Skin Tone Bias: Understanding Links Between Perceived Skin Tone and Personal Attributes In African American and Latino Young Adults

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Abstract

People are largely unaware of their implicit biases and often act upon them, particularly when it comes to race (Daryl, Payne, and Knobe, 2010). Skin tone, a phenotypic characteristic that signals race, also plays an important role in implicit bias. Little, however, is known about how perceived skin tone relates to a range of positive and negative personal attributes. The current study examines whether an interviewer evaluates personal attributes of African American and Latino young adults differently based on their perception of the participant’s skin tone. We hypothesize that an interviewer will assign lighter skin individuals more positive attributes compared to darker skin individuals.

Using data from the Health and Relationships During College (HRDC) study, African American (n = 92) and Latino (n = 53) young adults were recruited to participate in an initial assessment and have their photograph taken. An African American independent rater used these photographs and assessed their perceptions of the participants’ skin tone (very light, light, medium, medium dark or dark) and coded participants on positive (athletic, attractive, educated, motivated, superior and wealthy) and negative (bad attitude, criminal, dirty/smelly, inferior, lazy, ostentatious, poor, sexually aggressive, tough/aggressive, unattractive, uneducated and unintelligent) personal attributes. The response choices for attributes ranged from 1 low degree to 7 high degree.

Simple linear regressions were conducted. A majority of African Americans were identified as medium light skin tone. Among Latinos, a majority of participants were coded as having a very light skin tone and no students were coded as medium dark or dark.

Skin tone was related to several attributes for African American participants; negative attributes were associated with darker skin tone, whereas positive attributes were associated with lighter skin tone. Latino participants had only one attribute, rhythmic, positively associated with their skin tone. This may be because Latinos in our study had lighter skin compared to African Americans.

Introduction

- Stereotyping and prejudice stemming from race-based discrimination, often triggered by an individual’s skin tone, continues to be part of American culture (Adams, Kurtz-Costes & Hoffman).
- Skin tone bias, or colorism, is reacting or behaving negatively towards an individual of a certain racial category based on the lightness or darkness of their skin tone, with the added focus on physical characteristics (Madden & Gray, 2001).
- Colorism is not a recent phenomenon as it traces back in time.
- Skin tone was only related to one attribute: rhythmic (see Table 1) and was significantly related to different attributes for African American and Latino participants; negative attributes were associated with lighter skin tone, whereas positive attributes were associated with darker skin tone, whereas positive attributes were associated.

Sample & Procedures

Using data from the Health and Relationships During College (HRDC) study, African American (n = 92) and Latino (n = 53) young adults were recruited to participate in an initial assessment and have their photograph taken. African American independent raters used these photographs and assessed their perceptions of the participants’ skin tone (very light, light, medium, medium dark or dark) and coded participants on positive (athletic, attractive, educated, intelligent, kind, motivated, rhythmic, self-assured, superior and wealthy) and negative (bad attitude, criminal, dirty/smelly, inferior, lazy, ostentatious, poor, sexually aggressive, tough/aggressive, unattractive, uneducated and unintelligent) personal attributes. The response choices for attributes ranged from 1 low degree to 7 high degree.

Literature Review

- Decades of research literature indicates that lighter skin individuals are viewed more favorably compared to darker skin individuals.
- Forty African Americans and forty-two Whites were asked about their knowledge of stereotypes, and described lighter skin individuals with more positive traits and fewer negative traits compared to darker skin individuals (Madden & Gray, 2002). Lighter skin individuals were less likely to be coded as criminal, poor, or tough and aggressive.
- Hanson (2004) found that Hispanic respondents with darker skin were more likely to be assessed as unintelligent by interviewers.
- When given a random group of photographs paired with distractingly Hispanic or non-Hispanic names, participants rated the same face about one skin tone shade darker when it was paired with a distractingly Hispanic name (Garcia Abascal, 2011).

Skin tone preference

- Skin tone discrimination
- Skin tone is a viable prompt for individuals to activate their implicit bias or prejudice which may lead to further discrimination (Adams, Kurtz-Costes and Hoffman, 2006). Judging another person’s race happens quickly and without much thought (Herman, 2010).
- When observing results of The Implicit Association Test (IAT) White individuals more quickly paired positive words with White faces and negative words with African American faces compared to White faces with negative words and African American faces with positive words (Smith-McAleney, Johnson, Dovidio and Pearson, 2005).
- In a study by Madden and Gray (2001), participants viewed photographs and written statements for only eight seconds and still sub-categorized them into skin tone based racial categories.
- Women in Stepnova and Strube’s (2009) study perceived photographs of darker skin tone faces as more African American compared to lighter skin tone faces.

Sample & Procedures

- Interviews were asked to rate participants’ skin tone (very light, light, medium light, medium, medium dark, dark).
- Skin tone was also assessed by the rater using two figures.

Attributes

- Instructions for raters: How would you rate the participant on the following items if you only have one second to judge them?
- How many skin tone attributes are associated with their skin tone?

Measures

- Positive and negative personal attributes of African American and Latino young adults
- Skin tone & Attributes
- African Americans
- Positive attributes
- Athletic, Attractive, Educated, Intelligent, Kind, Motivated, Rhythmic, Self-Assured, Superior, Wealthy
- Negative attributes
- Bad Attitude, Criminal, Dirty/Smelly, Inferior, Lazy, Ostentatious, Poor, Sexually Aggressive, Tough/Agressive, Unattractive, Uneducated, Unintelligent

Results

- Skin tone
- A Majority of African Americans were identified as medium light skin tone.
- A Majority of Latinos, a majority of participants were coded as having a very light skin tone and no students were coded as medium dark or dark.

Discussion

- Little is known about how perceived skin tone relates to a range of positive and negative personal attributes.
- The current study examines whether an interviewer evaluates personal attributes of African American and Latino young adults differently based on their perception of the participant’s skin tone and other phenotypic characteristics.
- Facial features, as well as skin tone, may be when assessing White’s reaction to African Americans (Hagwara, Kasdy and Cesario, 2007).
- This study focused on the relationship between interviewer perception of participants’ skin tone and personal attributes for African American and Latino young adults.
- Skin tone was related to several attributes for African American participants; negative attributes were associated with darker skin tone, whereas positive attributes were associated with lighter skin tone.
- Latino participants had only one attribute, rhythmic, positively associated with their skin tone. This may be because Latinos in our study had lighter skin compared to African Americans.
- Overall, findings suggest that implicit bias related to perceptions of skin tone may add to the problem of stereotyping and potential discrimination.
- Results may also have implications beyond perceptions. For example, if darker skin individuals are perceived as being criminals, they may be followed in a store or stopped more frequently by the police.