Colorism: (Still) Getting Away With Racism

A Review of

*Color Matters: Skin Tone Bias and the Myth of a Post-Racial America*

by Kimberly Jade Norwood (Ed.)


http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/a0037641

Reviewed by

Martha E. Banks

*Color Matters: Skin Tone Bias and the Myth of a Post-Racial America* is an edited volume with contributors from the fields of law, psychology, and social work. The nine chapters build on each other, moving from ancient history, through close inspection of slavery and subsequent racism in the United States, to racism’s and colorism’s effects on everyday lives at the beginning of the 21st century, and ending with recommendations for the future.

Colorism, similar to racism, is an ongoing consequence of the myth of White superiority, manifested as “the allocation of privilege and disadvantage according to the lightness or darkness of one’s skin” (Burke, 2008, p. 17) and “the tendency to perceive or behave toward members of a racial category based on the lightness or darkness of their skin tone” (Maddox & Gray, 2002, p. 250). In the United States, educational opportunities, employment, incarceration, and wealth can be linked to skin tone, with definite advantages for people with lighter skin.

Contributors integrate social and psychological impacts of colorism with economic and legal issues, emphasizing the effects on individuals as they discover their societal status and opportunities due to skin color. In addition, the authors review issues of ethnic identity at the group level, examining how skin tone can be used for collective advantage, as well as how it can be used, both interracially and intraracially, to divide families and communities. People with light skin tone can use their privilege to work toward improving the status of all people in their ethnic or racial groups, or they can separate and create their own exclusive communities, organizations, and institutions. The perceived advantages of light skin tone are internalized to such an extent that some people engage in attempts to lighten their skin (Chapter 1).

Some chapters address those international social systems that include color hierarchies, but the primary focus of the book is on the ongoing, pernicious legacy of slavery in the United States. During slavery, skin color was the primary salient feature used in an economy that
deemed dark people to be property and light people to be free. Some slaves of mixed Black and White ancestry were able to argue that skin color was more salient than race in order to obtain their freedom (Chapter 2).

Brown (Chapter 3) portrays race as losing legal significance in the 21st century and concludes that skin color is increasing in importance as U.S. census and immigration policies and practices are debated and modified. Specific attention is given to the changes in counting, as U.S. citizens are no longer externally categorized simply as Black or White but can now self-identify with multiple ethnic and racial groups, including multiracial. Several of the contributors (Banks, Chapter 4; Hall and Johnson, Chapter 8; Sanders Thompson, Chapter 6) describe attractiveness, educational, employment, wealth, and health disparities based on skin color. Banks includes examples of media portrayals, such as Kander (2009), that omit or limit images of people with darker skin and, at times, exoticize those identified as being of color while admiring the lightness of their skin.

Skin tone/color is included in lists of considerations of demographics reflecting patterns of discrimination and/or marginalization (e.g., American Psychological Association, 2003; Civil Rights Act of 1964) but is often uncritically conflated with the socially constructed concepts of race and ethnicity. As a result, most discrimination lawsuits that actually involve skin color are argued on the basis of race, and the issue of color is ignored (Chapter 8). Although employers are required to abide by federal legislation deeming discrimination illegal, those determined to keep their workplaces as “White” as possible are able to do so by limiting the employment and promotion opportunities available to African Americans and other people of color with dark skin tones.

Despite U.S. society’s focus on race instead of skin color, the relationship between skin color and stereotypes has been demonstrated through assessment of skin tone memory bias, whereby negative stereotypes are attributed to darker skinned people and known positive attributes lead to perceiving individuals of color as counterstereotypic “exceptions.” Ben-Zeev, Dennehy, Goodrich, Kolarik, and Geisler (2014) found that “a counter-stereotypic Black male tends to be remembered as ‘Whiter’ in accordance with cultural beliefs and thus offer(s) support for the existence of a skin tone memory bias” (p. 7).

Norwood’s solo chapter (Chapter 7) on the impact of “Blackthink” provides an intense examination of what it means to be Black, how authentic blackness is defined and evolves, and the “soul patrol” that determines membership in that racial or ethnic group. It is important to note Norwood’s recognition that “[t]he schizophrenic nature of the way in which blackness is monitored also is riddled with holes” (p. 170); it is possible for a person deemed by the soul patrol as not Black in one instance to become “authentically” Black by a perceived or acknowledged “change” of behavior (p. 170). She also uses the term schizophrenia in describing “the same individual who simultaneously despises, covets, and adores” light skin (p. 170).

This book is a critical reference that should be included as a textbook in courses on current issues and history of race and/or ethnicity. Students will find the book accessible, with many of them able to relate to the inclusion of phrases used by children and adults to communicate perceptions of societal “place” based on skin tone. Teachers and professors looking for easy ways to review U.S. history or to quickly demonstrate that all people of color do not share the same current or historical experiences will find this a useful text. Although the argument about whether the United States is in a postracial phase continues,
this book makes it clear that colorism persists, with ongoing negative impact on Americans of both dark and light color.

References


Footnotes

*Note: Martha E. Banks is not a contributor to the book, nor is she related to either of the two contributors whose surnames include “Banks.”*