

To better understand racial trauma, expert says we must also acknowledge skin tone

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Antoinette Landor, assistant professor of human development and family science, and a leading expert on colorism, says that bias related to skin tone can lead to negative health and relationship outcomes for African Americans. Credit: University of Missouri

As the country continues to grapple with racism, one University of Missouri professor suggests that bias related to skin tone can lead to negative health and relationships for African Americans. Antoinette Landor, assistant professor of human development and family science, and a leading expert on colorism, says discrimination based on skin tone plays a significant role in the lives of African Americans.

"For a long time, colorism has been considered a 'dirty little secret,'" Landor said. "Our recent research illustrates the need to unmask skin-tone wounds and promote healing for individuals, families and communities that suffer from skin-tone [trauma](#)."

Landor's study looked at the historical context of skin tone to create the first model for understanding skin-tone trauma. Through this model, she found that colorist incidents might directly and indirectly lead to negative effects on the health and interpersonal relationships of African Americans. This is due to colorist incidents eliciting traumatic stress reactions.

The model looks at both the historical and contemporary role of colorism and how it impacts African Americans. While colorism has roots in slavery and colonialism, it has carried over into mainstream popular culture as well. Landor points to several examples in popular culture that illustrate colorism such as; casting of fair-skinned Zoe

Saldana to portray dark-skinned Nina Simone; and magazines photoshopping pictures of Beyonce, Kerry Washington and others to make them appear lighter.

Landor points to differing portrayals of Steph Curry and Lebron James in [sports media](#) as an example of how bias about skin tone can impact how individuals are discussed. Landor noted that James has often been described in the media as "the villain and a braggart," while the lighter-skinned Curry was often described as "likable and approachable."

"When a phenomenon is nameless, individuals might doubt what they are experiencing," Landor said. "Naming these experiences as skin-tone trauma gives them a voice to speak about their experiences. Understanding skin-tone trauma also will help counselors or health providers develop tools to help heal these wounds."

Landor offers the following advice to help people heal from skin-tone trauma:

- Acknowledge that colorism exists through individual, institutional and cultural encounters and that it occurs across races.
- Have difficult conversations about the implications of colorism.
- Identify and define words that might cause [skin-tone](#) trauma and be aware of how those words might affect others.
- Believe others when they are open about trauma implications of colorism they are experiencing.

"Skin-tone trauma: historical and contemporary influences on the health and interpersonal outcomes of African Americans," was published in *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, a flagship journal of the Association of Psychological Science.

Provided by University of Missouri

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