abundant amount of years, knowledge, and wisdom to recognize the types of internalized oppression my paper seeks to unmask. I thought people of my generation were generally too young to comprehend and understand the oppression that surrounds us. It is what we've been taught and so I thought interviewing someone within in my own age range (early twenties) would prove difficult. This was furthest from the truth as will later be discussed. The interviews with each subject gave insight into each subject's personal life and preferences, how they were treated as children and adults, and some of their own personal philosophies. After the interviews were finished, I listened to each one again and recorded where there was a consensus and disagreement in response to each question.

Results

By conducting the interviews of the younger generation of subjects, I found that—contrary to my belief—they served as good candidates to demonstrate the effects of internalized oppression in the black community. I believed, because they were young, they would not readily identify specific aspects in their lives where they had witnessed prejudice or discrimination from members in their own community. After conducting several interviews with the younger generation I found they were just as capable as their older counterparts. In regards to the question about personal hair

preferences, most participants demonstrated that hair texture really didn't matter to them. However, of the fourteen interviews, eight contested that having a higher grade of hair was attractive. Hair that is straight, curly, or coiled was often described as good. It would seem that today there is a type quality of hair that is the standard of "good hair," but it doesn't matter so much to an individual person. There is now a tolerance for other hair textures and they are being accepted and not seen as outright ugly.

Questions asked about the subject's treatment in regards to their skin color, hair texture, and facial features among family, friends, and strangers revealed that a majority of the subjects could not clearly remember any outlandish discrimination or prejudice against them. However, a dark-skinned female subject could recall that her lighter-skinned cousin did get special attention from the elders in the family. "Everyone could remember her name and she was the pretty one," she said. Lighter-skinned subjects agreed that they were treated a bit better in school than their darker-skinned classmates. A female lighter-skinned participant commented that she wasn't treated better in her family but "[her] sister, who is actually darker than me, never treated me badly but she would cry sometimes because she didn't have light skin like me or my other sister. She wanted to be lighter-skinned and have pretty hair like us." On the other end of the spectrum, a dark-skinned male subject felt he was treated the same as everyone in class but "certain teachers picked [him] out more than others" because he had a dark skin tone. Another dark-skinned participant was called "white boy" by his cousins because he enunciated his words and spoke clearly. As black individuals, these people described feelings of hurt and confusion at the hands of people they knew because of their skin tones.

When asked about society's standard of beauty for men and women, there was a unanimous consensus about the ideal black woman. "Light skin," "long hair," "big butt," "curvaceous," and "attractive" were terms used to describe the idealized woman in the black community. The standard of beauty for men, however, was not as clear-cut. "Tall, dark, and handsome" was a common answer among half of the subjects while the other half described him to be the same but only with light skin. The ideal man was described as being muscular and well-fit, well-groomed, and having a low haircut with waves. From these results it would seem that the standards of beauty for men and women in the black community are as scholars attest them to be.

When questioned about skin color preferences while dating or seeking a companion, a majority of the subjects indicated they did not have a specific preference but did not want someone who was "too dark." One female light-skinned participant admitted to preferring "darker men. A dark skin man represents strength and power to me. I associate dark skin men with safety and as see most as protectors." Those participants that were young and unmarried generally agreed that skin color did not matter to them and they would date anyone, including people not in the black community. A light-skinned male said, "I would prefer an African-American female, probably lighter-skinned... But it really doesn't matter if she was Caucasian, Mexican, or Puerto Rican," indicating that color doesn't matter to him. However, two light-skinned females admitted at one point in time they did not try to obtain relationships with men from the Caribbean. "Island boys are very possessive...protective and so clingy. They are hard to get rid of than most American boys," one said. With a majority of the subjects, skin color doesn't matter in regards to choosing a companion. This result contradicts what scholars assert about the color complex blacks have when dating and mating.

I have found that today the effects of internalized oppression are actually being reversed in the younger generation. There seems to be no real definite preference for dark or light skin black people.

Discussion

The effects of internalized oppression on the people in the black community seemingly stems from life during slavery. It was believed that white people were superior to blacks. Black people didn't receive the basic rights of free human beings and were treated as subhuman. The ideology that being white was better than being black became imbedded into the black psyche as a result of this treatment.

Through the mixing of peoples, different skin tones and features were added into the black community. Slaves born with lighter skin were allowed to work less strenuous jobs than dark-skinned slaves. Slaves of a lighter shade received better quality food, clothes, and shelter and were thought of as being better than their darker counterparts. With this ideology coursing through the community's collective mind generation after generation, the seeds of internalized oppression took root. Specific attitudes about the way blacks view hair, themselves, beauty, and relationships are the result of this internalized oppression.

From my research, I have found that today the effects of internalized oppression are actually being reversed in the younger generation. There seems to be no real definite preference for dark or light skin black people. Skin color preferences are now dependent on the individual person and not their skin color. Tolerance for different hair textures, lengths, and styles are beginning to erase the damage done by earlier strict "good" and "bad" hair codes in the black community.

Today, colorism does not seem to be as big of an issue in the black community as it once was. Regardless, most cultures don't know about the community's "dirty little secret." It is this ignorance of the situation that fuels racial problems between different cultural groups. It is through this research that people of all cultures can be edified so that we as a human race can continue to progress.

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