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Perceived Skin Tone Discrimination Across Contexts: African American Women's Reports

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Abstract There is a void in empirical research that examines African American women's self-reported skin tone discrimination from out-groups (e.g., whites) and in-groups (blacks). We analyzed data of women from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds in the nationally representative National Survey of American Life ($N = 1653$). Light-skinned women reported less out-group colorism, and light-, medium-, and dark-skinned women with higher self-mastery perceived lower out-group colorism. Medium-skinned women perceived less in-group colorism, while dark-skinned women perceived more in-group and out-group colorism than counterparts. Implications for intergroup and intragroup race relations as well as well-being are discussed.

Keywords Colorism · Skin tone · Intra- and intergroup discrimination · Attractiveness · Self-mastery

The presence of Oscar winner and *People* Magazine's 2014 Most Beautiful Woman, Lupita Nyong'o, has sparked new conversations about the shade of beauty and complex life experiences of women of color. With very dark skin and short, coarse hair, she is conspicuous in Hollywood. Nyong'o (2014) recently stated, "I remember a time when I too felt unbeautiful. I put on the TV and only saw pale skin. I got teased and taunted about my night-shaded skin. And my one prayer to God…was that I would wake up lighter-skinned…" (p. 93). That shocking revelation resonated with some other women of color that voiced similar painful experiences with colorism—the discrimination and allocation of status and resources based on skin tone (Herring et al. 2004). A derivative of racism, colorism has historically been an important source of social capital and a determinant of a variety of life outcomes for African American women (Hunter 2005; Keith 2009) because their outward appearances are judged critically and they also endure sexism and intersectional stigma.

Although it is an important part of the literature on gendered stereotyping, relatively few researchers directly investigate self-reports of skin tone discrimination. This current paper is intended to bridge this gap in the literature by examining African American women's self-reported experiences related to skin tone bias using a nationally representative sample to address two main research questions. First, what is the relationship between women's skin tones and their perception of colorism outside the race (i.e., perpetrated by out-groups like whites) versus colorism inside the race (i.e., perpetrated by blacks)? Moreover, will skin tone predict women's perceived out-group or in-group colorism when physical attractiveness is controlled? Second, do women utilize protective psychological resources (i.e., self-mastery) to remain resilient when exposed to colorism? Succinctly, what is the relationship of perceived colorism to self-mastery—the belief that one can control events and circumstances that affect one's life?

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Literature Review

Historical Skin Tone Bias in the United States

Sociologists and historians have found that negative stereotypes and discrimination of darker black women have deep roots in American history. Skin tone stratification was established by practices of slave–owners during American slavery that differentiated light-skinned slaves from their darker counterparts. Dark slaves ("field slaves") were assigned physically strenuous fieldwork in plantations and considered ugly or inferior (Bond and Cash 1992; Herring et al. 2004). The favored indoor "house slaves" (who were often biracial women with Eurocentric features) were light-skinned and regarded as more attractive (Hall 2010) but were sometimes forced into prostitution (Jablonski 2012). Because the biases have been deeply ingrained in the culture, vestiges of those light-skin privileges persist. A recent nationally representative study found that light-skinned black Americans of both sexes completed more years of education, earned higher incomes, and occupied more prestigious jobs (Monk 2014), consistent with an early study (Keith and Herring 1991). These within-race socioeconomic disparities across skin tones are typically more pronounced among women. Furthermore, among women, there is evidence that negative stereotypes about darker and lighter women documented before the civil rights movement (Parrish 1946) may persist (Wilder 2010).

The Perceiver's Perspective

Psychologists have also examined skin tone prejudices that originated during slavery such as attractiveness and intelligence perceptions. However, psychological research often neglected the gendered nature of women's experiences, which the aforementioned sociological research highlighted. Maddox's (2004) review of racial phenotypicality bias illustrated that "low-prototypic" blacks (i.e., those that had weaker physical resemblances to blacks such as lighter skin tones and narrow nose or lips) were evaluated more positively than their "high-prototypic" counterparts. Experimental research suggested that skin tone was very important to whites in their prototypicality judgments of blacks (Stepanova and Strube 2012) and whites exhibited more negative affective reactions toward high-prototypic blacks (Hagiwara et al. 2012). It is noteworthy that this line of experimental research relied heavily on white undergraduate perceivers that observed images of black male targets; thus, it overlooked black females' distinct experiences.

These prejudices matter because they may motivate discriminatory behavior. Other psychological studies suggested that whites were less likely to initiate friendships with high-prototypic blacks (Hebl et al. 2012) and more likely to punish them because they were perceived as criminals (Blair et al. 2004; Eberhardt et al. 2006). As dark skin tone connotes masculinity and aggressiveness, outgroups may find black men's dark complexions quite threatening (Hall 1995). In addition, because of the importance of dark skin in the criminalization of black men, much of the psychological experimental literature also focused heavily on the male experience of discrimination by exclusively utilizing photographs of males as stimuli. In contrast, although dark women endure stereotypes of low attractiveness and intelligence, unlike their dark male counterparts, they may not necessarily be perceived as threatening or dangerous because of their female gender. Maddox's (2004) review acknowledged this exclusion of women as a limitation to building thorough stereotyping models as those findings may not generalize to black women.

The Target's Perspective

While the literature on racial phenotypicality bias documented perceiver biases against African Americans, few empirical studies have investigated skin tone discrimination from the target's perspective (i.e., their self-reports of colorism). A clarification about terminology—this paper will use the terms "African Americans" and "Blacks" interchangeably because literature summarized henceforth will be restricted to black Americans. Some studies from the target perspective have found that darker African Americans self-reported more discrimination (Klonoff and Landrine 2000; Uzogara et al. 2014), while others have found no relationship (Keith et al. 2010; Krieger et al. 1998; Landor et al. 2013). Importantly, studies that found significant relationships did not fully isolate or closely examine women's appraisals of colorism, which left a gap in the literature.

There are a few important limitations in this literature that may contribute to the mixed findings. The first limitation is that *skin color* discrimination (feature based) and *racial* discrimination (category based) have been confounded in this literature, perhaps because the term "color" is incorrectly regarded as a synonym for "race." This is flawed because although racism and colorism represent two separate but overlapping forms of oppression (Hunter 2008), many studies fail to analyze experiences of colorism separately from racism. Succinctly, studies that did not find any significant relationship between skin tone and discrimination (e.g., Keith et al. 2010; Landor et al. 2013) mostly measured racism. To capture and differentiate perceptions of colorism from racism, skin tone may need to

be made more salient in the phrasing of measures (e.g., Uzogara et al. 2014).

Another limitation is the generalizability of some samples. Colorism occurs both within and across race, and there is some evidence that it is particularly detrimental within intragroup contexts (Harvey et al. 2005); thus, colorism outcomes may differ in racially homogenous settings. Finally, some past research relied exclusively on self-assessments of skin tone (e.g., Klonoff and Landrine 2000), which may introduce more "noise" because of social desirability biases and/or subjective personal preferences. This current paper will attempt to clarify these limitations of past research by (1) examining only women, (2) using discrimination measures that make skin tone salient, and (3) trained observer-assessed skin tone.

Theoretical Underpinnings

Two theoretical frameworks inform the direction of this current paper. First, self-categorization theory posits that the self can be categorized in higher or lower levels of abstraction (Turner 1987). The theory suggests that we can invoke different social selves in response to social stimuli. Individuals socially compare themselves along categories (e.g., skin tone) and determine whether others are relatively similar to the self (e.g., in-groups/persons of similar skin tones) or relatively different (e.g., out-groups/persons of different skin tones). It is plausible that when skin tone is made salient, respondents may be better able to invoke their skin tone-based social selves and respond accordingly. For example, although light-skinned women may report similar levels of racial discrimination as their counterparts (Keith et al. 2010), when skin tone is made more salient, they may respond differently because of social comparisons to their darker peers.

Second, this paper examines the target perspective of discrimination and considers implications of sociodemographic contexts (Celious and Oyserman 2001; Harvey et al. 2005). In their heterogeneous race model (HRM), Celious and Oyserman (2001) theorized,

> …skin tone will have different significance in settings that are exclusively ingroup than it will in interracial outgroup settings…the value ascribed to skin tone is variable among African Americans but generally holds medium skin tone as the ideal because it is less stigmatized…intraracial interactions may feel more comfortable with someone who looks relatively similar to the self. This may be why being considered "very dark" or "very light" is highly stigmatized…[in interracial settings] most negative stereotypes are associated with dark skinned Blacks [and] light-skinned Blacks may be seen as more likable and less threatening. Because of this, interracial settings are thought to offer more advantages to lighter skinned Blacks (pp. 160–161)

Succinctly, in racially homogenous settings (i.e., predominantly black), social meanings attached to skin tone may differ from those in racially heterogeneous social contexts. The present paper will examine this possibility that Celious and Oyserman (2001) proposed. Further, the experience of gender and relevance of the intersectional perspective (Cole 2009; Collins 2000) were alluded to in the HRM theory as norms of female beauty are embedded within colorism. The intersectional perspective advocates for attending to the diversity within their gender instead of considering African American women's experiences in terms of how they differ from the black male standard.

African American Women's Experiences of Skin Tone Discrimination

Research suggested that skin tone consequences are gendered, impacting women's lives differently because their outward appearances (as it relates to beauty) are judged very critically (Celious and Oyserman 2001; Keith 2009). Further, in multiracial societies like the USA, dominant groups (e.g., whites) set beauty standards that reflect their own ethnicity's physical features (Etcoff 1999) and accord higher status to women of color with Eurocentric features (e.g., light skin, narrow nose, and straight hair). This may allow those women to accumulate more social and economic resources than their counterparts with darker skin and more Afrocentric features (Monk 2014). It is not surprising that in popular culture, highly successful African American female celebrities, such as Beyoncé or Halle Berry, are light-skinned with Eurocentric features. Although attractiveness may impact women's experiences of colorism as the HRM informs, studies frequently overlook this factor, failing to adjust for attractiveness in analyses.

Additionally, research indicates that colorism outcomes from the target perspective may operate on a three-layered structure (i.e., dark, medium, and light skin) rather than on a binary or continuous one (i.e., dark–light) (e.g., Wilder 2010). As the HRM suggests, African American women judged as having a medium brown color (i.e., the relatively typical/central shade) have had distinct reactions compared to lighter and darker counterparts (i.e., the relatively atypical/peripheral shades). Therefore, outcomes for dark, medium, and light women should be separated in analyses.

Discrimination from Racial Out-Group Members

The heterogeneous race model (Celious and Oyserman 2001) posits that one consistent advantage of light-skinned women is their greater ability to accumulate material wealth because of their favorable treatment in social contexts where blacks interact with whites. Further, the intersectionality perspective indicates that this feature (women's skin tone) should be understood in the context of power relations. Since American society has historically been socially structured to privilege whites, they are typically gatekeepers of access to social and economic resources; consequently, they have the leverage to restrict or promote opportunities to non-dominant racial groups based on skin tone and Eurocentric beauty, which impacts life outcomes.

Moreover, because of white privilege, substantial between-race (black–white) disparities exist across five reciprocally related domains: (1) income and (2) education (Thompson and Suarez 2015), (3) health (Adler and Rehkopf 2008; Williams and Jackson 2005), (4) punishment of young schoolchildren (Gregory et al. 2010; Okonofua and Eberhardt 2015), and (5) incarceration of adults (Wakefield and Uggen 2010). This mirrors growing evidence that significant within-race (black–black) disparities consistently privilege light-skinned blacks (particularly women) across the same five domains of income and education (Monk 2014), health (Sweet et al. 2007), punishment of young students (Hannon et al. 2013), and incarceration of adults (Gyimah-Brempong and Price 2006; Viglione et al. 2011). As race, gender and skin tone are each structural qualities, research has shown that these patterns are particularly evident among African American females presumably because of their subordinate gender and racial position in addition to the role of skin tone as a marker of their beauty. Instances of colorism perpetrated by out-groups in those five domains could impact African American women's ability to gain human capital, simultaneously creating opportunities for some (e.g., light-skinned) and oppression for others (e.g., dark-skinned).

Intuitively, the targets of this discrimination (African American women) are presumably aware of these biases when interacting with out-groups, particularly when colorism reports are explicitly solicited or when skin tone is made salient, as self-categorization theory suggests; evidence from small qualitative research supports this (Hunter 2005; Wilder 2010). It is surprising that empirical research about women's perceptions of out-group colorism is sparse. Scholars typically cite Klonoff and Landrine's (2000) empirical study as evidence that light-skinned women self-report less discrimination from whites; however, it is worth noting that the authors sampled blacks that resided in a highly segregated, low-income region and also did not explicitly solicit their appraisals of *out-group* colorism. Since structural inequality prevents many blacks living in such segregated areas from having regular contact with whites, it is unclear whether it was necessarily racial out-groups that perpetrated the respondents' reports of discrimination. This current study will fill this gap in the literature by using measures that directly solicit appraisals of out-group colorism.

Additionally, empirical research on colorism often overlooked psychological mechanisms through which colorism operated to impact women although it is an important area for interventions. Since out-group colorism may be prevalent in numerous aspects of an African American woman's daily life (see aforementioned five domains), it can be conceptualized as a type of chronic social stressor. To better understand how out-group colorism may undermine their well-being, it is important to consider whether internal control beliefs, such as self-mastery, may buffer negative psychological consequences of this stressor.

Thus far, research has examined the effect of colorism on women's *self-esteem*, but little is known about its relationship with *self-mastery*, a control belief. Keith et al. (2010) concluded that black women's mental health was threatened by experiences of racial discrimination since it undermined their sense of control (mastery beliefs). However, the authors decided to not directly connect that finding to colorism-based discrimination since an early study found that levels of control beliefs did not vary across women's skin complexions (Thompson and Keith 2001). That relationship was worth exploring further since a growing body of research has documented the stress-buffering effect of self-mastery. Research that was largely conducted on women suggested that subjects with higher self-mastery were less susceptible to negative consequences of various stressors and also ruminated less (Ma et al. 2007; Mausbach et al. 2008; Neupert et al. 2007; Roepke et al. 2011); additionally, self-mastery was especially protective when individuals encountered stressors that were persistent. It is, therefore, plausible that among African American women, self-mastery may have attenuated elevated stress responses to a persistent stressor such as out-group colorism. Bridging this literature on self-mastery with skin tone discrimination research would suggest that women with higher self-mastery might be less prone to appraise high out-group colorism.

We hypothesize the following:

H_{1a} Light-skinned women will report the least out-group (i.e., white-to-black) colorism

H_{1b} Women with higher self-mastery will report lower out-group colorism (H_{1a})

Discrimination from Racial In-Group Members

Colorism inside the race is arguably more complicated partly because of its connection with women's attractiveness. Light-skinned women are simultaneously advantaged and disadvantaged for this reason. As Celious and Oyserman's (2001) HRM informs, "light skin may act as kind of currency in one situation, facilitating entry, and as a barrier and source of exclusion in another" (p. 160). Within African American families, parents may invest more resources and support in their light-skinned daughters (Landor et al. 2013). Black men also pay more attention to light-skinned women because of their attractiveness (Hill 2002; Hunter 2008). This is in sharp contrast to perceptions of dark women who are regarded as less attractive, less intelligent, and more unfeminine (Wilder 2010). Light-skinned women are more marriageable and attract more upwardly mobile suitors (Hamilton et al. 2009). However, their privileges within their families, among whites, and among black men may strain their relationships with black women.

There are penalties associated with light-skin tone within-race. Because they are strongly pursued by black men, light-skinned women (particularly those judged as attractive) may be a source of resentment for darker female peers that feel threatened (Wilder 2010). For example, some light-skinned women are stereotyped as snobby or "not Black enough" (Hunter 2008). Perhaps because light-skinned women are less prototypical in appearance, their female counterparts may assume that they do not share their experiences of oppression. Consequently, attractive light-skinned women may appraise in-group colorism since darker women may socially exclude them (Hunter 2005). Although this consequence of exclusion from woman-to-woman ties may be painful, since darker women hold a more subordinate position in society, their actions would not hinder light-skinned women's abilities to gain socioeconomic benefits as whites serve as gatekeepers in those domains.

Medium-skinned women's experiences of colorism may be different. There is some evidence that medium-skinned women express a stronger sense of protection from negative stereotypes because, historically, there have been no derogatory terms associated with their complexion inside the race (Wilder 2010). The HRM and other studies have addressed aspects of this sense of low stigmatization of medium brown complexions within the race (Celious and Oyserman 2001; Hall 1992; Parrish 1946) although empirical research has overlooked women's unique perceptions of in-group colorism.

This current study will also examine the relationship of self-mastery and in-group colorism. As some studies have suggested that racial in-group rejection may be especially hurtful or deleterious (Bernstein et al. 2010; Mays et al. 2007; Mendes et al. 2008; O'Brien et al. 2012), self-mastery could be particularly undermined because the types of attributions that targets can form are limited. Since the social exclusion was perpetrated by in-group members (blacks) and motivated by a stable/unchangeable characteristic (skin tone) (Jetten et al. 2006), emotional consequences of in-group rejection may differ from out-group rejection because in-group loyalty expectations are violated. Unlike rejection from out-groups, in-group exclusion is considered a non-prototypical form of discrimination. O'Brien et al. (2012) added, the "self-protective nature of attributions to discrimination [from out-groups] rests on the assumption that these attributions are external to the self…however, in cases where rejection comes from a member of one's own group, an attribution to discrimination may be less external, and therefore less protective" (p. 1231). Thus, it may be possible that higher feelings of self-mastery may not offer some women substantial protection from perceiving in-group colorism.

H_{2a} Consistent with HRM, medium-skinned women will report the least in-group (i.e., black-to-black) colorism

H_{2b} The relationships between self-mastery and out-group colorism will differ from relationships between self-mastery and in-group colorism

Summary

Because gendered skin tone discrimination is an understudied topic, this paper examines African American women's experiences of colorism using survey data collected after the 1980 National Survey of Black Americans (NSBA). Although some studies have found no relationships between skin tone and women's reports of discrimination (Keith et al. 2010), we argue that consistent with self-categorization theory, when skin tone is made salient and explicitly addressed in measures, reports of discrimination will differ across skin tones. The paper uses data from a nationally representative sample collected during the twenty-first century that surveyed many respondents raised after the civil rights movement. This is important because previous nationally representative studies of women's skin tone outcomes (Hunter 2002; Thompson and Keith 2001) are now limited by their historical period because they relied on the 1980 NSBA.

Methods

Participants and Design

We examined outcomes using the 2001–2003 National Survey of American Life: Coping with Stress in the twenty-first century (2003 NSAL). Face-to-face household interviews were conducted through the Program for Research on Black Americans at the University of Michigan's Institute for Social Research and Survey Research Center. The trained interviewers finished fieldwork in homes of respondents in 2003 for the NSAL (70.7 % response rate for blacks). These home interviews were mostly "race-matched"—meaning that black interviewers visited homes of same-race black/African American respondents in 85.7 % of households.

To reduce "noise" introduced by non-race-matched interviews (Hannon and DeFina 2014), analyses in this paper were restricted to race-matched interviewer-respondent pairs of African American women that had complete data on covariates ($N = 1653$) and were at least 18 years old ($M_{age} = 41.83$, SE = .70, range 18–90 years). This final NSAL sample excluded all black women that were not African Americans (e.g., black Caribbean's and black African ethnic groups) because of the relevance of culture. Additional information on the NSAL is available on this Web site: http://www.rcgd.isr.umich.edu/prba/nsal.htm.

Predictor Variables

Observer-Rated Skin Tone

At the conclusion of interviews, interviewers privately coded observations about respondents, including skin tone and attractiveness. During their one-week orientation at the Institute for Social Research, interviewers were trained to use a color palette to code skin tones at the end of household visits. Since interviewers were mainly drawn from the same local communities as respondents, their assessments are assumed to reflect community judgments of skin tones. Observer-rated skin tone was used in previous skin tone studies of African Americans (Hunter 2002; Thompson and Keith 2001; Uzogara et al. 2014).

NSAL interviewers coded respondents' skin tones on a seven-point scale: 1. "Very dark" (2.24 %), 2. "Dark" (13.91 %), 3. "Somewhat dark" (16.52 %), 4. Medium (41.50 %), 5. "Somewhat light" (14.40 %), 6. "Light" (8.47 %), and 7. "Very light" (2.96 %). This measure was collapsed to three shades (dark, medium, and light). All shades *lighter* than "medium" were re-coded to "Light," all shades *darker* than "medium" were re-coded to "Dark," and the original "medium" group remained the same. The final distribution was comparable to distributions in other major skin tone studies that used interviewer ratings or objective machine (e.g., reflectometer) ratings (Sweet et al. 2007). As mentioned earlier, dark, medium, and light-skinned African American women have unique experiences (Wilder 2010).

Attractiveness

Physical attractiveness was assessed with a question that asked interviewers, "where would you place the respondent along the following scale [of physical attractiveness]? Please enter a number 1 to 7 with 4 being Neutral." The options provided were 1 = "Most attractive," 2., 3., 4 = "Neither attractive nor unattractive," 5., 6., and 7 = "Most unattractive." This measure was reversed so that *higher* scores reflected *higher* attractiveness ($M = 4.72$, SE = .08, range 1–7). Furthermore, a binary measure of physical attractiveness was created for descriptive purposes in the tables by re-coding ratings above neutral as "attractive" and neutral/less than attractive ratings as "non-attractive." Using this measure, 55.60 % of this NSAL sample was judged as "attractive." Since studies have found that attractiveness is associated with skin tone and discrimination outcomes for women (Hill 2002; Landor et al. 2013), this variable was controlled in analyses.

Self-Mastery

The Pearlin Self-Mastery (SMS) Scale (Pearlin and Schooler 1978) measures an individual's sense of self-mastery, a psychological resource defined as "the extent to which one regards one's life chances as being under one's own control in contrast to being fatalistically ruled" (p. 5). The NSAL ($\alpha = .72$) included all 7 items of the SMS (1 = *Strongly Agree* to 4 = *Strongly Disagree*). Some items include, "I can do just about anything I really set my mind to"; "I often feel helpless in dealing with the problems of life." Items were reversed so that higher scores reflected higher self-mastery ($M = 3.30$, SE = .02, range 1.57–4.00).

Dependent Variables

Perceived Skin Tone Discrimination (Out-Group and In-Group Appraisal of Colorism)

The interviewers asked respondents two questions about respondents' appraisals of whether their skin tone helped or harmed them during interactions with whites (i.e., out-group colorism appraisal) and blacks (i.e., in-group colorism appraisal). Importantly, unlike some previous

investigations, the phrasing of these measures explicitly address colorism and make skin tone salient. The survey question that immediately preceded these appraisals asked them to self-categorize the shade of their skin relative to complexions of most black people. Subsequently, they reflected on their treatment by others based on color distinctions.

The appraisal of out-group colorism asked: "How often would you say that Whites treat you badly because of the shade of your skin color? 1. Very often (7.40 %); 2. Fairly often (14.98 %); 3. Not too often (30.62 %); 4.Hardly ever (22.68 %); 5. Never (23.83 %)." An identical question was asked for their appraisal of in-group colorism that replaced "Whites" with "Blacks" with responses of 1. Very often (4.12 %); 2. Fairly often (11.28 %); 3. Not too often (26.50 %); 4. Hardly ever (19.83 %); and 5. Never (37.90 %). These out-group and in-group colorism responses were reversed so that higher scores reflected higher appraisals of discrimination. Additionally, after reversing the response options, the two highest categories (i.e., "Very often" and "Fairly often") were collapsed to "Often" since few respondents reported "very often" for the out-group appraisal and in-group appraisal.

Covariates

Respondent Characteristics

The survey asked for income and education. Age was calculated based upon respondents' date of birth, and education attainment was assessed by the following options: 1. Did not complete high school, 2. High school graduate/General Education Development (GED), 3. Some college, and 4. College graduate. Education levels ranged from 1 to 4 ($M = 2.25$, SE = .05). Annual household income was captured in the following brackets: 1. lower than $7000, 2. $7000–$13,999, 3. $14,000–$19,999, 4. $20,000–$29,999, 5. $30,000–$40,999, 6. $41,000–$54,999, 7. $55,000–$74,999, and 8. $75,000 or higher ($M = 3.94$, SE = .10, range 1–8).

Interviewer Characteristics

Demographic characteristics were collected for the 89 interviewers in this final sample. Interviewer race was recorded and used to exclude all interviewer–respondent pairs that were not race-matched. Variables recorded for interviewers were sex (male, female), educational attainment, and age. Their educational attainment was measured using the following options: 1. first–eighth grade, 2. Some high school, 3. High school graduate, 4. Some college, 5. College graduate, 6. Master's degree, and 7. Doctoral degree.

Analytic Approach

First, descriptive characteristics (unadjusted) were examined using ANOVA and Chi-square tests (Table 1). Second, ordered logistic regression was used to examine the hypothesized relationships before and after adjusting for covariates (Table 2), which included respondents' characteristics (i.e., age, income, education, self-mastery, and the continuous measure of attractiveness) and the interviewers' characteristics (i.e., age, sex, and education). Ordered (ordinal) logistic regression was used because the dependent variables (i.e., out-group and in-group colorism) were both ordinal. Assumptions of proportional odds were satisfied (McCullagh 1980), and subpopulation analyses were used (instead of listwise deletion) to prevent inaccurate estimation of standard errors (Graubard and Korn 1996). Analyses were conducted using STATA version 14.0 (StataCorp. 2015) (*svy* commands) to handle the weights, stratification, and clustering of the complex NSAL design.

Results

Consistent with previous research, light-skinned women were judged as more attractive. Light-skinned women were also more socioeconomically privileged than their counterparts, as past research suggested. In addition, skin tone alone did not predict a control belief (i.e., self-mastery) for women as a previous study found (Thompson and Keith 2001).

H_{1a} Light-skinned women will report the least out-group (i.e., white-to-black) colorism

H_{1b} Women with higher self-mastery will report lower out-group colorism (H_{1a})

Before adjusting for covariates, dark-skinned women (reference group) reported more out-group colorism than medium-skinned ($b = -.38$, SE = .14, $p = .013$) and light-skinned women ($b = -.65$, SE = .16, $p < .001$) (see Fig. 1). While using medium-skinned women as the reference group, light-skinned women reported less out-group colorism, but this relationship was marginally significant ($b = -.27$, SE = .14, $p = .057$). Next, interviewer and respondent sociodemographic variables were adjusted. Those relationships did not change after adjusting for covariates (see Table 2). When using medium-skinned women as the reference group, light-skinned women did not significantly differ in their reports of out-group colorism ($b = -.24$, SE = .14, $p = .085$). As expected in H_{1b}, increases in self-mastery levels were associated with lower reports of out-group colorism ($b = -.62$, SE = .11, $p < .001$).

Table 1 Unadjusted sociodemographic characteristics of African American women—2003 NSAL

	Total	Dark skin	Medium skin	Light skin	*p* value
N (% of sample)	1653 (100 %)	540 (32.67 %)	686 (41.50 %)	427 (25.83 %)	
Age, mean (SE)	41.83 (.70)	42.78 (1.09)	42.38 (1.02)	39.77 (.95)	.018*,†
Income (household) scaled score, mean (SE)[a]	3.94 (.10)	3.73 (.13)	3.93 (.13)	4.19 (.15)	.028*
<$7000 (%)	13.39 %	14.50 %	14.17 %	10.73 %	
$7000–$13,999 (%)	16.51 %	17.18 %	15.18 %	17.87 %	
$14,000–$19,999 (%)	15.88 %	19.25 %	15.63 %	12.16 %	
$20,000–$29,999 (%)	17.68 %	17.62 %	18.64 %	16.16 %	
$30,000–$40,999 (%)	11.76 %	9.98 %	11.94 %	13.63 %	
$41,000–$54,999 (%)	10.78 %	10.12 %	11.12 %	11.04 %	
$55,000–$74,999 (%)	6.72 %	5.76 %	5.58 %	9.78 %	
$75,000 or higher (%)	7.29 %	5.58 %	7.74 %	8.62 %	
Education scaled score, mean (SE)[b]	2.25 (.05)	2.16 (.06)	2.25 (.06)	2.35 (.06)	.061*
Education					
Did not complete high school (%)	22.69 %	26.43 %	21.27 %	20.48 %	
High school graduate/GED (%)	41.55 %	41.13 %	43.94 %	38.09 %	
Some college (%)	23.82 %	21.95 %	23.22 %	27.10 %	
College graduate (%)	11.94 %	10.49 %	11.56 %	14.33 %	
In-group appraisal, mean (SE)	2.20 (.04)	2.33 (.07)	2.10 (.06)	2.19 (.07)	.06‡
Out-group appraisal, mean (SE)	2.52 (.04)	2.71 (.06)	2.50 (.06)	2.33 (.07)	.001*,†,‡
Attractiveness rating,[c] mean (SE)	4.72 (.08)	4.47 (.07)	4.75 (.11)	4.98 (.13)	<.001*,‡
% Rated as "attractive"	54.85 %	46.56 %	54.25 %	65.95 %	<.001
Self-mastery, mean (SE)[d]	3.30 (.02)	3.28 (.04)	3.30 (.02)	3.34 (.03)	*ns*

These measures above are statistically weighted in the NSAL, but the frequencies ($N = 1653$) are un-weighted

Superscripts indicate statistically sig. differences between * light- and dark-skinned. † Light- and medium-skinned. ‡ Medium- and dark-skinned

[a] Income is on an eight-point scale; higher scores reflected higher household income

[b] Education is on a four-point scale; higher scores reflected higher education

[c] Attractiveness (reversed) is on a seven-point scale; higher scores reflected higher attractiveness. The dichotomous measure is not used in any analyses

[d] Self-mastery is on a four-point scale; higher scores reflected higher feelings of mastery

H_{2a} Consistent with HRM, medium-skinned women will report the least in-group (i.e., black-to-black) colorism

Appraisals of in-group colorism were examined next before adjusting for other explanatory variables. Using dark-skinned women as the reference group, medium-skinned women reported significantly lower in-group colorism ($b = -.38$, SE = .16, $p = .020$), but light-skinned women did not report significantly lower in-group colorism ($b = -.23$, SE = .15, $p = .154$). In addition, medium-skinned women (reference group) did not differ from light-skinned women ($b = .16$, SE = .14, $p = .277$) in their reports of in-group colorism. After adjusting for explanatory variables, the relationships did not change substantially (see Table 2). There was still no significant difference between medium-skinned (reference group) and light-skinned women ($b = .196$, SE = .15, $p = .214$). It is noteworthy that social desirability bias may have impacted results since increases in interviewer education were associated with decreases in reports of in-group colorism (see Table 2).

H_{2b} The relationships between self-mastery and out-group colorism will differ from relationships between self-mastery and in-group colorism

Increases in self-mastery were indeed related to decreases in reports of in-group colorism ($b = -.59$, SE = .09, $p < .001$) similarly to earlier results involving out-group colorism (H_{1b}). Further analysis revealed that an interaction term of self-mastery and skin tone entered in a model for in-group colorism was statistically significant between light-skinned women (reference group) and dark-skinned women ($b = -.50$, SE = .21, $p = .020$) but not between light-skinned women and medium-skinned women ($b = -.42$, SE = .24, $p = .091$). To understand

Table 2 Ordered logit coefficients for relationship between predictors and perceived out-group and in-group colorism—2003 NSAL

Variable	Out-group colorism *b* (SE)[a]	*t*	*p*[b]	In-group colorism *b* (SE)[a]	*t*	*p*[b]
Skin tone						
Light skin	−.65 (.15)	−4.27	<.0001	−.24 (.16)	−1.43	.161
Medium skin	−.41 (.14)	−2.90	.006	−.43 (.16)	−2.66	.012
Dark skin	Ref	Ref	Ref	Ref	Ref	Ref
Self-mastery	−.62 (.11)	−5.81	<.0001	−.59 (.09)	−6.28	<.0001
Age (in years)	−.001 (.00)	−.31	.761	.004 (.00)	1.30	.201
Attractiveness	−.004 (.04)	−.09	.930	.01 (.04)	.18	.860
Income	.01 (.03)	.47	.641	.03 (.03)	1.06	.296
Education						
<High school	−.11 (.25)	−.44	.664	−.42 (.19)	−2.16	.038
=High school or GED	−.20 (.17)	−1.18	.245	−.01 (.16)	−.07	.944
Some college or associates	−.31 (.19)	−1.59	.120	−.38 (.16)	−2.38	.023
Bachelor's or higher	Ref	Ref	Ref	Ref	Ref	Ref
Interviewer sex (male reference)	.09 (.16)	.56	.581	−.29 (.17)	−1.67	.105
Interviewer education	−.13 (.06)	−2.22	.033	−.23 (.07)	−3.13	.004
Interviewer age	−.01 (.01)	−.78	.442	−.01 (.01)	−1.42	.165

Outcomes: "White people treat me worse (out-group colorism) and "Black people treat me worse (in-group colorism)" with response options ranging from 1 = Never, 2 = Hardly ever, 3 = Not too often, 4 = Often

[a] Proportional odds assumed

[b] *p* value for each logit coefficient

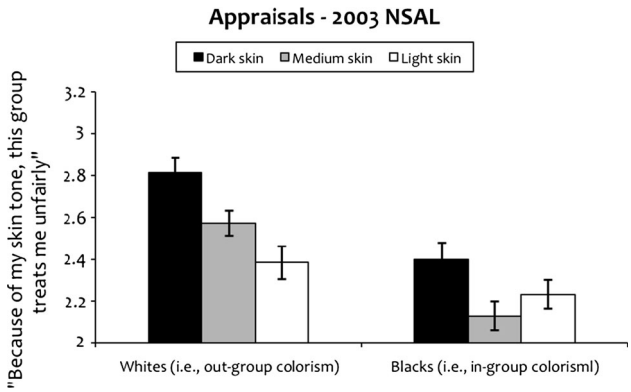

Fig. 1 African American women's appraisals of skin tone discrimination (unadjusted for covariates) inside and outside of the race—2003 National Survey of American Life (NSAL). **Error bars* reflect ±1 SE of the mean

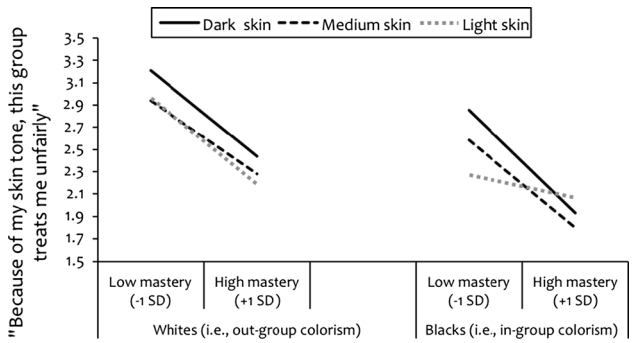

Fig. 2 NSAL African American women's mean appraisals of skin tone discrimination (unadjusted) among respondents with low self-mastery (−1 SD below mean) and high self-mastery (+1 SD above mean). Across skin tones, women with lower self-mastery perceived more colorism than their counterparts with higher self-mastery

this interaction, a graph of in-group colorism was plotted using only respondents that scored 1 SD above and 1 SD below the mean self-mastery scores (see Fig. 2). Light-skinned women's reports of in-group colorism did not greatly vary along self-mastery levels, whereas dark- and medium-skinned women with lower self-mastery reported greater in-group colorism. In contrast, there was no interaction between skin tone and self-mastery in predicting out-group colorism between light- (reference) and dark-skinned women ($b = .05$, SE = .22, $p = .836$), light- and medium-skinned women ($b = .14$, SE = .19, $p = .454$), and medium- (reference) and dark-skinned women ($b = -.097$, SE = .24, $p = .690$); thus, relationships between self-mastery and in-group colorism were not identical to those between self-mastery and out-group colorism, as expected.

Discussion

Findings from this study had several implications about the impact of colorism on African American women. First, it suggested that light-skinned women perceived favorable treatment outside of the race (out-group colorism). The current study not only replicated Klonoff and Landrine's (2000) finding that darker-skinned targets self-reported more biased treatment but also uniquely expanded the findings by accounting for the perpetrators (racial out-groups vs. in-groups). Second, medium-skinned women perceived more favorable treatment inside the race (in-group colorism) than dark-skinned women. Those patterns were generally consistent with predictions of the HRM. Dark-skinned women were the only group that did not perceive favorable treatment inside or outside of the race relative to other skin tone groups. Third, findings revealed that a control belief (i.e., self-mastery) might have had protective effects against negative consequences of out-group and in-group colorism.

There was another theoretical framework addressed in this paper: self-categorization theory (SCT). As expected, we found significant relationships in perceived colorism when using measures that made skin tone salient. As SCT predicts, because skin tone was made salient and a comparative context was presented in the phrasing of colorism appraisals, respondents could socially compare their experiences of colorism to their counterparts of different skin tones. These results contrast Keith et al. (2010) analyses of the NSAL that found no relationship between women's skin tone and discrimination, perhaps because the authors relied on the Everyday Discrimination Scale (Williams et al. 1997)—a measure that was intentionally designed to not make skin tone or physical characteristics salient.

Implications for Well-Being

Psychological and well-being consequences of cross-race discrimination (e.g., from white actors toward black targets) are well documented. This current study (target perspective) found that darker women self-reported more out-group skin tone discrimination than lighter women, which aligns with findings from the phenotypicality bias literature (perceiver perspective) that revealed that out-groups indeed treated darker African Americans worse. Moreover, this present study uniquely expanded the literature because it revealed that women with higher self-mastery reported less out-group colorism. Additionally, some research suggested that rejection from whites may be associated with increased anger and risk-taking behavior among blacks (Jamieson et al. 2013); thus, future experimental research should examine whether darker-skinned women's reactions to discrimination differ from their lighter-skinned counterparts.

Moreover, in light of the literature on perceived discrimination's damaging effects on well-being (Williams and Mohammed 2009), accounting for the unique role of skin tone will contribute to a more thorough understanding of within-race inequities and may inform interventions tailored to African American women's needs. The finding that women with higher self-mastery reported lower out-group colorism has positive implications for interventions that build self-mastery. For example, although women cannot control whether they will become targets of colorism, they can exercise agency over how they react to it through internal control beliefs such as self-mastery. Thus, having high levels of self-mastery may have buffered the stress of out-group colorism.

Furthermore, consequences of same-race discrimination from black actors against black targets are very important but understudied. Results indicated that control beliefs were not related to light-skinned women perceptions of in-group colorism. An important finding was the interaction of self-mastery with skin tone in in-group colorism outcomes only. Light-skinned women's reports of in-group colorism did not vary substantially across self-mastery levels, whereas dark- and medium-skinned women with higher self-mastery reported lower in-group colorism. This could have occurred because the types of rejection that light-skinned women encounter may be more painful; for example, Hunter (2005) found that in-group women challenge the legitimacy of their racial group membership (e.g., "you are not Black enough").

Additionally, some aforementioned experimental work has indicated that rejection from same-race individuals (i.e., blacks/in-groups) may be particularly deleterious to well-being. If future research finds that dark and light women (i.e., peripheral phenotypes) indeed perceive more discrimination from in-groups, there may be some health consequences. For example, one study of mostly women found that low- and high-prototypic subjects (i.e., peripheral phenotypes) perceived more discrimination; perceived discrimination mediated the relationships between poorer self-rated health than their counterparts (Hagiwara et al. 2013). Findings from this current study may overlap with that growing literature on feature-based, within-race disparities.

Limitations and Future Directions

There were limitations in this study. The samples were cross-sectional, and causality should not be inferred. It is also plausible that social desirability bias may have suppressed women's appraisals of colorism in the presence of

a black interviewer; women from an already-oppressed group may be reluctant to acknowledge that in-group members discriminate against them. Additionally, although interviewers were trained, when they evaluated respondents' appearances, some human bias was inherent in those assessments, but we restricted the sample to race-matched interviewer–respondent pairs to reduce this "noise" (Hannon and DeFina 2014). In essence, skin tone judgments are social comparisons, and the interviewers' color palette reflected one social norm (Coard et al. 2001).

Despite these limitations, there were some important contributions. Since the current study examined targets directly, it also revealed possible psychological mechanisms that may be associated with colorism such as self-mastery—research questions that cannot be answered from the perceiver perspective. Previous research that examined women's skin tone discrimination from the target perspective was often small, qualitative studies (e.g., Hunter 2005; Wilder 2010); the present empirical study was large and included respondents from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds in a nationally representative sample. These diverse samples of adult women were important because they complemented the racial phenotypicality bias literature (perceiver perspective) that relied on samples of young undergraduate students and focused heavily on their perceptions of black men.

Investigating colorism is an important part of understanding the experiences of women of color as it combines with sexism, racism, and classism to produce complex social problems. Although this study investigated African American women, some results may apply to other women of color such as Latinas, Afro-Caribbean's, and South Asians because colorism has impacted darker and lighter women of those ethnic groups as well (Glenn 2009). Importantly, as our society becomes increasingly multiracial, it will be important for researchers to track colorism and other feature-based trends over time to adequately address the needs of racially diverse women.

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