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Skin tone bias among African Americans: Antecedents and consequences across the life span



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 22 July 2014

Revised 8 March 2016

Available online 28 March 2016

Keywords:

Racial discrimination

Skin tone

African Americans

Colorism

ABSTRACT

This article is a developmental review of research on skin tone bias and its consequences for African Americans. In the first section of the paper, we summarize research findings on skin tone attitudes, preferences, and stereotypes from childhood through adulthood. Next we summarize literature regarding African Americans as the target of skin tone bias. This section is organized in terms of individual and contextual factors that shape whether and how skin tone bias occurs; factors that moderate the target's reaction to such bias; and consequences of bias, including psychosocial and health outcomes, economic and educational disparities, and repercussions within the legal system. We conclude by discussing limitations of the extant research.

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In a society where racism is still common, skin tone is a visible cue that activates culturally embedded prejudices and stereotypes that may lead to race-based discrimination. This review summarizes research on skin tone bias toward African Americans, filling a gap in the existing literature by considering skin tone bias both from the perspective of the perceiver and the target; by examining age differences in effects; and by delineating antecedents, moderators, and consequences that shape the experiences of skin tone bias. We begin by discussing a few lexical and methodological considerations, then review empirical findings (mostly 1990 to present) on skin tone attitudes, preferences, and stereotypes during childhood, adolescence, and adulthood from the perspective of the perceiver.

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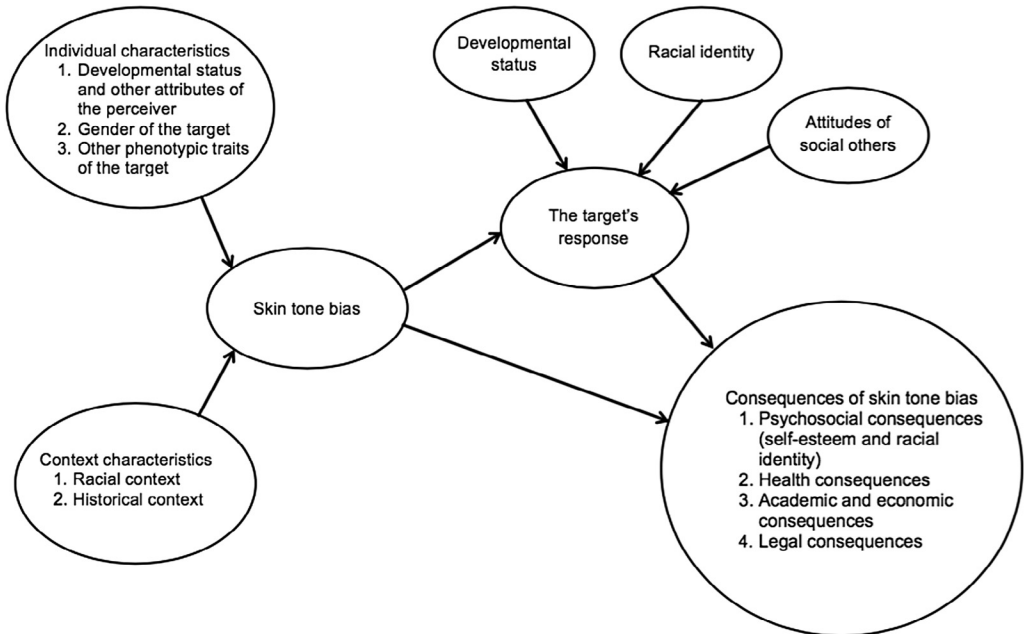


Fig. 1. Antecedents leading to the probability of skin tone bias, factors shaping the target's response, and consequences of skin tone bias.

Our review of skin tone bias from the perspective of the target is organized through a schema that distinguishes among antecedents of skin tone bias, factors that moderate its impact, and the consequences of skin tone bias for African American children, adolescents, and adults (see Fig. 1). As we describe in detail below, antecedents are characteristics of the individual and context that influence whether and how skin tone bias will occur. Moderators shape the individual's reaction to skin tone bias, and consequences are noted in psychosocial, health, educational, economic, and legal domains. Before beginning the literature review, we address terms used in this research domain.

Terminology used in the skin tone bias literature

A variety of labels have been used to explain the tendency for individuals to attend to different shades of skin tone. Some scholars refer to this phenomenon as *colorstruck* or *colorism*, both reflecting the privileging of lighter skin over darker skin (Keith, 2009; Russell, Wilson, & Hall, 2013). The term *racial phenotypicality bias* has been used to refer to the variety of physical cues (i.e., including not only skin tone but also characteristics such as hair texture and shape of nose and lips) that lead to bias (Maddox, 2004). Some researchers have used the term *color consciousness* to refer to how African Americans differentially attend to and respond to shades of Black skin tones (Breland, 1998). Lastly, the term *skin tone bias* denotes a “general, affect driven preference or dislike for African Americans with specific skin tones or as stereotypes of individuals possessing light or dark skin” (Brown, Ward, Lightbourn, & Jackson, 1998, p. 55). The term *skin tone bias* is the preferred term for the purposes of this review, encompassing a broad spectrum of bias including preferences, prejudice, stereotyping, and discrimination, incorporating both the positive and negative effects of having dark or light skin.

Although there is substantial evidence of negative bias toward darker skin tones, scholars have argued that – particularly within the African American community – light-skinned African Americans also suffer bias (e.g., Hall, 1992; Wade, 1996). If a light skin tone is perceived as too close to being White,

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