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Mr. Nelson Sociology Period 2

Sociology 101 Final Paper

Research Questions

For this project, I wanted to examine the social issue of race, particularly light skin vs. dark skin. To do this, I was guided by the following research questions:

Q1) How do beauty standards pertaining to skin color vary across cultures?

Q2) How do people from various social and cultural upbringings interpret the beauty standards they are subject to?

Q3) How does skin color affect self-perception and outsider’s perceptions?

Hypothesis

It was anticipated that non-Caucasians would prefer lighter skin while Caucasians would, ironically, prefer more tanned skin.

Methodology and Sample Group

I decided to conduct a qualitative study, consisting of purely interviews, because quantitative data on this topic could be found almost anywhere, given the age and prevalence of the race/skin color issue. I interviewed someone born and raised in another country, an adult who immigrated into the U.S. very early in life, an adolescent who immigrated into the U.S. early in life, a first-generation American, and a Caucasian person who was born and raised in America. This set of people allowed me to gain knowledge on perceptions of skin color from varied perspectives.

My Interview Questions

1. What does good skin mean to you?
2. How, in your opinion, did the media you were exposed to encourage people to be lighter or darker?
3. When you see someone pale, what assumptions do you automatically have about them? Darker skin?
4. How did your family talk about your skin?
5. How do you think skin color affects life in America in today?

Results and Analysis

The subject that was born and raised to adulthood in a foreign country (India) is a 78 year old grandmother, who has been in America for 40 years now. Her idea of good skin was soft, “natural-looking” skin. When asked what she meant by natural looking, she said that for south Asians, something brown, fair to white for Arabs, Hispanics, and Caucasians, and a darker brown for those from Jamaica, Africa, Haiti, the West Indies, etc. Her opinion on good skin was shared by every single one of those who were interviewed. She said that in her day, there were no television advertisements, but there was a general consensus that lighter skin would allow one to look and feel better, and would guarantee many marriage prospects. In her family, where she was one of 5 five children, her relatively fair skin color was often compared to those of her relatively darker siblings, and her parents let her leave the home because they believed her to be smarter and more likely to “be somebody”. Since seeking higher education in India, she states that all skin colors are acceptable and beautiful. However, there are still some minor stereotypes she internally fights so as to guarantee that she treats everyone equally. She felt that white people generally lead a better life; that they were smart, but did not work hard. She noted that the most of the white people she saw were on TV, and many of those she met in person or heard about were racist. They had it made, and many in this country came from old money when she first immigrated here. She felt that those with darker skin were also smart, and that they were also very hardworking. However, she felt that they were poor and unfortunate in many ways, and that they had to suffer and go further to achieve good things. She feels that there is a lot of institutional racism, but now it is a little better. Its less about skin color and more about presentation and professionalism, although people of color are more likely to not fit this bill. She stated that “each race has its angels and devils”.

One who might agree with her would be the adult who came here from India when he was 3, who said that “no matter where you go and who you meet, there are going to be good and bad people everywhere”. He felt that in many ways, the media always propagated the idea that lighter was better. On TV, you would only see fair models, and even in movies, the WASP stereotype was seen as ideal. Hi parents also encouraged this idea in many ways, even going so far as using peroxide to lighten his skin, saying “he’s too dark”. His mother and the other women in his life would cake themselves in makeup for much lighter skin tones, something he believes was rooted in a deep, subconscious self-hate. His idea of the light-skin vs. dark-skin concept was much more potent and raw. He said that those who were white seemed to have money, success, positions of power, and the like, without having to earn it through struggle. He claimed that the “White Man’s Burden” attitude permeated everything, and that he always felt that somehow white people in power where cooking up a cunning scheme to help themselves under the guise of benevolence, while those of darker skin tones felt inferior and intimidated. They came from cultures/situations where social Darwinism was the only form of survival. He said that they give off a carefree attitude and everyone thinks they’re on welfare, but they survived harsh growth, and take each day as it comes, because, for them, there is rarely any stability. He stated, “Minorities have a longer era of progression, but whites run everything. Lady Liberty, who is supposed to be a symbol of hope and the strength and progress, is a white lady. If people weren’t conquered physically, they were conquered financially, or they were slowly superseded. And the victor writes, or rewrites, history. Why do you think you see ancient Egyptians and Jesus and his disciples all pictured as white men?”

As for the adolescent who came to America from Guyana at a young age, she claimed that there were always ads and/or people encouraging the use of whitening creams, to be an ideal skin color. Someone with dark skin would find products with before and after pictures, and their skin tone was always the “before” picture, the “ugly” picture. White skin was a symbol of attractiveness and success. There is a general assumption that fairer people are more intelligent and less likely to commit crimes. It’s the opposite with those of darker skin tones. She received pressures from her family to lighten darker spots on her skin. She said that recently, there was a greater emphasis on equality among races, and that it was becoming more and more acceptable to be darker, and its doing wonders for those of minority populations whose parents were made to feel inferior for their appearances. She feels that if this attitude stretched over to include the scope of jobs and education alongside beauty, things would improve for people of color immensely.

For the first generation child, whose parents were born and raised in Bangladesh, she feels that in many ways, darker skin is still frowned upon. Television advertisements and magazine advertisements are always geared towards white people, and they are the people who usually star in advertisements, television, and movies (even when the settings in question have nothing to do with them). She said that pale people seem to be happier in life than their darker counterparts, and that in many ways they are a little more content with the state of their lives than those of darker skin tones. In her own family, relatives in this country, and abroad in Bangladesh make comments about how “black” she looks, even while she is only a shade or two darker than they are, and they mention that it will be hard for her to find a husband, as though her darker skin makes her undesirable and ugly. Because of this experience, she says that Europoean imperialism took over countries that had nothing to do with them and indoctrinated their beliefs so completely that hundreds of years later, the world is still skewed to their idea of beauty. She added that skin color can have a major impact on people, and especially now, with racial tension everywhere in the wake of the events that occurred at Ferguson, Missouri, people are rather vocal about the effects of skin color.

Finally, the born and raised American, who is Caucasian, contradicts the beauty standards mentioned above. She stated, “My family tells me that when I wear white that I should go put a shirt on and when I wear makeup even porcelain is too dark for my skin. They also tell me that on my 18th birthday that I should go get a spray tan. Most of what my family says to me is just jokes and they really haven't given me any advice.” She acknowledged that much of the media she was exposed to showcased lighter-skinned people, and that many of the darker skinned people she saw on TV were musicians/rappers, and they were either on TV advertising different products, or because of alleged crime. Being a person of a lighter skin color, she stated that many people assumed that she was rich and/or mentally unstable. She stated that she didn’t like to judge people of darker skin, but whenever she saw people behaving or speaking in a manner that suggested they grew up as savages, regardless of race, she thought less of them, and that she felt more anger towards people who were already boxed into that stereotype, because they were essentially fulfilling their own prophecies. She also expressed irritation at people being unnecessarily fearful of those with darker skin tones, saying, “the thing that bothers me most is how they clutch their purses or bags assuming the darker-skinned person is going to steal from them”. She felt that skin color affected job searches, and vividly recalls the many cries of outrage from white people across the nation upon Obama’s presidential win(s). She feels that skin color is not such a big deal anymore as it used to be, and that while there are people who haven’t caught up to the rest of post-racial America, the state of the race situation has improved.

There have been many studies regarding how people, even young children, perceived those with white/light skin to be better than those with darker skin. The most notable study was the Clark Doll Test (Explorable, n.d.). The study focused on stereotypes and self-perception and how children internalized and output these messages. Black children between the ages of 6 and 9 were given a white doll and a black doll and asked to answer questions and complete activities with these dolls. The study showed that children perceived the white doll to be smarter, prettier, and overall, better than the darker doll, which was perceived to be bad and ugly.

What many people seem to forget, or don’t even know , is that the continent of Africa alone is home to over 300 skin tones, and *that* paired with the various mixing among cultures that also have a wide variety of skin types have given rise to thousands of skin tones, with varieties of undertones and hues of their own. As stated by the Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History, and biology textbooks everywhere, melanin is the body’s natural UV protection, a brown pigment that is found in increasingly large percentages the closer a person is to the equator. Those with more melanin have darker skin, rarely get sunburned, and are less likely to suffer from skin cancers such as melanoma. Biologically, those with darker skin are biologically the best-adapted to life on earth, yet society has made it so that these people feel inferior to those of lighter pigmentation.

One theory as to why this may be, a reasonable theory shared among various cultures, is that the beauty standard of fairer skin being the better skin became increasingly popular and common as European nations began to imperialize the rest of the globe. The Europeans, who had lighter skin, were obviously wealthy, and they were more powerful than the darker-skinned natives they took over, who were often forced to toil the land or to wait on their new leaders. White skin became a symbol of wealth, power, and luxury, and given human nature, many tried to lighten their skin to give off the illusion of having these attributes.

This may have been acceptable long ago, but given science and common sense, such thinking is bigoted and irrational now. However, many of these pro-European concepts have been so deeply engrained in cultures that generation after generation, people are led to believe that lighter is better in nearly every conceivable way. Many are so unaware of this subconscious self-deprecation, and blindly tease, or look down on peers who may have darker skin. Currently, the converse has been occurring among white populations, who now believe that darker skin is healthier skin, which might be true, depending on where they reside. In recent times, especially, Caucasians have gone to great lengths to darken their skin, even to the point where they can overdo it and get cancer, hence the banning of tanning beds. Despite the logic of long-acknowledged scientific discoveries, things such as bleaching creams and self-tanners are still widely marketed and purchased, and many people are constantly pining over skin they never needed to have, which is telling of the irrationality of beauty standards in general.

References

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