

A Call to Action: The Need for a Cultural Psychological Approach to Discrimination on the Basis of Skin Color in Asia

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Abstract

A strong preference for fair skin appears to be the norm across the Asian continent and may pervade many aspects of social life. Yet scholarly work on this ubiquitous phenomenon is rare within psychological science. This article is a call for a psychological investigation into colorism in Asia. I argue that colorism has firm systemic roots as a result of the sociohistorical trajectories of different Asian societies that have attached cultural meanings to skin color. Consequently, similarities and differences in such trajectories may account for variability in the expression of colorism within contemporary Asian societies. Directions for a cultural psychological approach to colorism are suggested.

Keywords

colorism, Whiteness, Asia, racism, colonialism, discrimination, social pain, ostracism, skin color, cultural psychology

One evening, I drove to Little India and it was pitch dark but not because there was no light, but because there were too many Indians around.

—Choo Wee Khiang, former Singaporean Member of Parliament, during a parliamentary speech in 1992 (Velayutham, 2009, p. 255)

In one discussion of discrimination, my Chinese student told me that she currently felt much happier than when she was a little girl because over the years she had become paler-skinned. Taken aback by her unexpected confession, I asked her why it had made her happier. She told me that from a very young age, her aunties had regularly bullied her by saying that she was the “ugly duckling” of the family because her natural tan made her look like a “dark-skinned Indian.”

Although my initial reaction was one of shock, during my years of living in East Asia, I regularly observed social discrimination on the basis of skin color. Such discrimination is often referred to as *colorism*, which Nakano Glenn (2008) defined as “social hierarchy based on gradations of skin tone within and between racial/ethnic groups” (p. 281). Yet a search for empirical psychological research on the matter turned out to be

surprisingly difficult. In fact, numerous Asian colleagues told me that whereas most people are aware of its pervasiveness, colorism in Asia remains a taboo issue.

As a Dutch man of mixed race, I have always been cognizant of my surroundings. Growing up in the communal north of the Netherlands while deviating from the racial norm had primed me to a constant threat of discrimination; one was always on high alert. It also formed in me an empathetic understanding of the intense psychological and emotional struggles that often must be endured by individuals who are discriminated against. In this article,¹ I call for an investigation into the psychological ramifications of Asian cultures deeply rooted in the classification of people along the color line. The prolonged silence of psychological science, particularly in Asia, borders on complacency because it contributes to a lack of understanding of the psychological causes and consequences of colorism and therefore potentially significant human suffering.

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Cultures of Colorism

When or where colorism as we know it today first emerged remains a mystery. Jablonski (2012) argued that although the salience of skin color has been abundantly described in many historical texts, most did not carry the connotation of disdain for dark-skinned people or supremacist attitudes toward light-skinned people. According to Jablonski, the ancient Romans and Egyptians, for example, preferred a medium-brown skin color. At the same time, the reasons for being enslaved were still independent of skin color. In fact, archeological evidence suggests that in the Roman Empire, Black Africans intermixed with White Europeans (Boseley, 2017; Raff, 2017). Colorism as an indicator of one's value as a human being probably emerged sometime around the 7th or 8th century CE, during the supremacy of the Arab empire (Spaulding, 1995; Wright, 2007). Pseudoscientific notions of inferiority of sub-Saharan Black people legitimized their enslavement. The connection of Blackness to slavery was not as strong as it would eventually become because the Qur'an sanctioned the enslavement only of persons defeated in combat. Moreover, historians have noted that, in general, the Arab empire was marked by a strong sense of racial superiority over all non-Arab groups (albeit not as strongly as over Black Africans), as evidenced by cases describing the enslavement of Whites in Arab nations (e.g., the enslavement of White Americans in Algeria in the 17th century; Baepler, 1999; Hunwick, 2003; B. Lewis, 1976). Furthermore, lightness of skin color remained detached from attractiveness. Whereas wealthy Arab men preferred concubines of all skin colors and nationalities (European, Chinese, etc.), those who were perceived as the most attractive were Eastern Ethiopian women. Indeed, this can arguably be considered one of the first indicators of the sociocultural construction of meanings attached to skin tone (e.g., beauty or superiority), and hence evidence of its arbitrariness (Campbell, 2013).

It was not until the 17th century that the slave trade became dominated by Europeans, who introduced their own White-supremacist system beyond the system of Arab supremacy, which had been in decline since the 13th century (K. M. Lewis et al., 2013). It was also during this time that Blackness became an even stronger signifier to dominant social groups—in particular Europeans—that a person could be treated as a slave. Furthermore, Europeans colonized parts of the Arab world, which created a new color consciousness wherein light skin combined with European phenotypic features acquired strict hierarchical and racialized meanings. This racialized hierarchical system spread across the world during Europe's colonial plunder of

the majority of the world's non-European nations. The result was that across all continents, from Africa to the Americas and Asia, European Whiteness became the norm of racial and aesthetic superiority.

Cultural roots of colorism in Asia

As a receiver of this hierarchical system, however, Asia has been somewhat of an outlier because compared with other continents, there was already a long-standing tradition of preferring lighter over darker skin tones (Dixon & Telles, 2017). Indeed, Pan (2013) described how a portrait of a Chinese empress from 690 CE portrayed her as having extremely pale skin as an indicator of royal highness. Hence, whereas most colonized societies across the globe were subdued by a hierarchical system based not merely on colorism but also on the idea of "racial" superiority of European phenotypic features, colorism in Asia often expressed itself independent of colonialism, idolizing the fair-skinned (East) Asian phenotype (Rondilla & Spickard, 2007).

Indeed, Nakano Glenn (2008) pointed out that most, if not all, Asian cultures were historically rooted in class-based hierarchies in which light skin indicated nobility because it suggested that one did not need to go outside to perform manual labor under the sun. Take Japan as an example. Geishas in ancient Japan traditionally painted their faces white as a sign of femininity and nobility (in the premodern era of Japan, fair skin indicated nobility for men, as well). Indeed, Ashikari (2003) observed that to this day, "the Japanese makeup style is still characterized by the distinctive 'white' face" and that women "seem to be using foundation in order to achieve the 'right' face for a Japanese woman" (p. 56). Likewise, a preference for fair skin can be observed across the Indian continent, where dark skin was historically equated with lower and "untouchable" castes such as the Dalits, who performed hard manual labor outdoors (Khan, 2009). Similar historic class-based trends can be observed in many other Asian countries, such as China, Pakistan, Vietnam, Korea, the Philippines, Cambodia, Thailand, and Indonesia (e.g., Rondilla & Spickard, 2007; Wertheim, 2017). As a result, in such societies, dark-skinned individuals were (and maybe are) perceived as less capable, less intelligent, and more unhygienic than their light-skinned counterparts. In fact, a recent Chinese commercial for a laundry detergent sparked online outrage because it portrayed a dark-skinned (African) man as unclean; he then became a "clean" light-skinned (Chinese) man after being washed with the detergent (Gan, 2016).

As mentioned before, Asia did not escape the intrusion of colonialism and hence its influence on colorism. Take Indonesia, where Dutch colonization restructured

society according to colorist hierarchies: Light-skinned people (Dutch) were perceived as being on top, the “yellow”-skinned people (Chinese) were in the middle, and the dark-skinned people (Indonesians) were at the bottom (Wertheim, 2017). This colorist social order is still visible in present-day Indonesia. Filipino culture is also shaped by a colonial past spanning more than three centuries. Under both Spanish and U.S. rule, race-based hierarchies tied to skin color were part of everyday reality, positioning Whites at the top, racially mixed Mestizos in the middle, and dark-skinned indigenous Filipinos at the bottom (e.g., Chandler, 2017; Hunter, 2007). Therefore, in postcolonial cultures, the distinction between colorism and racism may become blurry and could in fact strengthen each other (i.e., interact).

These cultural differences highlight the importance of a nuanced cultural investigation into colorism because they show that a preference for fair skin does not necessarily mean a preference for “racial Whiteness,” as is often assumed. Such an assumption would ignore the subjective class-based value that many Asian cultures had already assigned to fair skin, independent of colonial influences or White facial features (e.g., Ayu Saraswati, 2010). In fact, the sociologist King-O’Riain observed that although beauty pageants among Japanese strongly value fairness, half-White participants are often deemed to look too (racially) White and are therefore considered less attractive than women who are seen as fully Japanese. As a consequence, such participants often use dark contact lenses and dye their hair to the darkest hue possible in an attempt to look more Japanese (as cited in Rondilla & Spickard, 2007). Indeed, the persistent idea that a preference for fairness necessarily results from colonization (and refers to “racial Whiteness”) exposes a biased and racialized conception of fair skin, effectively supporting the inconvenient observation that psychology may carry with it its own “racism-relevant way of seeing the world” (Salter, Adams, & Perez, 2018, p. 152). Nevertheless, through globalization and digital technology, global habits that categorize people along the color line have merged, transforming the norms of hierarchy to a level unseen before (Hall, 2018).

Colorism in contemporary Asia

Today, cultures of colorism are rampant across the Asian continent. Indeed, in their sociological investigation, Rondilla and Spickard (2007) described a deeply ingrained form of colorism still being passed down from generation to generation within contemporary Asian families. From preferential treatment of fairer siblings to parental rejections of dark-skinned romantic partners, across the geographically and culturally diverse continent of Asia, the preference for fairness

appears to be the norm. In contrast, dark skin sometimes appears to be the epitome of all that is wrong with humanity. Consequently, I term these *cultures of colorism* because they revolve around the perpetual priming of the cognitive salience of skin-color-related attitudes and their consequential behaviors in the social sphere.

This is also what distinguishes colorism in contemporary Asia from what one sees in the West today. Whereas colorism in Asia has remained firmly rooted in the supremacist assumptions of lighter skin tones (a trend similar to classist Renaissance Europe), Western colorism has transformed into a system in which tanned skin is considered desirable because its sociocultural meanings became attached to the ability to engage in leisure activities and aesthetic beauty (Chen, Yarnal, Chick, & Jablonski, 2018). Nevertheless, colorism in the West is comparable with that in Asia in its effect on between-group perceptions: Racial groups having darker skin tones are still connected to a lower standing in the social hierarchy (Daniel, 2007; Ford, 2009).

In the following section, I attempt to shed light on the psychology of colorism (or lack thereof) and the potential social psychological effects of colorism in Asia. The singular focus on the Asian situation should be viewed not as downplaying the importance of colorism across other continents but, rather, as a complementary addition to the literature that has largely been ignored within psychological science. At the same time, colorism across Asian cultures may arguably be one of the most severe and persistent expressions of the phenomenon.

Colorism in Psychological Science

A PsycInfo search on “colorism” yielded 137 results, suggesting that the topic attracts marginal attention within psychological science (comparatively, a search on “collectivism” yielded 4,068 results). Entering the words “colorism and Asia” in the search box together yielded one result: a sociological investigation into global research on colorism (Dixon & Telles, 2017). A search on “skin color,” on the other hand, provided more results: 947. The vast majority of these were Euro-American studies. Nevertheless, entering “skin color and Asia” together yielded a mere nine results. I then attempted to narrow the search down to two Asian countries. I chose India and China because not only does colorism appear to play a major role in both countries, but also they contain the largest populations in Asia. Moreover, India is currently struggling with the aftermath of its caste system, which was deeply rooted in the classification of people according to their skin color (e.g., Jogdand, Khan, & Mishra, 2016; Vallabhaneni, 2015). These searches yielded a total of 4 studies when searching on “colorism” and 21 studies when searching on “skin color.” To ensure that this surprisingly small

Table 1. Search Results

Search engine	Search terms							
	Colorism/“skin color”				Collectivism			
	Base	+Asia	+India	+China	Base	+Asia	+India	+China
PsycInfo	137/947	1/9	4/15	0/6	4,068	97	143	338
Web of Science	199/6,756	2/48	8/36	2/45	6,322	122	160	733
Psychology	50/264	0/0	1/3	0/1	2,572	31	57	236
Sociological Abstracts	289/2,915	39/458	34/388	12/289	2,834	770	489	1,082

number was not an artifact of the specific search engine, I repeated all of the above searches using the well-known Web of Science engine, resulting in just four studies that were conducted within the psychological sciences that (a) focused on colorism and (b) used non-Western Asian participants. Table 1 shows a summary of all searches and includes a comparative search on “collectivism,” which, like colorism, is a cultural construct that is highly applicable to the Asian continent. Yet collectivism has inspired considerably more psychological research than colorism.

Why has psychological science remained silent? Indeed, our empiricist world neutralizes and renders our science, in a sense, “color-blind,” because subjective experiences are often deemed unmeasurable and are therefore willfully ignored (e.g., Lilienfeld, 2017; Sue, 2017), while at the same time, competitive individualism toward a hierarchical social order is assumed to be “just natural” (e.g., Adams & Kurtiş, 2012; Hogan & Emler, 1978; Parker, 2007; Perez & Salter, 2019; Salter & Adams, 2013; Shweder, 1990). Therefore, psychological science has been portrayed as a hegemonic science that is not free from biases governed by ideologies that come from the privileged (Adams, Estrada-Villalta, Sullivan, & Markus, 2019; Bettache & Chiu, 2019; Salter et al., 2018). In fact, Dietze, Gantman, Nam, and Niemi (2019) argued that sensitive but vital themes (e.g., White supremacy) are systematically avoided because peer reviewers often function as gatekeepers who make sure that psychological research remains focused on “safe” constructs (e.g., collectivism) that do not threaten the status quo. With this in mind, it is unsurprising that colorism has found little resonance in psychological science. This highlights the need for a critical lens on the priorities of our science. We can currently only guess at the effects such preferences may have on the livelihoods of millions (or even billions) of people in Asia who are unable or unwilling to conform to such standards.

A sociocultural approach to colorism

It appears that psychological science has failed to study colorism in Asia. Therefore, I invite scholars to “aim their arrows” at questions that transcend the Asian

conception of fair skin as merely an innocent beauty standard. As many societal factors may play a decisive role in the continuation of colorism in Asia, a scientific approach to colorism that respects its sociocultural origins is imperative. Hence, both macro and individual levels of study should be considered. Yet mainstream psychological science has increasingly engaged in methodological individualism—a reductionist understanding of human behavior largely disconnected from the social environment. Understandably, scholars have pointed out that this is problematic when one wants to understand the causes and effects of human behavior (e.g., Adams et al., 2019; Burge, 1986; Wilson, 1994). On the other hand, attention to the mutual constitution of culture and individual behavior has surged over the past two decades but seems to privilege some constructs (e.g., the self; Markus & Kitayama, 2003, 2010) over others (e.g., racism; Salter et al., 2018). It becomes increasingly clear, however, that a sociocultural approach may be crucial to foster an understanding of all human tendencies (Chiu & Hong, 2013; Lehman, Chiu, & Schaller, 2004). As such, cultural psychology may hold the key to bridging the gap between the behavioral individualism of contemporary mainstream psychology and the group-level focus one sees more strongly within the nonpsychological social sciences such as sociology, which has paid considerably more attention to colorism (for reviews, see Dixon & Telles, 2017; Hunter, 2007; Table 1).

Acculturation and socialization

Of particular relevance is the argument Salter et al. (2018) recently put forward with regard to fostering an understanding of racism, wherein they posited that we must go beyond reductionist individualism by also applying a cultural approach, because such an approach considers “racism as a set of ideas, practices, and materials embedded in the structure of everyday cultural worlds” (p. 151). Note that colorism is not the same as racism; it expresses itself as horizontal intragroup discrimination (e.g., light-skinned vs. dark-skinned Chinese; Jones, 2010) and across racial group boundaries (e.g.,

Chinese vs. Indian). Nevertheless, I suspect that comparable cultural processes are at play that maintain, reproduce, and reinforce colorism in Asia. In addition, a cultural approach has the potential to account for similarities (e.g., conceptions of female attractiveness) and differences (e.g., internalization of White supremacist views) in the expressions of colorism across Asian societies as a result of similarities (e.g., gender and class-based colorism) and differences (e.g., colonialism) of historic trajectories, respectively.

In other words, socialization and acculturation may shape specific colorist tendencies across different Asian cultures. In line with this, Liu et al. (2019) stressed the necessity for acculturation research to be applied to the question of how Whites and people of color in the United States navigate a cultural world of White hegemony: A cultural system of White supremacy is a shared cultural lens and, thus, a shared reality shaping attitudes and behavior toward race and skin color. At the same time, individual differences (e.g., White vs. non-White) shape nonshared realities because of differences in self-evaluation and/or treatment by others and thus differences in the effects of knowledge structures (meanings) associated with Whiteness. Knowledge structures deeply embedded in one's culture (e.g., "fair equals beautiful") become easily accessible because they are a recurring part of everyday life (e.g., through popular culture, upbringing, etc.). It is this accessibility that drives culture-specific behavior because such knowledge structures provide an interpretative lens through which to see the world when activated (Hong, Morris, Chiu, & Benet-Martinez, 2000).

This opens up numerous research paradigms, such as the potential consequences of differences in interpretive frames of Asian women versus men when their culture is made salient. Priming cultural cues, for example, may contribute to women's sense of attractiveness and self-esteem. Conversely, cultural priming may influence male preferences for the phenotype of potential romantic partners. Therefore, differential treatment of Asians because of their skin tone may pervade many aspects of life, including education, marriage, and employment (e.g., Utley & Darity, 2016). One working assumption, therefore, is that the pervasive issue of skin whitening among Asians (e.g., Yeung, 2015) is not simply the result of a need to feel "more beautiful," but in fact is indicative of a broader wish to actualize the self toward an unreachable ideal so as to be treated as a worthy or equal human being. Indeed, psychological theory has repeatedly stressed the notion that "'losing touch' with one's true self (e.g., because of parental or societal demands) is a source of considerable human misery" (Schlegel, Hicks, Arndt, & King, 2009, p. 474). In fact, David (2010) argued that skin whitening among

Filipinos is symptomatic of self-inferiorizing attitudes triggered by a hatred toward their natural skin tone, developed during colonial times.

Colonialism versus classism. This opens up a second direction for research; namely, the investigation of colonialist or classist influences on contemporary understandings of skin color (i.e., colorist attitudes). As mentioned, historically, classist colorism revolved around gradations of within-group skin coloration, with the palest form being the most preferred. On the other hand, colorism rooted in colonialism added a racialized component of European superiority. Hence, both forms of colorism may result in qualitatively different behavioral outcomes. For example, colorism rooted in colonialism may go hand in hand with the internalization of White supremacist attitudes, such as feelings of inferiority toward Europeans or a disdain for dark-skinned ethnic groups. These attitudes, in turn, may influence intergroup behavior (e.g., dating preferences) of individuals in postcolonial Asian societies. Hence, whereas Malaysian, Filipino, or Indonesian colorism may interact with racial features because of their colonial histories, this effect may be weaker (or absent) in societies such as Japan, where colorism was historically predominantly tied to class. Worth mentioning, therefore, is David and Okazaki's (2006) Colonial Mentality Scale, which measures internalized colonialism among Filipinos (but can potentially be adapted to other Asian cultures), and therefore may be a valuable tool to investigate the mechanisms behind cultural (and individual) differences in colorism among Asian postcolonial versus noncolonial cultures. Hence, in some cultures, colorism may be more strongly driven by the internalization of classist attitudes, whereas in others, internalized colonialism may carry additional explanatory power.

Intersectionality research. Another sociocultural component of colorism may be the interaction with a multitude of social identities, such as gender. Historically, and across Asia, conceptions of femininity and beauty have habitually been paired with fair skin. Fairness was—and likely is—most strongly enforced for women. In fact, Rondilla and Spickard (2007) argued that colorism among Asians is symptomatic of a patriarchal system wherein skin color is much less of a concern for men because their appeal is largely dependent on social standing. On the other hand, stigmatizing depictions of criminality in dark-skinned men seems to be a common practice in popular culture and, hence, could be a "contemporary" form of colorism that revolves around perceptions of masculinity and violent intent. Indeed, this could be the result of the aforementioned globalization of colorism (Hall, 2018) and thus potentially comparable with studies conducted among African Americans. For example, one

study showed that light-skinned Black women were judged as more attractive than dark-skinned Black women, but also that this effect was absent when rating Black men (Hill, 2002). In fact, dark-skinned Black men rated themselves as more attractive than light-skinned Black men (Wade, 1996). In contrast, dark-skinned Black men, on average, receive longer prison sentences than their light-skinned counterparts (Burch, 2015).

Furthermore, in some Asian cultures, such as those that endured colonial rule, this gender effect may interact with the effects of race. For example, a dark-skinned Chinese Singaporean woman may carry the burden of feeling (or being perceived as) less attractive compared with her light-skinned peers; however, a dark-skinned Indian Singaporean woman may additionally carry the burden of stigmatizing depictions assigned to her race because the social standing of ethnic Indians was lower than that of ethnic Chinese during British colonial rule (e.g., Barr, 1999).

To add to the cultural complexities of colorism, in some societies, such as Thailand, sexual orientation may play an additional role, as light-skinned Thai men have long been most appealing to upper-middle-class gay Thai men because they were perceived as conveying a sense of “class,” whereas darker-skinned men have traditionally been more appealing to Western immigrants who preferred “exotic-looking” Thai men (Canotal, 2009).

These complementary effects of race, skin color, gender, and sexual orientation all emphasize the complex nature of colorism as a function of culture. Recent trends in intersectionality research may therefore play a critical role in fostering an understanding of these issues (e.g., Case, 2012; Cole, 2009; Warner, Settles, & Shields, 2018).

Internalization of colorist beliefs. It may be interesting to gauge to what extent colorist attitudes are a reflection of personal beliefs. Although cross-cultural research has shown consistent differences in values and attitudes across cultures (Hofstede, 1984), some scholars have questioned to what extent such values can be considered personally endorsed values or as a function of perceived cultural consensus. To highlight this issue, Chiu, Gelfand, Yamagishi, Shteynberg, and Wan (2010) argued that culture functions at three levels, namely, the supraindividual level (social representations embedded in cultural institutions), the individual level (internalized individual-level characteristics), and the intermediate level (intersubjective perceptions of culture—beliefs and values one thinks are widely shared among fellow group members). Hence, to investigate the social potency of colorism, research could probe the extent to which people engage in colorism because they believe it is valued by others, because

they endorse colorist attitudes themselves, or both. I stress the importance of this seemingly simple question because constructs, in particular colorism, may conflict with deeply held personal values. In fact, my own preliminary and unpublished studies suggest a consistent majority preference for light-brown skin (as opposed to fair skin) among Malaysian Chinese and Singaporean Chinese research participants.

At the same time, the majority of female participants have admitted to avoiding sun tanning and wearing white facial foundation. Therefore, I suspect that many (younger generation) Asians may hold moral objections against colorism, yet succumb to it because of social pressure, because it is firmly encapsulated in their sociocultural worlds, wherein fair skin represents significant *symbolic capital*, as Nakano Glenn (2008) fittingly put it. Indeed, in their report of a qualitative study, Chen et al. (2018) described the inner conflicts felt by Asian American women because of their disagreement with their elderly family members, who were often firmly opposed to their acquisition of a suntan, reiterating the importance of cultural influences on colorism, given that Asian American biculturalism seems to drive opposing views on the matter. One could further test the possibility of implicit versus explicit colorism. Despite an explicit preference for light-brown skin, some Asians may hold implicit preferences toward fair skin, not unlike the existence of an implicit colonial mentality among some Filipinos (David, 2010).

Colorism as a function of economic prosperity. Hall (2018) argued for a transformation of critical race theory into critical skin theory, as the dynamics of globalization in relation to economics increasingly transform the conception of European Whites as topping the social hierarchy toward light-skinned social groups as topping the social hierarchy instead. With the rise of China and the relative economic successes of South Korea and Japan, societies of the northern hemisphere have been able to impose their ideals of human aesthetics (i.e., fair-skinned in-group prototypes) onto peoples of the southern hemisphere, whose economic hardships deny them the affordance of a similar mobility. This effect should be seen in light of the global reign of neoliberal capitalism, which celebrates a globalized fair and free marketplace (Beattie, Bettache, & Chong, 2019; Bettache & Chiu, 2019). In reality, however, it results in a form of cultural colonization wherein wealthy nations use their economic hegemony to hold power over the cultures of less-affluent nations (e.g., Chiu, Gries, Torelli, & Cheng, 2011).

For example, Google has been accused of applying racist algorithms that promote White ways of being (e.g., Euro-centric beauty ideals; P. Lewis, 2018; Tufekci,

2018), whereas Facebook has recently been caught using political fact-checking companies with ties to White-supremacist groups (Levin, 2019; Mindock, 2019). Hence, these corporations hold disproportional influence over the psychology of global recipients of social media and thereby maintain White hegemony in non-Western nations through the selective presentation of pro-White racialized information. In a similar way, Asian countries such as China and South Korea increasingly use their economic hegemony online (e.g., WeChat, Youku, or K-Pop); we are witnessing an increase in the admiration of the fair-skinned, northeast Asian beauty ideal and, hence, the potential concordant social construction of racial superiority. In fact, regardless of the centuries-long colonial legacy of Filipino culture, Rondilla and Spickard (2007) quoted Filipina women stating that their ultimate aesthetic ideal was not European or White, but instead was the northeast Asian phenotype.

Victims of colorism. Finally, I wish to emphasize the necessity of an investigation into the subjective experiences of those who may suffer from colorism. Within (hegemonic) psychology, the emphasis has predominantly been on the lived experiences of those who discriminate. That is, our science tends to center around the “perpetrator perspective” (Freeman, 1978; also see Salter & Adams, 2013). Although this perspective is essential to understand the motivations behind prejudicial behavior, it is merely part of the story. A sociocultural psychological approach to colorism demands both: Whereas culture shapes a shared reality of values attached to skin tones, differences in phenotypic expressions of melanin-based skin coloration shape individual differences in reality. Examples include the potentially preferential treatment of light-skinned individuals over dark-skinned individuals, internalized feelings of superiority versus inferiority, or the experiences of microaggressions due to one’s skin tone. Understandably, Sue (2017) has argued that human suffering necessitates listening to the voices of the oppressed, as “those voices tell stories of the many hurts, humiliations, lost opportunities, need for change, and the often unintentional microaggressions endured as they struggle against an unwelcoming, invalidating and even hostile . . . society” (p. 171).

Concluding Remarks

Although we are living in an era of extreme globalization wherein the intermixing of different ethnic groups has never before been so widespread, colorism seems to paradoxically become ever more prevalent. Hence, it is surprising, if not distressing, that there is hardly any scholarly work on such a socially relevant phenomenon within psychological science. With this article, I hope

to motivate researchers to start a serious investigation into colorism in Asia. Insight into the psychological causes and effects of colorism may prove essential in providing solutions to a situation of social inequality based on skin color among Asians, both within and between ethnic groups.

Transparency

Action Editor: Laura A. King

Editor: Laura A. King

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared that there were no conflicts of interest with respect to the authorship or the publication of this article.

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Acknowledgments

My deepest gratitude to Catherine Alexandra McBride (The Chinese University of Hong Kong) and Saroja Dorairajoo (National University of Singapore) for their help in the preparation of the manuscript.

Note

1. It is important to note that the topic of colorism necessitates the usage of highly sensitive language. I acknowledge that some of the terms that are used (e.g., regarding race or skin color) may be deemed offensive, even in the context of the article. I therefore ask for the readers’ understanding that these terms are used because of a lack of better alternatives.

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