

*Ronald E. Hall*

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# The Bleaching Syndrome: The Role of Educational Intervention

*Per the Bleaching Syndrome, people of color, including African, Asian, and Latino Americans, are both victims and perpetrators of color discrimination. The Bleaching Syndrome encompasses perceptual, psychological, and behavioral sectors that affect students' schooling experiences. Education professionals,*

*including teachers, administrators, and counselors, must address these factors to promote mental and emotional health among learners. In this article, I discuss how the Bleaching Syndrome and color bias affects dark-complexioned African American children in contemporary US schools.*

**P**RESIDENT BARACK Obama's rise as a Black man to the Presidency of a majority White sovereignty was unprecedented at any point in recorded history and signaled a shift in social dynamics. Although many observers were excited by national electoral evidence that the country had supposedly entered a post-racial era (Hoagland, 2008), others speculated that racism had simply taken on new forms (Netter, 2010). Given how color discrimination has mitigated experiences for people of African (Gatewood,

2000; Goldsmith, Hamilton, & Darity, 2006), Asian (Hall, 2010a, 2010b, Sung, 1990), and Latino (Fergus, 2004; Hunter, 2008) descent, many onlookers questioned whether President Obama's victory was cause for both celebration and consternation; that is, claiming the hope and enthusiasm of an African American breaking a racial barrier while, nevertheless, remaining mindful that Obama's proximity to Whiteness was not insignificant in his national ascent. In fact, Senator Harry Reid, a Democrat from Nevada, publicly apologized for comments that he made about Obama's lack of "Negro dialect" and complexion when he encouraged his former senate colleague to seek the presidency (Heilemann & Halperin, 2010; Netter, 2010).

Colorism, or discrimination based on skin tone and related features, such as hair texture, is making the lives of people of color increasingly complex and multifaceted (Norwood, 2014;

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Russell-Cole, Wilson, & Hall, 2013). Based on skin complexion (i.e., light, medium, or dark tones), people of color engage manifestations of bias as both victims and perpetrators. Dark-skinned people of color historically bear the burden of being discriminated against by both Whites and light-skinned people of color (Hall, 1992) and it is well-known, for instance, that both Whites and communities of color generally consider light-complexioned Latina, Asian, and Black women more attractive than women whose physicality is dark or most dissimilar to popular White ideals. Moreover, the dramatic relationship between skin color and discrimination frequently prompts intraracial divisions that blur distinctions between victimization and oppression, as shared in the films *Light Girls* (Beharie et al., 2015) and *Dark Girls* (Berry, Berry, & Duke, 2011).

According to noted author and Black intellectual James Baldwin (Jones, 1966), the historical root of difficulty for people of color in the United States is skin color. In the case of colorism, the Bleaching Syndrome directs attention to nuanced phenomena that are sometimes muffled in ongoing conversations about race. The Bleaching Syndrome, a theoretical construct conceptualized by Hall (1994) who was responsible for the first publication on the topic (Hall, 1995, 1999, 2006a, 2006b, 2010a), refers to a gradual erosion of quality of life and/or human well-being based on racial and colorist forces. The construct is initiated by the perceptual, then followed by the psychological, and concluded via the behavioral. The goal of this article is to discuss perceptual and behavioral dimensions of the Bleaching Syndrome on dark-complexioned people of color, especially African Americans (Kitano, 1985). Although skin color is not irrelevant to White European Americans, associated pathological influences upon the group are largely immaterial. By virtue of having idealized light skin, White Americans are shielded from the social consequences of the Bleaching Syndrome, such as health problems that can develop from skin whitening (Perry, 2006). Conversely, the problem is a uniquely complicated social circumstance for people of color (Hall, 2003) that keenly affects dark-skinned Black people. Color prejudice is

particularly painful for dark-complexioned people because the denigration of Africa and Blackness has been so endemic to Western civilization (Solomos, 1995) and, as Lederman (1996) has noted, dark skin is commensurate with racist prejudices that supported slavery and colonization. Although ending the Bleaching Syndrome is a key way to uproot colorism and attack racial discrimination generally, dynamics of the color complex in contemporary schools have not been thoroughly explored (Monroe, 2013).

### **The Bleaching Syndrome: Perceptual Attributes**

Images that people see may be ordered based on physical features and in the case of the Bleaching Syndrome complexion is paramount. Color, as applied to human skin and within racist systems, conveys a not-so-subtle hierarchy of status that is rooted in social constructs including culture, norms, values, and ideals among personal preferences (Getzels & Csikszentmihalyi, 1969; Jordan, 1968). Common perspectives influence interactions between people who are otherwise unfamiliar with one another, such as when personal traits or circumstances are ascribed to individuals based on colorist stereotypes, such as assumptions about socioeconomic class and the nature of one's work (Rondilla & Spickard, 2007). In educational arenas, unfortunate and wrongheaded inferences may be made about intelligence, behavior, and work ethic as a variety of social circumstances (e.g., discrimination, stereotyping, historical inequities) encourage trends in which dark-complexioned Blacks tend to have lower academic completion rates than medium- or light-complexioned Blacks (Seltzer & Smith, 1991).

In modern schools, students tend to have good institutional experiences when they are perceived as nice-looking, smart, and amiable. As in the overarching national context, attractiveness, academic ability, and likeability tend to be traits that are most commonly associated with Whites and, oftentimes by extension, to light-skinned people of color based on their approximations of

Whiteness. When people with dark skin are disparaged, or simply ignored, such actions facilitate opinions, perceptions, and trends of inclusion and exclusion that blight educational settings. The positive messages and images to which White and light-complexioned students are often exposed may build self-esteem, but dark-skinned individuals must process such information in a manner that rescues their self-image.

Unfortunately, empirical studies of colorism in 21st century P–12 schools are limited. However, personal insights about skin tone (Duncan, 2000) and complexion difference (Wilder & Cain, 2011) within families raise important concerns about healthy views regarding skin color, especially among dark-complexioned children. Landor et al.'s (2013/2014) study of African American families exemplifies several noteworthy concerns. Based on a study of 767 African American families, Landor and her colleagues (2013/2014) found that light girls and dark boys received what was described in the study as “higher quality of parenting” (p. 8) such as parental efforts to socialize boys about mistrust, a tendency that the researchers attributed to caregivers’ awareness of heightened forms of prejudice that dark-skinned Black boys and men encounter in the United States (e.g., discriminatory treatment in the criminal justice system; Blair, Judd, & Chapleau, 2004). Meanwhile, preferential treatment toward light-skinned daughters was linked to the long-standing contention of light skin advantage among Black women (Hunter, 2007). Given that Black children are frequently socialized about race from an early age, educators must be mindful that young people often enter school settings with racially conscious mindsets that reflect crucial nuances that are gender-specific. As a consequence, African American boys and girls are likely to be affected by colorism differently and, in turn, respond to school-based episodes in dissimilar ways. Dark-skinned Black girls may be vulnerable to micro-aggressions about their looks, particularly charges that they are unattractive, and dark-complexioned boys may be more susceptible to derogatory stereotypes about their behavior.

### **The Bleaching Syndrome: Behavioral Traits**

Over the course of a lifespan, perceptual components of the Bleaching Syndrome increasingly influence human behavior (Hyde, 1995). In the psyche of those who succumb to the Bleaching Syndrome, complexion is fundamental to behavioral initiatives that are unhealthy. Besides the bleaching of skin, victims of the Bleaching Syndrome may act out behavioral changes in their dress, speech patterns, social contacts, and any other preference that seemingly distances individuals from the imagined White ideal. Thus, the Bleaching Syndrome is not limited to complexion but extends to all social decisions that are intended to approximate Whiteness (Hyde, 1995). In the behavior of those affected, Eurocentric ideals are not automatically absorbed without some reservations, but are gradually accepted over time. Individuals are often unaware of their acceptance of Eurocentric ideals, as the behaviors are frequently internalized and acted out unconsciously. Subsequently, when victims of the Bleaching Syndrome adopt specific behavioral traits, they may experience conflict with their own inner beliefs. For example, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) is widely heralded for its organizational efforts to improve the lot of Black Americans. However, in an editorial for *The Crisis*, W. E. B. Du Bois, a light-skinned African American, labeled Black leader Marcus Garvey as “fat, Black, and ugly,” implying that dark features were unattractive (Lewis, 2000, p. 80). On another occasion, an NAACP official seemed to suggest that Garvey’s pronounced African features were not complimentary (Garvey, 1986). This type of activity is certainly not peculiar to African Americans, but is found among all people of color who are similarly oppressed in a Eurocentric environment. Clear-cut examples are skin-bleaching routines that are acted out by women of color globally (Perry, 2006).

### **Educational Interventions**

Educators can play a critical role in dismantling the Bleaching Syndrome by drawing on

many of the same approaches that are used to confront other social problems. This section includes a short summary of recommended strategies for educators and schools.

First, school leaders should ensure that institutional personnel and students are aware of what colorism is. The topic should be included in staff handbooks, clearly defined, and accompanied by a list of resources that handbook users may consult to learn more about the topic. Although color discrimination is a long-standing problem, White European Americans are often not aware of how deeply and pervasively intraracial discrimination affects communities of color. Simultaneously, educators of color may be familiar with the phenomenon through personal experiences, but they are not necessarily well-prepared to intervene in encounters that involve students, colleagues, parents, school visitors, and so forth. Formally identifying the problem in district resources is one way of raising awareness about color prejudice and institutionalizing a climate in which discrimination is unacceptable.

Second, students, in particular, should be taught how to constructively negotiate colorism-driven experiences. Perhaps one of the most common manifestations of colorism among K–12 students is name-calling. If young people are the target of derogatory taunts related to the Bleaching Syndrome (e.g., Oreo, jigaboo, coconut, banana), youths should have access to counselors, teachers, administrators, and other adults who can appropriately console them and support children's self-concept. It is particularly critical to teach youngsters how to handle said situations in a healthy fashion if such occasions arise again.

Third, classroom teachers and school administrators must develop an honest awareness of how colorism affects student profiling, stereotypes, and, thus, educational outcomes. Along with abandoning professed orientations of colorblindness involving race, professionals must stop pretending that they are not influenced by complexion variation within racial groups. Unmistakable patterns exist that center on skin tone and beauty perceptions among women (Craig, 2009; Hunter, 2007), discipline (Hannon,

DeFina, & Bruch, 2013), and self-esteem (Robinson & Ward, 1995). Individuals who work in the field of education must critically consider how color messages infuse all aspects of their practice from selection and presentation of curricular materials to interpersonal interactions to modeling to advocacy and other elements. Given the extensive time that young people spend in schools during childhood and adolescence, educators who undertake these steps can do much to counter Western forces that promote and sustain color bias. Practitioners can especially broaden awareness of the Bleaching Syndrome and its harmful physical and psychological effects.

### Conclusion

The Bleaching Syndrome for people of color is a ubiquitous reflection of White attitudes toward those having darker skin (Gushue & Carter, 2000). Because Whites in all Western nations remain gatekeepers of Western culture, their skin color preferences are a critical factor in how personal worth is assessed (Bracey, Bamaca, & Urmana-Taylor, 2004). Troubling outcomes among people of color may also reflect their reactions to the reality of color bias. For example, White European Americans and light-skinned people of color may rely on factors other than talent and hard work as prerequisites to their success and dark-skinned populations may perceive that prejudices against dark skin cannot be skirted through personal effort.

Valorizing light skin as ideal reflects culturally-constructed biases, and people of color must develop their identities and self-esteem to value the range of complexions that exist across Black communities. Contrary to the Bleaching Syndrome, people must come to develop a critical awareness and resistance against cultural myths that pertain to skin color. Some of these myths are the obvious negative stereotypes about the inferiority of dark skin and the superiority of light skin by White European ancestry (Hall, 1992). Other falsehoods are less well articulated, such as the notion that light-skinned people with White European ancestry are arrogant and/or self-

centered (Jones, 1994). To the degree that these views have been socially nurtured and accepted, they must be socially critiqued and dismantled.

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### Additional Resources

1. Keith, V. M., Lincoln, K. D., Taylor, R. J., & Jackson, J. S. (2010). Discriminatory experiences and depressive symptoms among African American women: Do skin tone and mastery matter? *Sex Roles*, 62, 48–59.

The authors use data from the National Survey of American Life to query connections between depressive symptoms and perceptions of discrimination among African American women with varying complexions. The findings did not suggest that perceived discrimination significantly differed as related to skin tone. Respondents' sense of

personal mastery, a trait that is informed by educational background among other factors (e.g., age), mediated women's coping strategies.

2. Lindsey, T. B. (2011). Black no more: Skin bleaching and the emergence of new Negro womanhood beauty culture. *Journal of Pan African Studies*, 4, 97–116.

This article provides a historical perspective on skin bleaching among Black women in the United States. The author sheds insight into why the practice gained popularity, especially as related to the role of skin tone among the Black Elite. Critiques of colorism

and skin bleaching that existed during the era are noted as well.

3. O'Connor, C., Lewis, A., & Mueller, J. (2007). Researching "Black" educational experiences and outcomes: Theoretical and methodological considerations. *Educational Researcher*, 36, 541–552.

This article focuses on how researchers have traditionally approached the topic of race in scholarly investigations. They argue

that race is an undertheorized concept and that common approaches do not sufficiently engage the heterogeneity that exists across Black populations. Although the article does not emphasize phenotype as an under-explored dimension of Blackness, the paucity of school-based research on colorism positions the topic as a strong fit for the authors' calls to broaden awareness in Black education.



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