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Perceptions of Beauty and Identity: The Skin Bleaching Phenomenon in Jamaica

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Keywords: colorism, postcolonialism, skin color, informal learning, identity

Abstract: Founded on the significance of the skin bleaching phenomenon in Jamaica, and the persistent influences of colonialism, the purpose of this paper is twofold: (a) to explore the skin bleaching phenomenon and (b) to provide a snapshot of how colonialism (despite national independence) influences perceptions of beauty and identity in Jamaica, particularly through informal learning. Based on an empirical study, the research sought to explore and understand the perceptions and motivations behind the practice of skin bleaching, given the historical and social context, and how it influenced the participants' perceptions of beauty and identity

Perceptions of Beauty and Identity: The Skin Bleaching Phenomenon in Jamaica

Despite slavery's abolition and Jamaica's independence from Britain, there continues to be internal struggles related to Eurocentric and Afrocentric values on the island. Influences of the British monarchy are still quite evident within the country's political, social and education systems. Afro-Jamaicans constitute the overwhelming majority of Jamaica's population. In fact, 97% of the population is of partial or total African descent (Encyclopedia of the Nations, 2010), yet, there is an elevation of Eurocentric values and a denigration of Afrocentric values in many facets of life. This is particularly true as it relates to skin color; specifically in the promotion of light skin as an indicator of beauty and social status. With vestiges of colonial life lingering in the country, it is important to reflect on how British colonialism framed the nation's history and how it continues to show itself as an agent of socialization in modern culture and society.

One lesson taught by slavery and colonialism was a social discrimination and hierarchical structure between members of the same race, based on skin color, a phenomenon known as colorism. Within this struggle, people of color, particularly those with darker skin complexions, are victims of a set of societal structures that support and enable colorism. Further, skin color has a direct correlation to economic and political power and Eurocentric ideologies have deemed light skin as the ideal identifier of beauty (Hall, 2008). Light skin, also called fair skin, is an asset (Robinson & Ward, 1995) and it enjoys a positive image and perception all over the world.

Skin color and skin color stratification based on complexion are important issues for all people of color. Hunter (2002) described it as a major sociological issue for African American and Mexican American communities. Light skin color sits within a space of privilege and the preferential treatment afforded to members of the colored community with lighter skin complexions relates to the popular ideal or globalized concept of beauty.

Within the black community, skin tone is important in defining beauty (Hunter, 2002; Wolf, 1991); lighter-colored skin for a long time has been and still is typically seen as more beautiful than darker-colored skin. This is particularly true and impactful for women because as Hunter pointed out "light skin color works as a form of social capital for women. Women who

possess this form of beauty (capital) are able to convert it to economic capital, educational capital, or another form of social capital” (2005, p. 37). The value of this beauty (capital) has caused the practice of skin lightening to become increasingly popular as a means of improving beauty and, thus, increasing opportunities for economic and social mobility.

Skin lightening typically occurs through a skin-bleaching regimen. This is not a new practice for people of color all over the world. Hoetink (1971) noted that in Santo Domingo, as early as the sixteenth century, Indian women used painful processes to bleach their skins, trying to become more attractive to colonizers. In Suriname too, for example, indigenous women were bleaching their skin in order to be considered more attractive to White male colonizers (Menke, 2002). Additionally, Pitche, Kombate and Tchangai-Walla (2005) highlighted that females in the Black population have been using cosmetic skin-bleaching products as a social practice for about 30 years. The use of these chemicals on the skin has proven harmful and has led to disfigurement and even death (Miyajiri de Souza, 2008). Despite the potential harm, the bleaching syndrome (Hall, 1995) continues to gain support through influences from popular media and localized culture.

The media serves as an effective means of socialization and transmission of popular culture. Mass media and popular culture have an interdependent relationship. Numerous studies have been concerned with the effect of the media on society and whether or not the messages delivered in the media are reflective of society (Hearold, 1986; Wood, Wong & Chachere, 1991; Paik & Comstock, 1994; Baran & Davis, 1995). Researchers have noted several commonly mentioned intended and unintended media effects (McGuire, 1986). The study of media effects is based on the idea that the content delivered in mass communication has clear effects on people, society and culture in general (Perse, 2001). Given the pervasiveness and influential properties of popular culture portrayed through the media, it plays an important role in the skin bleaching practice in Jamaica. According to Guy (2007), popular culture is instructive in matters related to race, class, gender, and other forms of socially significant difference. It is equally important to note that television is filled with stereotyped images of women and minorities (Signorielli, 1990).

The opinion that light skin is attractive, and especially more attractive than dark skin, is permeated throughout the media. This message is extended in mass media, throughout the community, and continues to reverberate among people across all age groups. As a result of this idea that light skin is more attractive than dark skin, the evidence of it being a marker of social status, and that it is a popular fashion trend; some people in Jamaica are bleaching their skin to gain an advantage.

Significance and Purpose

Despite the severity of the problem of skin bleaching, it has not received much attention in the social science literature. Much of the current literature on skin lightening deals with the health complications from using the products. Studying the skin bleaching phenomenon in Jamaica is reflective of the field of adult education; it provides an opportunity for conceptualizing the field of adult education as the broad field that it is, encompassing other less promoted areas such as civic education, health, and media literacy. Traditionally the term adult education conjures up images of adult basic education and adult literacy, but this study engages in other avenues (literacies) that are also reflective of the field. Although study examined the Jamaican experience, issues related to skin bleaching are pertinent to other people of color all over the world.

Founded on the significance of the skin bleaching phenomenon in Jamaica, and the persistent influences of colonialism, the purpose of this paper is twofold: (a) to explore the skin bleaching phenomenon and (b) to provide a snapshot of how colonialism (despite national independence) influences perceptions of beauty and identity in Jamaica, particularly through informal learning. The questions which guided the study are as follows:

1. How does a history of slavery and colonialism continue to influence perceptions of beauty in postcolonial Jamaica?
2. How does a history of slavery and colonialism continue to influence perceptions of identity in postcolonial Jamaica?
3. How does early learning and socialization within a postcolonial society contribute to the decision to practice skin bleaching?

Studying the skin-bleaching phenomenon provides a window of opportunity for understanding the motivations behind the pervasive problem. It allows for hearing the voices of *bleachers* and to glean insight into the phenomenon. Adult educators will be better equipped to design, develop and implement educational activities to address the unique needs of the skin bleachers. By learning more about the skin bleachers and their multiple realities, adult education practitioners will be able to systematically incorporate health literacy concepts and adult education learning activities to address the skin bleaching phenomenon. The need for this research is particularly great as multiple national-level initiatives to address the problem have been met with less than favorable results. There are global lessons to be learned from the Jamaican experience.

Conceptual Framework

The frameworks for understanding this research are postcolonialism and social cognitive theory. Postcolonialism offers literary critique of the many consequences of colonialism, particularly affecting the cultures and life of ex-colonies (Ashcroft, Griffith & Tiffin, 2004). Essentially, in conducting this research, the various influences of colonialism that have persisted throughout the nation's culture, and their role in influencing the decision to bleach one's skin, were considered to be particularly relevant and important. This framework is relevant as it also supports a purposeful and descriptive analysis of cultural values and practices that may influence the practice of skin bleaching.

Social Cognitive Theory was conceived by social psychologist Albert Bandura and is particularly relevant to this study. Merriam, Caffarella and Baumgartner (2007) noted that social learning theory considers the learner and the learner's environment and that behavior is learned through observation and interaction with the social environment. Through this theory, the learned behavior of skin bleaching could be understood as an effect of colonial and later postcolonial socialization.

Research Design

Since the study sought to explore the phenomenon of skin bleaching from the bleacher perspective, it called for naturalistic (in the natural world) methodological procedures (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). The methodology utilized in this research study was qualitative. To develop a complex and detailed understanding of the skin-bleaching phenomenon as experienced by each individual participant, the broader context of their lives--to include early learning, socialization and media influences--provided the context for data collection and analysis. Within this basic interpretive and descriptive qualitative study, understanding how the participants made meaning

of the phenomenon, was mediated through the researcher as an instrument, the strategy was inductive, and the outcome descriptive (Merriam & Associates, 2002).

The primary source of data collection was through audio recorded open-ended interviews (Patton, 2002), conducted in a face-to-face format at the participant's site of preference in the Kingston Metropolitan Area in a collegial style (Bergen, 1993). In addition to interviewing, cultural artifacts were collected and analyzed throughout the research process. These included newspaper articles, poetry, transcribed songs, games, photographs, public signage, and various bleaching products and agents. The data analysis was done synchronously (Merriam, 2009). The collection, analysis and report writing are interrelated and were done concurrently (Merriam, 1998; Creswell, 2007). A thematic analysis was useful to analyze the way in which the participants made meaning of the bleaching phenomenon through their stories. Analyzing the narratives from the interviews showed how they (participants) structured their descriptions to make sense of their stories (Riessman, 1993).

Findings and Conclusions

The research shows that since slavery, light skin color has been considered more attractive and appealing than dark skin (Herring, Keith & Horton, 2004; Rogozinski, 2000; Williams, Lavizzo-Mourey & Warren, 1994). With this positive judgment and preference for light-skin over dark, issues of colorism become apparent (Graham, 1999; Hunter, 2002). The findings from this study suggest that British values are held in high esteem on the island. In particular, there is significant preference for light skin over dark. The nation's history of, and experience with, slavery and colonization remains at the core of this belief and way of life. This preference influences the way in which the participants conceptualize beauty and identity. It can be appreciated that an individual's values are taught, often in informal and non-formal ways, from very early in life. Jamaicans are socialized with the remnants of colonization which continue to lurk in formal systems and informal agents of socialization.

The data suggested that the bleaching practice is a social and multifaceted one which is definable by the observer as well as by the practitioner and the study revealed gross inconsistencies in the definitions of the practice. The findings show that there is a significantly negative perception in society of the practice, despite the prevalent elevation of light skin over dark complexions. Bleaching, according to the study, results in several benefits—some functional, some perceived and some realized. Most significant, in this is the resulting exaggerated sense of beauty among the participants.

Bleaching in Jamaica, as far as the participants in this study are concerned, is a personal matter which relates mostly to the idea of beauty and fashion. While initial responses to the question of "why do you bleach?" tended to begin with expressions of ignorance (I don't know why I bleach; no real reason), the primary reasons revolved around concepts of being in style or in fashion, looking good (because of being brown) and sophisticated. This was particularly true for the men in the study who admitted that they are often targeted as being effeminate because they were bleaching; they all admitted to be rubbing for purposes of looking good—especially for women. The responses tended to focus on looking good, but with an emphasis on having a "cool complexion," flawless and blemish free skin. Essentially, they wanted their skin to be "cool," that is, not flushed.

Other efforts to lighten the skin were explained by the desire to look good, to be seen, to be popular and to possibly attract a good mate, or to get a job in an up-town environment. Some participants, particularly the bleachers spoke of the "unique" color that they get from bleaching

and as such find it difficult to stop. The unique color appeared to be a symbol of fashion and style. The findings suggest congruence with the literature on the benefits of having light skin as being more attractive than dark (Herring, Keith & Horton, 2004; Rogozinski, 2000) and as a means of social capital (Hunter, 2002). The findings revealed that the participants are motivated by the status which they gain from bleaching. Their responses show the way in which light skin color is idealized as the marker of real beauty and how bleaching also helps to make them feel beautiful, appreciated, accepted and even validated.

Implications for Adult Education

The study is significant in various ways as it has implications related to theory, practice and policy. On a theoretical note, the study takes a historical look at the context of the participants' lives and the influences of an ex-colony's culture (to include popular culture and media) as influential driving forces of learning in the skin-bleaching phenomenon. Recognizing the compelling influence of popular culture and the media as a source of adult education is important. Tisdell (2007), highlighted, "popular culture has an important role to play in adult education as a vehicle of critical media literacy" (p. 11). The study of the influential media and popular culture in the skin-bleaching phenomenon is practically significant in that it highlights the need for non-traditional kinds of literacies—critical media literacy and health literacy. Adult education practitioners can find practical ways to incorporate critical media literacy and critiques of popular culture in the adult education classroom or learning opportunity. This will provide learners with surprising revelations about the media's influence on their lives.

This study's implications for policy relate to the matter of civic literacy. As is the case in Jamaica, the skin-bleaching problem poses serious concern to health officials on the island. The burdening of the health system concerns the government on two levels. There is social concern for the major health problems affecting the population of skin-bleachers as well as a fiscal concern related to the problem of skin bleaching. This provides an opportunity to address to matters related to health literacy in the adult classroom.

This study has implications for governing policy related to the problem. By exploring the psychology behind the practice of skin bleaching in Jamaica and examining the role of popular culture and the media in the phenomenon, health and other government officials may negotiate their role in handling the dangerous trend. This study may supply alternative approaches in dealing with the problems of skin-bleaching phenomenon in relation to governmental policy, in terms of its administration and execution. It also may prove instructive in handling other issues of social concern.

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