COLORISM EMBODIED: SKIN TONE AND PSYCHOSOCIAL WELL-BEING IN ADOLESCENCE

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Embodiment is a salient marker of the human experience. The physical constraints of our body and the ability of our mind to actively reflect on our body as we are interacting in the world shape our mental images of the world—our thoughts, feelings, and perceptions. In the absence of a physical body, there is no mind, and in the absence of a functioning mind, we are unable to perceive the world. Our abilities to self-reflect and make self-appraisals, including those based on our physical appearances, play an integral role in identity development and help define who we are as persons. Feelings of satisfaction and self-consciousness about our bodies influence the way we experience and perceive the world throughout the course of our lives, but especially during specific developmental periods such as adolescence. Moreover, these feelings take on especially important roles during specific developmental periods, including adolescence.

Although each of us experiences varying levels of bodily self-awareness depending upon the circumstances and current context (e.g., standing in front of a three-way mirror in the dressing room, being the only person of the opposite sex at a business meeting, being alone in a room with
the door closed), adolescents are especially vulnerable to experiences of increased levels of bodily awareness due to their rapidly changing bodies and advancing cognitive capabilities. Being the only dark-skinned child in the sixth grade, the only overweight girl in gym class, or the shortest boy in the entire ninth grade exacerbates normative feelings of self-consciousness associated with entry into adolescence. Our bodies make us visible to others; other people view us and we perceive ourselves as perceived. This unavoidable social cognition contributes to the close monitoring of our bodies, as we as humans manage our appearance to create desired impressions.

Many factors influence body image and awareness of one's self as a physical being, but some, such as race and gender, have taken on a wider social and political significance. Race, for example, is unique in that the very definition of racial categories has often been dependent on a socially constructed, value-laden hierarchy of physical features—most notably skin color. Additionally, racial categories tie not only to physical features but also to various stereotypes related to intelligence and behavior. As social and cognitive skills develop, children gain increased awareness of societal messages regarding privileged phenotypic features (e.g., light skin, straight hair). Thus, society confronts many youth of color with a double quandary in regard to body image and appearance; society not only devalues their physical features as unattractive (or exotified), but they also link their appearances to negative cognitive and behavioral traits. For children who do not possess the socially valued traits (and, at times, even for those who do, but perceive that they do not), this can lead to decreased satisfaction with self. In order to promote positive coping responses in youth and to combat racism in the 21st century, it will be necessary to acknowledge the continued presence of societal biases (no matter how subtlety they are expressed) and understand how youth interpret and react to these biases.

In this chapter, we examine how minority status exacerbates the negotiation of body image and physical sense of self and creates challenges for youth of color. First, we present Spencer's (1995) theoretical framework, the Phenomenological Variant of Ecological Systems Theory (PVEST), to identify and interpret the risks, challenges, and coping strategies that youth employ in order to negotiate physical self-consciousness. We then present a social and historical overview of colorism (e.g., skin color bias) in the United States, followed by a review of literature on body image, skin color perceptions, and preferences, and the impact of skin color bias on psychological well-being, noting empirical findings, methodological challenges, and broader implications. Finally, we will present preliminary findings from our study of skin color perceptions and attitudes among our sample of racially diverse adolescents. The discussion covers the implications of our findings along with possibilities for future research.

PHENOMENOLOGICAL VARIANT OF ECOLOGICAL SYSTEMS THEORY (PVEST): AN IDENTITY-FOCUSED, CULTURAL-ECOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

As a synthesis of several frameworks, Spencer's (1995) PVEST combined a phenomenological perspective with Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory, linking context with perception. PVEST serves as a model to examine normative human development, framed through the interaction of identity processes and context. As such, it utilizes an Identity-Focused Cultural-Ecological (ICE) perspective, integrating issues of social, political, and cultural context with normative developmental processes. As a theory of human development, PVEST accounts generally for the differences in experience, perception, and dissonance, all of which are important to body image and physical sense of self. The PVEST model consists of five basic components that form a dynamic theoretical system, (a) net vulnerability, (b) net stress engagement, (c) reactive coping methods, (d) emergent identities, and (e) life-stage specific outcomes.

The first component, net vulnerability level, consists of the contexts and characteristics that pose potential challenges during specific developmental periods throughout the life course. Risk contributors are factors that may predispose individuals to adverse outcomes, depending on the context. Protective factors that serve as buffers against the experience of stress may offset risk, thus, defining the net vulnerability level for a given individual. For youth of color more generally, and for Black youth in particular, normative phenotypic features such as skin color are risk factors in a society that clearly and consistently devalues dark skin. Other risk factors may include socioeconomic conditions such as living in poverty, imposed expectations such as race and gender stereotypes, and larger historical processes such as racial segregation and discrimination. Self-appraisal is a key factor in identity formation, and perceptions of risks and resources are central to the process. Thus, the manner in which youth of color negotiate their own physical appearances and body image is contingent upon both macro- and micro-level characteristics of the social context and the availability of protective resources.

Net stress engagement, the second component of PVEST, refers to the actual experience of situations that challenge an individual's well-
being. While net vulnerability represents the net balance between risk contributors and protective factors, net stress engagement represents the manifestation of risks as potential challenges; stressors are actualized risk factors. And, since social and structural supports can help youth negotiate the challenge of experienced stress, supports are actualized protective factors. Experiences of racism—both subtle and overt—and other related dissonance-producing situations are salient stressors for youth of color, exacerbating normative developmental issues encountered by all adolescents (e.g., puberty, identity exploration, peer relationships). With the onset of adolescence, body image and appearance become more salient, with physical features, such as skin color, serving as potential sources of dissonance for youth of color. Normative cognitive maturation makes awareness of dissonance acute and unavoidable, especially for those adolescents with no available support networks. Research suggests that, for youth of color, proactive racial socialization and positive ethnic identity are two protective factors that may serve as buffers against feelings of dissonance, directly impacting the level of stress they experience (e.g., Stevenson, H. C., 1994). Thus, within a given context, the net level of stress an individual experiences is the balance between his or her perception of risks and the availability of supports.

In response to the challenges that experiences of stress present, adolescents employ reactive coping methods to minimize or resolve dissonance-producing situations. Reactive coping responses include problem-solving strategies that can lead to adaptive or maladaptive solutions, depending on the context. It is important to remember that an adaptive solution in one context may be maladaptive in another context. For example, a Black adolescent boy walking through a predominantly Black neighborhood may adopt a certain body posture to avoid ridicule from his peers. However, the same body language may get him in trouble when walking through a predominantly White neighborhood because of residents' stereotypical beliefs about adolescent males based on the color of their skin. As youth employ different coping strategies, they are, at the same time, making self-appraisals, based in part on others' reactions to their behavior. Youth internalize those strategies that yield desired results for the ego (e.g., strategies that boost positive self-feelings or reduce feelings of anxiety and fear) and may replicate them in other situations. Over time, strategies that successfully protect the ego become stable coping responses, and, coupled, yield emergent identities. Emergent identities define how individuals view themselves within, and across, multiple contexts of their lives (e.g., family, school, and neighborhood). They provide stable ego processes experienced over time and place. The combination of racial and ethnic identity, sex role understanding, self, and other appraisals all help to define our identities, including our body images and physical self-appraisals.

Our identities lay the foundation for future perceptions, self-appraisals, and behaviors, leading to productive or adverse life-stage specific outcomes. Productive outcomes include good physical and mental health, academic competence, a sense of purpose, positive body image, and positive feelings about self; while adverse outcomes include poor physical and mental health, a lack of purpose, early parenthood, and self-destructive behaviors.

The PVEST framework represents dynamic, normative human processes that continue throughout the lifespan as individuals balance new risks against protective factors, encounter new stressors (potentially offset by supports), and establish novel and, ideally, more mature coping strategies. Throughout the process, individuals continue to refine and adjust their internal perceptions of themselves. Thus, identity is a process (as opposed to a static entity) that continues to evolve and develop throughout the lifespan. Spencer (1995) designed the PVEST model to elucidate salient challenges and developmental processes impacting identity formation during each successive stage of development, all occurring in a broader social context. The focus of this chapter is on one specific challenge, colorism, and the connections between body image, the perception of and attitudes toward skin color and positive feelings about self.

**SOCIAL AND HISTORICAL ROOTS OF COLORISM IN THE UNITED STATES**

Colorism, or bias based on the lightness or darkness of a person's skin tone, is not a new phenomenon. In the early 17th century, when colonial plantation owners brought the first African slaves and White indentured servants to the American colonies, it was in the best interest of the planters to create a social hierarchy based on skin color. By elevating White servants to a higher rung on the social ladder than enslaved Blacks (who were relegated to the lowest rung), they were able to prevent dissatisfied slaves and servants from joining forces and starting an uprising against their landowners (Steinhorn & Diggs-Brown, 1999). In doing so, poor White servants suddenly found themselves with racial privileges, based solely on the color of their skin, that set them apart from the slaves and provided them with satisfaction in their newly acquired status over Blacks.

In their book, *The Color Complex*, Russell, Wilson, and Hall (1992) detailed the history of race mixing that contributed to the variation of skin color in America. Before slavery was abolished, it was not unusual
for White slave masters to engage in coerced sexual relationships with enslaved Black women, resulting in light-skinned mulatto (one-half Black), quadroon (one-fourth Black), and octoroon (one-eighth Black) children that were sold for a large profit on the slave market (Izrael, 2001). Slaves with White fathers led more privileged existences than their "pure Black" counterparts (Frazier, 1957). White slave masters typically assigned tasks that required more training and intellectual ability to light-skinned slaves, while they left dark-skinned slaves to toil over the most physically demanding or menial work (Blackwell, 1985; Frazier, 1957). As a result, there was an assumption of privilege associated with light skin. The preferential treatment of light slaves caused the darker slaves to feel inferior and the lighter slaves to become further alienated from their families and communities. Nevertheless, this same treatment made the dream of freedom more attainable for light-skinned slaves. The close contact with Whites exposed them to improved basic needs (e.g., food, clothing, and shelter), opportunities to read and write, and exposure to White society (Franklin, 1980; Landry, 1987).

Lighter Blacks continued to experience skin color privilege even after the abolition of slavery. Opportunities for occupational training, education, and property acquisition were more accessible to light-skinned Blacks, in part, because racist ideology among Whites continued to dictate a preference for lighter skin, although Blacks themselves also helped to perpetuate this philosophy. Lighter skinned Blacks passed their phenotypic privileges on to their children by avoiding marriage with darker skinned Blacks and maintaining ties with the White community (Hunter, 2004). Further, they formed social clubs (e.g., the Bon Ton Society of Washington, DC and the Blue Vein Society of Nashville) in which the lightness of one's skin mainly determined membership. Even historically, Black universities discriminated against applicants based on the color of their skin. Universities granted lighter skinned Blacks (those with mixed blood) access to a liberal arts education while they denied darker skinned Blacks ("pure Blacks") the same privilege based on the implicit belief that they did not have the intellectual capacity to benefit from a more advanced education (Maddox, 1998). The belief that whiteness, and anything white-like, was good or superior, while darkness, and anything black, was evil or inferior drove these biased practices. Over time, the habit of associating white with good and black with evil was so automatic that it embedded itself deeply in the American psyche, helping to perpetuate the myth of White supremacy that continues to exist today.

Consider, for instance, the fact that skin color remains a frequent source of social and community acceptance or rejection even during the current climate of seemingly "color-blind" policies developed to eliminate skin color bias. Russell et al. (1992) claimed that the significance of one's skin color begins nearly at birth: "Many Black families can rarely disguise their anxious concern about the color and features of a newborn" (p. 94). Families often pass on a range of attitudes about skin color to children (Boyd-Franklin, 1989). For example, in some Black families, light skin color is prized and regarded as special, while in other Black families, dark-skinned members are preferred and light-skinned members are viewed as a constant reminder of the considerable shame and guilt attached to slavery and miscegenation.

Skin tone continues to affect relationships throughout different developmental periods. During childhood and early adolescence, overt and covert within group color bias exists, particularly where peer relationships are concerned. Some of this literature has found evidence that some prefer children with lighter complexions as friends over those with darker complexions (e.g., Vaughn & Langlois, 1983).

Moreover, findings from more recent studies provide evidence that skin color continues to be a significant predictor of educational attainment and socioeconomic status among Blacks. Several studies have found that even after controlling for participants' gender, age, and parental socioeconomic status, lighter skinned Blacks completed more years of schooling than darker skinned Blacks (Hughes & Hartel, 1990; Keith & Herring, 1991). In addition, Keith and Herring (1991) reported that the personal income among lighter skinned participants in their study was 65% greater than that of Black participants with darker complexions. Unfortunately, the tendency to discriminate based on skin color is not unique to the continental United States. Studies have shown that colorism exists in a number of countries around the world including Puerto Rico (Hall, 1997), Japan (Wagatsuma, 1968), India (Beteille, 1968), and the Central and South American countries of Brazil, Portugal, and Mexico (Russell et al., 1992). In all of these societies, as in the United States, skin color serves to stratify individuals' educational, occupational, and economic opportunities, with fewer opportunities afforded to those with the darkest skin, even though our current government would have us believe otherwise.

**SKIN TONE AS DEVELOPMENTAL CHALLENGE FOR ADOLESCENTS OF COLOR**

**Body Image: A Normative Adolescent Challenge Exacerbated by Color Bias**

For all human beings, the body is a fundamental component of lived experience; our body is always with us, consciously and unconsciously
affecting our thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. Self-understanding and knowledge about the physical world develop, in part, as a consequence of our physical motor capabilities. Our bodies provide the means for us to physically explore our environments and interact with others. Self-awareness—the understanding that we exist apart from objects and other people—develops through our social interactions. As Vallacher (1980) pointed out, we become aware of ourselves because other people are aware of us. Children's developing abilities to take the perspective of another allows them to develop a sense of who they are as persons. Over time, children begin to internalize the perspectives of others, especially significant others such as their parents, friends, and teachers (Vallacher, 1980).

Being persons with particular bodies influences how other people respond to us. In turn, our perceptions of others' reactions toward our physical appearances influence how we respond to them. Thus, the mental representation of our physical selves (e.g., our body images) develops, in part, from our perception of how others evaluate our appearances. Consequently, when we reflect on our physical appearance, we use criteria that we have inferred from others and internalized as ours, especially during earlier stages of development. As we get older, although we are aware of others' attitudes toward us, we do not necessarily accept them as valid, particularly if they widely contradict our internalized views of self.

Our body image may or may not be accurate, in terms of objective reality (Weinshenker, 2002). Nevertheless, it influences how we feel about our appearances, and how we respond to those feelings despite whether we base our mental pictures on fantasy or reality. The affective component of body image is the emotional response or level of satisfaction we experience when comparing perceptions of our actual to ideal body image (e.g., the perceived perfect body). Our perception of the physical traits that our family, friends, and larger society value influences our mental image of the ideal body. When the gap between our actual and ideal body image is too large, it can lead to the development of a negative body image, diminished self-satisfaction, and maladaptive coping behaviors (e.g., eating disorders, illegal use of steroids).

There is a wealth of research on body image among adolescents (especially among girls), primarily because the transition into adolescence precipitates an increased focus on the self—both the inner self and the outer self. It is difficult for young people to escape from being preoccupied with their physical appearance given the dramatic bodily changes puberty ushers in, especially when others are always pointing out those changes with comments such as, “Is that hair I see growing on your chin?” or “You don’t look like a little girl anymore.” Further, with the onset of formal operational thought, adolescents become more introspective and more likely to engage in thinking about what others are thinking about them. For the first time, they begin to really see and appraise themselves through the perceived eyes of others (a realization of what they believe they represent to others by virtue of their physical appearance).

According to Damon and Hart (1988), a normative shift occurs between the early and late stages of adolescent self-concept development. Adolescents' self-reflection shifts from a heightened awareness of the body to a recognition of more abstract psychological processes. During early adolescence, youth base self-evaluations predominantly on normative standards, social comparisons, and behaviors, evolving into personal beliefs and standards during late adolescence. Given that early adolescence is a period when youths' social environments are rapidly expanding and their bodies are quickly changing, the task of meeting new people and trying to make a good first impression becomes a more frequent occurrence, and for some, a common source of anxiety. Youth often base first impressions on physical appearance, prompting adolescents to focus even more on their looks and how they measure up in the eyes of others. As a result, young people are continuously modifying their body image in response to others' perceived reactions.

It has been well documented that girls typically report greater levels of body dissatisfaction than boys (e.g., Rosenblum & Lewis, 1999; Kenealy, Gleeson, Prude, & Shaw, 1991), with White girls consistently reporting higher levels of dissatisfaction than Black girls (see Franko & Striegel-Moore, 2002). For example, in a recent study of children between the ages of 8 and 17 years, Thompson, Rafioriu, and Sargent (2003) found that girls, regardless of age, were more likely to report being overweight and more concerned about their weight than boys are. These findings were more pronounced for older White girls than for older Black girls, although researchers did not find these differences among younger girls. Similarly, Parker et al. (1995) noted that Black and White adolescent girls in their study differed in the criteria they use in forming their images of the ideal body. They found that White girls tended to use the “Barbie Doll” ideal as the criterion for the perfect body, while Black girls had more flexible notions of attractiveness, basing their ideal body image on the specific features of their appearance that they considered attractive. However, other research with more racially diverse samples found that diminished body image satisfaction is not limited to White adolescent girls. In a large health survey study of adolescents, Storry, French, Resnick, and Blum (1995) found that among girls in their study,
Asians, Hispanics, and Whites reported lower levels of body image satisfaction than Black and Native Americans did.

Altabe (1998) suggested that the reason researchers consistently detect racial differences in body image is because most research assesses weight related body image rather than nonweight related body image. She designed her study of a racially diverse group of college students to help fill the gap in knowledge about racial and gender differences in nonweight related body image. In addition to completing more traditional measures of body image and perceived attractiveness, participants completed the Physical Appearance Discrepancy Questionnaire (PADQ; Altabe, 1996); this measure asked respondents to list the physical traits that best describe their actual physical appearance, ideal body images, and perception of physical traits their cultures valued most. Findings concerning body image dissatisfaction and ratings of physical attractiveness among females in the study were consistent with other findings. Whites displayed the most weight related body dissatisfaction and Blacks rated themselves higher in physical attractiveness than Hispanics who, in turn, rated themselves higher than Asians and Whites. In addition to replicating earlier findings, examinations of the five most frequently listed ideal body image traits revealed some interesting patterns—males and females in all racial groups listed height as an ideal trait; Asian and White males and all of the females listed being thinner; Black and White females and all of the males listed being more toned; Black, Hispanic, and Asian females listed having long or longer hair; and all of the groups listed having a different shade of skin color (either darker or lighter) as an ideal trait. Asians valued light skin the most, followed by Blacks. Conversely, all of the groups except Black females and Asian males included having a darker shade of skin color on their list of the top five ideal traits. However, when examining cultural values of attractiveness, a similar proportion of Asians and Blacks listed light or lighter skin as a culturally valued trait (23.5% and 21.2% respectively), with a smaller proportion of Hispanics and Whites listing light or lighter skin as a trait their cultures valued (10.5% and 8%, respectively). Findings from this study highlight the importance of examining physical traits other than body weight when examining racial differences in body image. Further, as indicated by participants' lists of culturally valued traits, college students from different racial groups were easily able to pinpoint physical traits they perceived as those that their cultural group valued. When does this awareness develop, and how does it affect our individual life outcomes? The following section addresses these questions by briefly reviewing research on children's skin color awareness and attitudes toward skin color.
Subsequent research on children's skin color preferences and racial identifications generally supported the K. B. Clark and M. P. Clark's (1947) findings. Despite different types of props and stimuli (e.g., puppets, dolls, line drawings of children and animals, photographs of children and adults, etc.), researchers continued to find that both White and Black children evaluated light-skinned people more positively than dark-skinned people, and that all groups of children routinely displayed pro-White/anti-Black biases, although these biases were more pronounced among White children (e.g., Anderson & Cromwell, 1977; Landreth & Johnson, 1953; Moreland, 1963; Spencer & Horowitz, 1973; Spencer, 1984; Williams, Boswell, & Best, 1975). Moreover, preferences for light-skinned figures or the color white were found among children from both southern and northern regions of the United States (e.g., Asher & Allen, V. L., 1969; Greenwald & Oppenheim, 1968; Radke, Sutherland, & Rosenberg, 1950; Stevenson, H. W., & Stewart, 1958), suggesting that the tentacles of skin color bias extended beyond regions that overtly displayed racial bias and bigotry to regions that seemingly more open-minded and less tolerant of blatant racism. It would appear that children are equally skilled in identifying overt and covert expressions of colorism.

Unfortunately, findings from skin color studies conducted within the past 20 years suggest that not much has changed. Studies among racially diverse groups of children, adolescents, and adults indicate that society has made little progress in changing pro-White/anti-Black biases (e.g., Averhart & Bigler, 1997; Bond & Cash, 1992; Cramer & Anderson, 2003; Porter, 1991). This is true despite technological improvements in stimuli that allow for more realistic, digitally altered images and the relatively recent use of neutral stimuli, such as color wheels and color bars, that eliminate bias based on physical appearance, in addition to allowing for a wider range of skin color selections. For example, in Averhart and Bigler's (1997) study of perceived skin color and racial attitudes among a sample of younger Black elementary school students, researchers presented children with five ceramic tiles, ranging in color from light tan to dark brown, and asked them to select the tile with the color that was most like their own skin color. The researchers then examined the association between children's skin color selections and their racial attitudes. Investigators read racially stereotypical and counterstereotypical stories about light- and dark-skinned Black characters to the children and later tested them for their memory of story details. They found that children who selected the lighter tiles as being most like their own skin color were more likely to remember racially stereotyped stories (those in which darker skinned characters were described with negative qualities and lighter skinned characters were described with positive qualities) than children who selected the darker tiles. Interestingly, experimenter ratings of children's actual skin colors did not relate to skin color attitudes and memory. Averhart and Bigler suggested that this was an indication that children's racial attitudes may alter their perceptions (or self-reports) of their own skin colors. If children perceive that dark skin is associated with negative traits, and if these traits do not fit into how they see themselves, they may change their perceptions of their own skin colors as a way of reducing dissonance.

**The Developmental Significance of Race and Skin Color**

During middle childhood and early adolescence, children's awareness of minority status differs substantially from earlier periods (Spencer, 1984). Very young children often conceive their race and gender as alterable, something that may change when they get older (Allen, Spencer, & Brookins, 1985; Vaughn, 1987). Similar to preschool boys who sometimes aspire to be a Mommy when they grow up, young Black children may aspire to be White (Tatum, 1997). Pulido-Tobiassen and Gonzalez-Mena (1999) illustrated young children's logic concerning racial constancy in the following question two preschoolers asked, "If I don't speak Spanish, can I still be a Mexican?" and "I want to have eyes like Miyoko's. If I learn Japanese, will my eyes change?" (p. 3).

In contrast to young children, older children have the ability to interpret differences in physical appearance based on the social meaning attached to them. For youth of color, an increased sensitivity to how members of the majority culture appraise their own minority groups compounds anxiety stemming from heightened bodily self-awareness (Comer, 1975; Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Muga, 1984). With the inception of more advanced social perspective-taking abilities, young people become more vulnerable to messages transmitted through racially stereotyped media images, derogative labels, and sayings used to convey attitudes about dark skin tones (Brown, Ward, Lightbourn, & Jackson, 1999). One such catchphrase is, "If you're white you're alright, if you're yellow you're mellow, if you're brown stick around, if you're black get back." Regardless of the lightness or darkness of one's skin, perceptions of stereotypes based on skin color serve as a risk factor for all minority adolescents. Moreover, the awareness of negative societal appraisals can influence not only their social and emotional development, but also the choices they make in life and the tactics they choose to achieve them (Spencer & Dornbusch, 1990). Thus, for youth of color, and particularly for Black Americans, the task of integrating the frequently devalued physical characteristics of their race exacerbates the
normative task of negotiating body image (e.g., facial characteristics, hair texture, and skin color) into their physical self-schemas (Fullilove & Reynolds, 1984).

If dark skin is such a liability, how is it that some of these youth are thriving despite the dire odds? In the past, researchers have attempted to answer this question using a circuitous route. Instead of studying youth who were succeeding and attempting to uncover what makes these young people resilient, researchers concentrated their efforts on extreme groups of youth who were not successful (e.g., juvenile offenders, drug users, school dropouts, unwed parents, gang members) and tried to rehabilitate them or uncover traits or conditions (e.g., risk factors) that appeared to be related to their maladaptive behaviors. The problem with this approach is twofold. First, it pathologizes individuals and perpetuates the notion that youth of color are an inherent liability rather than an asset. Second, even if all of the risk factors (and combinations of risk factors) could be identified, they cannot all be eliminated (e.g., race, gender). It would be more beneficial and cost effective to ask what one could do to prevent detrimental outcomes and to identify supports or buffers that one could put in place to support their optimal developments.

Research suggests that one source of support is the racial socialization of children by parents and other adults. Minority parents can, and often do, socialize their children to understand the importance and implication of race and skin color. Peters (1985) claimed that racial socialization is necessary for “raising physically and emotionally healthy children who are Black in a society where Black has negative connotations” (p. 161). Concurring with this sentiment, Spencer, Dupree, and Hartman (1997) suggested that the childrearing efforts of minority parents demand, of necessity, the imparting of clear and explicit explanations to their children concerning the meaning and significance of their children’s skin colors and races. Research has found that racial socialization practices can help children learn to cope more adaptively with experiences of racism and discrimination (Stevenson, H. C., 1994).

It is important to note that skin color can serve as both a risk and a protective factor. For lighter skinned minority youth, the privilege associated with light skin might initially serve as a protective factor because others (especially peers, teachers, and other adult figures) tend to judge adolescents with a lighter skin color more positively, thus hindering the perception and internalization of mainstream cultures’ negative racial stereotypes. This same privilege, however, may also be a risk factor because, as is the case for more affluent White youth, privilege may preclude the development of adaptive coping skills. Thus, when faced with adversity for the first time, these youth may be shocked to learn that they are not immune from being a target of racial discrimination and bigotry. In the absence of previously developed coping skills, these experiences might cause young people to employ maladaptive coping skills that may temporarily reduce their psychological distress, but, in the long run, serve to undermine their ultimate life outcomes (e.g., quitting college, limiting opportunities due to fear of rejection).

Viewed against the backdrop of the history of colorism in the United States, we have tried to illustrate the impact that bodily self-awareness and color bias can have on multiple domains of life, including psychological development. For youth of color, experiences related to skin color bias are stress encounters that they must negotiate in conjunction with normative developmental challenges such as rapidly changing bodies and developing a positive body image. Ultimately, the ways in which youth cope with these challenges (e.g., reactive coping responses) can lead to either adaptive or maladaptive solutions that, over time, may become a stable part of adolescents’ identities. We know that our perceptions of self and other peoples’ attitudes toward us influence our behaviors (e.g., Spencer, 1995). It is less clear how the mental images that adolescents construct of their physical appearances (including skin color) and their perceptions about what physical traits society values (or devalues) most affect adolescents’ identities and psychological well-being.

The following exploratory study is an initial attempt to untangle the processes that might be important in understanding the role of the embodied self in psychosocial development. It would be imprudent to test a model of skin color perceptions and attitudes before understanding the links between various constructs and processes. Thus, as a beginning point, we selected a limited set of variables to represent the five components of PVEST including perceived skin color and preferences as the risk component, ideal body image stereotypes as the perceived challenge, ethnic identity as a protective factor, worrying about neighborhood-related risks as a reactive coping response, and positive self-attitudes as an emergent identity. It is expected that adolescents who express dissonance about the color of their skin (e.g., those who indicate that they prefer a skin color other than the color they select as being most like their own) will report engaging in less ethnic identity exploration, will be less satisfied with their body images, and will have less positive attitudes about self and more anxiety related to neighborhood characteristics than adolescents who do not experience dissonance concerning their skin color (e.g., those whose perceived skin color is consonant with their preferred skin color). We will conduct post hoc exploratory analyses to examine within group differences.
An Exploratory Study of Skin Color Perceptions and Attitudes

Study Sample. The sample for the present study is comprised of a subsample (Cohort 1) of adolescents who were part of a longitudinal randomized field trial looking at the effect of monetary stipends on the academic achievement of low resource urban youth. Two groups of low-income adolescents, high-academic performers (A/B students), and marginal-academic performers (C/D students) attending public high school in a large northeastern city of the United States were recruited from grades 9, 10, and 11 and were randomly assigned to “control” and “treatment” groups. Researchers drew the data for this study from baseline data collected in 1999 and 2000; 779 participants completed their baseline assessment; 65% were high-achieving students; 69% were females; 15% were Asian/Asian American, 56% were Black/African American, 11% were Hispanic/Latino, 7% were White/European American, and 11% indicated their race/ethnicity as “Other.”

Procedures. A team of trained research assistants administered annual surveys to participants. Survey administrations took place either in large group settings at geographically central locations or in smaller group settings at students’ schools and at our research center. We offered participants $25 incentives to complete their annual surveys and informed them that tokens for public transportation would be available for students who took public transportation to and from the survey site.

Demographic Variables. Researchers took demographic information from respondents’ answers to questions on their baseline survey including age, race, ethnicity, family household structure, and maternal employment. Respondents’ mean age was 15.36 years (SD = 1.18); 35% lived in two-parent households, 53% lived in single-parent households (2% father only), and 12% lived with their grandparents or other relatives and adults. Among students who reported living with their mother (including two-parent and single-parent households), 64% of the mothers were employed, with 71% of the employed mothers working full time.

The Measurement of Skin Color. Adolescents perceptions of, and attitudes toward, skin color were assessed using the Skin Color Opinions and Perceptions Evaluation (SCOPE), a 17-item questionnaire comprised of questions related to participants’ perceptions of their own skin colors, the skin colors they would most like and least like to have and questions assessing their perceptions of the skin colors that “referent others,” such as teachers, peers, and other adults, value most. Adolescents indicated their skin color choices using the Visual Inventory for Skin Tone Assessment (VISTA)—a commercially produced, glossy-finished, 15-inch color bar developed specifically for this project. The VISTA is comprised of 10 colors arrayed across the bar from lightest to darkest. Researchers selected colors on the VISTA from a wide range of human skin-tone colors that they presented to a pilot group of students who then asked to select the color that was most like their own shade of skin color. Based on information gathered during the pilot period, researchers ultimately reduced the selection of colors to 10.

Psychosocial Measures

Body image satisfaction. We assessed body image satisfaction using the seven-item appearance evaluation subscale of Cash’s Multidimensional Body Self-Relations Questionnaire (as cited in Thompson, Hoberg, Altabe, & Tanleff, 1999); a measure that assesses overall satisfaction with one’s appearance (e.g., feelings of attractiveness and unattractiveness). Students rated, on a scale of one to four, the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with statements such as, “I am physically unattractive” and “Most people would consider me good looking.” The alpha reliability for this measure was .88 and the mean was 48.01 (SD = 10.08).

Ethnic identity. We assessed ethnic identity using Phinney’s Multigroup Ethnic Identity Measure (Phinney, 1992), a 23-item scale designed to explore the structure of ethnic identity in adolescents and young adults from diverse ethno-cultural groups. We used only the 16 items included in the revised MEIM (see Roberts et al., 1999) to construct the scaled scores used in these analyses. Participants rated, on a scale of one to four, the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with statements such as, “I have spent time trying to find out more about my own ethnic group, such as its history, traditions, and customs” and “I have a clear sense of my ethnic background and what it means for me.” The alpha reliability for this measure was .83 and the mean was 48.71 (SD = 10.01).

Worry about neighborhood-related risks. We assessed the extent to which adolescents’ worry about risks in their neighborhood using an eight-item version of the Fear of Calamity Scale (Riechard & McGarrity, 1994). Students rated, on a scale of one to five, how much they worried about various risks in their neighborhood, such as getting stabbed or getting beat up. The alpha reliability for this measure was .91 and the mean was 46.55 (SD = 15.57).

Positive attitudes about self. Positive attitudes about self were assessed using the Hare/Funder/Block Ego-Esteem/Resilience Scale (Hare, 1977;
Shoemaker, 1980; Block, 1985; Hare & Castenell, 1985), a self-report inventory comprised of 23 items drawn from the Hare Self-Esteem Scale (items are expressions of individuals' perception of others' positive views of self) and the Funder/Block ego-resiliency Q-sort measure (items are self-assertions of attitudes and behaviors). Respondents rated, on a scale of one to four, the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with statements such as, "I am generous with my friends" or "Most of the people I meet are likeable." The alpha reliability for this measure was .85 and the mean was 48.95 (SD = 9.99).

Gender, achievement and racial group differences in scores on psychosocial measures. We used the analysis of variance and t-test statistical methods to examine mean group differences on measures of body image satisfaction, positive attitudes about self, ethnic identity, and fear of calamity. Scores on measures of body image satisfaction, positive attitudes about self, and ethnic identity did not differ significantly between males and females. However, the mean fear of calamity score for females (M = 47.46, SD = 15.31) was significantly higher than the mean score for males (M = 44.47, SD = 15.96), t(775) = -2.47, p = .014, indicating that adolescent girls reported worrying more about risks in their neighborhood than did the boys.

High- and marginal-achieving adolescents' mean group scores differed for all psychosocial measures except fear of calamity. The mean body image satisfaction score for the marginally performing group of adolescents (M = 49.08, SD = 10.13) was significantly higher than that for the high performing group (M = 47.44, SD = 10.02), t(759) = 2.14, p = .033. Conversely, the high performing group was significantly more likely than the marginally performing group to score higher on measures of positive attitudes about self (M = 50.15 and 46.77, SD = 9.88 and 9.85, respectively), t(775) = -4.56, p < .0001, and ethnic identity (Ms = 50.06 and 46.24, SDs = 9.56 and 10.35, respectively), t(773) = -5.17, p < .0001.

Racial mean group scores differed on measures of body image satisfaction (F(4, 756) = 33.03, p < .0001), positive attitudes about self, F(4, 772) = 10.98, p < .0001, and fear of calamity, F(4, 772) = 2.51, p = .04. Exploratory post hoc analyses using Tukey's Standardized Range test (alpha = .001) revealed that the mean body image satisfaction scores and positive attitudes about self scores for the Asian group were significantly lower than the average mean scores for all other racial groups (Ms = 50.63, 49.12, 47.44, 44.68 and 39.78 for body image satisfaction and 50.11, 48.51, 50.34, 49.74, and 43.56 for positive attitudes about self for Black, Other, Hispanic, White, and Asian groups, respectively). Further, post hoc analyses revealed that the White mean group score on the measure of fear of calamity was significantly lower (at the .005 alpha level) than the mean scores for all other racial groups (Ms = 48.52, 47.31, 45.9, 45.2 and 41.21 for Hispanic, Black, Asian, Other, and White groups, respectively).

Skin Color Analyses. Analyses using variables from the SCOPE questionnaire omitted 23 participants due to incomplete or inconsistent data (e.g., participants who selected the same answer for most preferred and least preferred skin color were omitted from the analyses). These participants did not differ significantly from participants in the analysis group by gender, race/ethnicity, or academic achievement.

Perceived skin color. The variable perceived skin color is a categorical variable created from adolescents' responses to the following item on the SCOPE, "Choose the color that you think best represents the color of your facial skin." We constructed the variable by collapsing the 10 skin tone selections into three categories: (a) light, which includes participants who selected one of the four lightest skin tones, (b) medium, which includes participants who selected one of two medium skin tones, and (c) dark, which includes participants who selected one of the four darkest skin tones.

We conducted chi-square analyses to examine gender, achievement, and racial group differences in adolescents' perceived skin color group (see Table 11.1). We used analysis of variance to examine mean perceived skin color group differences on measures of body image satisfaction, positive attitudes about self, ethnic identity, and fear of calamity. We conducted post hoc analyses using Tukey's Standardized Range test (alpha = .001) to examine pair-wise comparisons on scores for measures where the omnibus F test reached the .05 level of significance.

As indicated in Table 11.1, there were no significant differences in adolescents' scores on measures of ethnic identity and fear of calamity as a function of their perceived skin color. And, although the omnibus F test for perceived skin color group differences in scores on positive attitudes about self reached the .05 level of significance, the post hoc analyses showed only a slight tendency (alpha = .05) for the group of participants who self selected one of the four lightest skin tones to score lower in positive attitudes about the self than those in groups who selected medium and dark skin tones. However, there was a robust difference between perceived skin color group mean scores on the measure of body image satisfaction, with the light skin tone group mean score being significantly lower than the mean scores of the medium and dark perceived skin color groups.
their actual and ideal perceived skin colors, and adolescent girls were no more likely than boys to be dissonant in their actual and ideal perceived skin colors. However, there was a slight tendency for high-achieving adolescents to be in the consonant skin preference group and for the adolescents who were not doing as well academically to be in the dissonant group. Further, in terms of racial group differences, Asian students, in comparison to their peers in other racial groups, were more likely to be dissonant in their skin color preference.

Finally, when examining whether skin color preference differed as a function of adolescents’ perceptions of their actual skin color, adolescents in the light skin color group were just as likely to be in the consonant skin preference group as they were to be in the dissonant skin preference group. However, adolescents in the medium skin color group were more likely than their peers in the light and dark skin color groups to be consonant in skin color preference, while adolescents in the dark skin color group were more likely than their peers in the light and medium skin color groups to be dissonant in their skin color preference.

*T*-tests were conducted to examine whether group scores on body image satisfaction, positive attitudes about the self, ethnic identity, and fear of calamity differed by skin color preference (see Table 11.3). Over-

| Table 11.2 Demographic and Perceived Skin Color Differences (%) in Skin Color Consonance and Dissonance |
|-------------------------------------------------|-----------------|-----------------|
| Demographic Group | Consonant (n = 384) | Dissonant (n = 365) |
| Gender | | |
| % Male (n = 226) | 51.33 | 48.67 |
| % Female (n = 523) | 51.24 | 48.76 |
| Achievement: $\chi^2 = 5.52, p = .02.$ | | |
| % High Achievers (n = 485) | 54.43 | 45.57 |
| % Marginal Achievers (n = 264) | 45.45 | 54.55 |
| Race: $\chi^2 = 9.95, p = .04.$ | | |
| % Asian/Asian Am. (n = 110) | 39.09 | 60.91 |
| % Black/African Am. (n = 421) | 54.87 | 45.13 |
| % Hispanic/Latino (n = 79) | 53.16 | 46.84 |
| % White/Euro. Am. (n = 56) | 53.57 | 46.43 |
| % ‘Other’ (n = 83) | 45.78 | 54.22 |
| Perceived Skin Color: $\chi^2 = 11.1, p = .004$ | | |
| % Light Tones (n = 206) | 50.97 | 49.03 |
| % Medium Tones (n = 319) | 57.37 | 42.63 |
| % Dark Tones (n = 224) | 42.86 | 57.14 |

Perceptions of actual and ideal skin color. We constructed the variable skin color preference using two items from the SCOPE, “Choose the color that you think best represents the color of your facial skin” (e.g., actual skin color) and “Choose the facial skin color that you would prefer to have” (e.g., ideal skin color). We classified adolescents who selected the same color for their actual skin colors as consonant for skin color preference, and we classified those who selected different skin tones for their actual and ideal skin colors as dissonant for skin color preference.

Gender, academic, racial and perceived skin color group differences in scores on psychosocial measures. We conducted chi-square analyses to examine gender, achievement, racial, and perceived skin color group differences in adolescents’ skin color preference. As depicted in Table 11.2, there were no gender differences in skin color preference. Adolescent boys were no more likely than girls were to be consonant in skin color preference (see Table 11.3). Over-

Table 11.1 Perceived Skin Color Distribution by Demographic (%) and Psychosocial Mean Group Scores

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Demographic Group</th>
<th>Perceived Skin Color (Self Rating)</th>
<th>Light Tones</th>
<th>Medium Tones</th>
<th>Dark Tones</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td></td>
<td>(n = 206)</td>
<td>(n = 324)</td>
<td>(n = 225)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Male (n = 230)</td>
<td></td>
<td>25.65</td>
<td>36.52</td>
<td>37.83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Female (n = 525)</td>
<td></td>
<td>28.00</td>
<td>45.71</td>
<td>26.29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Achievement</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% High Achievers</td>
<td></td>
<td>33.20</td>
<td>41.55</td>
<td>25.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Marginal Achievers</td>
<td></td>
<td>16.29</td>
<td>45.45</td>
<td>38.26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Race/Ethnicity</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Asian/Asian Am.</td>
<td></td>
<td>58.93</td>
<td>35.71</td>
<td>5.36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Black/African Am.</td>
<td></td>
<td>8.25</td>
<td>46.70</td>
<td>45.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Hispanic/Latino</td>
<td></td>
<td>41.77</td>
<td>51.90</td>
<td>6.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% White/Euro. Am.</td>
<td></td>
<td>91.23</td>
<td>8.77</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% ‘Other’ (n = 83)</td>
<td></td>
<td>24.1</td>
<td>48.19</td>
<td>27.71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Psychosocial Measures</td>
<td></td>
<td>M = 44.4</td>
<td>M = 49.29</td>
<td>M = 49.55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Body Image Satisfaction</td>
<td></td>
<td>F (2, 737) = 18.89, $p &lt; .0001$</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General Positive Attitude</td>
<td></td>
<td>M = 47.44</td>
<td>M = 49.7</td>
<td>M = 49.35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethnic Identity Development</td>
<td></td>
<td>M = 48.39</td>
<td>M = 49.03</td>
<td>M = 48.84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fear of Calamity</td>
<td></td>
<td>M = 45.12</td>
<td>M = 47.63</td>
<td>M = 46.03</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The table illustrates the mean skin color ratings for each demographic group and the significance levels of the chi-square tests. The results indicate that there were no significant differences in skin color preference among demographic groups. However, the overall skin color preference ratings were significantly higher for those in the light skin color group, followed by the medium and dark skin color groups.
all, adolescents who reported preferring a skin color other than the color they selected as best reflecting their own skin color (e.g., the dissonant group) reported being less satisfied with their physical appearance, less positive views about self, and experiencing more fear of calamity than their peers who selected the same color for their actual and ideal skin color (e.g., the consonant group). In addition, the mean ethnic identity score for the dissonant group was significantly lower than that for the consonant group. These findings suggest that the affective component of adolescents’ actual and ideal skin color perceptions is related to their self-reports of body image satisfaction, positive attitudes about self, and the extent to which they have begun to explore their ethnic identity. However, are these findings more salient among different groups of youth?

In light of the fact that scores on various psychosocial measures differed as a function of race and perceived skin color, we conducted a second series of t-tests within these groups to see if the same pattern of skin color preference findings would be detected for different groups of youth. We first examined differences within racial groups. We found the same pattern of findings among our sample’s Black youth; the dissonant group’s mean scores were lower for body image satisfaction, positive attitudes about self, and ethnic identity, and higher for fear of calamity than those for the consonant group. And, although the mean scores for the consonant and dissonant groups within the Hispanic and “Other” groups of youth followed the same overall pattern, the only significant mean score differences between youth in the consonant and dissonant groups were in positive attitudes about self and body image satisfaction (although a trend only in the “Other” group). Among youth in the White group, there were no significant differences between the dissonant and consonant group mean scores on ethnic identity, fear of calamity, and positive attitudes about self, although the mean body image satisfaction score for the consonant group was significantly higher than that for the dissonant group. Interestingly, among our sample of Asian youth, scores on body image satisfaction, positive attitudes about self, and ethnic identity development did not differ by virtue of skin color consonance or dissonance, although there was a trend for adolescents in the dissonant group to express higher levels of fear of calamity than their peers in the consonant skin preference group. Given that our sample of Asian youth scored significantly lower overall on body image satisfaction and positive attitudes about the self than participants from all other racial groups, it is difficult to conclude whether these findings are a result of a ceiling effect or whether skin color preference makes no significant contribution to Asian participants’ scores on body image satisfaction and positive feelings toward self.

When examining differences between consonant and dissonant groups of youth within preferred skin color groups, we detected the same general pattern of findings. Overall, the dissonant group within the light, medium, and dark skin tone groups had significantly lower mean body image satisfaction scores than their counterparts in the consonant group. However, the pattern of findings for positive attitudes about self, ethnic identity, and fear of calamity deviated slightly from the overall pattern depending upon perceived skin color. When examining differences between groups of consonant and dissonant youth, there were no significant differences in positive attitudes about self among adolescents in the light skin tone group, within the medium skin tone group there were no significant differences in ethnic identity development, and within the dark skin tone group, there were no significant differences in fear of calamity.

**DISCUSSION OF EMPIRICAL FINDINGS**

Consistent with early speculations, specifically about African Americans (Franklin, 1968; Kardiner & Ovesey, 1951; Pettigrew, 1964), there continues to be long-term interest in the role that skin color serves in individuals’ social experiences and psychological well-being. In fact, for the virtual 50-year interim period between early touted, and often incendiary, assumptions concerning color/racial group membership as a “mark of oppression” (see Kardiner & Ovesey, 1951), interest in the topic has not abated. However, exploratory and empirical efforts to disentangle the relationships between race, color, context, and psychological development remain sparse. Specific measurement challenges along with the need for studies that directly link skin color with psychological processes (e.g., as opposed to a priori assumptions of psychopathology
for minority groups) were suggested over 30 years ago (e.g., see Spencer & Horowitz 1973; Spencer 1977, 1983). Unfortunately, evidence supporting the assumed relationship continues to be elusive while pathology linked speculations remain evident across disciplinary lines.

Researches have cited a variety of reasons for the lack of advancement in colorism research; one of the most frequently noted is the lack of good measurement tools. However, as demonstrated in Kardiner and Ovesey's (1950) widely cited volume, Mark of Oppression, another important conceptual shortcoming of the literature has been the assumption of a linear (and pathological) relationship between skin color/racial group membership and psychological well-being. The intent of this chapter was to introduce a systems perspective for understanding the complex processes underlying the impact of individuals' skin color perceptions and attitudes on psychological development and to open discussion of possible intervening, context-linked, mediating factors that might suggest strategies for exploring and testing more complex sets of relationships.

This chapter provides a first step toward understanding the role of adolescents' self-perceptions of skin color for psychological processes. The reported research introduced an alternative theoretical framework that views human development from a systems perspective that includes an individual's contextually linked phenomenology or perceptions. As a systems perspective, PVEST affords a conceptual strategy that is different from the traditional linear models frequently employed when considering issues of colorism. As mentioned, analyses of data from our multiethnic sample utilized measures generally associated with risk factors (e.g., race and skin color), their transformation into specific perceived challenges (e.g., the degree of consonance between perceptions of actual and ideal body image), protective factors (e.g., ethnic identity as proxy for racial socialization), reactive coping methods (e.g., degree of neighborhood-related worry and fear), and emergent identities (e.g., self-concept).

The most salient overarching trend in this study is that adolescents' skin color consonance or dissonance, rather than perceived skin tone itself, was most relevant to their psychosocial outcomes. We illustrated the utility of a contextually sensitive, identity-focused perspective, such as PVEST, here. Contrary to the assumption that dark skin leads to maladaptive coping and poor psychosocial outcomes, the findings indicate that one can attain consonance—relative satisfaction with one's skin color—regardless of skin tone, in spite of the fact that a large bias toward light skin remains in American society. Individuals with darker skin tone must cope with these biases, but they can learn to do so in adaptive ways, given adequate social and cultural capital. This highlights the importance of proactive racial and cultural capital—a necessity to prevent societal biases from adversely impacting the development of children of color.

The lack of significant differences in ethnic identity and fear of calamity scores for adolescents who differed in self-perceived skin color (e.g., those in the light, medium, and dark self-rated skin color groups) stands in contradiction to previous assumptions. As noted, one might presume, based on cultural socialization theorizing, that parental cultural socialization of ethnic identity would serve as a protective factor. However, ethnic identity scores did not vary as a function of distance from the "societal norm" relative to skin color. Also somewhat surprising were the significantly lower scores on body image satisfaction and positive attitudes about self among adolescents in the lightest skin tone group relative to their peers in the two darker skin color groups. One explanation may be that young people having lighter skin tone self-ratings are also sensitive to externally based expectations for stereotypic body image attitudes; thus, a consequence of feeling less satisfied with your physical appearance may be an emergent identity that is less positive overall, than those who feel more satisfied with their appearance. However, does this pattern suggest that these youth, in fact, are more psychologically vulnerable and require particular types of support?

The findings also raise other questions. Higher achieving youth were more likely to report skin color consonance, and marginal performers more often reported skin color dissonance. Does this indicate that one links marginal performance, as an outcome, to such youths' "misuse" of psychic energy? That is, are youth focusing their limited psychological resources on concerns about skin color perception and skin color-based biases (e.g., feelings of dissonance) that instead one might ideally better use for academic pursuits? The fact that the analyses examining differences in scores on psychosocial variables by both skin color consonance and dissonance and skin tone ratings were similar to patterns obtained within racial groups suggests interesting speculations. Are the color stereotypes concerning "Whiteness" psychologically powerful enough on their own to have such an effect for the several racial groups or do adolescents associate "power and privilege" with a specific shade of skin color that one desires to the point of generating dissonance? The sets of analysis presented in this chapter cannot answer these questions. However, they suggest far more complex interactions between skin tone values and psychosocial well-being than previously explored.

Finally, the study initiates the process of placing skin color, as a salient physical attribute, within the realm of body image and physical
appearance concerns of adolescents. For people of color, one should examine colorism, skin color attitudes, and perceptions in conjunction with the numerous other social biases governing appearance, such as those related to body weight and dimensions, eye and hair color, and so forth. Moreover, one should factor the additional sociopolitical significance of color—the legacy of Jim Crow and other manifestations of White supremacy—into this analysis.

CONCLUSION

As America enters the 21st century, we are in the post-Civil-Rights era—a time where formal legal distinctions based on race and color are moot. However, we should not be naïve enough to assume that colorblind law translates to a color-blind society, nor should we hold to the simplistic, pathological formulations regarding skin color that were espoused in the past. We hope that this chapter will help researchers move beyond past errors to understand the changing, albeit continuing, significance of race and skin color in shaping children’s lives.

ENDNOTES

1. Adolescents who were eligible for the study provided verifiable proof that their family’s total household income met the financial criteria guidelines for the Federal Free Lunch Program (130% of the poverty line).

2. For each psychosocial scale or subscale, researchers computed students’ raw scale scores as the unit-weighted sum of salient items and then transformed to area T conversion scores, a method of standardizing scores that does not assume linearity.

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