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Dark skin penalty, shame and resistance: negotiating colourism in UK families

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ABSTRACT

Colourism – prejudice and discrimination penalising people with dark skin – can occur in many social settings, including within families. Drawing on qualitative research with women and men from different minoritized ethnic backgrounds in the UK, we argue that while families can be an important buffer against racism, children are often exposed to colourism by family members. Our findings, based on reflexive thematic analysis on data from 33 semi-structured interviews, highlight how families can reproduce colourism. Taking an intersectional analytical approach, we found that colourism in families is often gendered, with girls and women more affected than boys and men. We found that dark skin can be seen as negative and a potential source of familial shame. Further, colourism in families can have harmful, enduring effects on wellbeing and body image. However, we found that families can also be sites of resistance, protecting family members from colourism.

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Introduction

Colourism is a form of prejudice and discrimination based on an appearance-based hierarchy that disadvantages people with dark skin and phenotypical features that do not resemble those associated with whiteness[1] (Dixon and Telles 2017). It is a pervasive global issue that occurs between and within racialised groups, operating both structurally and interpersonally within society (Strmic-Pawl, Gonlin, and Garner 2021). Further, colourism is a gendered phenomenon, affecting women and men in different ways. This is because global gendered appearance ideals and stereotypes position light

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skin as a symbol of beauty and femininity, resulting in women often experiencing greater burden than men (Hunter 2005).

Colourism is evident in many different aspects of society. It is pervasive in the media, where colourist ideas (e.g. equating light skin with beauty and higher social class and dark skin with criminality and lack of civilisation) are promoted and reinforced (Jha 2016). At a structural level, studies from the United States show that black, Asian, and Latinx people with dark skin experience greater discrimination in education, employment, healthcare, and in the criminal justice system, compared with peers from the same racialised groups who have lighter skin and features that are associated with whiteness (Crutchfield et al. 2022; Monk 2021; Slaughter-Acey et al. 2020; Stockstill and Carson 2022). At the interpersonal level, colourism has been documented within families, among peers, and in romantic contexts (Abrams et al. 2020; Hall 2017; Landor et al. 2013; Phoenix and Craddock 2022; Wilder and Cain 2011). In these social contexts, colourism can take the form of preferential treatment towards those with light skin as well as teasing and negative comments made to, or about, those with dark skin.

Research has documented associations between colourism and poor health outcomes (Craddock et al. 2023b; Keyes, Small, and Nikolova 2020; Monk 2021). In addition, recent findings indicate that perceived experiences of colourism from people belonging to the same racialised group are often associated with worse health and wellbeing outcomes than perceived experiences of colourism from white people (Craddock et al. 2023b; Monk 2021; Oh, Lincoln, and Waldman 2021). While these studies do not distinguish categories within the ingroup (e.g. family, peers, acquaintances, strangers etc.), it is plausible that experiences of colourism from important others, such as family members, are particularly detrimental to wellbeing. This is because racialised minority families are often constructed as protective places that shield children from racialised prejudice and discrimination (James et al. 2018). Consequently, prejudice from within the family may be harder to endure, as well as being less well acknowledged.

This paper makes a contribution to colourism research by exploring the understudied topic of colourism within families in a UK context where there is little colourism research. Research conducted in the US and Brazil indicates that families play an important role in colour socialisation and in introducing and perpetuating colourism to subsequent generations through their actions and comments (Hall 2017; Hordge-Freeman 2013; Wilder and Cain 2011). For example, Wilder and Cain (2011) reported that the black women they interviewed "cited their families as the most influential force in shaping their views and ideas about themselves and others as it relates to skin tone" (p.584). Further, qualitative research examining the experiences of Afro-Brazilian families provides examples of preferential

treatment of children with light skin by parents and other relatives (Hordge-Freeman 2013).

Existing literature also highlights the gendered nature of colourism within families, with girls and women experiencing more negative consequences for having darker skin. For example, Wilder and Cain (2011) observed that the black women they interviewed learned to "associate negativity with darkness and to equate goodness with lightness" from other female family members including mothers and aunts (586). In a qualitative study conducted with British South Asian women, Mishra et al. (2023) highlighted cases of family pressure placed on young women to have light skin in order to be viewed as attractive and, in turn, find a husband. Additionally, in a longitudinal quantitative study examining colourism in African American families, Landor et al. (2013) found gendered differences in how children were treated by their parents based on skin shade. They found that girls with lighter skin reported experiencing higher quality parenting than girls with darker skin. This trend was not found for boys.

Given the gendered experiences of colourism within families highlighted in prior research, our work is informed by an intersectional approach. Intersectionality allows for the simultaneous consideration of multiple, interdependent social identities, such as gender, racialised group, and skin shade in explorations of social inequality (Crenshaw 1991). Individuals experience power relations and inequity based on different aspects of their social identities, which together shape the way they perceive and make sense of their social worlds (Cole 2009). This makes an intersectional approach particularly valuable for analysing qualitative data on colourism from women and men from different minoritised ethnic backgrounds and for exploring the effects of colourism in the family. Throughout this paper we examine how gender, racialisation, skin shade and generation inform experiences of colourism.

The Study and Present Paper

The data upon which this paper is based did not aim to explore colourism in the family specifically. Rather, it was collected for a broader exploration of how colourism is experienced in the UK. However, it was striking how central families were in participants' narratives on skin shade and colourism. Therefore, we decided to dedicate a full paper to the topic. To this end, this paper explores the role of family in narratives of, and experiences related to, skin shade and colourism for UK adults from different minoritised ethnic groups. Specifically, we identify how skin shade was discussed within families and how colourism was experienced. We were attentive to occasions when family members reinforced colourist appearance ideals and stereotypes, as well as times when colourist ideas were actively resisted by families. We also explore gender dynamics related to negotiations of skin shade that took place within the family.

Methods

Ethical approval for a broad, scoping qualitative research project on colourism and skin shade in the UK was granted by the Research Ethics Committee at SOAS, University of London. Study advertisements were shared on social media inviting people of colour[2] (aged 18 and over) living in the UK to take part in a 60-minute interview on their experiences related to their skin shade. Snowball sampling was also used. Interested individuals were sent a study information sheet and consent form. Thirty-four adults returned signed consent forms.

Interviews were conducted with 33 adults of colour (24 women, 9 men) living in the UK (one participant withdrew prior to taking part in an interview due to scheduling conflicts). Participants belonged to different minoritised ethnic groups; black ($n = 17$), South Asian ($n = 4$), East Asian ($n = 1$), and those who had mixed ethnic backgrounds ($n = 11$). Six participants (five women and one man) were full-time students (undergraduate or postgraduate), and one woman was a stay-at-home parent. The remaining participants worked in a variety of occupations in government, healthcare, journalism, media, and transport. All participants identified as heterosexual, except for one woman who identified as pansexual. Participant demographics, self-reported skin shade based on a chart using 30 colours from Pantone Skin Tone Guide, and pseudonyms are detailed in Table 1.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted by both authors following an interview schedule. Questions from the interview schedule include: *How do you think others view your skin shade? Do you feel pressure to change the shade of your skin? Have you ever received preferential treatment because of the shade of your skin? Have you ever been discriminated against or treated badly because of the shade of your skin?* Notably, none of the interview questions asked directly about family. Interviews were held either in person ($n = 16$) or on a video call ($n = 17$) in 2019 and lasted between 39 and 102 minutes (average duration = 60 minutes). Interviews were transcribed by either a professional transcription service, freelance transcribers or one of the study authors. All transcripts were anonymised and pseudonymised.

Data analysis was led by the first author and used reflexive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2018). The epistemological approach to analysis was social constructionism and intersectionality. Social constructionism views social reality as created through social contexts and interactions (Berger and Luckmann 1966). People express words, ideas or actions which are, in turn, reproduced (e.g. in media or literature) and can be internalised (Burr 2015). Intersectionality is a valuable addition to social constructionism as it challenges knowledge production that marginalises people and their lived experiences and views social positioning and power relations as socially constructed (Cho, Crenshaw, and McCall 2013).

Following Braun and Clarke's (2018) guidance, we read and re-read the transcripts to facilitate familiarisation with the data. In line with our social constructionist approach, we focused on participants' constructions of their experiences. We coded the dataset line-by-line using latent codes to capture deeper underlying ideas, patterns, and interpretations. We met on multiple occasions to discuss candidate themes based on our coding notes and candidate theme summaries with relevant coded quotes prepared by the first author. Once we had agreed our final themes, the first author wrote up the results section. We then met again after reviewing this draft, as well as re-reading all the transcripts, to ensure the draft was a fair reflection of the data. To maintain methodological integrity, we did not quantify our themes. Rather, themes were prioritised based on a coherent analytic story which provided more richness in relation to the study research questions (Braun and Clarke 2018).

Table 1. Participant demographics.

Pseudonym	Gender	Age	Ethnicity	Religion	Place of Birth	Relationship Status	Children[1]	Skin Shade
Alice	Woman	25	Black African & White British	Christian	UK	Engaged	No	
Qudrah	Woman	31	South Asian	Muslim	Pakistan	Married	Yes	
Jamila	Woman	33	Black African	Muslim	UK	Single	Yes	
Zara	Woman	34	South Asian	Muslim	UK	Single	No	
Portia	Woman	51	Black Caribbean	None	UK	Single	Yes	
Jennifer	Woman	24	Black Caribbean & White British	Atheist	UK	Single	No	
Kelly	Woman	30	Black Caribbean	Christian	UK	Single	No	
Josephine	Woman	55	Black African & White British	Christian	UK	Divorced	Yes	
Marie	Woman	50	East Asian	None	UK	Single	No	
Viv	Woman	48	Black Caribbean & White British	None	UK	Married	Yes	
Yemi	Woman	29	Black African	Christian	UK	In a relationship	No	
Sienna	Woman	25	Black Caribbean & White British	None	France	Single	No	
Erika	Woman	26	Black Caribbean	Christian	UK	Single	No	
Divya	Woman	43	South Asian	None	UK	Divorced	Yes	
Catherine	Woman	29	Black Caribbean, White & Chinese	None	UK	In a relationship	Yes	

Grace	Woman	45	Black African & White British	None	UK	Married	Yes	
Sofia	Woman	20	Black Caribbean	None	UK	Single	No	
Ella	Woman	19	Black African & White British	None	UK	Single	No	
Chloe	Woman	33	Black Caribbean & White British	None	UK	In a relationship	No	
Dawn	Woman	60	Black Caribbean	Christian	Guyana	Married	Yes	
Destiny	Woman	32	Black Caribbean	None	UK	Married	Yes	
Ilana	Woman	38	Jewish, indigenous & Spanish	Christian	Ecuador	Married	Yes	
Jasminder	Woman	53	South Asian	Sikh	UK	Single, Divorced	-	
Clare	Woman	53	Black Caribbean	Christian	UK	Single	-	
Gregory	Man	58	Black African	Christian	UK	Married	Yes	
Ekow	Man	35	Black African	Sufi	UK	Single	No	
Andrew	Man	45	Black African	None	Kenya	Single, Divorced	-	
Bilal	Man	34	Black African	Muslim	UK	In a relationship	-	
Terrence	Man	22	Black African	Christian	UK	Single	-	
Isaiah	Man	32	Black Caribbean	None	UK	Single	-	
Michael	Man	47	Black Caribbean	Christian	UK	Single	-	
Malakai	Man	30	Black Caribbean	None	Jamaica	Single	-	
Henry	Man	27	Black African & White Irish	None	UK	In a relationship	No	

Acknowledging that qualitative research is a co-production between researchers and participants (Dwyer and Buckle 2009), it is important to discuss the positionality of the researchers for transparency and interpretation of findings (Yardley 2000). Aisha Phoenix is an African Caribbean university lecturer with dark/medium-dark skin. Nadia Craddock is a postdoctoral researcher who has a mixed ethnic background (Indian and white) and medium brown skin. As women of colour living in the UK, we had a mixture of both insider and outsider status (Dwyer and Buckle 2009) with our participants. Shared identities (e.g. same gender, similar minoritised ethnic group, similar age, belonging to a minority ethnic background) may have helped to put participants at ease, allowing them to be candid in their responses. In contrast,

aspects of outsider status (e.g. different gender, different minoritised ethnic group, different age etc.) allowed us to prompt for clarifications that enriched the data. However, at times, a combination of insider and outsider status may have made discussing particular topics (e.g. appearance ideals for women) more challenging. For example, black men participants may have found it harder to tell Aisha Phoenix, who is also black, but a woman with dark skin, that they prefer women with light skin.

Results and discussion

Reflexive thematic analysis generated the following four themes related to colourism in the family: the idea of dark skin as negative and a potential source of familial shame; how colourist family ideas affect the formation of romantic relationships; the negative psychological effects of colourism in the family; and how families resist colourism. Almost half of the participants in our study described their families as key transmitters of explicitly colourist ideas. The participants explained that sometimes family members venerated light skin, sometimes they denigrated dark skin, and often, they both praised light skin and disparaged dark skin. This affected participants in different ways, depending on their gender and where they were situated in terms of their phenotypical proximity to whiteness. A few participants mentioned that they had family members who used skin-lightening products, which was one way that families modelled colourist practices. However, about a quarter of our participants described how colourism was resisted in the families that raised them. Additionally, five participants discussed their efforts to ensure colourism was not passed down to their children. To illustrate our themes within the space limitations, we have presented quotes that demonstrate each analytic theme most clearly.

Dark skin as negative and a potential source of familial shame

Some of the participants' narratives about colourism within the family were imbued with ideas about dark skin being seen as negative. In different ways their narratives evoked notions of dark skin as inferior and/or a potential source of shame. Some highlighted family preoccupations with dark skin as ugly, while others suggested that their families deemed dark skin to be low status. It is striking that each of the participants below whose narratives suggested that their dark skin was seen as a potential source of shame in their families were women. This gendered difference may reflect patriarchal societal norms that accord women value according to colourist beauty ideals (Glenn 2008).

Several participants discussed their families' narratives about skin shade in ways that suggested dark skin was seen as ugly. The ways in which they

constructed their narratives about dark skin being "ugly" conveyed the sense that it was a potential source of shame. For example, Portia, a 51-year-old black woman, said:

> [E]ven my father I remember saying to me once when I was, I don't know, maybe I was about 13, or something like that, and I remember him saying to me – and I know that people would want to deny this but it's something that is etched on my brain … but I remember him saying to me […] that I was black and ugly like my grandmother. Now that's his mother […] showing how deep this self-hatred is.

Notably, she prefaces her memory by saying, "I know people would want to deny this," suggesting her late father's colourist comments would now be seen as societally unacceptable. She went on to make excuses for her father, describing him as "a product of his upbringing, his environment" and said she suspects that he "may have been told the things" that he said to her and others. It is possible that her father is reproducing what Tate (2009, 96) describes as "trans-generational beauty shame". Tate (2018) also argues that "discourses of shame are already there for Black women to inhabit from the moment they are born because as Black girls they are interpellated as ugly, as lacking beauty value" (2018, 25).

Portia also describes her brothers calling her names about her skin shade when she was growing up. She said that one brother, whom she described as having not much lighter skin than her, used to call her "black", implicitly positioning blackness as shameful. She continued to say that the same brother, "still says stuff, not about me particularly, but I can hear the comments being made about– someone who comes up on the telly and they are particularly dark or something." From Portia's narrative, it seems that both her father and brother were preoccupied by skin shade. They problematized dark skin, perhaps implicitly associating it with a sense of shame produced by associating beauty (and acceptability) with lighter skin and whiteness.

Jasminder, a 53-year-old Indian woman said that she always viewed South Asian women with lighter skin as "more sophisticated" and more beautiful. She explained that her mum, who had lighter skin than her, "would get after me about being ugly". While she argues that her mother and sisters are preoccupied by beauty, in response to a question asking whether she thinks they feel superior to her because they perceive their skin shades to be lighter, she said, "I think, yes. I think that's one reason, and then I think the other is just … um … yeah, physical. Well, maybe not. Maybe it is skin … the shade of your skin; I'm not sure." It seems that Jasminder is rendered both ugly and inferior by the women in her family for having dark skin in addition to not conforming to dominant appearance ideals in other ways.

Dark skin was not only positioned as ugly, it was also considered symbolic of lower socioeconomic status by several participants' family members. For

example, Marie, a 50-year-old Chinese woman, described ambivalent feelings about going out in the sun to work on her allotment due to the negative associations of dark skin in her family. She said:

> I don't like going outside because I'm going to get darker and end up looking like a peasant. That sounds really bad, but basically my parents were peasants, you know. When they were growing up, they used to work in the countryside and I remember as a kid, mum says, "no, don't go outside because you'll get dark, and you'll end up looking like you work in the paddy fields".

Implicit in her narrative is the idea that her mother is ashamed of her own peasant background, and keen to distance herself and her family from that past. Dark skin seems to symbolise poverty and a low socioeconomic status in Marie's narrative. This resonates with Leong's (2006) description of the intersection of colourism and socioeconomic status, with dark skin being associated with low socioeconomic standing in China (Leong 2006).

Marie described how both her mother and sister would make negative comments about her skin shade if she got darker from the sun. She gave the following examples: "'God, you're looking like a peasant!' Stuff like that. Like, 'My God, you've been out in the sun!', or they say, […] 'Why are you looking so dark?'". The comment, "God, you're looking like a peasant!" is both disparaging, imbued with notions of shamefulness, and potentially disciplining, designed to deter her from getting dark like that in the future. The questions Marie reports that were posed to her sound accusatory, as though Marie has wronged her mother, sister, and herself by letting her skin tan.

As the narratives in this section have shown, some of our participants' narratives suggested that their families may be grappling with feelings of shame related to negative perceptions about having a relative with dark skin. This suggests that these participants' family members have internalised colourist ideas (Harvey, Tennial, and Hudson Banks 2017). Further, the fact that some family members were so concerned about their relative's skin shade suggests that they may not be secure in their own positioning in skin shade hierarchies. Arguably, Portia, Jasminder and Marie were monitored and scrutinised by their relatives for having dark skin that positioned them low down on skin shade hierarchies in a patriarchal society that associates attractiveness with light skin (Glenn 2008).

Colourist family ideas and romantic relationships

Participants in our study discussed how families directly or indirectly encourage their children to choose partners with light skin due to negative value judgements about dark skin and recognition that light skin has inherent social capital.

When asked whether her skin shade affects her dating prospects, Portia said she has been single "for a long long time, long years now. So, maybe

it does". While she said she hoped it did not, she explained that what black men are told by their families affects who they choose to date. She said:

> I do know that some black men don't … date or like darker-skinned women, but then again, I'm not having children with them, so I don't know, maybe that– because I think that is partly– part of their worry, often with men, because they hear things from their parents and their elders.

This comment suggests that she thinks black men are apprehensive about having children with women with dark skin because of what they have been told by their parents and older relatives or respected people. As Phoenix (2014) argues, heterosexual men of colour often demonstrate colourism in their partner choices or descriptions of what makes women attractive. Here we explore the ways in which these choices can relate to dominant narratives about skin shade and prospective partners in families.

Andrew, a 45-year-old black man who said his mother used to use skin-lightening products, stated that his grandmother helped instil ideas about light skin being superior in younger family members.

> [W]e grew up in an environment where even we ourselves felt that it was nicer to be lighter. I can remember my grandmother making references to lighter people being more beautiful … [I]t's what we are taught from when you're younger. You learn these things.

His reference to "what we are taught" and "[y]ou learn these things" points to the role families play in socialisation about colourist values related to skin shade. As Wilder and Cain (2011, 585) argue, maternal figures can serve as "points of origin for *normative* ideologies of colorism." It seems that for Andrew, absorbing colourist beauty ideals from his mother and grandmother when he was growing up has influenced his ideas about beauty as an adult. He said he finds women from mixed ethnic backgrounds and Latina women "very attractive" and "even sometimes Indians, because they are not too light, and they are not too dark."

The idea that familial colourism, and particularly maternal colourism, affects how people approach relationships was repeated by several participants. For example, when asked whether skin shade has influenced her choice of partner, Chloe, a 33-year-old woman who has a black mother and a white father, said, "yes, this is really sad, so my mum doesn't like us to date black people […] Not actually just black people, she only wants us to date white people". She later said that her mother was okay with Chloe dating her former Chinese boyfriend but wouldn't accept her children dating Indian or Pakistani people and was "uncomfortable" when Chloe dated a man with a mixed ethnic background. Implicitly, in being uncomfortable with her children dating people who have a mixed ethnic background and objecting to them having South Asian and black partners, who tend to

have darker skin than white people, Chloe's mother is problematising not only her own racialisation as a black woman, but that of her mixed black–white children.

As Portia, Andrew and Chloe's narratives suggest, the centrality of colourism means that it influences how some families orient themselves to the future in terms of the kind of romantic matches they encourage or permit. This relates to Glenn's (2008) argument that families seek to lighten the family skin shade through marriage in order to gain privileges associated with light skin.

It is important to note, however, that not all families encouraged their children to choose white partners or those with light skin. Gregory, a 58-year-old black African man who was married to a black Caribbean woman, said that his preference for a black partner was, in part, influenced by his grandmother. He said that she told him he "must not marry someone that was white" because she wanted him to "keep within the race and propagate the race." The ideology instilled in Gregory privileged blackness, rather than white, or specifically light skin. However, it is noteworthy that it was also a maternal figure (his grandmother) who was seeking to influence his relationship choices. It is notable that participants highlighted the role played by older women (mothers and grandmothers) in policing the next generation's relationship choices. This underlines the importance of taking an intersectional approach to examining colourism in the family, one that is attentive to both gender and generation, as well as socioeconomic status (as discussed above).

The harmful impact of familial colourism on wellbeing and body image

Participants in this study spoke about the painful, unsettling, frustrating and/or confusing effect of colourist messages from mothers and other family members in their childhoods. This included long-term effects on their general self-worth and their body image, specifically their skin shade satisfaction.

Divya, a 43-year-old Indian woman, said that her mother's preoccupation with skin shade and how she favoured light skin had a significant impact on her when she was young.

> [O]ne of the biggest issues I had was with my mum always, always going on about how it's better to be fairer, [that] you'll only find a boy if you're fairer and you're only beautiful if you're fair. And I think that really, really, got to me. Like, how do you interpret that when you're a young child?

Evident in this quote is the tension between mother and daughter related to beauty ideals for women where light skin is prioritised and linked to

favourable relationship prospects. Divya implied that her mother's preoccupation with colourism extended to attempting to change Divya's skin shade. When asked whether there was ever any pressure to change her skin colour, Divya said:

> A couple of times. My mum, particularly as I was probably in my late teens, early twenties, when she used to go to India, she would come back with this sandalwood concoction that you were meant to paste on your face, to make you lighter.

Implicit here is that her mother saw Divya's darker skin as a problem that needed to be fixed with a skin-lightening product. Further, emphasising the enduring negative impact of the appearance pressure to have light skin to which Divya felt subjected, Divya said that in her family, "what you look like was so important to your success. […] [F]or such a long time it felt like a big problem for me."

Some participants suggested that colourism in their families had such a profound impact on them that it made them apprehensive about spending time in the sun. Their narratives highlighted how negative jokes and comments about getting darker can lead to insecurities about skin shade. For example, Erika, a 26-year-old black Caribbean woman who described her skin shade as "dark brown" or "milk chocolate", said:

> [W]hen you go on holiday, my family […] it would always be kind of like a joke, like, "You've got so dark", or like, "You've got so black". And it was always like a joke, but one that kind of stings a little bit. So, I never wanted to come back and that be the joke.

The fact that Erika, who characterises the kind of joke to which she's subjected as one that kind of stings", never wanted to have that joke aimed at her, suggests that it had a marked impact on her. What Erika describes is colourism in the guise of humour, which men in our study also reported (Phoenix and Craddock 2022).

In a similar way, Terrence, 22, who is Black African with dark skin, said that when he was younger the elder of his older brothers, whose skin shade was lighter than his, used to warn him to avoid staying out in the sun, so he did not get darker. That brother would always joke about his other brother's dark skin, leaving Terrence to wonder whether what he looked like "is the ideal". Terrence's narrative suggests that his brother's jokes and colourist comments made him insecure about his skin shade.

Zara, 34, who has one Indian and one Pakistani parent, said that her mother "has a complex that she's a bit darker in skin colour than [me and my sister]". Zara said that while she is comfortable in her skin now, when she was younger, "I did sometimes wish that I was fairer." She contextualised this, arguing that it relates to associations of light skin with purity, the idea that "if you're really light and fair, that you're also pure." She said such

associations reinforce ideas about the ideal skin shade "because everyone is in awe of someone who is really fair." This is consistent with work by Li and colleagues (2008) who argue that in Indian culture white skin is seen as a symbol of positive attributes, including beauty, cleanliness, purity, privilege and power. It is possible that what Zara describes as her mother's "complex" about having darker skin than her daughters created a colourist home environment that contributed to Zara's desire for lighter skin when she was younger.

Unfavourable comparisons with her sister, who Zara described as having much lighter skin, also contributed to Zara's insecurities about her skin shade. She said that extended family members would compare her with her sister and criticise Zara. For example, she said she was asked, "'How come you're darker than your sister? Do you not scrub your skin properly in the shower?'" In reporting this question, Zara explicitly conveys the idea that dark skin is imbued with negativity and seen as unclean. That Zara said she bought skin lightening products when she was younger "in the hope that it would maybe lighten my skin and then that would make me feel more beautiful and more confident about myself," needs to be read in the context of the familial colourism to which she was exposed and subjected. She said she grew up "with almost a kind of complex that I was darker than my sister and that is a bad thing in the way it was perceived in the Asian community. Being light-skinned or fair is synonymous with beauty." The "complex" Zara describes echoes findings from other UK-based research that found that experiences of colourism are associated with psychological distress (e.g. Craddock et al. 2023a).

Portia, whose narratives about being called "black and ugly" by her father we explored earlier, said she was not sure whether she would ever get to a place where she is completely happy with her skin shade. She suggested that colourism has had such a profound effect on her that it is likely to be impossible for her to achieve complete skin shade satisfaction.

> I can say 70–80% today [I am] happy with my skin tone but will I ever get to 100%? I don't know. I'd like to think so, but I'm not sure in this society that we are placed in.

Ilana, 38, who identified as "mixed" and said she was Jewish, indigenous (from South America) and Spanish, said that the appearance of her eyes led to her receiving colourist comments and teasing from her family because of their phenotypical distance from white appearance ideals. She said:

> My family – they had issues. I have like Asian-looking eyes. Or so people tell me, I don't know. I just think they look like my eyes, so they always used to call me Chinese when I was little, which used to make me really angry because I feel like [unclear] they have a derogatory slight to it.

It is clear from the narratives of these participants, most of whom were women, that the colourism to which they were subjected by their families was unsettling as they grew up. It caused confusion, upset and anger and led them to feel insecure about their skin shade. It also affected decisions, such as whether or not they felt comfortable spending time in the sun. Previous research has shown that faced with disadvantages associated with colourism, people with dark skin can feel helpless, have poorer health outcomes, experience psychological distress, and sometimes resort to skin lightening practices (Craddock et al. 2023a; Glenn 2008; Monk 2021). This underlines the importance of resisting and addressing colourism at the familial level and beyond.

Families resisting colourism

Alongside the many narratives about colourism being passed down and perpetuated by families, about a quarter of participants described how their families resisted colourism. Some suggested that the families they grew up with accepted people irrespective of their skin shade. Others said that their families instilled a sense of pride and confidence in their skin shade, dissuaded them from engaging in skin lightening practices, and/or worked to ensure that colourism was not perpetuated. Additionally, five participants who were parents themselves discussed their efforts to ensure their children were not colourist or affected by colourism. In some cases, this contrasted with the colourism they encountered in the families that raised them.

Reflecting on their upbringing, some participants described how colourism was resisted in their families. Josephine, a 55-year-old woman with a black African and a white British parent, said that there are people of very different skin shades in her family and that everyone is accepted:

> [T]he dynamics of when we're all together as a family, it's really – because we really do have from white to light brown to, you know– I call it, you know, the United Nations and we see things so differently. It's like when we're with the family, it's like we're in the bubble because we accept, you know colour is not an issue, we don't, you know, we just celebrate our differences. We've got someone who has dreadlocks, someone who has chopped their hair off and– but we just accept and we're so proud to be who we are. […] I do think that we're so accepting.

It is noteworthy that Josephine, who has light skin, does not actually name "dark skin". She says, "we really do have from white, to light brown to, you know … " This suggests both that whiteness is seen as normative, the starting point, and that there is an awkwardness when it comes to talking about dark skin. In likening her family to the United Nations and speaking of celebrating difference and being "proud" to be who they are and being "so accepting," Josephine seems keen to present her diverse family in a positive, non-colourist light.

Similarly, when asked whether she ever feels like she treats people differently because of their skin shade, Ella, a 19-year-old woman with a black African and a white British parent, pointed to her mixed ethnicity family to explain why she does not focus on skin shade or racialised difference:

> [W]e have so many different ethnicities like within our family, like Greek, Indian, like black African, black Jamaican, white […] [S]o from a young age, I've just – these are just people to me, I've never been thinking like, "Oh my God that person is dark, that person's white, that person is a bit more tanned," that's just not how I've learnt to categorise people.

Ella's efforts to avoid being colourist, "[t]hey are just people to me", seem akin to so-called "colour-blind" arguments about not seeing "race". As Karmali et al. (2019) argue, people ignore racialisation in an effort not to appear prejudiced, on the assumption that doing so will convince others that their actions are not influenced by racialisation and are therefore not racist. Ella, who described herself as being a "kind of yellowy colour", repeats that they "are just people to me" and states that "I don't do that myself," referring to treating people "differently". This suggests that it is so important to her that she is not seen as prejudiced that she perhaps overlooks racialised and skin shade differences that are often associated with privilege or disadvantage.

In response to being asked whether she ever feels that she treats people differently because of their skin shade, Destiny, a 32-year-old Black Caribbean woman, said she did not treat people differently because of their skin shade thanks to her upbringing. Destiny, who said she had "brown" or "dark brown" skin and said people describe her as looking Ethiopian, said she was taught about colourism and racism and the impact of those prejudices on people's lives:

> [T]his stuff has been drilled into me for such a long time, from when I was born […] understanding why colourism and racism exists […] and being proud of the amazing things that our culture has done. […] Because of racism [experienced by her family], I was always told that it's really awful to judge someone on their skin shade.

Similarly, Kelly said that her mother was "very adamant that growing up, it was important to be proud of where we came from and what we looked like." Likewise, when asked if he ever felt pressure to change the shade of his skin, Malakai, a 30-year-old Black Caribbean man who grew up in Jamaica and London, also said no, because of his mother's efforts to make her children feel proud of their skin shades.

> It's a testament to your ancestors that we've come this far. We have experienced so much struggles because of our skin tone. It is lovely. It is who you are. It is how God made you. You should be proud of what you have.

In their narratives, Destiny, Kelly and Malakai described how their families helped to instil a sense of racialised pride and belonging in them. To some extent, this served to protect them from the colourism in society, which is consistent with earlier research (Hordge-Freeman 2013). In contrast to this process of racialised socialisation through instilling a sense of racialised pride, Qudrah, who is 31 and Pakistani, said "fear of my mum" helped her to resist pressure (she does not outline from whom) to lighten her skin. She said, "I knew that if I came home and thought about it my mum would be like, 'what are you doing? Throw that in the bin!'"

Twenty-seven-year-old Henry, who has an African American mother and a white Irish father suggested that the way in which his mother, who had dark skin, liked to tan served to disrupt colourist ideas. He said:

> I know people, black people that have not wanted to go in the sun because they don't want to get any darker because of the stigma attached to dark skin […]. Mum didn't care and that taught me, in a sense, to not care.

Almost half of the participants who were parents discussed the efforts they make both to ensure colourism is not passed down to their children and to protect their children from societal colourism. Jamila, a 33-year-old Eritrean woman who described her light skin as a source of privilege and praise in her family, said she tried to help her daughters, particularly her elder daughter, feel more positive about their darker skin. In response to a question asking how her elder daughter struggles with her appearance, she said:

> She makes a lot of comparisons between our skin colours. And says look at how much lighter you are. You look white. And she'll comment on how white my legs are, and my hands, compared to hers. And when she does that […] I find that really difficult because she clearly wants to be more like, to look more like me in terms of her appearance, and that's really difficult for me … to accept. To allow her to feel that way. So, I try to always tell them that I prefer their shade of skin.

Gregory, who has a black wife, daughter and son, said that in his family "everyone is kind of happy with their shade, which there's various," in part because of the efforts he and his wife made to help their children appreciate their skin shades. He said that when his children were about eight or nine in a school that was predominantly white "they did raise questions about why their shade […] was so different." In order to instil skin shade confidence in his children he said, "I remember the wife and I giving them positive messages and affirmative messages, and so, it hasn't been an issue since then, ten years ago, more than ten years ago."

Just as Gregory said that he and his wife worked to instil positive and affirmative message about skin shade in their children, Ilana, 38, whose

narratives about being teased because of her "Asian-looking eyes" we explored earlier, said that the colourism to which she was subjected by her family growing up made her determined to teach her children that dark skin should not be seen as negative. She said that her awareness of how her mother treated her has led her to highlight skin shade differences between herself and her children, telling them, "Look at you, you're so much lighter than me, I'm so much darker than you," but "this darkness doesn't mean anything bad, some of the people that you love the most are this way, and you have to be aware of this."

Ilana's approach to trying to ensure her children are not colourist takes for granted the notion that colourism is prevalent in UK society. Highlighting that some of her son's relatives have much darker skin than him, but that "darkness doesn't mean anything bad," presumes that he will already have been exposed to the idea that darkness does indeed mean something bad. This, coupled with Gregory's narrative about his children questioning their skin shade at school, reflects the fact that even when colourism is not prevalent in a nuclear family, it can still influence young people's perceptions of skin shade.

Portia, whose father called her "black and ugly" when she was growing up, said she talks to her son about colourism and that when they see colourism, she and her son "call it out":

> [b]ecause otherwise you end up carrying this stuff around, thinking, oh, it's because of you, it's your fault. You know, and it's not. So– and that is also part of the healing, is to talk with my son about it, because I don't want him carrying this baggage around. I want him to go into the world as confident as he can be as a young black man.

Lastly, Catherine, 29, whose parents are both mixed black–white, said she tries to teach her young children to "be respectful". She also stressed that it was important for her daughter who "especially in the summer she […] is really dark" to "know that actually she's really beautiful and she should just own that".

At the end of each interview, we asked participants how they thought colourism should be tackled. The three most popular responses were through: media and representation; education and the family. It is notable that just a quarter mentioned the family as a potential site of intervention against colourism despite almost half of the participants highlighting the family as a key site for transmitting colourism.

One way participants recommended addressing colourism was through educating parents so that they did not reproduce the prejudice in their families. Participants emphasised the need to support parents to raise awareness of colourism among their children and to instil positive associations with dark skin. For example, Portia said, one way to help is "getting in early to families and

supporting our children and young people. […] We need to support parents, you know, to parent positively." Malakai said that to address colourism "You, as a people, need to educate your children and tell them that they are beautiful. […] Teach the younger ones, educate them. And teach love among our people." Here, Malakai emphasises the important role of families in educating the next generation to disrupt the transmission of colourism.

Conclusion

Colourism is a social justice issue that affects people of colour in numerous areas of their lives. The fact that it often originates in the family, an institution associated with colour socialisation and protecting children from prejudice (James et al. 2018), compounds its potentially negative impact. Building upon existing research that is predominantly focused on colourism within black families from Brazil and the US, our analysis based on 33 interviews with adults of colour living in the UK found that almost half constructed their families as key transmitters of colourist ideas. Implicit in some of the narratives of women with dark skin was the idea of trans-generational shame related to skin shade, with dark skin viewed as ugly and/or low class, while light skin was idealised. It was evident that gender, socioeconomic status and generation were all important in intersection with skin shade.

Some participants discussed how colourist ideas were apparent in family members' opinions and attitudes towards their potential romantic partners, affecting who they then chose to date. It seems likely then that family colourism contributes to colourism in the relationship market. Although we did not have the space to discuss it here, several participants argued that colourism had a significant impact on desirability and dating.

Unsurprisingly, given the considerable impact colourism has been shown to have on people of colour in the USA (Monk 2021a), our data suggests that colourism from family members was a source of pain and distress, which often had a lasting impact, including intergenerationally. Given this, it is important that colourism is tackled in the family. Encouragingly, our data also shows examples of families resisting colourism by accepting people irrespective of their skin shade, trying to instil skin shade satisfaction in their children and working to ensure that colourism was not perpetuated. Participants who had their own children, some of whom experienced colourism in the families that raised them, outlined the steps they take to protect their own children from colourism.

Limitations

Our findings must be considered in the context of two main limitations. First, these results are from an exploratory qualitative project on skin shade and

colourism and there were no specific questions in the interview schedule about the role of family. Therefore, there may be important narratives that were not captured in relation to colourism in the family. However, the importance of family to colourism became evident because when participants shared experiences of colourism, these were often situated in the context of the family when they were growing up.

Second, analysis is based on a heterogenous sample limiting the potential to draw meaningful patterns based on particular groups. For example, our participants' ages ranged from 19 to 60. This wide age span is likely to have affected how participants recalled family events and experiences growing up. It also adds a confounding factor of time if participants are recalling childhood experiences of colourism. Age is likely to have been an important intersecting factor, giving participants more distance from the pain of familial childhood experiences and giving them an opportunity to see how their own children could be helped to avoid colourism. In addition, some, but not all, participants have their own children. Therefore, not all participants were able to talk about how they were raising their children. In addition, they differed in terms of ethnic background and as we recruited via convenience sampling, we did not have an equal distribution of broad ethnic groups in the UK. While our heterogenous sample allowed us to draw broad parallels, it limited the possibility for in-depth analysis based on a particular demographic. There were also unequal numbers of men (9) and women (24) in the sample, which may mean that we did not gain a full range of men's experiences.

Future directions

To build upon the present research, future studies should directly question adults of colour living in the UK about their childhood experiences of colourism in the family setting. A focused study on parents of colour would be valuable to explore both their childhood experiences of how skin shade was discussed and negotiated in the family, as well as how they are navigating skin shade with their own children. Further, in-depth studies focused on specific ethnic/racialised groups would allow for insights about colourism in the family that may further address intersections of ethnicity, gender, age, generation, and social class. Obtaining random samples across all these social categories would enable further intersectional analysis to be conducted.

Notes

1. We recognise that whiteness is a social construction and there is no singular white look. However, Northern European features such as light skin, straight

or wavy hair, light eyes with a double eyelid and a slim nose, are often associated with whiteness.

2. We acknowledge that the term "people of colour" is imperfect. It implies that white people have no colour and thereby renders whiteness invisible.

   Where possible we have specified particular ethnic / racialised groups but occasionally for simplicity and brevity, a collective term is useful.

3. We did not ask if participants had children so only have data if it was presented.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Statement of ethics

This study was granted ethical approval by the Research Ethics Committee at SOAS, University of London.

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