Physical Attractiveness As a Process of Internalized Oppression and Multigenerational Transmission in African American Families

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This article examines aspects of physical attractiveness that influence African American families as a process of multigenerational transmission and internalized oppression. Specifically, it addresses how the cultural standards of aesthetic preference associated with facial features, skin color, hair texture and length, and body size are transmitted across generations through the process of internalized oppression. The negative correlates of physical attractiveness continue to serve as a function of internalized oppression in African American families. Based on findings, it can be concluded that with the exception of body size, Anglo facial features, lighter skin color, and fine straight hair continue to be factors in the oppression of African American families across generations. Another finding suggests that given the shame associated with internalized oppression within one's own family or cultural group, this phenomenon often remains a family secret. These findings have particular relevance for training of culturally competent family counselors.

Keywords: *African American; physical attractiveness; internalized oppression; multigenerational; family*

The origin of the physical attractiveness phenomenon is debated, but it appears to be timeless, pervasive across all societies, and based on the social order as dictated by cultural standards (Cunningham, Roberts, Barbee, Druen, & Wu, 1995; Patzer, 1985). We do know, however, it is a universal concept. In all societies, there has always been the will to adorn (see Cordell & Schwarz, 1979; Wall, 1997) and extend nature based on cultural standards. Numerous scholars have examined the concept of physical attractiveness, yet no clear and concise definition of the term has been formulated (Rhodes & Zebrowitz, 2002). For the purpose of this investigation, *physical attractiveness* is defined as a cultural standard of beauty involving an assessment and evaluation of aesthetic quality based on body type, hair texture, skin color, and facial features. The combination of these characteristics of physical attractiveness fosters interest that produces aesthetic preferences. These aesthetic preferences are then expressed within the cultural context of a particular group and family. As such, aesthetic preferences become the most visible and accessible informational cue about a culture and have a pervasive effect on every aspect of the individual's life.

As a cultural edict, physical attractiveness is a component in all human communication and social interactions. Patzer (1985) noted the significance by stating that

> a thorough understanding of physical attractiveness is crucial because a communicator's appearance is the first and most obvious element observed in all (visual) communication. The conclusion must be that physical attractiveness is a major component of successful communication for there are few, if any, communication situations that do not ultimately involve visual contact between the participants. (p. 5)

Perceptions about physical attractiveness can be observed regardless of age, socioeconomic status, gender, or race. In a

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Editors' Note: This article was the last project of the late Mary Smith Arnold. Mary, who conducted numerous workshops and trained students and others on the subject of internalized oppression, was a friend to *The Family Journal* and IAMFC since the beginning. We will miss Mary and feel honored to share these final words of her wisdom.—*Jon Carlson/Mary Kay Nieponski*

Authors' Note: The authors wish to thank Constance Maundu for her contribution to the research for this article.

THE FAMILY JOURNAL: COUNSELING AND THERAPY FOR COUPLES AND FAMILIES, Vol. 12 No. 3, July 2004 230-242
DOI: 10.1177/1066480704264931
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second, our perceptions of physical attractiveness are established relative to fecundity or reproductive success (Buss, 1988; Wade, 2003), mate selection (Buss, 1988; Parmer, 1998; Ross, 1997), club membership (Graham, 1999; Okazawa-Rey, Robinson, & Ward, 1987), identity (Clark & Clark, 1947), work opportunities and employment (Cash, Gillen, & Burns, 1977), parent-child relations (Greene, 1991), mental health (Boyd-Franklin, 1991), racial identity (Baldwin, 1984; Helms, 1990), and communication (Patzer, 1985).

Given the power of perceptions, at first appearance physical attractiveness attributes can serve to discount and discredit an individual based on notions of aesthetic preference. This process of discounting attributes is based on factors "which are incongruous with our stereotype of what a given type of individual should be" (Goffman, 1963, p. 3). In the United States, people considered highly attractive are said to have a better quality of life with more privileges, whereas those who are considered less attractive have a lower quality of life and fewer privileges (Patzer, 1985; Rhodes & Zebrowitz, 2002). As is the case of White privilege (McIntosh, 1989), discounting on the basis of physical attractiveness maintains a process of systematic oppression. Consistent with the notion of oppression, McIntosh (1989) maintained that her White skin color places her in a position of what she termed unearned advantage or entitlement and conferred dominance. The types of advantages afforded by privilege influence the balance of power and status in relationships. Thus, the phenomenon of physical attractiveness and the consequences of systemic oppression serve to influence the individual's well-being and quality of interpersonal relationships.

. . . it can be concluded that with the exception of body size, Anglo facial features, lighter skin color, and fine straight hair continue to be factors in the oppression of African American families across generations.

The purpose of this article is to examine specific aspects of physical attractiveness that influence African American families as a process of multigenerational transmission (Bowen, 1978; Kerr & Bowen, 1988) and internalized oppression (Fanon, 1967; Lipsky, 1977; Pheterson, 1986). Specifically, this article will address how the cultural standards of aesthetic preference associated with facial features, skin color, hair texture and length, and body size are transmitted across generations through the process of internalized oppression, subsequently affecting the mental health of African American families. The interpersonal relationships and well-being of African Americans continues to be influenced by notions of physical attractiveness.

Physical attractiveness is rooted in the ethnocentric views that have created a social stigma discrepancy (Goffman, 1963) based on facial features, hair texture, skin color, and body type. Thus, there is the perception that the individual is deemed physically undesirable, the person is perceived to be less than human (i.e., the African American during slavery). Ultimately, the individual accepts the socially enforced notion of their own inferiority, and this sense of inferiority contaminates families across generations (Goffman, 1963). As an example, Harvey (1995) noted that "for some child clients, skin color is a factor in their diagnosis of attention-deficit disorders, conduct disorders, and behavioral disorders" (p. 6). The social stigma discrepancy based on physical attractiveness has affected the psyche of African American families in unique ways since their forced arrival in this country almost 400 years ago. Neal and Wilson (1989) noted the impact of ethnocentric views and the resulting social stigma discrepancy by stating "even today for many Black Americans central feelings related to perceived self-worth, intelligence success, and attractiveness are determined by such factors as the lightness of their skin, the broadness of their nose, and the kinkiness of their hair" (p. 324).

For generations, African American families have adopted and projected the stigma of physical attractiveness as asserted by the oppressor. Boyd-Franklin (1991) noted, "The issue of skin color, hair texture, and body image have their painful origins not just in societal attitudes but in their families of origin as well" (p. 32). In this process, African Americans may have concluded that "What is beautiful is good" (Dion, Berscheid, & Walster, 1972) based on the prevailing notions of physical attractiveness produced by dominant, Eurocentric culture. It must be noted that other cultural groups have physical attractiveness issues. However, as a cultural group, the effects of slavery have perpetuated the issue of physical attractiveness in African American communities. Therefore, given the different historical and sociocultural experiences relative to physical attractiveness that have prevailed for 400 years, African Americans have assigned different meanings to their experiences due to the devaluation of their physical features and the comparative appraisal against White standards of

beauty—blond, blue eyes, tall, thin, light skin (Perkins, 1996).

Internalized Oppression and Multigenerational Transmission in Physical Attractiveness

Oppression is defined as

> a state of asymmetric power relations characterized by domination, subordination, and resistance, where the dominating persons or groups exercise their power by restricting access to material resources and implanting in the subordinated persons or groups fear or self-deprecating views about themselves. (Prilleltensky & Gonick, 1996, p. 129)

Fanon (1967) has written extensively about the process of psychological oppression as an influence on people of African descent (Bulhan, 1985). In an analysis of Fanon's work relative to the psychology of oppression, Bulhan (1985) stated:

> For in prolonged oppression, the oppressed group willy-nilly internalizes the oppressor without. They adopt his guidelines and prohibitions, they assimilate his image and his social behaviors, and they become agents of their own oppression. . . . The well-known inferiority complex of the oppressed originates in this process of internalization. Because of this internalization and its attendant but repressed rage, the oppressed may act out, on each other, the very violence imposed on them. . . . They engage in self-destructive behavior injurious to themselves, their loved ones, and their neighbors. (p. 126)

This internalized form of oppression is often perpetuated from within one's own cultural group (Bartky, 1990; Gainor, 1992; Lipsky, 1977; Pheterson, 1986). According to Bartky (1990),

> It is possible to be oppressed in ways that need involve neither physical deprivation, legal inequality, nor economic exploitation; one can be oppressed psychologically. . . . To be psychologically oppressed is to be weighted down in your mind and to have a harsh dominion exercised over your self-esteem. The psychologically oppressed become their own oppressors. (p. 22)

Therefore, internalized oppression is the "turning upon ourselves, upon our families, and upon our own people the distress patterns that result from the racism and oppression of the majority society" (Lipsky, 1977, p. 6).

There is a dearth of literature on the influence of oppression in the counseling process (Hanna, Talley, & Guindon, 2000), and even less has been written about internalized oppression. Physical attractiveness as a process of internalized oppression is significant in counseling because it has been projected across family systems for generations in African American communities. According to Lewis (1999), "an adult's recollection of statements made about racial aspects of skin color, hair texture, and nose and lip size may constitute an additional index for assessment of feelings of parental acceptance, rejection, or denigration" (p. 508). It is reasonable to assume that this process of acceptance, rejection, or denigration is transmitted across generations of families. Kerr and Bowen (1988) noted that "the way family problems are played out in one generation has predictable consequences for the next generation" (p. 225). Through this process one can observe an orderly and predictable transmission of not only genetic matter but also the components of the emotional system of families across generations. In the context of forming relationships, levels of chronic anxiety associated with physical attractiveness are experienced. This is consistent with Bowen's notion of the family as an emotional system where a multigenerational transmission process occurs in families (Kerr & Bowen, 1988). In this system, one can observe how family members manage being close around unresolved attachments. The goal is to become differentiated and de-triangulated from the emotional process involving self and family by reducing anxiety.

Absent the prevailing attractiveness stereotype relative to hair, skin color, and body size, the emotional systems of families become affected by anxiety in successive generations. Subsequently, these internalized behaviors become an integral part of the identity of African American families across generations. From the perspective of a mentally healthy society, oppression in any form prevents individuals from being adjusted socially, emotionally, and physically such that the individual lacks a sense of well-being. Such an identity results in behaviors manifested by self-hate, rage, powerlessness, and feelings of inferiority. Studies have reported a correlation between social situations and lifestyle factors such as anger (Abernethy, 1995), hypertension (Livingston, 1994), powerlessness (Wallerstein, 1992), meaninglessness, and alienation (Ruffin, 1984) from society.

Internalized Oppression as a Family Secret

There is an unwillingness by African Americans to discuss or perhaps even admit to their personal struggles associated with attractiveness. The absence of dialogue on this subject in counseling may reflect a general discomfort with the subject for African Americans and a lack of awareness of the attractiveness phenomenon by individuals of other cultural groups and the helping professions. Relative to African Americans, it may be that the topic of physical attractiveness is thought to be an unspoken family secret acted on through cultural nuances such as metaphors, jingles, and wives tales (Russell, Wilson, & Hall, 1992).

Like any family secret (Fall & Lyons, 2003; Karpel, 1980; Vangelisti, Caughlin, & Timmerman, 2001), discussions about physical attractiveness are not appropriate and are not to be engaged in with White people, the perceived oppressor. Understanding that there are family secrets and knowing how to address them are essential to becoming a culturally competent counselor. Because this issue is often not talked about,

few counselors will have knowledge of how the secrets influence relationships and create alliances within the family. According to Fall and Lyons (2003), the secrets can serve as a disequilibratory force and damage the family system. Where there are family secrets and cultural nuances, the lack of knowledge and sensitivity may seriously compromise the helping process. The following example demonstrates how little counselors in training know about the variety of notions of physical attractiveness. After viewing the documentary *A Question of Color* (Sandler & Bourne, 1993) in a multicultural counseling course taught by the first author, White counseling students reported that before watching the film, they were unaware of the issues African Americans faced as a result of physical features and other aspects of physical attractiveness. In essence, students were clueless and unaware about how these issues were projected across generations and perpetuated in the form of oppression against other African Americans.

Historical Context of Physical Attractiveness in African American Families

As a historical condition, the legacy of slavery continues to shape notions of family, identity, and the sociocultural norms of African American families. The pernicious institutional effects of slavery, cultural interactions with Europeans and Native Americans, and the retentions of selective African traditions in the diaspora have shaped the African American family as we know it today (Billingsley, 1968; Frazier, 1930; 1966; Genovese, 1968; Gutman, 1976). Two significant residuals of the slave legacy are (a) the deliberate formation of a family structure that was to be perceived as inferior across generations and (b) the multiracial sexual contact that produced mulatto children leading to the creation of legal statutes, and that challenged the physical and aesthetic definitions and categories of race over time.

Relative to formation of a family structure, there have been many positive residuals of the slave family (Hill, 1972). Yet many of the negative effects on the African American family under slavery have endured, leaving structural, social, and psychological scars. These negative effects were based on the pervasive attitudes that developed with the enslavement of Africans; these attitudes rationalized that because of savage and uncivilized characteristics, Africans were well suited for slavery. According to Pickney (1993), these attitudes by White Americans established racial inferiority as the basis for the institution of slavery. Earlier, Moynihan (1965) asserted that the African American family under slavery suffered from a tangle of pathology. However, he failed to address the inextricable link to the fact that unlike any other group in the United States, society created these distinctive family traditions through oppression, denial of resources, and lack of access to full participation as citizens. The distinctive family patterns and cultural traditions are the result of oppressive conditions and methods of survival in a society of institutional slavery where individuals were not allowed to practice their African family culture, nor were they allowed to become full participants in the larger White society (Pickney, 1993). As an example, under the institution of slavery, African American families were not legitimate because marriage among slaves was not legal and thus, not recognized and sanctioned by the state or the slave master. Parenthetically, southern slaves on plantations created the symbolic ritual of jumping the broom that was perceived as one tradition for validating marriages in the slave community (Dundes, 1996; Taylor, 1958).

Another tradition from the slave legacy period that has influenced African American families is multiracial sexual contact. According to Johnston (1970), "The mixture of the races began to take place almost as soon as the first Negroes and White men came into contact in America" (p. 165). In the slave environment, females as property continued to be sexually violated, and their value was based on the ability to produce offspring (D. G. White, 1985). Male slaves were not allowed full access to society and were thought to be inhuman and a threat to society given the perception that they were sexually erotic and lusty (Staples, 1991). As a result of the many multiracial sexual contacts and miscegenation, there was an increase in mulatto children. This practice was not embraced in the larger society, and various laws were enacted to punish slaves and White women who violated the sexual laws. In 1661, Maryland was one of the first states to pass an antimiscegenation law that was not declared invalid until 1967 in *Loving v. Virginia* (Alonso, 2000).

Multiracial sexual contact and miscegenation have left lasting effects on African American male and female sexuality, interpersonal relationships (Parmer & Tam, 1992; Staples, 1991), and identity development (Helms, 1990). The legacy of slavery devalued the formation of a positive sense of group identity and served to create a myth of inferiority associated with African American families (D. G. White, 1985). This was the culture in which the African American family was to form in the new world. These notions have been maintained through the years by oppression through discriminatory practices such as segregation and racism. As a consequence, these forms of oppression have been internalized as negative self-images that result in the idealization of majority culture. One lasting consequence of multiracial sexual contacts and miscegenation has been the creation of an elite group of mulattos. Because these individuals have fewer African features, they have set the standard for what physical attractiveness is in African American communities relative to facial features, skin color, hair, and body size. Although issues of physical attractiveness are likely to affect all family members, it is often the African American female who is the family scapegoat. Neal and Wilson (1980) contended that "although these concerns affect both men and women, psychologically these effects appear to be stronger for females,

who regardless of race, have had to traditionally concern themselves more with appearance" (p. 324).

Physical Attractiveness in African American Families

Facial Features and Physical Attractiveness

In a quick glance, it is possible to assess the facial features of an individual and determine physical attractiveness. Some of the facial qualities that are assessed relate to size and shape of features, skin color, hair length and texture, and configuration of the eyes. In a second glance, it is possible to make determinations about the attractiveness of the body relative to size, shape, weight, height, and appeal. Each of these assessments of attractiveness is based on an attractiveness stereotype unique to a specific culture, especially for women. Typically, dominant White culture insists that women with long blond hair, big blue eyes that are spaced far apart, narrow or small noses, high foreheads, small mouths with moderate-sized lips that are not too thick, oval-shaped faces, high cheek bones, large breasts, and thin body types are considered attractive (Jackson & McGill, 1996; Patzer, 1985; Rhodes & Zebrowitz, 2002). Michael Jackson, the pop icon, and his apparent quest to embody some of these very features seemingly demonstrate a hyperbolic example of this phenomenon.

For African Americans, their uniqueness is characterized by the presence or absence of African or White European facial features. Individuals with the more pronounced African facial features are considered less attractive than those with White European facial features (Glezen, 1997; Neal & Wilson, 1989; Russell et al., 1992). Neal and Wilson (1989) stated that historically, facial features usually fell into two categories—good and bad. Individuals with small noses, thin lips, less protruding foreheads, and light-colored eyes were thought to have good features. Those with wide noses, full lips, and short or kinky hair had bad features. The concept of good or bad features is often a central theme for authors of Black fiction. In the novel *Coffee Will Make You Blacker,* Stevie ponders the intergenerational significance of facial features:

> Mama says she wishes I'd gotten more of Daddy's lighter color and especially his curly hair. She says she prayed that if I was a girl, I'd have good hair that didn't need to be straightened. Mama says one reason she married Daddy was cause she was looking out for her children. She says it was almost unheard of for a colored man to marry a woman who was darker than himself. Mama was lucky . . . she's glad I don't have a wide nose and big lips. (Sinclair, 1994, p. 8)

In spite of the genetic limitations, these Eurocentric standards have influenced the perceptions and definitions of physical attractiveness among African Americans (Bond & Cash, 1992; Chambers, Clark, Dantzler, & Baldwin, 1994; Makkar & Strube, 1995; Perkins, 1996). As a result, females with lighter skin, long silky hair, and White European facial features are considered as the standard for physical attractiveness among African Americans. Given the stereotypical beauty standard, many African Americans continue to struggle with their African facial features and the standards of beauty determined by the dominant culture. As an example, prior to the advent of cosmetic surgery, Neal and Wilson (1989) noted that Black women often attempted to reduce the width of the nose by sleeping with a clothespin clamped on the nose. Therefore, for African Americans, attempting to obtain an idealized and unrealistic standard of beauty can be deferential to their psychological, emotional, and identity development.

Skin Color and Physical Attractiveness

There continues to be a fascination with and relationship between skin color and perceptions of physical attractiveness. Skin color is probably the most frequently researched and discussed subject in the physical attractiveness literature (Bond & Cash, 1992; Breland, 1998; Grammer & Thornhill, 1994; Hall, 1995; Harvey, 1995; Keith & Herring, 1991; Russell et al., 1992; Wade, 1996). For centuries Black people with dark skin have been attempting to pass the brown paper bag test (Graham, 1999; Hunter, 1998). The desire for light skin has been endemic in the culture, therefore, products such as bleaching creams and "Black Skin Remover" were created for African Americans (Rooks, 1996). The presence of such products and the associated advertising placed Black skin "in the same context as an imperfection that can be fixed, it is positioned as a disease or blemish" (Rooks, 1996, p. 29)

Although the origin is unknown, old adages such as "the blacker the berry the sweeter the juice" (Thurman, 1969) and other similar colloquial sayings about physical attractiveness have held special significance in African American families for many generations. The term was used to counter the notion that "looking White" or having Anglo-like features was a more desirable characteristic for African American females. However, a retort often accompanied the berry adage: "Yeah, but you don't have to get sugar diabetes" (Harvey, 1995, p. 4). Another popular jingle or rhyme relating to the denigration of darker skin color that has been passed on for generations is "If you're white [light] you're all right, If you're yellow you're mellow, If you're brown stick around, But if you're black get back" (Graham, 1999). Again, similar struggles with color are pervasive themes in Black literature. The character Emma, in the novel *The Blacker the Berry,* laments about her skin color:

> She should have been a boy, then color of skin wouldn't have mattered so much, for wasn't her mother always saying that a black boy could get along, but that a black girl would never know anything but sorrow and disappointment? But she wasn't a boy; she was a girl, and color did matter. (Thurman, 1969, p. 4)

Debates center on whether skin color issues remain a matter of concern given that the civil rights and Black Pride movements raised consciousness and embraced an aesthetic preference that supported love of one's self and cultural origins (Wade, 1996; S. White & G. White, 1998). Yet there is still evidence that females with lighter skin have more advantages and privilege than their darker peers. For example, lighter skinned African Americans earn more money than their darker skinned counterparts. It has also been reported that light-skinned women are preferred for marriage because they are perceived as moral, chaste, and intelligent, whereas dark-skinned women are seen as sensual and promiscuous (Harvey, 1995). Studies have shown that lighter skinned females tend to be more frequently married, have wealthier spouses, and are afforded more educational, career, and economic advantages (Frazier, 1966; Hall, 1995; Keith & Herring, 1991; Wade, 1996). The resilience of the bias against African features is supported by Leeds (1993), who noted the possibility that the effects of the civil rights and Black Pride movements, though positive during their time, did not totally alleviate the aesthetic preference for Anglo features.

Hair and Physical Attractiveness

Hair is important in all cultures and is elevated to prominence due to its capacity to adorn the body. The significance of hair texture, style, and length cannot be underestimated for African American males and females. As Banks (2000) noted, "hair matters" in the formulation of a how African Americans view the world culturally, socially, historically and politically. For this reason, the concerns relative to the politics of skin color and hair are thought to parallel one other in the African American experience (Russell et al., 1992). At issue are the prominence assigned to and the preference given for long straight hair that is considered "good hair" versus short, kinky, and nappy hair referred to as "bad hair" (Banks, 2000; S. White & G. White, 1995, 1998). Assigning negative value to the natural state of African hair implies inferiority when measured against the preferred standard of long, silky, fly-away blond hair. The significance of good or bad hair is learned very early in the intergenerational socialization of African Americans. Beginning in childhood, the development of a positive racial formation and identity may very often be based on notions about one's hair rituals (S. White & G. White, 1998). In support of this intergenerational transmission process, Greene, White, and Whitten (2000) noted that whether consciously or unconsciously, an African American mother who has had negative childhood hair experiences is likely to project similar attitudes to her daughter(s).

Lewis (1999) used hair combing rituals as a means to examine African American intergenerational legacies in mother-child relations. Lewis noted that the interactions experienced in the hair combing process provided an "understanding of the contributions of the mother's individual and generational racial biography to formation of the child's racial self-concept" (p. 507). A recent example of this intergenerational behavior was observed in 1999, when a White, third-grade teacher in a New York public school was ostracized by African American parents and the community for reading a children's book titled *Nappy Hair* to students in her classroom (Banks, 2000; Ferguson, 1999). The most serious social violation by the White teacher was speaking in public about nappy hair. Carolivia Herron, the author of the book *Nappy Hair* was quoted as saying "It's time to take the nap out of the closet. . . . This idea that it can't be talked about is ridiculous. . . . If Black women would talk about it, it wouldn't be such a sensitive issue" (Ferguson, 1999, p. 13).

Like skin color, the significance of hair rituals among African Americans has historical roots dating back to slavery. Slaves, and specifically runaway slaves, were often described in the context of their various hairstyles. Slavery was the beginning of the degradation of the hair of those of African ancestry. Although their African ancestry had taught slaves to be proud of their hair rituals and elaborate designs, any demonstration of such pride in the slave quarters was devalued and assigned negative connotations (S. White & G. White, 1998). In the process of devaluing the hair of slaves, *wool* was the term used by the slave master to describe the thick, curly texture of African Americans' hair, intimating a relationship to animals (S. White & G. White, 1998).

Even after slavery, the negative connotations of Black hair continued to be associated with inferior status. To compensate for this inferiority, various types of hair products were made available by Whites to Blacks in the north as early as the mid-1800s. Women anxious to change the negative perception of attractiveness rushed to alter their appearance by using these methods and products that were being developed to change hair texture and length (Rooks, 1996). This desire to possess straightened hair existed unabated until the 1960s with the advent of the Black power and Black is beautiful movements. According to Craig (2002), these movements connoted "the spirit of self-love and exuberance felt by a generation that had found a new way to see self . . . the new practices of self-presentation and the newly expressed appreciation of dark skin and tightly curled hair that became widespread" (p. 23). At that time, wearing a big, rain-cloud (very large) Afro hairstyle and having a new sense of self became a symbol of racial pride and Black consciousness. More recently, the apparent bias among African American males and females toward long and straight hair and the number of women opting to wear their hair in more natural styles, including braids and dreadlocks, are increasing (Russell et al., 1992). However, these women often receive backlash and criticism from both Black and White people within their communities and workplaces (Neal & Wilson, 1989; Russell et al., 1992).

However, for African Americans, it may be that pride in one's hair is short-lived. Today the pressing comb, used earlier to straighten the hair, has been almost entirely replaced by relaxers (chemicals designed to straighten), jeri curls, hair weaves, and braid extensions (Tyler, 1990). These methods are used to either straighten or lengthen. Hair continues to be a politically charged metaphor that has had an affect on the psyche of African Americans for generations. The significance of hair can be seen when examining what African Americans spend on hair products. In 1997, African American women spent U.S.$7.4 billion on personal care products such as cosmetics, hair, nails, and so forth. This dollar amount reflects a 27.8% increase over what White women spent for personal care products (Edwards, 2003; N'Deeo Beauty, 2003).

Body Size and Physical Attractiveness

African Americans hold similar preferences to that of dominant culture when judging characteristics of physical attractiveness relative to facial features, hair, and skin color. However, differences can be observed when judging the physically attractive body size. Being thin in America is highly valued and seen as most attractive by the dominant culture (Glezen, 1997; Goodwin, 2000; Grimes, 1997; Jackson & McGill, 1996). However, despite the value dominant culture places on being thin, African American women tend to have less negative attitudes toward larger bodies (Cunningham et al., 1995; Glezen, 1997). Here again, the influence of African ancestry relative to attitudes toward body size is apparent. For example, in certain African societies there was the practice of sending young girls to the fattening house, where eating, pampering, and relaxing is done to ensure the well-being of the female prior to marriage (Talbot, 1915). Within this context, the African notion of fattening the bride is seen as an aesthetic attraction that has entirely different significance from the preparation of the bride in Westernized societies. In Western societies there is the tendency to emphasize the loss of weight in preparation for marriage.

Generally, African American women tend to be slightly bigger in body size than White women (Glezen, 1997), have an appreciation of a fuller figure, and have different standards for what is overweight. In a study of African American adolescent girls relative to body image and weight concerns, one participant related that *overweight* was defined as "someone who takes up two seats on the bus" (Parker et al., 1995, p. 110). Larger body size tends to be embraced in African American families and communities across socioeconomic status (Kumanyika, 1987). In fact, African American women associated a larger body size with respect, competence, power, and beauty. In addition, many reported that their partners expressed a desire for them to remain at a larger body size (Allan, Mayo, & Michel, 1993). Therefore, there appears to be more culturally permissive attitudes among African Americans that prevail about women with larger body sizes. Less emphasis among African American women on being thin may also be due to the fact that on average, African American males prefer heavier women.

Other studies show that in most instances, African American men view Black women with bigger thighs and buttocks as more attractive (Grimes, 1997). Jackson and McGill (1996) conducted a study that examines differing body-type preferences and body attractiveness among African Americans and White European Americans. Results indicated that African American males prefer more average body types over slightly thin body types of females of their same race, whereas for White European American males, responses were split equally with half preferring average bodies and the other half preferring slightly thin bodies for White European American females. Duplicating the Jackson and McGill study, Rosenfeld, Stewart, Stinnet, and Jackson (1999) reported similar results. They observed that African American men find the ideal weight for African American women as being 10 pounds greater than White European American men's ideal weight for White European American women. Because African American women tend to place less emphasis on body size, the rate of eating disorders and/or poor body image are much less than among their counterparts within the dominant culture (Glezen, 1997; Parker et al., 1995). However, this may change as African American women gain economically, take on the attributes of majority society, and achieve social success within the dominant culture. African American women may feel pressure to appear thin as they assimilate more fully into professional and academic realms previously unattainable to them.

The fact that African Americans embrace different standards of attractiveness relative to body size does not suggest that they are not concerned with appearance (Parker et al., 1995). It may suggest that African Americans have learned to define self in more positive ways based on culturally appropriate standards. According to Fallon (1990),

> Of all the ways people think of themselves, none is so essentially immediate and central as the image of their bodies: The body is experienced as a reflection of the self. . . . Culturally bound and consensually validated definitions of what is desirable play an important part in the development of body image. (p. 80)

The fact that African Americans attribute fewer unfavorable characteristics to their bodies can be understood within the context of culture, where community, peers, and family positively support a larger body size (Allan et al., 1993; Jackson & McGill, 1996; Kumanyika, Wilson, & Guilford-Davenport, 1993). As Allan et al. (1993) noted, "Overweight does not dominate Black women's social identity, sexuality, and self-concept as it seems to do among White women" (p. 332). Although larger body size may be embraced, there are

negative health consequences such as high rates of diabetes, hypertension, and heart conditions in African Americans associated with being overweight (Livingston, 1994).

Given that this is the one area where the family projection process relative to attractiveness is favorable, the issue becomes how have African Americans presented and projected themselves and negotiated their identities and body size according to favorable cultural dictates. This may be explained by the retention of cultural nuances and stylistic expressions of body aesthetic and image retained from African cultural traditions (S. White & G. White, 1995, 1998). A significant dimension of African American culture is that of "looking good" (Allan et al., 1993), "styling," having "tude" (attitude), "flavor," and "having it going on" (Parker et al., 1995; Smitherman, 1994). Each of these qualities has to do with the unique way the body is dressed, adorned, and presented, suggesting the development of a "look which 'works' given her [African American female] own physical endowments and her social and economic environment" (Parker et al., 1995, p. 109). Parker et al. (1995) captured the sentiment of adolescent girls by stating their views accordingly: "Regardless of a girl's body size or shape, height, weight, skin color, hairstyle, etc., if you can clothe and groom yourself and have the personality to carry off your personal style, you are 'looking good'" (p. 108). Therefore, relative to physical attractiveness as a factor in body size, it appears that African Americans have fashioned culturally appropriate ways to evaluate their body size by "making what they have work for them" (Parker et al., 1995).

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this article is to examine specific aspects of physical attractiveness that influence African American families as a process of multigenerational transmission and internalized oppression. Specifically, it addresses how the cultural standards associated with facial features, skin color, hair texture and length, and body size are transmitted across generations through the process of internalized oppression. The strongest findings suggest the negative correlates of physical attractiveness continue to serve as a function of internalized oppression in African American families. According to findings, it can be concluded that with the exception of body size, Anglo facial features, lighter skin color, and fine straight hair continue to be factors in the oppression of African American families across generations. Relative to body size, African American females tend to embrace fewer negative dominant cultural attitudes. Another major finding suggests that due to the shame associated with internalized oppression within one's own family or cultural group, this phenomenon often remains a family secret. Therefore, few individuals outside of African American cultural groups have knowledge of how the process of oppression influences well-being.

Given the Black consciousness movement of the 1960s (Tyler, 1990; Wade, 1996), it would be expected that these issues would have lessened in the lives of African Americans. However, Keith and Herring (1991), in reporting findings from a stratification and skin tone study, noted that

> virtually all of our findings parallel those that occurred before the civil rights movement. These facts suggest that the effects of skin tone are not only historical curiosities from a legacy of slavery and racism, but present-day mechanisms that influence who gets what in America. (p. 777)

Therefore, family members are likely to be subjected to the negative impact of psychological oppression from within their own family and society in general. These findings provide some important implications for practice, training, and research in family counseling and other mental health professions.

Few contributions have been made in the field of counseling to the physical attractiveness literature (Harris & Busby, 1998; Ponzo, 1985). From the counseling perspective, the term *physical attractiveness* is understood in terms of the interpersonal appeal (or warmth and friendliness) the counselor has toward the client (Hackney & Cormier, 1996). This appeal is important, as it affects the level of comfort, notions of competence, and degree of trust the client expresses in the development of the therapeutic relationship. Therefore, there continues to be a physical attractiveness stereotype in counseling associated with skills, competence, and comfort (Harris & Busby, 1998; Vargas & Borkowski, 1983). We are aware that counselors tend to favor YAVIS clients—those who are young, attractive, verbal, intelligent, and successful (Schofield, 1964). However, this favoritism fails to account for the diversity of client and counselor interactions and human diversities observed in a global society. It may be that counselors do not understand the many dimensions and cultural influences of physical attractiveness operating in the formation of mental health problems. Harris and Busby (1998) noted, "Because research on the influence of attractiveness on the success of therapy is still limited, we do not yet fully understand its role in the development and maintenance of the therapeutic relationship" (p. 256). These limitations may have to do with the assumption that in counseling, it is the psychological makeup that is important, whereas our physicality may be perceived as an insignificant (Harvey, 1995).

Little has been done in counseling to understand the role of physical attractiveness as an influence on the clients' or counselors' own lives (Harris & Busby, 1998). In the training process, counselors should be invited to examine their own emotional and personal family issues (e.g., personal counseling and the genogram). Bowen (as cited in Titelman, 1998) cautioned that to be an effective teacher, one must master concepts of self. Significant to learning about self is examining

the multigenerational process through the use of the genogram. This is consistent with the Hardy and Laszloffy (1995) notion of a cultural genogram as a means to examine how culture has influenced the identities of the counselor. Counselors should be encouraged to ask questions such as How has my own attractiveness affected my life? or How do I feel about my own attractiveness? and Growing up, was I ever rejected based on correlates of physical attraction? (see Ponzo, 1985, for additional questions). In addition, after exploring his or her own attractiveness issues, the counselor may be in a better position to assess the overall perceptions of a family's attractiveness as well as the counselor's influence on family functioning. This is consistent with Bowen's (cited in Titelman, 1998) notion that the way the therapist thinks about the family will influence the counseling process. Without a conscious awareness of the impact of physical attractiveness, the counselor and the family may be discounted or discredited based on stereotypical notions of aesthetic preference that may influence trust, competence, and compatibility (Goffman, 1963).

It is vital that counselors examine how our physicality (experiences as physical beings) influences the therapeutic relationship (Ponzo, 1985). Doing so helps open the way to treat the oppressor and the oppressed (Hanna et al., 2000) based on human differences. The process of validation also necessitates concisely defining physical attractiveness and its correlates of facial features, skin color, hair texture and length, and body size as a universal cultural concept reflecting the diversity of physicality as an influence on how components of therapeutic relationships are formed and maintained in the counseling process.

Given the persistence of the dominant culture's influences on standards for physical attractiveness, it is important to understand how physical attractiveness can be taken into account in the counseling process when working with African Americans. Although research on African Americans and their perceptions of physical attractiveness seems to have grown during the past several decades, its ramifications for counseling are seldom discussed (Harvey, 1995). The attractiveness of the client and counselor particularly affect the formation of the therapeutic relationship for African Americans given (a) the unique role of culture in the formation of symptoms associated with internalized oppression, (b) the historical context of internalized oppression for African Americans, and (c) the economic and psychological privilege granted to those that the dominant culture deem more physically attractive. Although racial slavery ended almost 400 years ago, White Americans have not dealt with their historical collective guilt. African Americans have not overcome the shame of the residual effects of institutional slavery that affected their family structure across generations. It may also be that discussing the unique aspects of race in this culture is difficult, given the history of the United States. However, to be effective in the helping role, both majority and minority counselors and clients must become aware of and acknowledge each of their respective histories in America. Titelman (1998) noted that the notion of historical awareness is consistent with Bowen's contention that "the more you know about the past, the more you know about you" (p. 17).

Mio and Barker-Hackett (2003) suggested that resistance to these training issues may occur due to students' denial of their own racist ideas, naïveté about issues of racism in society, and avoidance of the feelings that are experienced in the course of exploration of these issues. McGoldrick et al. (1999) noted that in the training of family counselors, these issues are often seen as irrelevant, associated with deep shame, and dealt with from a narrow lens. In this process, African American counselors, clients, and individuals of majority cultures must operate as colearners given that little is known about the process of internalized oppression. This is especially important given that the oppressed is likely to know more about the oppressor than the oppressor knows about the oppressed (Hanna et al., 2000). This lends support for counselors to embrace their own racial and cultural consciousness as a learning process (see Alessandria, 2002; Parmer, 1994).

Counselors wishing to be better informed may begin by expanding their understanding of multicultural counseling to include the study of sociocultural issues, such as oppression, as an influence on human diversity. Hanna et al. (2000) noted that "the current movement acknowledges the existence of oppression but has seldom addressed it as a subject in terms of its mechanisms, process, and clinical approaches. This world wide phenomenon has affected people in many cultures throughout history" (p. 430). The denial of the existence and impact of sociopolitical issues of race in the context of oppression, discrimination, sexism, and racism serves to dismiss the historical, social, cultural, political, economic, and environmental influences on internalized oppression. However, in many instances it is the effects of the sociocultural issues experienced in the context of the cultural environment that finally bring families into counseling (Mio & Barker-Hackett, 2003).

Counselors must have the courage to raise issues associated with physical attractiveness, especially for clients and families who are on extreme ends of the continuum and given the variability found in this area (Ponzo, 1985). This is consistent with Prilleltensky and Gonick's (1994) notion that raising issues of internalized oppression is a "testament to the human spirit of many oppressed groups that despite harsh conditions of oppression, they developed strategies for resisting or overcoming domination" (p. 149). This is also consistent with a systemic perspective, where the family counselor must observe, examine, and assess the family as a relational body that exists in the context of mutual influence. For example, just as the family counselor observes in session dynamics such as where individuals sit or who speaks first, they must also learn to observe and assess the variability in skin color,

hair length, or facial features as sources of internalized oppression and tension among family members. Harvey (1995) reported that as an African American counselor, he gives permission to discuss attractiveness issues by making reference to his own skin color.

Counselors must also examine body size and image as a psychological and sociological perspective. Grogan (1999) asserted that to understand this phenomenon about the body, "we need to look not only at the experiences of individuals in relation to their bodies, but also at the cultural milieu in which the individual operates" (p. 2). In a weight conscious society, a culturally competent counselor must also assess how family members perceive body size and image. This is significant for African American families because of questions that remain relative to their antithetical attitudes about positive body size. At this point, the question might be How can African Americans embrace similar positive attitudes regarding other aspects of physical attractiveness given that they have fashioned culturally appropriate ways to evaluate their body size by "making what they have work for them" (Parker et al., 1995)? To understand it fully, interdisciplinary research on body size, image, and fashion as a process of cultural adornment for African Americans is essential. Also, research on variables that contribute to embracing positive perceptions of body size in African American communities may hold the secrets to understanding aspects of eating disorders given that historically, this has not been an issue for African Americans (Glezen, 1997; Parker et al., 1995).

Prilleltensky and Gonick (1994) suggested that an interdisciplinary interpretation to the approach of oppression is essential and requires partnerships between many disciplines. Failure to account for the impact of interdisciplinary sociocultural issues would limit any understanding of how oppression is a likely cause for much of the mental illness in society (Hanna et al., 2000). Hanna et al. (2000) lent support to this notion by stating that "indeed, oppression . . . is related in some way or another to most of the problems presented to counselors" (p. 432). The idea of an interdisciplinary interpretation to the approaches of internalized oppression as an influence on physical attractiveness in counseling has implications for research collaborations across many disciplines (e.g., history, sociology, communication, law, and family studies). Through such collaborations, we can ask questions such as What is the impact of the White counselor addressing his or her ancestors' role in the supporting of institutional slavery? This is an important question given that African Americans have retained many of the extant family patterns across generations and also because many White Americans have not dealt with their ancestors' role as an oppressor and the progenitor of internalized oppression. Therefore, we are challenged to move toward a broader definition of human diversity to encompass the many social, cultural, and political aspects of society seen from the perspective of many disciplines.

The results of this study seem to have particular relevance for training family counselors who are not only culturally competent but also able to transgress academic demarcations. Little research moves beyond the verification of the phenomenon to the influence of physical attractiveness in the practice of counseling. Cross-disciplinary study in this area is important because much of the research on facial features, skin color, and hair length and texture tends to duplicate what is already known about physical attractiveness. The incorporation and synthesis of a wide range of academic disciplines could greatly augment this process. Sprenkle and Moon (1996) stated that "a pluralistic research community values and appreciates different inquiry paradigms, methodologies, and designs. . . . Specifically, then, a pluralistic community asks a wide variety of research questions and answers them with a wide variety of research methodologies" (p. 5). In family counseling, this could be accomplished by looking toward other areas of academia to expand qualitative and quantitative research approaches that assess awareness of how physical attractiveness correlates will influence the therapeutic relationship, therefore making it possible to observe diversity and cultural pluralism in African American families on a number of levels.

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