Structural Colorism: Illuminating the Shadow of Structural Racism and Its Malcontents

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If it was so honorable and glorious to be black, why was it the yellow-skinned among us had so much prestige? - Zora Neal Hurston

Colorism—in my definition, [it is the] prejudicial or preferential treatment of same-race people based solely on their color. For colorism—like colonialism, sexism, and racism—impedes us ~ Alice Walker

Colorism as The Doppelganger of Racism

On May 25th, 2020, in Minneapolis, Minnesota, George Floyd was violently subdued by police officers after an arrest for allegedly trying to use a counterfeit bill. For a total of 8 minutes and 46 seconds, the black man was continuously restrained with a police officers’ knee firmly planted on his neck despite his desperate pleas that he could not breathe. He was essentially murdered on camera, with footage that the entire world would eventually see. Given the American legacy of brutal police killings within the past 40 years and mass lynchings for several hundred years, it is inarguable that George Floyd’s death was racially-motivated.

But we might pause to ask the question: Was it because he was a dark-skinned Black man? What if George Floyd had been a light-skinned Black man, with a skin tone consonant to the retired Navy Seal David Goggins, or the American Fashion Model Jeremy Meeks, or even our 44th U.S. President, Barack Obama? Would the probability of being brutally murdered in the streets while Black be greater for a dark-skinned George Floyd versus a hypothetical light-skinned one?

Within the past decade or more, there is some evidence to suggest that the probability of being murdered while Black or the probability of being unemployed while Black or the probability of developing psychosis while Black may be mediated by the shade of one’s skin.

Structural Racism vs Structural Colorism

For Americans, racism is a well-known, oft-banded about word. However, it’s definition is often misunderstood and misconstrued. According to Shirley Chisholm: “Racism is so universal in this country, so widespread, and deep-seated, that it is invisible because it is so normal”.

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- **Structural racism** – racism involving interconnected institutions that reinforce discriminatory beliefs, values, and distribution of resources amongst racial minorities,
- **Institutional racism** – racism that occurs at an institutional and/or organizational level and results in differential treatment of marginalized racialized groups,
- **Interpersonal racism** – racism that involves intentional and unintentional discriminatory acts based on prejudice of racial groups that occurs between people,
- **Cultural racism** – racism instilled by the imagery, symbols, and unstated assumptions of a greater society, and
- **Internalized racism** – racism that manifests within oneself and imbues a sense of racial superiority or inferiority.

Yet, what is even less well-known, perceived, or appreciated, is the shadow of racism – or colorism.
Structural Colorism in Contemporary Life

According to James Baldwin, “History is not the past. It is the present. We carry our history with us. We are our history. If we pretend otherwise, we are literally criminals.”

This quote is particularly apropos not only for the legacy of racism in American society, but also the heritage of colorism as well. And while certain manifestations of overt racism are illegal, socially unacceptable, and morally and ethically repugnant, colorism does not consistently elicit the knee-jerk derision and contempt that racism does. From depictions in the movies The Color Purple, Precious, Beloved as well as Netflix’s show Self-Made: Inspired by the Life of CJ Madam Walker, the narrative of colorism is ensconced in American cinematics, and is only intermittently controversial, as in the white-washing of Beyonce’s Wax statue. For instance, learning that Black Americans have disproportionately higher rates of police brutalization and homicide, mass incarceration, death row sentencing, unemployment, maternal and infant mortality, virulent prostate and breast cancer, exposure to teratogens and carcinogens, elementary school detentions, suspensions, and expulsions, and poverty compared to White Americans will likely cause the average person to flinch if not outright shudder.

But what about the historic election of Barack Obama as the 44th President of the United States? Or the momentous election of Madame Kamala Harris as the first African American woman to the U.S. Vice Presidency? Or Cory Booker to the U.S. Senate, or Deval Patrick to the governorship of Massachusetts? Are these not exemplars of Black Excellence triumphing over any residue of racism left clinging to American society? Do we now consider them to be the paragons of Black Success that all Black children can now aspire to? And more critically – aren’t these the elements of the potion to assuage White Guilt, or ushers to the egalitarian promise that has eluded America for so long?

Although it is arguable that these political and individual victories may leave a dent on structural racism in American society, it is nonetheless a far cry from a nail in the coffin of racism. In fact, if we look closely, it may in fact be a Trojan horse for racism’s shadow cousin – colorism. For when you scrutinize these Black Successes and many others, a predominant swathe of them are masterstrokes for light-skinned Black Americans. Would a darker-skinned individual have had the same probability of becoming President or Vice President?

As it turns out, there is growing scholarship suggesting that Black colorism is alive and well, and actually quite similar to, if not a contemporary replica of slavery times. Some research has shown that lighter-skinned Black Americans are more advantaged than darker-skinned Black Americans in obtaining higher educational attainment, accessing gainful employment, amassing greater social and economic resources, obtaining higher socioeconomic status and occupational prestige, suffering less punitive consequences in the criminal justice system, and being perceived as more attractive, intelligent, and moral. In 2015, the National Survey of American Life found that darker-completed African Americans have higher odds of having increased rates of systolic and diastolic hypertension compared to lighter-completed African Americans. From an intersectional perspective, dark-skinned gay/bisexual Black men have reported greater experiences of racially targeted homophobia and resultant anxiety, stress, and depression compared to light-skinned gay/bisexual Black men.

Similarly, some studies have demonstrated that dark-skinned Black women report overall lower self-esteem than lighter-skinned Black women. Studies have shown that women who are darker-skinned Black tend to have delayed prenatal care, which may result in higher infant mortality and maternal mortality, compared to lighter-skinned Black individuals. Additionally, dark-skinned Black women self-report worse overall health outcomes than light-skin Black women, and this reporting persists across early adulthood and mid-life. Furthermore, shade of black skin tone has even been shown to change the odds of having a lifetime psychotic experience: dark-skinned Black Americans have higher odds for developing and/or being diagnosed with psychosis than light-skinned Black Americans.

And while colorism is a global phenomenon—with footprints on various Asian and Latinx groups—its pervasiveness is greater in multiracial and multiethnic societies such as the U.S., particularly amongst Black Americans. Indeed, in American society, Black colorism has roots in slavery, in which Black Americans were categorized based on their skin tones and line of work, as dark individuals were often referred to as “field negroes” and light individuals were frequently denoted as “house negroes.” While lighter-skinned house negroes had advantages to more easily obtain education, property, and even freedom from slavery, darker-skinned field negroes were often confined to the cotton fields, denied education, better housing, or manumission from slavery.

Future Research and Policy Considerations for Structural Colorism

Admittedly, the research for structural Black colorism – or the differential impact of societal, institutional, and organizational policies and practices on the lives of lighter-skinned Black Americans versus darker-skinned Black Americans – is still meager and inconclusive compared to the extant bevy of research for structural racism on the same population. And while this article exclusively brings structural colorism for Black Americans into sharp relief, there is still the acknowledgment that structural colorism is present in Latinx, Asian, and other racial minority communities in America and around the world; these forms of colorism are just as worthy of further deconstruction and demolition.
Regardless of geographical location, however, there is ample opportunity for future research in structural colorism as well as the development of policies that directly address the deleterious effects of colorism. These possibilities are delineated below:

An intentional, conscientious, and wider research focus on structural colorism must commence. This focus is not meant to distract from or undermine the focus on structural racism or even work in intersectionality. Instead, it is to reveal what structural racism cannot elucidate: that Black Americans are not monolithic and have heterogeneous experiences in which particular skin tone plays a role, in everything from their educational attainments to their life expectancy.

- It is important to note that light-skinned and dark-skinned individuals can likely be victims of both structural racism and structural colorism, at the same time or at different times. Admittedly, distinguishing when and how structural colorism operates – in comparison to structural racism – may be empirically difficult.

- How structural colorism affects a myriad of health outcomes for dark-skinned versus light-skinned Black Americans is herculean. Existing public health literature has examined differences in hypertension, prenatal care, and mental health. However, there is room to discern whether disparities exist in rates of cardiovascular disease, cancer mortality, sexual and reproductive health, and much more.

- This article admittedly focuses on the traditional conceptualization of colorism. However, there are more nuanced forms of Black colorism, as interactions not just between White-Black individuals, but also amongst Black individuals. Thus, research must not merely discern structural colorism as it is typically understood. Rather, research must also elucidate reverse colorism, in which lighter-skinned Black Americans may experience prejudice, discrimination, and poorer outcomes, health-related or otherwise, relative to dark-skinned Black Americans.

- Research methodologies for structural colorism appear to be in their infancy, as skin tone is often utilized as a proxy for colorism, and self-reported skin tone or measurements of skin tone (based off a person's inner arm) are established indicators. However, colorism can be measured not just in terms of one’s shade, but also in a feature-based (e.g., hair texture) or more composite-based way (e.g., skin tone plus hair texture plus nose and lip width). These differing methodologies of skin tone or other colorist categorizations may impact what health outcomes are revealed in the research.

- Conducting research on the causal mediators along the pathway from structural colorism to poor health outcomes is critical. Many studies already exist that point to discrimination and stress as mediators of the health effects of racism via increased hypervigilance and the deterioration of multiple physiological systems; dysregulation of cortisol and greater oxidative stress; increased allostatic load and inflammation; shorter telomere length; coronary artery calcification; induction of negative emotional states; unhealthy coping behaviors; and lack of adherence to medical regimens. These mechanistic pathways may be similar for structural colorism on health outcomes.

- Beyond public health outcomes, structural colorism needs to be further researched in employment; education; neighborhood segregation and housing; psychosocial trauma; environmental and occupational inequities; state-sanctioned violence and incarceration; political exclusion; and stereotype threats. The pervasiveness of the colorism problem has yet to be fully appreciated empirically.

- Greater scrutiny of the nominal “diversity and inclusion efforts” of corporate, educational, and other societal institutions can occur with a structural colorism lens. For instance, a higher education institution may claim it has a reasonable representation of Black individuals; however, if a greater number of these individuals are lighter-complected than darker-complected, then that institution, inadvertently or not, is guilty of structural colorism. By using a structural colorism lens, these institutions can be held accountable in their diversity recruitment and retention practices. If organizations and institutions had been merely examined by the microscope of structural racism, they would have had the illusion of appropriate diversity.

To quote social justice guru Dr. Nancy Krieger and intentionally replace her use of the word “discrimination” with the phrase “structural colorism”:

“The purpose of studying the health consequences of [structural colorism] is not to prove that oppression is ‘bad’ because it harms health. Unjustly denying people fair treatment...is, by definition, wrong—regardless of effects on health. Rather, the rationale for studying [structural colorism] and health...is to render an accounting of who and what drives population patterns of health and health inequities and to generate knowledge useful for guiding policies and actions to prevent and rectify harm and advance health equity.”

Inspired by Kreiger’s wisdom, we must include tools to dismantle structural colorism in our armamentarium. For the sake of health equity and social justice in all walks of life, we mustn’t continue to ignore colorism.
References


