

The issue of skin color in psychotherapy with African Americans

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ABSTRACT (ABSTRACT)

The significance of skin color in the psychology of African Americans, its contribution to the psychosocial dysfunctioning in some individuals and techniques for dealing with issues of skin color in psychotherapy are examined. The dynamics of European oppression of Africans and their descendants has provided the foundation for skin-color concerns.

FULL TEXT

THE LITERATURE ON DIRECT PRACTICE with people of color in the United States is minimal but growing. Models of social work practice with people of color have been developed by Devore and Schlesinger (1981), Green (1982), Lum (1986), and Norton (1978). Significant work in counseling psychology is being conducted by professionals such as Sue and Sue (1990). The literature is complemented by practice models that focus specifically on people of African ancestry living in the United States.

In her seminal work on social work in oppressed communities, Solomon (1976) presents a theoretical model for providing services to African Americans. Her thesis was that the problems that African Americans encounter originate in oppression and that all interventions must focus on empowerment as their ultimate outcome. McPhatter (1991) offered a model for assessing the needs of African Americans, and Bass, Wyatt, and Powell (1982) addressed assessment, treatment, and research issues relating to African American families. Harvey (1985) incorporated an Afro-centric perspective in a discussion of theoretical research and descriptions of program models for providing services to African American families. As significant as the aforementioned literature is in its contribution to understanding and providing services to African Americans, the research does not address the issue of skin color and its role as a therapeutic issue with African Americans.

Scholars such as Porter (1991) and Hall (1992) addressed this issue but from a sociological perspective. Their work focused on skin color as a significant factor in mate and friend selection for African Americans. Hughes and Hertel (1990) concluded from their research that skin color remains a significant variable in life chances and mate selection for African Americans. Russell, Wilson, and Hall (1992) analyzed the dynamics of skin color from a sociological and political perspective, providing an in-depth analysis of the role of skin color in the life of African Americans. But their work stopped short of investigating the significance of skin color in the provision of psychosocial services to African Americans. Neal and Wilson (1989) and Boyd-Franklin (1989) addressed the relevance of skin color to the provision of mental health services to African Americans. Neal and Wilson provided a cursory introduction into the implications of skin color and physical features for African American women in therapy, and Boyd-Franklin discussed skin color as the etiology for various adverse mental health symptoms.

Skin Color Issues

Skin color has been and continues to be a significant factor in the psychosocial dynamics of African Americans (Billingsley, 1992; Boyd-Franklin, 1989; Fordham, 1988). Scholars have also attested to the significance of skin color in the psychosocial experiences of African Americans (Drake & Cayton, 1962; Porter, 1991; Poussaint, 1972;

Russell et al., 1992).

If you're white you're all right; if you're brown stick around; if you're black stay back.

This adage is common in the African American community as well as the white community, exemplifying African Americans' negative feelings about the color of their skin. For African Americans, whiteness, as referred to in this saying, suggests the sociocultural advantages of the light-skinned African American person. A high value is placed on light skin because white society is more accepting of African Americans whose skin color more closely approximates European standards. Adaptation of white standards of skin color leads many African Americans to believe that light skin represents beauty, intelligence, charm, and grace, which is reflective of the "double consciousness" DuBois (1986) referred to in his work *Souls of Black Folk*. I refer to this phenomenon as the "paradox of blackness." On one psychological level, African Americans want to be accepted and approved of by white society, and on another, white society is less preferable than is black society. White society represents a sustaining environment (Chestang, 1976, Norton, 1976) in which one is more likely have his or her basic needs fulfilled. African Americans are pressured to adhere to the standards set forth by white supremacy. The career of Bert Williams, a black comedian in the early half of the twentieth century, serves as an example of this need to adapt to white society: Williams dressed in "black face" and billed himself as a "real coon" in reaction to white performers who dressed in black face and denigrated "blacks" through comedy (Ferguson, 1992).

African Americans' nurturing and emotional needs are met by other African Americans (Chestang, 1976; Norton, 1976). In the African American community, African Americans can express their true self. They can shout and wave their arms in exaltation in church when the choir sings "That Old Rugged Cross," slap "five" in agreement with their brother, or say, "I heard you, girlfriend" (Dillard, 1973). Paradoxically, the same African American who might in a nurturing environment accept and love other African Americans regardless of the shade of their skin color will in other environments or circumstances show preference based upon skin color and adhere to the belief that black people are mean, evil, nonproductive, and not to be valued or trusted.

This skin color paradox suggests that light-skinned women are preferable as wives and girl friends because they are moral, chaste, and intelligent. Dark-skinned women, on the other hand, are viewed as sensual and promiscuous. Lighter-skinned men are viewed by women as desirable and by darker-skinned men as "punks"; black-skinned men are viewed as dumb and aggressive. The adage "the blacker the berry the sweeter the juice" (Thurman, 1970) has an obvious sexual connotation, that is, the darker the person, the better he or she is as a sexual mate. During the African American nationalist movement of the 1970s the expression took on more positive connotations. The traditional response to the "blacker the berry" saying is "yeah, but you don't have to get sugar diabetes," which suggests that dark skin color still has a negative, less desirable connotation and is a significant and pervasive issue in the emotional and psychosocial life of people of African descent.

African American literature is replete with stories describing the impact of color on the psyche of African Americans (Himes, 1991; Naylor, 1989; Thurman, 1970). In his short story "Dirty Deceivers," Chester Himes (1991) wrote about an African American couple, both of whom pass for white, who meet, fall in love, and marry. Neither realizes that the other is black. After marriage, they continue to conceal their true racial identity from the public and each other. Himes describes the anxiety that this subterfuge creates for them. The man goes out for a haircut, not saying that the barber is in Harlem. The wife waits until the husband leaves so she can visit a beauty parlor also in Harlem. Under duress, they finally reveal their identity to each other. Although they initially find psychological relief by disclosing the truth, their trust in each other has been destroyed, and they eventually divorce.

Skin Color and Oppression

African Americans' psychosocial makeup is formulated in their relations with people of other races and cultures, particularly people of European culture and the white race. This sociohistorical relationship has been built upon systematic oppression and exploitation of people of African descent for the psychological and economic benefit of European culture (Akbar, 1984; Bulhan, 1985; Fanon, 1963; Welsing, 1991; Wilson, 1990).

Skin color identifies an individual as belonging to an oppressed and exploited group of people and is a significant

variable in many of the problems affecting the psyche of African American people. Moreover, skin color plays a significant role in the cognitive, emotional, and behavioral development of people of African descent (St. Julian, 1977) on both the conscious and unconscious levels. To understand the psyche of African Americans, one must acknowledge the role of skin color in identifying slaves. Africans were kidnapped from their homeland, transported across the Atlantic to the so-called "New World," forced to work as free labor for European abductors, and traded as a commodity on the world market (Davidson, 1961; Genovese, 1967; Williams, 1976). Their skin color identified them as beings who could be used and abused at the whim of a white-skinned person. White skin made one a superior being, whereas black skin made one an inferior being.

Fanon (1967) contended that white skin makes one a member of the oppressor class and black skin makes one a member of the oppressed class. The negativism associated with blackness served to subjugate Africans to European control (Jordan, 1987). Consequently, in antebellum America, free black persons were in a state of constant anxiety about whether the color of their skin would identify them as property and thus subjugate them to slavery. Historically, "blackness" has also identified a person as belonging to African culture (Hacker, 1992). The customs and rituals of Africans were viewed as savage, heathen, uncivilized, and unproductive (Hacker, 1992)—the antithesis of European culture (Jordan, 1987).

These negative views affect African Americans on both the conscious and unconscious level (Akbar, 1984; Cross, 1978; Thomas & Thomas, 1971). Welsing (1991) and Wright (1982) suggest that people of European descent maintain a system of white supremacy through the subjugation of people of color, particularly black-skinned people. Wilson (1990) and Welsing (1991) state that white supremacy is sustained through the psychological oppression and domination of people of African descent. Hilliard and Middleton (1988) believe that such oppression requires the suppression of African culture and control of sociocultural institutions.

Abkar (see Kambon, 1992) developed psychological classifications to understand the self-negation of African Americans: the alien-self disorder (persons who deny the realities of racism and whose behaviors support white supremacy), the anti-self disorder (persons who are covertly and overtly hostile toward anything related to their African/African American heritage), and the self-destructive disorder (persons who are so overwhelmed in their victimization that they will do anything to survive).

Thomas (1970) and Cross (1971, 1978) developed models of psychological nigrescence and of acquiring a black identity by which African Americans might move from a state of negative self-perception and culture to a more healthy and positive attitude of racial and cultural identification.

Skin Color as a Psychological Concern

In my experience as a practitioner with African American clients, I have observed that skin-color concerns, both conscious and unconscious, affect mental health. In fact, for some child clients, skin color is a factor in their diagnosis of attention-deficit disorders, conduct disorders, and behavioral disorders. According to Porter (1991), children of African descent are excluded or included in social activities on the basis of their skin shade. An extremely dark or light-skinned child might be excluded from peer activities or teased by his or her African American peers, causing the child to feel isolated and abandoned. Moreover, African American children might be excluded from activities or teased by white peers regardless of the shade of their skin.

Both black and white teachers may react negatively to children by reason of their skin color. Fair-skinned children with a narrow nose and curly or straight hair may be preferred over children with a broad nose and kinky hair. Cultural assumptions suggest that fair-skinned children are more intelligent, well-mannered, and hygienic than are dark-skinned children, who are considered more likely to have few intellectual abilities and to be rude and unhygienic. Such prejudices are incorporated into the psyche of the child and are manifested as dysfunctional behaviors in adults.

Case Illustrations

Case One

A middle-aged woman with almond-colored skin entered therapy with feelings of inadequacy and anxiety. She stated that she tended to daydream a lot since childhood. She conveyed suspicions of both black and white people

and felt disconnected from her family, except for her father whom she admired and trusted. She stated that as a child she felt that her mother liked her least of the five siblings. Her mother made her feel dumb and "different." The mother also seemed to resent the father. The woman claimed that she hated her mother for treating her this way and for reacting negatively toward her father.

In exploring issues of skin color, the woman recalled that her mother was very fair skinned and that her father, like herself, was almond colored. Her mother's family resented the fact that her mother had married a man with skin darker than hers. The client thought her mother believed she never obtained the social status she sought because her husband was dark skinned, despite the fact that her husband provided financially for the family and was active in the community. The woman also recalled that her maternal grandmother treated her as intellectually and socially inferior to her lighter-skinned brothers and sisters.

The dynamics of oppression and racism were explored in therapy, which helped the client understand the reactions of her mother and maternal grandmother. Through the exploration of racism and its effect on family dynamics, the woman's sense of self-worth increased, and she subsequently felt less isolated from people of African ancestry. She began to participate in African- and African American-oriented activities and organizations. Rather than hate her mother and grandmother, the client pitied them, perceiving them as victims of white-supremacy attitudes (Bell, 1992).

Case Two

A middle-aged, professional, fair-skinned African American male entered therapy at the request of his girl friend. He stated that his girl friend thought that he was sabotaging their relationship. He agreed with her but was confused about the reasons for his behavior. He said that such behavior was a pattern in his relationships with women.

In exploring issues of culture and race, I asked him to describe his mother, whom he described as a controlling person who was very proper, fair skinned, and not particularly attracted to darker-skinned persons. He stated that he was attracted to two categories of women. He liked light-skinned "attractive and intelligent" women whom he "could bring home to Mama." However, if a woman from this category became attracted to him and they entered into a meaningful relationship, he would begin to complain about some aspect of her personality or character, thus ensuring the dissolution of the relationship. He explained that although he was sexually attracted to these women initially, he tended to lose interest and begin complaining about some aspect of their sexual relationship. The other category of women to whom he was attracted were intelligent, "hip," darker-skinned women, women whom he "could not bring home to Mama." He was sexually attracted to these women and was not critical of their personality or character.

The client recognized that light-skinned women represented his mother. He tended to berate light-skinned girl friends because he felt unable to confront his mother about his feelings relating to mate selection. In therapy, he recognized that his relationships with darker-skinned women probably represented his true choice in women and that these relationships were psychologically healthy. He began to understand that color variation is an attribute of people of African ancestry and that it becomes a problem only when it is used as a yardstick to measure the worth of another person. The client acknowledged that he held negative perceptions about darker-skinned women that his mother had instilled in him during his developmental years. He also acknowledged that such perceptions were not based on reality but were emotionally based beliefs. The client left therapy with a frame of reference from which he could observe and analyze his thoughts and behaviors. He felt better able to make choices based upon his on preferences.

Treatment Interventions

The therapist's use of self can be an extremely effective therapeutic tool. In therapy sessions, I refer to my own skin color as a way of giving permission to the client to explore the issue of skin color and as a means for comparison and self-disclosure regarding incidents in my own life (Nielsen, 1980). Such self-disclosure helps to establish rapport with the client as well as validates issues of race and culture. My comfort with African American culture and my skin color serves as a positive reference for the client and helps validate clients' own value systems.

Many clients of African descent have a strong religious orientation (Boyd-Franklin, 1989; Mbiti, 1970; Washington, 1974). With religiously oriented clients, I explore the African concept that the material or physical universe is merely a reflection of the characteristics and attributes of the creative force (Mbiti, 1970). Skin color of African Americans comes in various hues, all of which reflect the infinite possibilities of creation. The statement "God don't make ugly" has a deep spiritual meaning for religious clients and can help clients understand that the value placed on skin color has a human, not divine, origin. Religiously oriented African Americans often respond well to the following inference: If black is ugly, then the Creator made a mistake, but because God can make no mistakes, color prejudice must be a human concept. Reference to God in therapy is useful because it reflects the values and life concerns for many African Americans (Franklin, 1993). It allows clients to perceive themselves as beautiful and full of potential as individuals and as members of their racial and cultural group (Lovinger, 1979).

Lambo (1974) contended that effective intervention must be based upon a correct understanding of the individual's cultural issues. In therapy, I explore blaming-the-victim issues (Ryan, 1976) as part of an oppressive and exploitative cultural paradigm. With clients, I explore how the concept of white supremacy uses this paradigm to alienate African Americans from their racial and cultural heritage. We explore how alienation causes individuals to reject that which is culturally or racially familiar and to accept and honor foreign ideas, values, and behaviors. I assist the client in understanding that culture has a significant function in the psychological development and maintenance of a cohesive self (Gehrie, 1979).

I use role playing and mirroring to help clients understand that rejection of black skin represents a rejection of self, family, and heritage. Unconsciously, African Americans who reject members of their own race assume the attitudes, values, and behaviors of the oppressor and thereby engage in the destruction of African Americans. Negative racial attitudes can result in symptoms of alcoholism, drug abuse, violence, suicide, and genocide. When the psychological negation of self as it relates to racial oppression is brought to the conscious level (Welsing 1991; Wilson, 1992), clients begin to understand their individual and group anxiety, depression, and anger. They begin to recognize themselves as victims, which provides them with the impetus to investigate their African history and culture. They are able to forgive other African Americans who have reacted to their blackness because they understand that they, too, are victims. Acceptance of skin color can lead to empowerment of self and community.

Therapeutic Insights

African Americans' relationship with the world is affected by their skin color. Despite the fact that this phenomenon is rooted in white supremacy, few practitioners address racial factors (Foley, 1975) such as skin color (Hall, 1992) in therapy. The healing/treatment needs to be rooted in the appreciation of the beauty and positive attributes of African culture. Therefore, African Americans benefit from working with African American professionals who hold African American and African culture in high regard (McGee & Clark, 1974).

Although skin color may play a significant role in the dynamics and the genesis of issues that African Americans bring into the psychotherapeutic process, therapists should not assume that they understand the role skin color plays in clients' lives but rather should explore these issues with them. Skin color can be perceived as a positive dynamic in the clients' lives as well as a negative factor. Some individuals and families view their blackness as a badge of honor.

In my clinical experience, clients often initially say that skin color does not affect the presenting problem, then return to this issue in later sessions. This issue needs to be moved from the unconscious to the conscious mind in order to begin the healing process; otherwise, it will influence thought and behaviors in irrational and nonproductive ways.

Therapists need to raise this issue because many clients are not aware of how this issue affects their life. Some clients are ashamed of their skin color or do not think other people react to this issue the same way as they do or believe that the issue of skin color is too trivial and mundane to mention. Moreover, if the therapist raises the issue, he or she gives the client permission to explore what might be perceived as a therapeutic taboo or racial secret (Boyd-Franklin, 1989).

Practice Implications

Skin color is an issue for various cultures (Telles, 1992) that have an African heritage, such as Puerto Rican, Cuban, Caribbean (Spencer-Strachan, 1992), and many Central and South American cultures. St. Julian (1977) stated that the issue of color was so deeply rooted in her family of origin that family members refused to identify themselves as being of African descent or black skinned and denied their African racial and cultural heritage by calling themselves mulattoes. Alvarez (1993) contended that denial of African heritage was deeply rooted in her Dominican Republic heritage. Nevertheless, at the unconscious level skin color influences social interactions and perceptions of self-worth and the worth of others; it has a profound effect on behavior and may even influence choice of marriage partner.

The issue of skin color needs to be explored from both the oppressed African perspective and the oppressor European perspective. Also, because African Americans' relationships to one another are paradoxical, treatment will also be paradoxical. Just as skin color can provoke negative reactions, it also has healing potential.

Practitioners can become knowledgeable about the dynamics of skin color in the lives of African Americans by reviewing scholarly works published by community-based publishers such as Third World Press and Afrikan World InfoSystems, reading literary works by African American authors, and exploring this issue with African American clinicians. Schools of social work need to train social workers who are knowledgeable and skilled in providing culturally competent services to African Americans. Schools need to develop mental health models that consider the peculiarities of race and culture. Moreover, educators will be more effective if they have experience providing services to African American clients from a racial and cultural perspective.

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