Chapter 8
The Tilted Room of Colorism

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Collective Shaming

I was a very curious child and during adolescence, I typically exercised my curiosity by being a good listener (during adult conversations) and asking a lot of questions. I can remember a specific conversation I had during adolescence, with one of my mom's dearest friends, Genevieve.[1] Genevieve was reflecting on her first marriage to her college sweetheart. We talked about how they met, how they fell in love, and we somehow landed on the topic of how her parents felt about him. Genevieve shared that her father did not like him and was not supportive of the marriage. I was baffled by this, as I knew Genevieve's first husband, Dr. Landry, and he seemed like a nice man and was a very well-respected dentist in our community. Genevieve went on to share that her father did not want her to marry Dr. Landry, because he thought Dr. Landry was unattractive. I thought this was odd, so I asked, "Well why did he think that?" Her response startled me…she said, "My dad thought he was unattractive, because he is dark skinned, and my dad did not want me to marry a dark-skinned man."

I will never forget how I felt at that moment. It was the first time I had ever heard of a parent disapproving of their child's significant other because of their complexion. I immediately wondered if one day I might encounter a significant other's parents not liking me, because I am dark skinned. Such a thought never crossed my mind prior to this conversation with Genevieve. While the immediate impact of that

[1] All names and other personal identifiers in clinical stories/vignettes in the chapter have been changed to protect privacy and confidentiality.

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conversation was fleeting, I did not realize the kind of seed planted around being perceived as unworthy because of my complexion.

A couple of years later, I was a senior in high school, and I began dating a boy that I really grew to like. A mutual friend found out that we were dating and he told me that the boy's parents would never accept me, because I was too dark. At that moment, I recalled the conversation I had with Genevieve years earlier, and decided that it didn't make sense to continue dating him. I immediately pulled away from the dating relationship and accepted, without even experiencing rejection, that I was too dark.

As people of color, we have experienced the collective trauma associated with aligning ourselves to meet Eurocentric standards of beauty, and reporting that by doing so, we are standing upright. We impose these standards upon others, among our shared race, in the form of colorism, by using proximity to Eurocentric standards of beauty as the barometer for physical attractiveness, privilege, and access. The collective shaming of physical features such as darker hued skin, tightly coiled hair, wide noses, and full lips, gives rise to implications that are so pervasive and enduring that they continue to be perpetuated through intergenerational transmission. This collective shaming is what causes African Americans to align themselves to a tilted room and report themselves as sitting upright.

The Tilted Room Theory

A postcivil war cognitive psychology study employed several situations to investigate the roles of visual and bodily standards in perception of the upright, in an attempt to explore field dependence (Witkin et al., 1975). In one such study, study participants were placed in a tilted chair, situated in a tilted room, and then asked to align themselves vertically (Witkin et al., 1975). In some cases, an individual who tilted as much as 35 degrees, to align themselves with the room, reported being perfectly straight. In other cases, regardless of the position of the surrounding (tilted) room, other individuals adjusted their body to stand upright, despite the tilted room. Borrowing from scholar, political scientist, and professor, Melissa Harris Perry's application of this theory utilized as a lens to explore concepts related to the lived experiences of African Americans, we can use this tilted room theory to explore the concept of colorism and its implications for African Americans (Harris-Perry, 2011). If we apply this theory to colorism, the perceived upright, in this case, represents Eurocentric beauty standards

Self-Awareness as a Tool to Manage Emotions Surrounding Colorism

Given the complex nature of colorism's historical legacy of collective trauma among people of color, it is essential for therapists of color to practice self-awareness to manage their own emotions associated with their individual experiences with

colorism. The absence of practicing self-awareness, while doing this work, exacerbates vulnerability to transference and countertransference across the continuum of the therapeutic relationship. Transference is when the patient/client transfers their thoughts or feelings on to the therapist (Hughes & Kerr, 2000). Countertransference is when the therapist transfers their thoughts or feelings on to the patient/client (Hughes & Kerr, 2000).

For example, I was working with a Black grandmother named Mable. Mable was articulating her frustration surrounding her granddaughter Bethany's mom Lisa, not properly grooming Bethany. When I asked Mable to give details, she went on to explain that Lisa does not perm (chemically straighten) or use heat to straighten Bethany's hair, and that she leaves Bethany's hair in an afro. Mable saw this as negligent, and a sign that Lisa did not care. As Mable continued to discuss the issue, she repeatedly made references to me about Bethany not having wash-n-go textured hair, suggesting that if Bethany had a different texture of hair, it would be okay for her to wear it in its natural state. Mable also made several references to me being a black woman and understanding that in order to be perceived as presentable, Bethany's hair needed to be straightened. In this case, Mable was looking to me to validate the ways in which she normalized appropriate hair presentation. Mable broad-stroked me into a category, and decided that because I, too, was a black woman, I subscribed to the same standards of beauty that she did. Mable was also expecting that I would deem Lisa's decision to leave Bethany's hair in its natural state as negligent. When I did not validate Mable's perception of the way that Lisa cared for Bethany's hair as negligent, Mable became frustrated with me.

At that moment, I was certainly bothered by the idea that a mother allowing her child to wear her hair in its natural state was somehow perceived by the grandmother as negligent parenting. However, I was self-aware enough to not impose my anger toward the underlying issue of colorism, to be projected on to an individual. In this case, Mable was a trigger for my larger frustration with colorism. If I would have become angry with Mable, that would have been an example of countertransference.

Practicing self-awareness allows us to expand our capacity to understand how experiences, such as colorism, have impacted us, how they show up in our interactions, and how we can better self-manage the difficult emotions that are cued up when we encounter these experiences.

As a woman of color, I spent most of my childhood dismissing experiences of colorism as ignorant. I convinced myself that my dismissal of colorism was an act of protest. It was my form of sitting upright in a tilted room and refusing to adjust myself to align with the tilted room. I held the opinion that the act of giving colorism any energy at all, further perpetuated within group prejudice, racism, and discrimination. My strategy to maintain my perspective was avoidance. The aforementioned avoidance functions similarly to the guise of color-blindness. In the same ways that the ideology of color blindness upholds racism, in that such a perspective allows individuals in our society to avoid confronting the issue of racism, my avoidance was allowing me to not confront within group prejudice and discrimination on the basis of complexion, hair texture, and facial features. I turned away

from those who made hurtful comments about skin color and hair texture, pretending that these things were not happening all around me. I refused to confront the complex interplay of colorism and the impact that it was having on my emotional well-being. This represented years of missed opportunities I had to elevate my voice around my own experience and to create space for others to do the same. As an adult, this avoidance came back to haunt me in my work with children of color and their caretakers. I began to observe harmful experiences of colorism, transmitted intergenerationally from parent to child. Each time I was witness to colorism in my clinical work with families, it felt like gasoline illuminating the little fires all around me. I could no longer ignore those fires as I recognized that standing upright in a tilted room was just as emotionally harmful as adjusting oneself to fit in the tilted room. It became clear that the tilted room was what required the adjustment, not the individual(s) sitting in the room.

Case Study #1

A couple of years ago, I provided clinical support to an organization whose staff worked with African-American girls whose fathers had been incarcerated. I facilitated a series of therapeutic group sessions centered in expanding their capacity to heal themselves through shared identity, shared experiences, and collective power. I divided each group cohort by age; the youngest participants in one cohort ranged from 5 to 7 years old.

Conventional Wisdom gained from over a decade of clinical practice with children experiencing the adverse childhood event of parental incarceration informed my expectations of common emotional and meta-emotional themes among the target population. I envisioned themes such as distrust, betrayal, feeling misunderstood, shame, powerlessness, fear, isolation, loneliness, disconnection, numbness, sadness, disappointment, and hopelessness.

These emotions and meta-emotions place children, with an incarcerated parent, at an increased likelihood to isolate and suffer in silence, subsequently stripping away the opportunity to activate supports that may serve as a buffer to the negative outcomes associated with this adverse childhood experience. As expected, all these themes were present. However, one theme emerged that completely took me by surprise: colorism.

Tully, a 7-year-old program participant, began to talk about experiences of what she referred to as “racism.” When prompted to explain the experience by giving examples, Tully stated that sometimes family members and kids at school referred to her as black and nappy headed and made fun of her darker hued skin. Other girls began to share similar experiences. They talked about these experiences in a very normalized way, accepting that if your hair is tightly coiled and your skin is of a dark hue, you are certain to be ridiculed for such characteristics.

As I listened to the girls, in the group, describe these experiences, I felt so many things. I began to worry about how I could give an appropriate clinical response. I

wondered if there was a best practice for addressing colorism. In addition to the uncertainty of how to respond, I was also trying to manage intense and negative emotions from my own experiences with colorism that rose up in response to what the girls had shared.

I had been told that my brown skin made me less attractive. My skin color had been used as the barometer for "too dark." I had been ridiculed about my hair texture. I had also observed other individuals having similar experiences. Even in recent years, as an adult, I had a family member say, "During the time that I was growing up, you would not have had access to the privileges that you have enjoyed due to your darker complexion." His statement haunted me for many weeks. It made me feel like I was of less value and less attractive because of my complexion. This painful experience was yet another reminder that we cannot ignore these little fires, because they never go away. They live within us as we navigate throughout life. Although I was an adult when a male family member called out what he saw as a flaw in my darker complexion, it triggered the hurt feelings of a little girl. It was that exact kind of pain that allowed me to connect with the other little black girls sharing similar experiences in the group.

And so, I took a deep breath and began with emotional vocabulary. I first introduced the concept of colorism to the participants, so that moving forward they could identify the appropriate word to articulate their experience. Somehow, giving it a name, felt like the appropriate first step. In doing so, I began to feel a shift in the energy of the room. *Colorism is a collective trauma that all people of color have experienced on some level.* When the girls recognized that the adults in the room shared in some of the same experiences they were currently having, they began to feel understood. Acknowledging that I, too, had been hurt by experiences of colorism and continue to be impacted by its harmful effects as an adult was important to disclose as a facilitator.

The decision to disclose as a facilitator was informed by the tenants of Shawn Ginwright's Healing-Centered Engagement (HCE), a practice that expands how we think about responses to trauma and offers a more holistic, strength-based approach to fostering well-being. HCE advances a collective view of healing, and re-centers culture as a central feature in well-being. As such, I leaned into the capacity to heal through shared identity and shared experiences (Ginwright, 2018). HCE coupled with trauma informed practices presents the opportunity to fill the gaps that exist in trauma informed practices alone. Healing-Centered Engagement advances the importance of community and a sense of belongingness as an essential component to healing (Ginwright, 2018). The approach also recognizes the collective experience of healing and that it is cultivated by shared identity across race, gender, and sexual orientation (Ginwright, 2018). The integration of culturally grounded rituals, through activities rooted in indigenous culture and the sharing of experiences, creates an environment in which black girls can experience healing through interconnectedness (Ginwright, 2018). The choice to disclose as a facilitator was used to facilitate interconnectedness across experiences around colorism and presented a unique educational opportunity to discuss the harmful effects of colorism. It also presented an opportunity to celebrate within group differences across hair texture

and skin hue. The girls began to compliment one another's braided and tightly coiled hairstyles and the diverse spectrum of brown hues that were represented in the room. We used this opportunity to push back against the normalization of derogatory comments about dark hued skin, tightly coiled hair, wide noses, and full lips.

Hair Combing Time

Hair combing time, for some African-American mother/daughter dyads, has historically been characterized by stress (Lewis, 2015). In the southern geographic region of the United States, where Jim Crow laws shaped politics of respectability, many African Americans conformed to politics of respectability through physical appearance. The ideological perspective that regarded one's ability to take control of their appearance as a protective factor that could prevent categorizations of negative stereotypes of African Americans was prevalent. Extending beyond this perception of protection from categorizations of negative stereotypes of African Americans, it was also thought to protect us from the inability to acquire a job, to protect us from not being regarded as "respectable," and to protect our sense of safety and security. It gave rise to the distinction between who was physically presenting themselves as "worthy" of respect and who was presenting themselves as unworthy of respect. While this country's legacy of racial terror continues to disprove the theory that presenting yourself as worthy of respect will serve as a protective factor, the underlying idea that worthiness of respect subscribes to a particular standard of appearance prevails. As such, throughout history, African-American women have utilized hair combing time as their opportunity to present their daughters to the world as "worthy" of respect, by achieving a hairstyle that meets the standards of "worthiness." Hair combing time is not simply about personal hygiene, it is about achieving a respectable look. It is through the process of achieving this look that many women of color transfer their own painful experiences of colorism on to their children and cultivate standards of beauty that their children pass down to their own children.

Talk, Touch, and Listen Hair Combing Interaction presents a unique opportunity to dismantle the intergenerational transmission of colorism, by creating new pathways to promote positive self-worth, as it relates to complexion and hair texture. Parents can utilize hair combing time to express positive sentiments about hair texture, during the hair styling process. I have personally observed this intervention transform the self-image of black girls.

Case Study # 2: Aiesha

Years ago, I worked with a mom, Aiesha, who shared that one of her deepest fears for her daughter, Dakota, was that Dakota would feel less attractive, because she did not have long hair. Aiesha stated that as a child, she never had long hair, and that she

felt less attractive because of it. Aiesha began to use hair combing time as an opportunity to allow Dakota to tap into her creative expression and assert autonomy over her hairstyles. Dakota would excitedly pick out hairstyles and bows. During the styling process, Aiesha would complement Dakota's hair and express how much she enjoyed this special time spent between the two of them. Once the styling was completed, Aiesha would say, "Wow, you look beautiful." This became a part of their routine, and one day, Dakota beat Aiesha to the compliment and said, "Wow, I look beautiful."

Also during this time, Aiesha made the conscious decision to transition her own hair into natural styles (no heat or chemical straightening), so that she could normalize tightly coiled hair texture in the household. This proved to be beneficial, as Aiesha reported that when she decided to straighten Dakota's hair for the first time, Dakota cried at the sight of the finished product and stated that she wanted her curly hair back. To this end, Aiesha no longer straightens Dakota's hair. She alternates between natural hairstyles (allowing her curls/coils to be free) and braided hairstyles.

The HCI intervention created space for Aiesha to practice self-awareness and reflect on her own personal experiences with colorism and how they impacted her sense of self-worth. In doing so, Aiesha was able to better manage her negative emotions triggered by hair, preventing her from transferring those negative emotions on to Dakota, during hair combing time.

As practitioners of color, creating space for healing through the Hair Combing Interaction intervention, we must also do the deep work of self-awareness, to recognize our own triggers and negative emotions connected to colorism, so that we are less likely to engage in countertransference around the issue of colorism. To create spaces of healing for others, we must do the important work of creating space for our own healing.

Conclusion

The politics of skin tone and hair texture are deeply embedded into the lived experiences of African Americans. These experiences extend beyond the parent child dyad. African-American children encounter these experiences across the various systems with which they interface, such as schools, churches, extra-curricular activities, and social gatherings. These various systems represent the tilted room of colorism. If we are not acknowledging and working to dismantle this tilted room, we are allowing it to perpetuate within group inequities, and subsequently supporting a tilted structure. Addressing the tilted room will require a multi-systems level approach that begins with building connection and positive feelings of self-worth through the parent–child attachment relationship, coupled with community-based training across various systems and directly informing policy level change.

For example, the Crown Act (Creating a Respectful and Open World for Natural Hair) is the first legislation of its kind, prohibiting race-based hair discrimination in schools and workplace (H.R. 5309, 2021). In short, the Crown Act prohibits the

denial of employment and educational opportunities because of hair texture or protective hairstyles associated with race. It was passed by the US House of Representatives in 2020. This multi-systems collaboration mobilized community members around the issue of race-based hair discrimination across the following entities: the CROWN Coalition, Dove, National Urban League, Color of Change, and Western Center on Law & Poverty. Working in tandem, across these various levels, is essential to creating real and lasting change.

As we continue to navigate inequities shaped by privilege and access, associated with Eurocentric beauty standards, it will be important to explore opportunities to shape policies that support dismantling colorism. This will be of particular importance in spaces where derogatory statements regarding skin color and hair texture have been normalized. Talk, Touch, and Listen provides a framework for elevating the psychological impact of such derogatory language. The HCI intervention tool is uniquely positioned to address colorism on the parent–child level (intrapersonal and interpersonal level), and has the potential to extend to the community and policy level.

Reflective Questions

1. In the opening paragraph of this chapter, the author shares a story that ends with *My dad thought he was unattractive, because he is dark skinned, and my dad did not want me to marry a dark-skinned man.* As you reflect on this, what stories, thoughts, or feelings – personal or professional – come to mind as they contribute to your own journey to self-awareness?
2. The author invites us to reflect on this: *Hair combing time is not simply about personal hygiene, it is about achieving a respectable look.* By what standard is "respectable" measured against and how does this lead to race--based discrimination?
3. How do you understand the meaning of "the tilted room of colorism" and why is it a powerful phrase, important to your work with children and families of color?
4. How can you bring the construct of colorism to your trainings or teachings or interventions with children and families of color?

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