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Skin Tone Stratification Among Black Americans, 2001-2003

Module 3: Sociological Perspectives on Black Experiences

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Study Motivation:

The primary motivation and the research question of this article is to discover whether skin tone significantly influences life chances for black Americans, specifically household income, educational attainment, employment status, occupational status, marital status, and spouse's education and skin color. In the past, skin tone has heavily influenced life chances for black Americans, from the period of slavery, through the Jim Crow era, and then the post-Civil Rights era; Monk seeks to find out whether this skin tone stratification has continued into the modern era. Additionally, Monk claims that little research has been done on relations among racial groups compared to relations between racial groups. He believes it is important that more research be conducted on this topic to shed light on previously ignored aspects of discrimination based on colorism as a separate phenomenon than racism.

Theories:

The main conceptual framework used in the study is colorism, analyzing the life chances of black Americans through the lens of colorism rather than racism. The terms racism and colorism have largely been used interchangeably, and while the terms are related, this article makes a clear distinction between the two, adding that colorism is becoming more relevant in the U.S. as Latin American and non-white immigration increases. Through colorism, people face discrimination based on their skin color rather than just their racial group. Darker skinned individuals are discriminated against more than lighter skinned individuals, both individually by people and systemically by institutions. According to the article, black Americans are more likely to associate darker skinned black individuals with negative stereotypes like dangerous, ugly, or unintelligent. Additionally, darker skinned black individuals face harsher sentences in jail than their lighter skinned counterparts.

This study also discusses skin tone stratification through the concept of gender differences. Black men and women sometimes fare differently based on how dark their skin tone is, with dark skinned black men being increasingly stereotyped as dangerous, and dark skinned black women historically being considered less attractive than lighter skinned black women.

Data and Methods:

This study was conducted using secondary data from the National Survey of American Life (2001-2003). The data collected for the NSAL was a representative sample of the African American population and their distribution throughout the U.S., conducted via face to face interviews with people of varying racial and ethnic groups. For the purposes of the study, only the sample of U.S. born black Americans was included. To include various aspects of life chances, the analysis of the data was based on several measures—household income, educational attainment, employment status, occupational status, marital status, and spouse's educational attainment and skin color. Regression analysis was used to compute results.

Findings:

The findings of the study showed that skin tone is significantly associated with educational attainment, occupational status, and spouse's educational attainment and skin color. When it comes to educational attainment, on average, lighter skinned black Americans have six more months of schooling than darker skinned black Americans. Additionally, educational attainment is heavily associated with household income and employment status, making skin tone indirectly related to both of these categories as well. For the category of occupational status, Monk found that specifically black men with very dark skin had a 97% higher chance of being in a low status job compared to very light skinned black men. Then, for spouse's education and skin color, lighter skinned black women were more likely to have a spouse with more education than darker skinned black women, and in general, black Americans tended to have spouses with a similar skin tone as them.

Review:

An aspect of this article that I liked was the use of the term colorism. I believe colorism is incredibly prevalent in American society, yet it is ignored or thought of as a synonym for racism. As a Hispanic person who is very light skinned, I have gone through my life largely unbothered by the discrimination faced by many Hispanic people in the U.S., whereas my darker skinned family members and friends have faced overt discrimination in places like small shops or restaurants for no other reason I can presume than the fact that they obviously are not white. Some strengths of this article are the connections Monk makes between his findings and contemporary American issues, the diversity in categories he uses for the analysis of the NSAL data, and how he addresses gender as a factor in colorism faced by black Americans. Some weaknesses in this article are the lack of a future research recommendations section, usually included in research articles, as well as the lack of a limitations section to cover aspects of the topic that were not explored in-depth in the research. Omitting these sections can make the article seem a bit sloppy, even though everything else is well-executed.

Conclusion:

Chapter 3 of *Race and Ethnicity in America* discusses white-black inequality along similar lines as this article discusses black-black inequality. While books like *Race and Ethnicity in America* are very useful in understanding racial and ethnic relationships in the U.S., Monk argues that analysis of inequality only between white and black Americans can marginalize the experiences between darker and lighter skinned black Americans that occur because of colorism. Both chapter 3 and this article quote W. E. B. Dubois "problem of the color line," in discussing contemporary racial issues. The "color line" is evidently still a problem between racial groups as well as within them.

This article is also very relevant to current issues between racial and ethnic groups, like the animosity towards Latin American immigrants displayed by conservative Americans, which they show selectively towards immigrants from specific countries that happen to have large populations of people with darker skin. In this case, colorism is a better explanation for animosity towards darker skinned immigrants than xenophobia or racism, because white immigrants from European countries are generally not discriminated against, and technically Latinos and Arab people are considered to be part of the white race. Colorism has always been an issue, and articles such as this one contribute to furthering discussion on the topic.