

Colorism within the Black Community and Health Disparities

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INTRODUCTION

Research has consistently shown that there are clear health disparities across different racial groups and different socioeconomic statuses (SES). For instance, in the United States, black people have higher rates of hypertension than white people, and black women have higher instances of adverse birth outcomes than white women (Adler and Rehkopf, 2008). Furthermore, individuals lower on the SES ladder have overall poorer health outcomes compared to individuals who are higher on the SES ladder, and higher income, as well as attainment of higher education, is more strongly associated with better health outcomes. For example, black people tend to exist at the lower end of the SES ladder at a higher rate compared to white people, who tend to exist at the top of the ladder at a disproportionately higher rate. However, although the trends are consistent among different studies, not much academic literature has focused on if these trends persist within racial groups themselves – this would be otherwise known as colorism.

It is clear that those who are closer to the top of the SES ladder (who are disproportionately white) benefit from social stratification in comparison to their lower SES counterparts (who are disproportionately black), but do people who are of a

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lighter skin complexion benefit more compared to their darker-skinned counterparts? This research question is important to inquire about as mixed-race relationships become more common and less stigmatized in our society, resulting in lighter-skinned people from black-white relationships. The problems are clear when discussing trends across racial groups. On the other hand, a less comparable amount of academic literature has focused on health disparities that occur within racial groups themselves. Does the same social stratification exist because of skin tone? If so, to what extent does it play, and how much of an effect does it have on the health and wellbeing of dark-skinned black people? These are questions that this paper aims to answer through the review of literature regarding colorism and health disparities.

The subject of this paper is the role of colorism in relative health risks when comparing black people with lighter and darker skin. This will be accomplished by first explaining the significance and evidence of colorism in everyday life, and then hypothesizing how colorism impacts health disparities within racial groups by pulling evidence from existing literature.

BACKGROUND / SIGNIFICANCE

There is a lack of academic literature that researches colorism's impact on health disparities within racial groups. Therefore, a review of systemic observations of colorism in general is required to give a background of its significance and its potential impact on health disparities.

Colorism is prejudice or discrimination that favors people with lighter skin over those with darker skin, typically among people of the same ethnic or racial group (Merriam-Webster). Colorism is present in many cultures throughout the world, and across all continents. When speaking of colorism's roots in

the African American community of the United States in particular, its origin can be traced all the way back to the 17th century. During slavery, slaves with lighter skin were treated better than their darker-skinned counterparts, who were subjected to harsh, field-related tasks by their masters (Reuter, 1918). This was because light-skinned slaves were often the result of slave rape (between a white master and a black slave) and were favored by slave owners who were their biological parents. Since light-skinned slaves worked in the house instead of in the fields, they were given a better chance at learning how to read, write, and learn different trade skills. When society progressed toward more abolitionist views, most freed slaves were light-skinned and mixed-race black people. Dark-skinned black people made up the majority of those still enslaved.

Even after the abolition of slavery, the social, educational, and economical head start that light-skinned black people already achieved in society put them ahead in comparison to other black people (Ellis, 2015). Societal practices like the “Brown Paper Bag Test” continued to put light-skinned black people at an advantage and their dark-skinned counterparts at a disadvantage. This trend continued throughout the Civil Rights Movement where light-skinned activists were taken more seriously than dark-skinned activists. For instance, 15-year-old Claudette Colvin refused to give up her seat on the bus to a white person nine months before Rosa Parks did in 1955 (NPR, 2019). However, civil rights leaders wanted Parks to be the face of the movement because she was older, respected, and light-skinned.

As the United States moves towards what many believe to be a progressive, “post-racial,” ethnically diverse society, interracial relationships have become more and more common. As a result, many offspring of these relationships tend to be lighter-skinned offspring of Black-White relationships, among

others. Although, the US has made great strides in the fight for racial equality, evidence suggests that present-day forms of colorism continue to exist and disadvantage those with darker skin. Light-skinned black people are viewed as more romantically desirable by members of the Black community and have become the standard definition of a black person to mainstream media (The Guardian, 2019b). For instance, an outsider to the United States would reasonably assume that all, if not most, Black people have light skin with straight or loosely curled hair. This is because of mainstream media's lack of representation of the Black diaspora, particularly dark-skinned Black people. Dark-skinned black women are commonly pushed to the side in the dating world and are often masculinized and negatively compared to light-skinned black women.

From a sociological viewpoint, the preferential treatment of light-skinned black people in comparison to dark-skinned black people has occurred for centuries. It has affected dark-skinned black people's ability to receive adequate education, professional opportunities, and proper media representation. What does the statistical data show for the instances and severity of colorism in society? Is there any data to support these observational claims? The short answer is yes; the long answer represents a much more complex and deep running form of racism that is present on a cultural, institutional, and internalized level within the United States.

Research has shown that the social stratification of skin color has manifested in schools. A study found that very dark-skinned boys and girls were 2.5 and 3 times more likely to be suspended compared to their very light-skinned counterparts, respectively (Data, 2019). It also acknowledged that an increased number of disciplinary infractions are closely linked to less academic success; and due to the long existing school-to-

prison pipeline, the study suggests that dark-skinned black students are more vulnerable to incarceration than light-skinned black students. When looking at the difference of judicial sentencing between light- and dark-skinned black people, research has shown that dark-skinned black women received sentences that were 12 percent longer than light-skinned black women (The Guardian, 2019a).

The Caste System also infiltrates the work environment and contemporary employment processes. Research has shown that the color-based stratification between light-skinned and dark-skinned black people is comparable to the racial stratification between black and white people separately. For instance, light-skinned black people were more likely to earn higher salaries and hold more prominent jobs than dark-skinned black people, even if they had similar resumes and previous job experiences (Matthew and Thomas, 2009). Dark-skinned black males were found to be at a disadvantage due to societal stigma that they are violent and aggressive. The study described both dark-skinned black men and women as dealing with “double” and “triple jeopardy situations,” respectively. This is due to dark-skinned black men’s race and skin tone, and dark-skinned black women’s race, skin tone, and gender, possibly putting them at automatic disadvantages in the job market.

The social stratification due to skin tone holds a strong juxtaposition to the social stratification due to race itself in the context of opportunity, education, representation, and criminality. However, does any evidence point to the idea that dark-skinned black people are more severely affected by health disparities than their light-skinned counterparts? Is there a relationship in terms of negative health outcomes as a function of whether you are a lighter- or darker-skinned black person? In addition to the social benefits that light-skinned people

receive, research has found that they also experience lower mortality rates and lower child mortality rates than dark-skinned black people (Ellis, 2015).

REVIEW

With respect to perceived discrimination, one study finds that dark-skinned black Americans are much more likely to report being discriminated against, and another study finds that light-skinned black people were only slightly less likely to report being discriminated against than dark-skinned black people (The Guardian, 2019a). This data (in the context of health disparities) accurately reflects the societal observations and statistical data from previous sociological research on colorism (Ellis 2015; Data 2019). Furthermore, other research suggests that chronic exposure to discrimination in general, rather than particularly traumatic episodes of “racial discrimination,” may be more important for explaining health outcomes. Chronic stressors are often stronger predictors of the onset and course of diseases than acute life events, and everyday discrimination measures have been found to be associated with subclinical cardiovascular disease and elevated C-reactive protein levels (Ellis, 2015). It also makes sense that tensions over color may be an important factor of stress within the black population, within families, among friends, and thus, may also help shape health outcomes within the black population. Analyses that only focus on inter-categorical comparisons and ethno-racial discrimination, however, are unable to tap into this potentially critical dimension of the black social experience.

Research has also found that gaps in SES among Blacks related to gradations of color were comparable to or even larger than gaps in SES between Blacks and whites, particularly in the

context of educational attainment (Ellis, 2015). This data (also in the context of health disparities) also mirrors the findings of previous sociological research (Adler & Rehkopf). Researchers propose that the ranges of different skin tones influence exposure to discrimination among Blacks, which may not only help explain health outcomes among Blacks, but also help explain why SES is stratified along a color continuum among Blacks. Nevertheless, while studies have drawn researchers' attention to these intra-racial differences in health, existing research often stops short of directly examining how or why these substantial intra-racial differences exist.

Research has shown that education, income, and race are clear indicators of social standing that impact one's susceptibility to health disparities. When combining the social-historical context of colorism with epidemiological data and self-reported health problems, it can be concluded that there is a skin tone-based stratification of black people in which those of darker skin experience worse health disparities than their light-skinned counterparts. The data proves enlightening because it can also be used to explain other findings within health disparities research and colorism that previously did not have a definitive explanation. For instance, a few studies found that skin tone is associated with hypertension (although the mechanisms linking skin tone to hypertension remain elusive) (Data, 2019). However, due to the link between perceived discrimination and allosteric load, it can be concluded that hypertension is just one of several negative health effects that dark-skinned black people experience when compared to their light-skinned counterparts.

CONCLUSION

When comparing the plights of light-skin vs dark-skin black people, the evidence is clear and compelling. These studies have demonstrated that we classify individuals into the superordinate categories of race to a high degree, and often automatically outside of our conscious awareness. These categories often trigger various stereotypes that shape and constrain social interactions in ways that produce and reproduce social inequalities. The results of this paper support previous findings of health disparities research that lighter-skinned black people are better off than their darker-skinned counterparts.

However, one main question remains to be addressed. Why does the skin tone stratification amongst the black community exist in the first place? Due to these findings, it is apparent that colorism manifests itself within the black community as a form of white supremacy that continues to inflict health disparities via institutional and internalized racism. Research has shown that colorism negatively affects dark-skinned black people's mental health, in addition to the other societal disadvantages that colorism hands them (The Guardian, 2019a). Consequently, the issue of colorism (and racism in general) as it relates to the social stratification and health disparities can only be eradicated if it is talked about. This next step for the future is one of the main ways that this issue can be addressed. Many of the thought processes that fuel colorism and racism are just ignorant thought processes that originate from long held prejudices that have continuously been promoted in our society. With enough communal unlearning and professional training, society can be one step closer to eliminating health disparities.

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