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A Descriptive Analysis of Skin Color Bias in Puerto Rico: Ecological Applications to Practice

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Travel brochures to the island of Puerto Rico aptly profess the rich variation in skin color and other phenotypes among its people. Following acts of domination vis-a-vis the island's cultural mores, invading colonizers evolved a social hierarchy to discourage any notions of merit attributable to racial diversity. According to the data herewith, the presumption of a relationship between skin color and selected values for skin color ideals is plausible. Social work practitioners are then challenged to decipher the maze of racial traditions as pertains to discrimination. Doing so will enable an environment for knowledge based purely upon merit in order to resurrect indigenous knowledge about the biases of otherwise victim populations.

INTRODUCTION

Travel brochures to the island of Puerto Rico aptly profess the rich variation in skin color and other phenotypes among its people. Vacationing tourists are impressed by the seeming lack of discrimination and/or racism which residents proudly attest to. Unmentionable, however, is the bias against Puerto Ricans characterized by dark skin. The existence of such bias is invisible to the casual observer but is immune to dispute in the aftermath of racism and European colonization.

Discrimination on some basis is as old as civilization itself (Winston, 1998). However, in a practice context, its manifestation on the basis of skin color is all but oblivious to social workers. Furthermore, among Puerto Ricans, current forms of bias are the direct result of having been militarily "colonized" by Europeans from Spain and socially colonized by Euro-Americans from the

mainland (Delano-Buono, 1991). Following their various acts of domination vis-a-vis the island's cultural mores, invading colonizers evolved a social hierarchy to discourage any notions of merit attributable to racial diversity (Hall, 1992). The uppermost in status became those, whose heritage most approximates that of the light-skinned colonists and the least being an opposite extreme (Hall, 1994). In an effort to comply, Puerto Ricans had been imposed upon by a homogeneous racial system that is in many ways not only alien to Puerto Rico itself but, psychologically debilitating to its citizens. For such a heterogeneous group as they, the effort to maintain doctrines of racial purity did not evolve with the same vigor as was characteristic of the U.S. mainland. While racial discrimination is not totally irrelevant as a social phenomenon in Puerto Rico, by U.S. standards it is much less potent. In the absence of a virulent race tradition, bias has prevailed on the basis of skin color.

ECOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

Empirical research and practice methodologies that are grounded in the ecological perspective enable social workers to access the bio-psycho-social forces of the cultural milieu. Said perspective also allows for consideration of the interchange between various systems including familial, community and formal institutions. Such systems are germane to the function and life cycle of Puerto Ricans. Peters (1988) concluded that an ecological theoretical perspective enables the development of culture sensitive methodologies. Such methodologies allow for more relevant conjecture attributed to social phenomena. Enabled by relevant conjecture, said phenomena can then be assessed within its native life space. The outcome facilitates a conduit for more objective analysis of skin color bias. Thus the conceptual and theoretical frameworks suggested herewith are critical to interpretation of the communal milieu of Puerto Rican people.

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Much of the scholarly literature pertaining to skin color bias has focused upon African-Americans. Extended from colonization and various forms of domination, African-Americans have

been no less susceptible than Puerto Ricans to color issues within the group (Lakshmanasamy & Madheswaran, 1995). Their darkest skin has evolved a "master status." It differentiates them from the mainstream as an inferior element of the population (Gacia & Swenson, 1992; Herrnstein & Murray, 1994). So potent is this "master status" that it has recently served as grounds for litigation between African-Americans of light and dark skin color belonging to the same ethnic group (*Morrow vs IRS*, 1990; Hiskey, 1990). A resort to legal tactics is an indication that for some, skin color bias has been particularly painful. In the aftermath, African-Americans themselves develop a disdain for dark skin because the disdain is a by-product of colonization (Anderson, 1991; Martinez, 1993).

According to James Baldwin, the root of African-American difficulty is directly related to skin color (in Jones, 1966; Robinson & Ward, 1995). This would contradict much of the rhetoric of the sixties. But as Hall (1995) notes the issue of color bias was never resolved, merely relegated underground. Thus, a well-known phenomenon among dominated groups is a rejection of group membership (Rosenberg, 1979; Banerjee, 1985). Internalizing alien norms is but one manner of expressing such rejection. For example, African-American women characterized by Caucasian features have superior social status in their community regardless of occupational skill or intellect (Okazawa-Rey, Robinson, & Ward, 1987; Neal & Wilson, 1989). The prevailing biases approximate a hierarchy that is characteristic of all people of color including Puerto Ricans.

Skin color bias among Puerto Ricans exists because it is ubiquitous and historical. The longevity of its manifestation preceded the U.S. sovereignty. Hence, the once colonized forefathers of Nicaraguans considered skin color to have an influence upon the manner in which common folk interacted. Mestizos (the racially mixed) refer to the darker-skinned Costenos (persons of African descent) in derogatory terms (Lancaster, 1991). Among Cubans, the idealization of light skin has existed historically despite the attempts of Castro's Revolution to eliminate it. Status in Cuba is continually based upon gradations of skin color and effects all aspects of Cuban life covertly and overtly (Canizares, 1990).

Perhaps the most dramatic manifestation of skin color bias is referred to as "brown racism." According to Washington (1990), brown racism is perpetrated by Mestizos . . . against persons of African descent. It is a variation of bias that probably occurred as a result of colonization. The behaviors are obvious but seldom addressed given the superfluous characterization of racism as a black/white dichotomy.

Aware of racism in the U.S. Chicano(a)s adamantly reject darker-skinned people (Martinez, 1993). Data collected from Chicano(a)s, Spanish speaking Americans, and Euro-American subjects in recent decades have verified high rejection rates of dark-skinned African-Americans. That rejection is most prominent among Chicano(a)s residing in rural areas.

As expected, intermarriage represented the most dramatic display of bias. Attitude studies of Chicano(a)s in Bakersfield, Los Angeles, and San Antonio further confirm these findings, with all groups overwhelmingly opposing intermarriage (Dyer, Vedlitz & Worchel, 1989). In another study, scholars measured rejection rates of African-Americans in four categories—marriage, as neighbors, co-workers, and becoming citizens via naturalization. Euro-Americans rejected African-Americans for marriage 89%, Spanish speaking 62%, urban Chicano(a)s 59% and rural Chicano(a)s by 78%. As neighbors, African-Americans were rejected by Euro-Americans 50% of the time, by Spanish speaking 45%, by urban Chicano(a)s 43% and 71% of the time by rural Chicano(a)s. As co-workers Euro-Americans rejected African-Americans 21% of the time, Spanish speaking 8% of the time, urban Chicano(a)s 39%, and rural Chicano(a)s 70%. Lastly, African-Americans were rejected for becoming citizens via naturalization by Euro-Americans 5% of the time, by Spanish speaking 4% of the time, by urban Chicano(a)s 41% of the time and by rural Chicano(a)s 74%! Given the lack of any significant historical confrontations between Chicano(a)s and African-Americans, the rejection of African-Americans by Chicano(a)s is arguably bias introduced via European colonization (Stoddard, 1973).

The ignorance applicable to skin color bias is not surprising since the issue is frequently regarded as "taboo" (Russell, Wilson & Hall, 1992). Among Latinos the myth of racial indifference helps preserve "personalismo" (warmth, openness and personal

attentiveness). As a consequence, there is more celebration in social life and courtship among Puerto Ricans than among other Americans aside from a subtle but tenacious idealization of light skin. Despite the fact, research conducted as far back as 1949 suggested that although most Puerto Ricans denied the existence of bias, half felt it was better to have light skin regardless of racial heritage (Montalvo, 1994). No one felt it was better to be dark. The custom of entertaining dark-skinned relatives in the kitchen, much as servants, is a common notion and not unknown to Puerto Ricans who migrate to the U.S. mainland. Such notion implied that some among relatives are less preferred than others precipitating family disjuncture (Levine & Padilla, 1980).

The existence of bias among Puerto Ricans is emphatically validated by litigation. One of the first cases of skin color discrimination brought by Puerto Ricans was that of the dark-skinned Felix—plaintiff—versus the lighter-skinned Marquez—defendant. It was decided in 1981 by the U.S. District Court of the District of Columbia. Both plaintiff and defendant were employees of the Office of the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico in Washington, D.C. (OCPRW). The plaintiff alleges that the defendant did not promote her on the basis of skin color discrimination. At trial, the plaintiff introduced the personnel cards of twenty-eight of her former fellow employees. She testified that among them, only two were as dark or darker in color than she. All of the other employees in the office, according to the plaintiff, were light-skinned. Other highly credible evidence presented to the court suggested, however, that she might have been in error.

As per defendant, the plaintiff was not entitled to a promotion in grade by virtue of her position, her qualifications, her seniority, and/or her length of service. The evidence showed that her employer awarded promotions in grade based upon criteria that were neutral with respect to skin color. Employees whose color was as dark or darker than the plaintiff's were given promotions in grade, while many other employees who were lighter than same were given infrequent promotions, or no promotions at all. Similar neutrality with respect to skin color was evident in the promotions in grade among employees throughout the entire agency. Based upon the rules of legal proceeding, the OCPRW did not discriminate against the plaintiff on account of her color

in failing to recommend her for a promotion in grade. Thus, the court decided that the plaintiff was not promoted in grade for legitimate business reasons having nothing whatever to do with her skin color (*Felix v. Marquez*, 1981).

In a more recent case brought on the island of Puerto Rico, *Felero versus Stryker* was litigated in 1998 by the U.S. District Court of the District of Puerto Rico. Falero, the plaintiff is a dark-skinned male while Rigoberto, the corporation defendant is a light-skinned male. The plaintiff claims he was terminated from his job on the basis of having dark skin. The defendant contends that the plaintiff did not establish that he was replaced by someone not within the protected class. Defendant further stated that the plaintiff's job had not been filled by anyone but admits one of his areas of work was assigned to another employee. Thus, direct evidence of skin color discrimination was lacking.

A loss in litigation should not suggest skin color bias does not exist among Puerto Ricans. Indeed the accusation makes apparent existence of the issue. While the evidence in the aforementioned cases does not rise to the level of legal guilt they fit a pattern of bias little acknowledged in the social work literature. That bias should not be presumed peculiar to Puerto Ricans but is instead an unmentionable dynamic associated with the milieu of all oppressed people of color in America.

METHODOLOGY

Within their ecological environment permeated by discrimination, Puerto Ricans have been no less susceptible to that which approximates skin color bias. An effort to determine the existence of said bias among residents of Puerto Rico was attempted. Using a sample of college students at one private and two public institutions, the following null hypothesis was formulated to provide a context for investigating the problem: "There is no relationship between skin color and selected values for skin color ideals." The sample consisted of 187 participants conducted on the island nation during the 1997–1998 school year and selected from the registrar's roster. Respondents had a mean age of 20 years. A self-report instrument available in Spanish was utilized for measuring their skin color. Called the *Cutaneo-Chroma-Correlate*,

this instrument was developed and previously pilot tested by the researcher to assess the relationship between skin color and various aspects of bias vis-à-vis sections "A" "B" and "C" (Hall, 1990). Section "B" (of the CCC) was used in this paper to assess the respondent's personal values pertaining to skin color. In differentiating responses, a designation of lightest was noted as 5, light as 4, medium as 3, dark as 2, and darkest as 1 (table 1).

Table 1

Section B	(A)	(B)	(C)	(D)	(E)
	Lightest	Light	Medium	Dark	Darkest
	5	4	3	2	1

Directions: Section "B" consist of 15 items designed to collect data on selected personal values. Using the codes above express your preferences about Puerto Ricans by blackening in on the answer sheet the response which best describes your opinion. (A)-lightest, (B)-light, (C)-medium, (D)-dark, or (E)-darkest.

6. Pretty skin is
 7. The skin color of pretty women is
 8. The skin color of the man women like is
 9. I wish my skin color were
 10. The skin color of smart Puerto Ricans is
 11. The skin color of Puerto Ricans who are snobs is
 12. The skin color of Puerto Ricans who are kind is
 13. The skin color of my best friend is
 14. I want my child(ren)'s skin color to be
 15. My ideal spouse's skin color is
 16. The skin color of my family should be
 17. The skin color of my race (Puerto Rican) should be
 18. The skin color of Puerto Ricans who are physically strong is
 19. The skin color of Puerto Ricans who are dumb is
 20. The ideal skin color of my projected child(ren)'s spouse is
-

Table 2

Results

<i>Item</i>	<i>Response</i>					<i>N</i>	<i>MN</i>	<i>STD</i>
	<i>1</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>3</i>	<i>4</i>	<i>5</i>			
6	68.9%	11.3%	6.6%	6.6%	6.6%	187	1.71	1.24
7	14.2%	20.8%	19.8%	20.8%	24.5%	187	3.21	1.39
8	13.2%	22.6%	15.1%	19.8%	29.2%	187	3.29	1.43
9	5.7%	7.5%	5.7%	30.2%	50.9%	187	4.13	1.17
10	5.7%	2.8%	10.4%	34.0%	47.2%	187	4.14	1.09
11	9.4%	8.5%	14.2%	23.6%	44.3%	187	3.85	1.33
12	15.1%	3.8%	14.2%	22.6%	44.3%	187	3.77	1.44
13	2.8%	4.7%	8.5%	31.1%	52.8%	187	4.26	1.00
14	2.8%	8.5%	8.5%	27.4%	52.8%	187	4.19	1.09
15	1.9%	7.5%	8.5%	30.2%	51.9%	187	4.23	1.02
16	3.8%	2.8%	9.4%	31.1%	52.8%	187	4.26	1.01
17	15.1%	21.7%	12.3%	17.9%	33.0%	187	3.32	1.50
18	18.9%	17.9%	8.5%	17.0%	37.7%	187	3.37	1.58
19	40.6%	11.3%	5.7%	17.9%	24.5%	187	2.75	1.69
20	42.5%	10.4%	22.6%	17.9%	6.6%	187	2.36	1.36

SUMMARY OF RESULTS

As per item 6 most students (68.9%) responded "dark skin" when questioned about pretty skin. This was a contradiction to items 7 through 18. The largest response to said items was overwhelmingly "light skin" (7] 24.5%; 8] 29.2%; 9] 50.9%; 10] 47.2%; 11] 44.3%; 12] 44.3%; 13] 52.8%; 14] 52.8%; 15] 51.9%; 16] 52.8%; 17] 33.0%; 18] 37.7%). When questioned about the skin color of Puerto Ricans who are "dumb" respondents overwhelmingly replied "dark skin" (19] 40.6%). In glaring contrast the same students responded "dark skin" (20] 42.5%) when questioned about the projected ideal skin color of their children's spouse. Referring to the aforementioned descriptive data it would appear with some contradiction that light skin is ideally valued among respondents.

DISCUSSION

According to these data, the presumption of a relationship between skin color and selected values for skin color ideals is plausible. There are then implications of a bias pertaining to the perception of various skin colors in the milieu of the population questioned. These findings would appear to contradict—or at least challenge—the island presumption of group harmony and racial tolerance. It also implies a reflection of continuing and pervasive racist attitudes toward persons characterized by dark skin. It is a bias that can be described as a variant of racism exhibited by Euro-Americans toward people of color. In a nation where “whiteness” is ideal, light skin invariably represents the standard. The scores of Puerto Rican students, on section “B” of the CCC test, suggested their tendency to appreciate selected ideals in self and others on the basis of color preferences. Such appreciation could be used to assess status and social worth, thereby contributing to the perpetuation of bias in an otherwise tolerant environment.

Individual and group social work methods must reconsider the various cultural criteria of the Puerto Rican milieu. Students—Puerto Ricans and others—will then be better qualified to assess the personal values and sort out negative messages in the social environment that inhibit growth potential. This will enable the development of more conducive coping strategies and adaptational behaviors. Particular attention needs to be given to assisting dark-skinned Puerto Ricans, and all people of color to develop a broader range of ego protection mechanisms. Social work students must acquire the knowledge to construct a psychological safety zone for affected clients as they challenge the internalized color biases and projective identifications, especially those pertaining to the associations of dark skin with less attractiveness. Additionally, family and community projection processes regarding color bias must necessarily be explored as dark-skinned Puerto Ricans may need to mend emotional disconnects that weaken their systems of support. For Puerto Ricans, conjoint family therapy may be particularly effective in resolving skin color issues dependent upon the availability of extended family. If this proves a viable strategy those affected must have had a chance to explore some of the color biases in individual sessions.

An imperative conclusion from the ecological phenomenon of color bias is that in spite of a multitude of sociohistorical obstacles, many dark-skinned Puerto Ricans continue to thrive in a hostile social environment providing support to their children, families and communities. Yet, in spite of the stabilizing, powerful, and constructive influences that many dark-skinned Puerto Ricans have upon the various systems, routine micro and macro practice efforts largely deny and/or ignore the existence of color bias. There can then be little doubt that present social work strategies are unwittingly fueled by public perception that distorts a subtle but complex dynamic in the social milieu of Puerto Rican people.

Social work students and practitioners alike habitually consign error to the ecological significance of the impact of skin color upon families, groups and communities. Succinctly put genograms, sociograms and ecomaps too often reject the emotional consequence of skin color among Puerto Ricans and other people of color. Practitioners must comprehend the "taboo" nature of color bias to enable its consideration in treatment strategies. Seldom acknowledged is the impact of skin color bias upon an emotional system that exerts a powerful, but not always apparent, force upon the systemic or dyadic relationship systems.

With few exceptions, the practitioners' marginalization of skin color issues is, in part, a manifestation of skew and social work tradition, particularly in the most widely read scholarly literature. Contrary to commonly held opinions, not all Puerto Ricans value diversity and adhere to racial tolerance. As the data suggests skin color for Puerto Ricans potentially functions as an impediment to their group cohesion and psychological well-being. The social work student and professional needs to acknowledge this issue in education and practice in order to be more effective in the field. Social work agencies must also reframe their approach to practice with people of color to go beyond racism so that they may facilitate healthy, functional behavior in their clientele population.

CONCLUSION

The postmodernist movement holds potential for rescuing social workers from the classic rigidity of the social science academy

(Capra, 1988). It will enable the incorporation and validation of new information. To the contrary maintenance of classic theory and canonization of same discourages evolution and new ways of thinking. The traditions of intraprofessional social work organizations, unlike the hard sciences too often defer to individual stature or organizational reference for the validation of theoretical information. As a result, all of social science has incorrectly viewed race as the primary basis of bias not relevant to people of color, including Puerto Ricans, save for victimization. In fact skin color bias is an ecological reality in the social milieu of Puerto Ricans and will become increasingly so in the new millennium. Any professional oversight is especially regrettable for dark-skinned Puerto Ricans and other people of color similarly characterized. What's more in the annals of history exist documentation that suggests social action—a mainstay of the social work ethos—precedes the resurrection of subjugated knowledge i.e. skin color bias (Foucault, 1980). Social work practitioners are then challenged to decipher the maze of tradition and create a suitable environment for knowledge based purely upon merit in order to resurrect indigenous knowledge about the biases of otherwise victim populations.

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