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The Impact of African American Skin Tone Bias in the Workplace: Implications for Critical Human Resource Development

The impact of skin tone bias among African Americans in the workplace was examined utilizing grounded theory. The data revealed the harmful personal and workplace effects of the phenomenon. Findings suggest that there is a silencing of issues of race, power, and privilege in organizations. The author recommends utilizing a critical human resource development perspective in order to explore and address systems of privilege that silence employees and perpetuate inequities in the workplace.

Critical human resource development (HRD) is a practice that focuses on exploring and addressing issues of power, privilege, and inequities in organizations. A critical perspective has been supported by several HRD and adult education scholars (Bierema & Cseh, 2003; Cunningham, 2004; Fenwick, 2004; Sambrook, 2003). Bierema and Cseh (2003) stated that critical perspectives are needed to address power relations in organizations. Cunningham (2004) urged HRD practitioners to “engage in critical pedagogy in the workplace” (p. 236) as a means to explore and eliminate issues of power. And Sambrook encouraged scholars to be more critical of HRD and explore issues of equity. Fenwick (2004) stressed that a critical HRD “is devoted to the transformation of organizations and HRD practice toward . . . a more just, equitable, life-giving, and sustainable workplace” (p. 198). Other HRD scholars agree, and slightly more research is being done to ensure employee equity is of high priority in organizations.

Although some HRD scholars are beginning to address the need for critical HRD to investigate and address issues of power and equity, the HRD literature rarely focuses on issues of diversity, equality, and power, including topics such as discrimination, sexism, homophobia, and racism (Bierema & Cseh, 2003). This gap in the literature can indirectly reinforce workplace inequities (Sims & Roth, 2003) because there are few research-to-practice recommendations. Bierema and Cseh (2003) examined the lack of power and diversity topics in the human resource development literature, specifically the Academy of Human Resource Development Proceedings papers from 1996-2000, and they concluded that although the aforementioned topics “pervade both the workplace and society” (pp. 5-6), “there is a need in HRD for focusing [more] on issues of equity and access in the workplace” (p. 23). Also, they “recognize the need for studies that could lead to creating a more diverse, empowered workplace” (p. 23). More research and literature in critical HRD, therefore, is essential.

Systems of power and privilege can maintain power inequities and perpetuate discrimination in the workplace. However, “in spite of the pervasiveness of privilege, anti-discriminatory practice and theory has . . . not examined it and its role in perpetuating discrimination” (Wildman & Davis, 1995, p. 574). The growing literature base on white privilege has prompted diversity trainers to include discussions of unearned power and privilege as a focus in workplace diversity training (Atkinson, 2001; Digh, 2001), but these conversations usually focus on heterogeneous group privilege issues, mainly how Whites perpetuate the oppression of racial minorities in the workplace by not acknowledging their status as privilege holders and/or how heterosexual males dominate those of the opposite gender and sexual orientation (Bendick, Egan, & Lofhjelm, 2001). The focus is rarely on issues of power and privilege within homogeneous groups. Furthermore, there is a lack of investigation of the impact of privilege within similar groups in the workplace.

Skin tone bias is a form of homogeneous group privilege, in which people from the same race use factors such as skin tone, physical features, class, and communication to create social caste systems and workplace hierarchies (Russell, Wilson, & Hall, 1992; Sims & Roth, 2003). Literature shows racial minorities use this form of intragroup discrimination to the detriment of relationships and communication. Examples include Asian American college students who marginalize Asian immigrants for “clinging to their ethnic heritage” (OCA-Seattle, 2005) or light-skinned African Americans who disassociate themselves from darker-skinned African Americans in the workplace. Although intergroup diversity is an essential focus when addressing issues of discrimination and promoting effective relations among diverse groups, there is usually an omission of the need for work in these areas within similar groups. “It is often

easy to ignore the diversity that exists within race and gender, but this is a diversity [focus] that we ignore to our detriment” (Malveaux, 2005, p. 31). A myriad of workplace problems can result from intragroup differences, including inequitable hiring and promotion practices, biased supervision, and a race-based hierarchy (Sims & Roth, 2003). The workplace climate can become hostile, creating strained employee relations, low employee morale and confidence, and poor job performance.

Homogeneous group privilege has served as a source of anguish and controversy because it grants unearned privilege to those with certain characteristics, perpetuating discrimination and power disparities in the workplace. However, a discussion of this form of privilege has not been considered in the literature in the same manner as heterogeneous group privilege. The impact of privilege among similar groups within the workplace is an important topic, and HRD literature that highlights power and privilege must consider homogeneous group privilege to become more far-reaching.

Statement of the Problem and Rationale

Human resource development literature lacks a critical investigation of power and privilege in organizations. When focusing on privilege, the focal point is narrowly and superficially on heterogeneous groups, omitting issues of power and privilege among similar groups in the workplace. Research on the impact of homogeneous group privilege in the workplace, therefore, is lacking. Skin tone bias among African Americans illustrates homogeneous group privilege and may have implications for workplace communication and relations. Employers must become aware of the possible impacts of skin tone bias in order to avoid or address them.

Purpose and Research Questions

The purpose of this study was to examine the impact of skin tone bias among African Americans within the workplace. Research questions that guided the study were:

1. How does skin tone bias impact African Americans in the workplace?
2. What are the implications of including skin tone bias among African Americans in diversity training?

Conceptual Framework

Scholars have suggested for years that skin tone bias in the African American community--the privilege of lightness--has served to promote power inequalities and to perpetuate stereotypes initiated by white slave owners (Mitchell, 2002). Two prominent historical viewpoints were that dark-skinned African American slaves were considered by Whites to be less attractive, lazy, and unintelligent, while light skinned African Americans were seen as more attractive, intelligent, and capable, mainly due to their biological connection to their white slave-owner (Graham, 2000; McGriff, 1995; Russell et al., 1992). Light-skinned slaves enjoyed the privileges of their slave-owner fathers usually without merit. Lighter-skinned slaves were allowed to work in the home of the slave-owner, while darker-skinned slaves were forced to do laborious duties in the cotton fields. Opportunities were available to lighter-skinned slaves, such as the ability to become educated and freed from slavery. These privileges allowed light-skinned African Americans to gain entry into predominantly white organizations, including institutions of higher education and workplaces because their light skin tone signified White ancestry and made them less threatening to Whites (Graham, 2000). A rift among dark- and light-skinned slaves resulted,

and current studies show that African Americans continue to have poor relationships based on the historical experiences and perceptions (Hawkins, 1992; Hill, 1999). The maintenance of demeaning stereotypes and negative attitudes keeps African Americans in separate groups, particularly those based on skin tone and class.

Skin tone bias may be oppressive and could support theories of superiority similar to that of White privilege. Light skin in the African American community grants certain unearned privilege that is despised by darker-skinned African Americans. This is true for many other racial groups that have variation in skin tones; fair skin is valued. But, just as being white carries considerable advantage and “maintains itself in the privileged seat of rationality and superiority” (Kincheloe & Steinberg, 1998, p. 6), lightness may constitute power in the African American community that has been used, directly or indirectly, to oppress others. This type of oppression can negatively impact societies and organizations as a whole, not just dark skinned African Americans. Hill (1999) adds, “Greater efforts should be made to encourage all Americans to become attuned to their own color bigotry--and challenge the insidious belief that ‘whiteness’ is a marker of beauty, merit, and intelligence” (p. 86).

Limitations

Limitations include having a small sample size from the Chicagoland area. Generalizations cannot be made to the larger African American population or other geographical areas. Another limitation is that the researcher was the only individual to collect data for this study. The researcher, however, utilized multiple strategies to enhance the trustworthiness of the data analysis and reporting.

Literature Review

Unearned Privilege

The study and exploration of unearned privilege is becoming related to the exploration of White privilege as a system of power and dominance. The focus is being shifted toward viewing not only Whites but all dominant groups as privileged groups because certain groups have advantages that are not merit-based but have been acquired by a position of dominance or power within society. Scholars who write about unearned privilege recognize it and the systems of power it creates and vice versa, and they describe its negative impacts, namely institutional racism, sexism, and other forms of discrimination (Johnson, 2001; McIntosh, 1988; Wildman, 1996; Wildman & Davis, 1995).

One of the most recognized works on unearned privilege centers on White privilege. McIntosh (1988) explored unearned White privilege and its negative implications in her workplace, an institution of higher education. As she began to challenge the unearned privileged status of men in her organization, she realized that being white afforded her a certain privileged status that she had never considered. She and other scholars believe that “naming ‘whiteness’” (Law, 1999, p. 603) and the problems associated with privilege (Johnson, 2001)--i.e., racism, sexism, classism, and ableism, to name a few--can encourage privilege-holders to address the negative impacts of privilege. McIntosh (1988) stated, “Describing white privilege makes one newly accountable” (p. 148). Katz (1994) agreed and stated, “We [white women] may be crystal clear about how, as women, our talents are diminished, overlooked and unheard. But we rarely see how we maintain those same beliefs and behaviors toward others. Understanding our power

and our prejudice can help us identify how we are part of the systems that oppress us and how we collude with those systems” (p. 48). These women write about disowning privilege and speak out against power and privilege, and they agree that staying silent about these issues further perpetuates them.

An important concept of privilege is that “in some contexts, we are privileged and in some subordinated, and these contexts interact” (Wildman & Davis, 1995, p. 578). It is important to recognize this idea as well because, as Russell et al. (1992) stated, when light skinned African Americans “ignore the benefits they may receive from simultaneous membership in another group [privileged due to skin tone] . . . they . . . risk perpetuating a social hierarchy based on appearance” (p. 4). McIntosh (1988) agreed and admitted that although she was treated as subordinate to men, she still held privileges granted to her based on her white skin. Her dual membership in both subordinate (female) and privileged (white) groups helped her to identify the unconscious oppressiveness resulting from her Whiteness.

Intraracial Discrimination

Intraracial differences have always existed, potentially or intentionally causing exclusionary and discriminatory acts. Among Whites, women are seen as a weaker group, so “white women still face . . . very real issues of glass-ceilinged management structures, gender-based salary and benefit inequities” (Katz, 1994, p. 46) in the workplace. Among the Latino and South American groups, Mexicans, Puerto Ricans, and Brazilians have different cultural norms and values, causing them to develop stereotypes about each other. African Americans are spread among different economic classes and have various skin tones, which is fertile ground for inequitable treatment among them. Asians and Pacific Islanders are also a diverse group with vast differences among the Japanese, Taiwanese, Samoan and Iranian, to name a few, that would allow for injustices to occur within the race. The conflicts that can arise within each of these racial groups can manifest in the workplace.

Much of the literature devoted to intraracial discrimination centers on skin tone bias, or colorism, among minority groups, including African Americans, Latin Americans, Asians, and Native Americans (Hall, 2000; Russell et al., 1992; Sheriff, 2000). One area of common research focuses on the stratification of African Americans based on socioeconomic status, including income, education, and career advancement. Studies show that lighter-skinned African Americans fare better than darker skinned African Americans in areas of adult socioeconomic status, educational attainment, and occupational success (Hill, 1999; Hunter, 1998). Also, the EEOC reported that based on the color of the skin, dark-skinned Blacks historically have experienced more [workplace] discrimination from Whites and members of their own race than lighter-skinned Blacks (Mirza, 2003).

Conversely, there has been literature written that discusses intraracial discrimination against lighter-skinned Blacks. To shed light on this phenomenon, Mirza (2003) stated that “color discrimination can cut both ways” (p. 65). She quoted a Duke University Law School professor as saying “[lighter-skinned Blacks] talk about being distanced by members of the African American community because of their lighter skin tone” (p. 65). Also, in 1995, Turner’s article was written to expose African American intraracial discrimination in the workplace, and he described three court cases that involved light-skinned African Americans suing their dark-skinned supervisors for skin color discrimination. Each lawsuit was a landmark case that helped shape employment discrimination laws, as they focused on the need to see color as a factor in

discrimination charges. Although this article does not discuss the prevalence of African American skin color discrimination in the workplace, it makes a recommendation that African Americans communicate with each other about the “reality and impact of intraracial discrimination in the workplace and in other settings” (p. 684).

Mirza (2003) also discussed intraracial discrimination as a phenomenon that exists among groups of Whites, also. Whites use physical features, skin tone, religion, class, and ethnicity as factors for discrimination against those who have the same skin color. Examples include judging fair-skinned Whites with blonde hair and blue eyes as superior to Whites with olive-colored skin and dark hair, Catholics who discriminate against Jewish, white collar workers versus blue collar workers, and Italians versus Irish. It is not unusual, however, to ignore these forms of discrimination in an effort to address more heterogeneous forms of diversity, that is, Whites versus Mexicans or males versus females.

Diversity Training and Privilege

Some companies have begun to offer training in this area of privilege as a result of growing intraracial discrimination charges. “Applebee’s has added a protection, along with cultural sensitivity training, against skin-tone discrimination to its antidiscrimination policies. In other words, the company must protect African-Americans from other African-Americans” (Maxwell, 2003, para. 15). The amount of training that exists on this diversity issue, however, is minimal. Mirza (2003) cited three individuals, a CEO of a consulting group, an EEOC lawyer, and a chair of a law firm’s employer training function, to describe the lack of employer policies and training for color discrimination. The omission of training in this area is detrimental to organizations and, furthermore, could have legal implications.

Aguilar and Woo (2000) described utilizing discussions of unearned privilege and systems of power and privilege in diversity training for national service programs. They state that examining cultural differences without dealing with structural power disparities is ineffective. Diversity trainers, they suggest, should challenge participants to examine their preconceptions and biases more deeply; release the pain, discomfort, and ignorance that result from this introspection; and come to terms with social inequities.

Some diversity training scholars describe discussing White privilege, in particular, as a component of their diversity training programs (Atkinson, 2001; Digh, 2001). Atkinson (2001) also believed that when diversity training programs focus on respecting different cultures as a single component, they ignore “the fact that there are systemic advantages for the white male culture” (p. 76). He further explained that although a focus on White male privilege is important, White women as privilege-holders based on skin color and Black men as privilege-holders based on gender should also be required to explore their statuses.

Methodology

This study utilized a grounded theory method in order to allow participants to speak about their experiences with the phenomenon under investigation. This form of qualitative research “uses a systemic set of procedures to develop an inductively derived grounded theory about a phenomenon” (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 24). The procedures included collecting data through interviews, observations, and documents; analyzing (coding and categorizing) the data; and forming theory. The procedures are not necessarily linear; the theory “evolves during actual

research, and it does this through continuous interplay between analysis and data collection, . . . a general method of [constant] comparative analysis” (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 158).

The grounded theory method allowed the researcher to interpret the stories of participants and give them voice. Strauss and Corbin (1998) stated that qualitative researchers “have an obligation to the actors . . . studied: obligations to “tell their stories” to them and to others--to give them voice” (p. 174) “We owe it to our “subjects” to tell them verbally or in print what we have learned” (p. 174).

Participants

Data were collected in 2004 using ten individual interviews of African American adults of various skin tones. Initially, participants were recruited from the Chicago chapter of the Black Data Processing Associates (BDPA), a national organization for African Americans in the information technology field. This group was chosen because members were predominantly African American and college educated. The researcher sent an e-mailed cover letter that described the study’s purpose and a recruitment questionnaire used to determine eligibility to the president of BDPA, who forwarded the documents to the prospective participants. Six members responded, and two were qualified based on the criteria.

The other eight participants were chosen from referrals from people who were aware that prospective participants had some experience with the phenomenon. These participants were faxed, e-mailed, or hand-delivered a cover letter and questionnaire, and the researcher determined their eligibility to participate in the study.

All the participants, five men and five women, self-identified as African American and described their own skin complexion, as well as how they had heard themselves described (See Figure 1). Five were in the age range of 35-45 years old, four were under 35 years old, and one was over 45. Seven had incomes within the range of \$40,000-\$70,000, and three had salaries above the range. The educational levels of the candidates included two with some college, three with bachelor’s degrees, and five with master’s degrees. The types of organizations in which the participants were employed included state government (2), city government (2), private university (1), hospital (1), technology corporation (1), nonprofit organization (1), community college (1), and a computer consulting firm (1).

All participants were interviewed face-to-face in locations where they felt most comfortable, which included their home or workplace. Participants were given a consent form to sign before the interview began. Each interview was audio-taped and lasted between 45 minutes and 1½ hours. Participants were told that they could end the interview at any point, especially if s/he experienced any discomfort. Each spoke about personal experiences with the phenomenon of intraracial discrimination, mainly skin tone bias.

Semistructured Interviews

Semistructured interviews were used to collect data, and thick, rich descriptions of participants’ experiences were received. Interview participants were allowed to be as specific and clear as they needed to be to describe their personal experiences, although further prompting from the investigator was necessary to ensure the questions were being thoroughly addressed. The participants were asked to be reflective and consider their feelings, thoughts, and other reactions to their experiences with the phenomenon.

The interviews allowed the participants to expand upon their answers and left room for unexpected discussions. After three interviews were completed, the researcher transcribed them. Based on an analysis of the responses, the researcher was able to determine that participants had similar experiences yet the research questions of the study were not being addressed. The impact was not being clearly described by the participants due to a lack of focused probing by the researcher. For this reason, the researcher asked probing questions during the following seven interviews when the participants did not elaborate, particularly the questions, “How did this form of discrimination manifest in the workplace, e.g. behaviors, attitudes, etc? Or, what was the impact?”

During the period following each interview, the researcher turned off the tape recorder and had general conversations with each participant. Each of the participants was even more candid than when the tape recorder was on. Patterns formed regarding the behaviors of the participants after the tape recorder was turned off, and notes were taken to describe the patterns. Patterns also formed regarding the ways in which the participants communicated with the researcher, i.e. some were not initially comfortable discussing the topic until the researcher described some of her own experiences with skin tone bias.

Field Notes and Memos

The researcher took detailed field notes during the 10 interviews and utilized memo writing when ideas formed related to the phenomenon being studied. Field notes were also taken immediately following the interviews and included topics such as body language, comfort/discomfort discussing the subject matter, openness, and the researcher’s comfort level with the participant. Patterns began to develop among the notes of the interviews, so dated memos, which helped in the creation of grounded theory, were written to link the patterns together. Memos also included generalizations about similarities among the interviews, linkages to the literature, and other ideas that connected the interviews to each other. Memos were also used to write notes about concepts that developed.

Theoretical Sensitivity

Theoretical sensitivity is an important component of grounded theory research, which refers to the researcher’s “awareness of the subtleties of meaning of data” (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 41), and contributes to the capacity to understand and have insight into the phenomenon being studied. Personal experience is a source of theoretical sensitivity that provides the researcher with background knowledge of the phenomenon. Strauss and Corbin (1998) state that “the more theoretically sensitive researchers are to issues of class, gender, race, power, and the like, the more attentive they will be to these matters” (p. 173). The researcher of this study is a light-skinned African American woman who has had personal experience with intraracial discrimination, specifically skin tone bias, and, therefore, shared her familiarity with the studied phenomenon in the form of a journal. The details of the researcher’s experiences with skin tone bias, as described in the journal, were quite similar to those given by the participants. The data from the journal was also used to develop theory.

<u>Pseudonym</u> <u>Gender</u>	<u>Self-descriptions of Skin Tone</u>	<u>Descriptions Offered by Others</u>
Participant M Male	Yellow, Light caramel	Light
Participant R Female	Brown	Yellow, Light skinned, Bright
Participant H Male	Brown-skinned, Light brown-skinned	Light skinned, Brown-skinned, Reddish-brown
Participant A Male	Brown, Light brown	Light-skinned, Brown-skinned
Participant D Female	Medium brown to a Lighter brown	Golden brown, A nice brown
Participant W Female	Dark-skinned	Black, Dark-skinned
Participant B Female	Light-skinned	Pale, Yellow, Latina-olive
Participant S Male	Medium hue	Medium, Fair, A little yellow
Participant G Female	Light-complected with yellow undertones	Apricot, High yellow, Redbone
Participant T Male	Dark brown	Dark brown colored, Chocolate, Black

Figure 1. Skin complexion descriptions.

Data Analysis

The researcher began the analysis with open coding of the transcribed interviews, field notes, memos, and the personal experience statement line by line. Significant words and phrases were written in the margins next to each line. These terms and phrases were then written on separate sheets of paper, which resulted in 40 pages of key words and phrases. Properties that were similar were listed together in a cluster and given a category name. Subcategories were then created, and titles of the categories were changed back and forth until the researcher was comfortable with the titles.

Axial coding occurred when the researcher related each category to the subcategories and to other categories. Memos were utilized to record ideas about evolving theory. Constant comparisons were made, and some categories were collapsed into each other, particularly when there was redundancy or a close relationship was identified. Selective coding was the final step, in which core categories were identified and explored. Many memos were utilized to integrate categories and consider the development of the core category.

Trustworthiness and Credibility

The researcher used various methods to ensure trustworthiness and credibility before and during the data analysis process, i.e. member checks and external audits. All participants were asked to review their transcribed interviews for accuracy. Also, as Creswell (1998) explained, “In member checks, the researcher solicits informants’ views of the credibility of the findings and interpretations” (p. 202). Therefore, three participants were informed of the final theory and asked if it was clearly stated, made sense to them, and appeared to be based on their experiences. They were allowed to give feedback that helped the researcher solidify the theory.

An external audit was used to share findings with readers for inter-rater reliability. This method was useful and helped the researcher articulate the theory to others. And finally, the researcher consulted with her professor for feedback as the theory emerged. This helped to ensure the theory was properly generated via grounded theory methods.

Findings

The findings indicate that skin tone bias is a common workplace phenomenon that results in certain negative behaviors, both intentional and unintended. These will be discussed.

Impact of Skin Tone Bias

Unequal Treatment. Participants were able to describe incidences of unequal and preferential treatment of light-skinned African Americans in the workplace. Many participants believed light-skinned African Americans were afforded special concessions from both Whites and other Blacks on the basis of their light skin. All the participants stated that light skinned African Americans are at an advantage. They believed that light-skinned African Americans “get the benefit of the doubt” (Participant M), and “are often seen as being more capable” (Participant D) and “more professional”(Participant M). Participant A, a previous corporate America employee, said, “If you’re being interviewed for a position, in house, . . . you will have . . . basically the same race going for the same position, but. . . most of the time, the person of [a] lighter shade would get the position.” Participant M described an incident when a lighter-skinned employee was retained at the expense of a darker-skinned employee. The darker-skinned employee was viewed as less professional by the manager and the lighter-skinned employee more competent, so the darker- skinned employee was laid off. Participant M described, “The other one [light-skinned employee] gave him a better image for his area . . . [so] he kept her.”

Participants of all shades described the forms of inferior treatment that they had witnessed dark-skinned African Americans experience. Participant B said a fellow black employee was being condescending and belittling to another dark-skinned employee and there was no apparent reason for this treatment. She believed it was due to his dark skin. Participant D said, “There’s a tendency to give them [light-skinned people] a chance, a tendency to be more concerned or to let them try. Whereas with the darker-skinned people, there’s a tendency, if they don’t so-called ‘cut it,’ that’s where the buck stops.”

The lighter-skinned African Americans reported maltreatment from darker-skinned African Americans. They reported hearing demeaning statements, being called or hearing derogatory names, and being asked inappropriate questions about their heritage and skin color. Participant G said she heard references such as “light, bright, damn near White,” “she thinks she’s cute,” and “with her high-yellow self” from darker-skinned African Americans. Another said, “You hear a

lot, ‘Oh, you wouldn’t understand.’ I hear that comment a lot, that I wouldn’t understand [a Black issue]” (Participant B). She also explained, “When you grow up so light, . . . with a white mother and a black father, you are gonna have to explain some things. So it’s always a topic.”

The light-skinned participants disagreed with the darker-skinned participants regarding the mistreatment of light-skinned employees. Only the lighter-skinned participants were able to describe maltreatment that they had experienced or accounts that included negative treatment of other light-skinned African Americans. For example, when asked if she perceived that there is discrimination against light-skinned African Americans in the workplace, Participant W, a self-identified dark-skinned person, said, “It would only be racial . . . from White to Black.” Another participant, Participant T, agreed and said, “Because I’m darker-skinned, I experience more blatant discrimination and racism, and they [lighter-skinned people] really don’t feel it.” Participant R, disagreed, however, and said, “Being light-skinned didn’t stop me from getting laid off. . . . He [the black boss] walked me out the door, and the dark-skinned ones were still there.”

Employee Relations and Work Environment. Participants described strained employee relations and an uncomfortable work environment as results of skin tone bias. Some said they witnessed segregated work environments where dark-skinned and light-skinned African Americans separated themselves from one another. Participant W purported, “I see light folks sticking together [more] than do darker-skinned, kind of murmuring to ourselves.” Participant M described his experience in a corporate workplace by stating, “You’ll see certain black people who aren’t spoken to by others because they don’t, . . . because they’re too light or too dark. You know, all the sisters with good hair won’t befriend, for some strange reason, won’t befriend the one dark-skinned sister with short hair because she doesn’t fit in with them.” Participant D said, “There’s no cohesiveness within the group [of African Americans]. The individuals do not stick together, they do not come together; there’s a breakdown in communication.”

Some participants believed intraracial discrimination prevents a company from truly benefiting from good employees. Participant S said intraracial discrimination “is discouraging because there’s a lot of talent that’s not being utilized because they [managers] have these biases.” Focusing too closely on skin color means “you missed the most important parts...their heart, their soul, the story they have to tell” (Participant R). The participants felt darker-skinned employees’ talents were being undervalued, which would negatively impact an organization’s ability to become excellent.

Unintended/Indirect Oppression. Participants stated that they themselves, as well as others, had begun to accept as commonplace that lighter-skinned African Americans received better treatment. Comments included, “People are so used to it in the workplace that it doesn’t cause a problem” (Participant A), and “you’re just accustomed to it” (Participant R). However, the attention that light-skinned African Americans receive, the opportunities that are offered to them, and the preferential treatment they experience indirectly caused darker-skinned African Americans to feel insecure and inadequate. Darker-skinned participants spoke about this form of oppression and made comments such as, “I see the darker skins moping. You know, with their heads hung down as if, you know, ‘I’m lacking something.’”

Light-skinned African Americans were also oppressed by skin tone bias. They explained that their talent and competence have been minimized when others believe they are benefiting from

their light skin and not merit. Participant M said a dark-skinned coworker told him, “So, you know the only reason they promoted you was because you are light-skinned. They find you acceptable.” He continued, “[This] was her reasoning, nothing to do with my educational background or work ethic.” Participant T admitted to making similar statements to his coworkers when he reported, “And I tell ’em, you know, you’re benefiting because you’re a lighter color. I tell them all the time.” These comments are belittling and may cause lighter-skinned African Americans to feel undervalued and inadequate.

Implications of Skin Tone Bias in Diversity Training

Opportunity for Discourse. Participants were asked about the availability of training or opportunities to have discourse about skin tone bias within their organizations. Although none of them had the opportunity to discuss this topic formally in the workplace, they believed it would be beneficial and important to have these conversations. Each participant believed it was important to be open and honest in order to truly improve relations and communication in the workplace. Participant M said: The only way you can resolve it [intra-racial discrimination] in the workplace is that . . . like any other diversity education, we as Blacks have to tell the truth. I think the reason the issue’s not addressed is ’cause we lie.” Participant R said, “This is a hard subject to talk about sometimes. I would really be interested in sitting down and having the discussion with people . . . White people...Asians.” Also, Participant B said, “I think diversity training, and I think just giving people an outlet to share, . . . I mean, if you come and just sit in a room and you share your experience with them, whether it’s a formal training or just you talking because this is something weighing on you, . . . I’m gonna learn from it, and I’m gonna have some empathy and better understanding.” Participant H stated, “We don’t address . . . the loathing meaning of . . . statements.” He continued, “If we address the meaning of [certain derogatory statements] and what happens to people, hear the voices of what happens to people, because part of it is being able to hear this dark-skinned person being articulate. So the oppressed has to have the freedom to talk about it.” These comments suggest that African Americans are interested in having some serious discourse on the subject of intra-racial discrimination and believe it can make a difference in workplace relations. They want the opportunity to voice their opinions and share their experiences so that others will understand them.

Inclusivity. Participants felt it was important to involve others in discussions of intra-racial discrimination. They believed a more inclusive diversity training model would include a focus on other racial groups’ issues of power and privilege. Participants were well versed on the similar impacts of this phenomenon on other ethnic groups, e.g., Asians, Eastern Indians, and Mexicans. For example, Participant B stated, “It’s not this American thing; it’s an international, worldwide thing.” Participant R said, “It’s not just our group. Read *The Good Earth* [regarding Asian intra-racial discrimination]...it’s an excellent story”

Discussion

Cycle of Silence

This study explored the impact of skin tone bias among African Americans in the workplace. The data revealed the negative effects of skin tone bias. These effects include a range of behaviors from blatant exclusionary measures to oppressive workplace environments. Although African Americans participants were aware that skin tone bias exists in the workplace, they were unaware of the various negative experiences of their lighter or darker counterparts and the depth of the impact of this form of homogenous group privilege. This was evident in their conflicting testimonies regarding the maltreatment of light-skinned African Americans and their lack of knowledge of their similar experiences of exclusion in the workplace. There is also an element of passive acceptance of skin tone bias among African Americans. Hooks (2003) supported this idea by stating, "Most black Americans, from slavery to the present day, along with white Americans and other nonblack folks, have passively accepted and condoned color caste" (p. 38). The passive acceptance of skin tone bias coupled with the personal, often taboo, nature of the phenomenon, creates silence around this issue of privilege. Johnson (2001) called this silencing the path of least resistance and stated that too many times African Americans accept forms of power disparities, such as color caste hierarchies, when they do not challenge this social construct. Because it is easier to avoid conflict and not draw attention to oneself, people keep quiet.

African Americans would like to have the opportunity to address power and privilege through formal or informal discussions, but they do not take steps toward initiating them. Johnson (2001) further described the hesitance to discuss issues of privilege:

To do something about the trouble around difference, we have to talk about it, but most of the time we don't because it feels too risky. This is true for just about everyone, but especially for members of privileged categories. . . . The discomfort, defensiveness, and fear come in part from not knowing how to talk about privilege without feeling vulnerable to anger and blame. (p. 82)

These factors prevent full exploration of the history, meaning, and impact of this phenomenon. These components must be explored on both a micro and macro level, but they are seldom even articulated. Although African Americans are willing to begin discourse to address and ameliorate the problems of privilege and power resulting from skin tone bias, hooks (2003) believed:

Merely describing the problems of color caste is not an act of critical intervention. Change will come only as we know the ways these hierarchies create a crisis of consciousness that must be addressed politically. . . . Everyone must break through the wall of denial that would have us believe hatred of blackness emerges from individual psyches and acknowledge that it is systematically taught through processes of socialization in white supremacist society. (p. 130)

Dialogue, therefore, must entail more than the superficial level of conversations among Blacks only. Deliberate discussions of the systemic and institutional racism that supports power and privilege must include Whites in order to fully dismantle the structures that have been created by White privilege. Whites must begin to articulate their role in African American intraracial discrimination, that is, they must speak openly about the ways in which whiteness is the standard

for success, beauty, and power. This standard is promoted via a white male-dominated society that controls the media, major businesses, educational institutions, and government. Naming these forces and addressing them with marginalized groups is one step toward ameliorating issues of power and privilege.

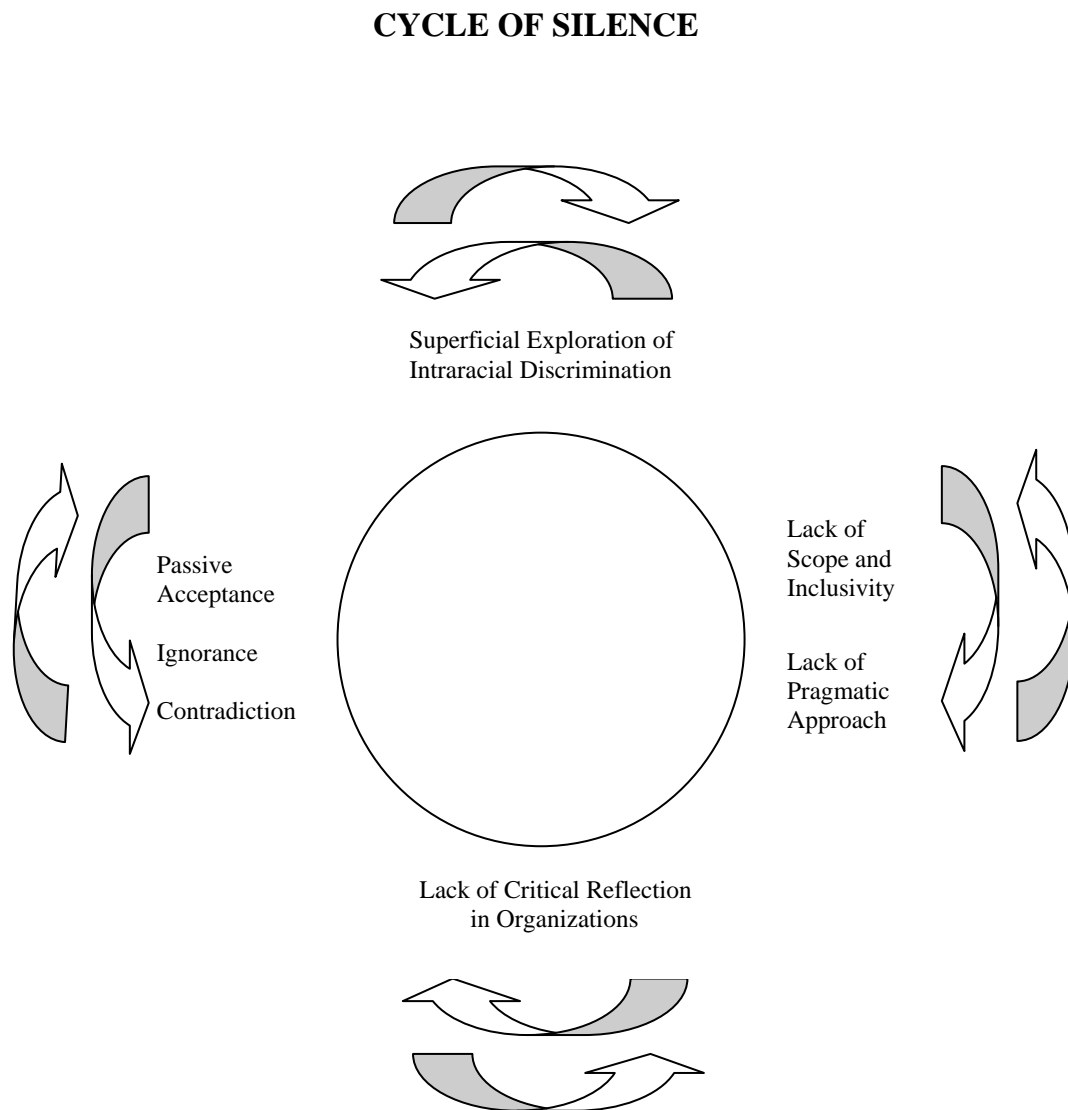


FIGURE 2. Cycle of Silence

A negative relationship exists between the superficial level of the exploration of intraracial discrimination and its effects and the lack of critical reflection on this phenomenon in

organizations. Each factor can perpetuate the other. A cycle of silence will continue until a critical intervention is utilized. In order to break the cycle of silence (see Figure 2) and create a positive reciprocal relationship, the application of critical perspectives, including critical human resource development, should be considered.

Implications for Critical Human Resource Development (HRD)

Critical human resource development can be a method used to address the silencing of issues of race, power, and privilege in the workplace as well as the exploration of systems of privilege in organizations. A critical exploration would include providing voice for the repressed and marginalized; exposing assumptions and values; revealing the use of power and control; and challenging inequities and sacrifices made in the name of efficiency, effectiveness, and profitability through a self-reflexive critique of rhetoric, tradition, authority, and objectivity (Fenwick, 2004). One critical approach that is useful is the concept of double-loop learning. Double-loop learning (Argyris, 1998; Argyris & Schon, 1974) calls for people to move beyond “whatever degree of inaccessibility, ambiguity, vagueness, and inconsistency already exists” (Argyris, 1998, p. 345), which is termed single-loop learning, to “questioning underlying goals and assumptions” (p. 345). As this study suggests, a great deal of ambiguity and inconsistency can be associated with skin tone bias. In order to delve into deep-rooted issues--their causes, the meaning, and the impacts--one must pursue double-loop learning. Greenwood (1998) stated that this is done by requiring and utilizing “reflection on values and norms...and the social structures which were instrumental in their development and which render them meaningful. By reflecting on the world they are instrumental in creating, human agents can learn to change it in ways that are more congruent with the values and theories they espouse” (p. 1049). Opportunities to reflect on organizational social structures should be encouraged and provided within organizations, and diverse groups should be invited to begin serious consideration of the impacts of the structures.

Research shows that unearned privilege is just as harmful to the holder of the privilege as it is to the person with less power (Johnson, 2001; Wildman & Davis, 1995). Johnson (2001) discussed how privilege impacts others by stating, “everything that is done to receive or maintain [privilege]--however passive and unconscious--results in suffering and deprivation for someone” (p. 10). To address the indirect harm caused by privilege, he suggested encouraging an understanding of the system of privilege. Critical HRD supporters must begin the dialogue that leads to meaningful exploration and deeper understanding of power and privilege in organizations.

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