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## Attempting whiteness : Black women's expected and actual results of skin bleaching

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## ABSTRACT

This qualitative study was aimed at exploring skin bleaching among black women. The study addressed women's motives, expected results of the process, actual results and whether or not the expected and actual results were similar. Nine black women, from varying ethnic backgrounds were asked a series of questions that addressed the above aims, but also sought to gain information on their process of skin bleaching. A total of 16 questions were asked over a 30-45 minute timeframe.

Major findings from the study indicated that a desire to become light skinned and to remove facial imperfection were the two most common motives for engaging in the practice. With regards to expectations, the majority of the participants indicated obtaining lighter skin or disappearance of facial imperfections as their expectation prior to starting the process. The majority of participants identified that their expectations from performing the skin bleaching/skin lightening process were met. Therefore, when comparing expectations of the process with the actual results, the findings indicate that both align or are exactly the same. Although the findings did respond to the research question of the comparison between expectations of skin bleaching/skin lightening and the actual results of the process, the findings also showed that there were a few unexpected results that came with the practice of skin bleaching/skin lightening for several participants.

Another important finding that emerged from the study was that participants used the phrase “skin toning” as a new descriptor to refer to the process of skin bleaching/skin lightening. Additional findings were that participants described a general level of awareness of the health concerns/risks associated with continued use of the skin bleaching/skin lightening practice and that there were several factors identified that strongly influenced how participants engaged in continued use of the skin lightening/skin bleaching products.

**ATTEMPTING WHITENESS: BLACK WOMEN'S EXPECTED AND ACTUAL  
RESULTS OF SKIN BLEACHING**

A project based upon an independent investigation  
submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of Master of Social Work

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2013

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## **CHAPTER I**

### **Introduction**

This is an exploratory study looking at the experience of skin bleaching/skin lightening among black women. This qualitative study aims to identify and examine the expected and actual results of skin bleaching/skin lightening among black women between the ages of 21 and 65 years in New York City. More specifically, the study will attempt to describe, from the participants' perspective, the reasons for engaging in this practice, the expected results in comparison to the actual results of engaging in this practice as well as assess what connection, if any, exists between the expected and actual results of the process. In understanding the results, this study will also assess how skin bleaching/skin lightening is reinforced as a practice among these women and perhaps the larger community of women in this country who engage in this practice.

This information collected on the experience of skin bleaching/skin lightening will support the practice of clinical social work by contributing to and supplementing existing literature. It will also increase the understanding of social and racial issues that will be useful to general service providers working within black communities and other communities of color. Finally, this study will advance the practice of clinical social work by offering some insight into conceptions of identity among black women that will provide social workers with a better understanding of the ways in which these issues may contribute to women's social locations as viewed by themselves and as placed on them by their communities.

In order to develop a framework for this study, one has to first and foremost define or establish a consistent understanding of skin bleaching/skin lightening. The term “Skin Bleaching” as used within this research study is defined as “the application of topical creams, gels, soaps and household products to the skin” (Lewis, Robkin, Gaska & Njoki, 2011, p.1). Skin bleaching is a process, which works by reducing the melanin pigment in the skin thereby giving a lighter complexion. The term skin lightening is often used interchangeably with the term skin bleaching to convey the same meaning. For the purposes of this study, both terms skin bleaching and skin lightening will be used interchangeably to convey the same idea. The idea of skin bleaching and/or skin lightening is not a novel one considering the fact that it has been practiced in the United States since the 1800’s (Glenn, 2008). In fact, it has become a phenomenon that is gradually encouraging much discourse in today’s society and has become a predominant issue in many countries including the United States (Glenn, 2008).

Previous studies have explored skin bleaching in Jamaica (Charles, 2003; Charles 2009), Tanzania (Lewis et al., 2011), Jordan (Hamed, Tayyem, Nimer, & AlKhatib, 2010), Togo (Kpanake, Munoz Sastre & Mullet, 2010), and Suriname (Menke, 2002). The idea and practice of skin bleaching is therefore taking place among women of color from a variety of nationalities, ethnic and racial groups including: Hispanic/Latino, African-Americans, South and East Asians, West and Southern African groups and West Indian and Caribbean populations. The phenomenon has become even more popular, within the past two decades, as evidenced by the increasing variety of products available.

Most of the research that has been conducted on this topic has explored women’s motivations for skin bleaching. Some of the research studies have attributed motives for engaging in skin bleaching to conceptions of beauty including such things as measures of

attractiveness to the opposite sex, wanting to seem more beautiful (Charles, 2009; Lewis et al., 2011) as well as to remove facial imperfections such as spots or pimples (Hamed et al., 2010; Lewis et al., 2011; Charles, 2009; Menke, 2002; Pierre, 2008). Other reasons have been linked to aspects of ethnic identity and colonial legacies (Hill, 2002; Charles, 2009; Hall, 1995; Hall, 2006) and finally some motivations behind the practice have been attributed to achieving higher social class and benefits within a homogenous population (Lewis et al., 2011; Kpanake et al., 2010). There were only a few studies located that described some of the physical consequences of using skin bleaching products and even fewer studies that spoke about general results of the process from the perspective of the users, i.e. the physical, psychological and social outcomes of the practice of skin bleaching/skin lightening and the ways in which the practice is reinforced in individuals..

In preparation for describing the study's methodology and findings the next chapter will describe the practice of skin bleaching/skin lightening as a process, how it developed historically and its establishment as an aesthetic practice within the black community in the United States, followed by several theoretical explanations for the practice of skin bleaching/skin lightening.

## CHAPTER II

### Literature Review

This section will present a discussion of literature about the topic of skin bleaching/skin lightening. It will attempt to examine literature written on the topic and related to the following areas: 1) the process of skin bleaching, 2) the prevalence of the practice of skin bleaching in countries around the world, 3) the prevalence and history of the practice within the United States, 4) women's motivations for skin bleaching as given in studies conducted with women of color throughout the world and finally 5) theoretical explanations for skin bleaching.

#### The Process of Skin Bleaching

The first step in creating a space for discourse around this controversial topic is to understand the physical components of skin bleaching. The skin bleaching process is a complicated and continuous one. "Skin bleaching" or "skin lightening" as terms used interchangeably within this paper is defined as "the application of topical creams, gels, soaps and household products to the skin" (Lewis, Robkin, Gaska & Njoki, 2011, p.1) for the purpose of obtaining a lighter skin hue. It is also important to note that oral tablets and injections are also used as processes that facilitate skin lightening/skin bleaching and is sometimes considered to be less harsh than the topical creams and gels (Fihlani, 2012). Skin bleaching/skin lightening, as a process, works by reducing the melanin pigmentation of the skin thereby giving a lighter complexion. A variety of compounds and chemical mixtures are used to obtain a desired skin hue. Historically European and American women have used compounds such as ceruse,

ammonia, lye and other harsh cleaning products (Blay, 2009; International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences, 2008; Lewis et al., 2011; Mire, 2001). Other household mixtures may contain curry powder, toothpaste and household bleach.

Currently, many of the commercialized or over the counter skin lightening or skin bleaching products may contain hydroquinone (in varying percentages), topical corticosteroids and even mercury. In some areas, such as Mali (Adebajo, 2002), topical corticosteroids are used as compared to Nigeria, where more hydroquinone containing products are used. Hydroquinone is regulated for no more than 2% within facial creams sold over the counter within the United States. This is easily seen in the many “spot removers,” “spot correctors” and even skin tone products advertised through companies such as, Ambi, Nadinola and Loreal to name a few. However, products that are used in combination or products that are obtained through black market channels may contain anywhere from 4 to 25% hydroquinone (Blay, 2009).

Many of these same chemicals have been used in some dermatological practices to treat melasma, lentigines and some post inflammatory pigmentations (Toombs, 2007). Hydroquinone based products have been used in dermatology in hyperpigmentation therapy to treat persons with Fitzpatrick skin types (Draeols, 2007), who often present with abnormal skin pigmentations. As a result hydroquinone-containing products are often distributed in these cases via a prescription, especially if the dosage will exceed the regulated 2% amount. Despite their uses, many of these chemical compounds are still harsh and can produce ill effects on the skin and within the body. Hydroquinone, specifically, when used over time continuously and in large doses, may potentially lead to many dermatological consequences and skin abnormalities including striae atrophica, exogenous ochronosis (Blay, 2009; Bongiorno, 2004; Charles, 2011; Mire, 2001). Exogenous ochronosis is a hyper pigmentation of the skin that is caused by

extended use of hydroquinone products, especially bleaching creams/gels. Hydroquinone usage in cosmetics has come under the scrutiny of the Federal Drug and Administration, (FDA), recently due to some of its more adverse effects and as a result a movement towards more stringent regulations is possibly in the process (Draeols, 2007; Toombs, 2007). There are other medical and health concerns such as, neurological problems, immuno suppression, Cushing's syndrome and renal damage, all of which have been linked to extensive use of skin bleaching products (Charles, 2011; Ajose, 2005).

In short, the process of skin bleaching/skin lightening is usually undertaken by an individual in a very deliberate way. Whether one uses topical creams or pills or injections, it is a very conscious and perhaps even a rigorous process. This is often due to the chemical compound, hydroquinone. Hydroquinone is present in mainstream acceptable beauty products such as spot correctors, as well as specific bleaching/lightening products, that are often also sold over the counter. However, the chemical composition or degree to which hydroquinone is present is what varies between these types of products and can possibly result in health, especially dermatological issues. With this understanding of the physical components of the process and some of the possible effects, one can begin to assess the prevalence of this practice worldwide.

### **The Prevalence of Skin Bleaching throughout the World**

Skin bleaching has been taking place throughout the world for quite some time. It has been documented as early as the 1800's among African Americans in the United States and by the mid 1900's in other countries such as South Africa (Glenn, 2008). Today the practice has become increasingly more prevalent in many communities throughout the world, including those in India, Europe, North and South America, Latin America, The Caribbean, Africa and the Middle East (Dadzie, 2010; Mire, 2005; Glenn, 2008). In addition, skin bleaching has a huge

market in Asia. Countries such as Japan and China have skin whitening (as it is referred to there) markets that are estimated as of 2001, to be worth \$ 5.6 billion and over \$ 1.3 billion respectively (Mire, 2005). In some communities in African countries, the prevalence rates seem significantly high: 25% in Bamako-Mali, 52% in Dakar, Senegal and 35% in Pretoria South Africa, (Glenn, 2008). In a recent article through *BBC News Africa*, “one woman in three in South Africa bleaches her skin” (Fihlani, 2012). In Zambia the prevalence rate for skin bleaching is given at 60%, 58% in Lome- Togo (Kombaté et al., 2012) and 77% in Lagos, Nigeria (Glenn, 2008). This significant prevalence rate for Lagos may be attributed to the fact that it represents both males and females who engage in the practice (Adebajo, 2002). Additionally, in Nigeria, there are few firm regulations controlling the marketing of skin bleaching products; while in the United States the Food and Drug Administration, (FDA), establishes regulations that ensure that the concentration of hydroquinone (one of the major ingredient found in most skin lightening products) in products sold over the counter is between 1.5 % and 2% (Adebajo, 2002).

The above information shows that there is a strong and active community of individuals who engage in skin bleaching practices throughout the world. The prevalence of the practice in countries of the African Diaspora is astounding. However, it is possible that the lack of stringent regulations governing chemical compositions of products in countries such as Ghana, Nigeria and Togo may contribute to a higher prevalence rate than most countries. In addition, the worth of the skin bleaching or rather “skin whitening” market in Asian countries is also quite high. It is interesting to note that the majority of the countries listed above were also under European/ Colonial rule at some point in their histories. Furthermore, many of the above were not historically, and in some cases, are still not considered first world countries or economically advanced countries. Thus, one questions what the prevalence of this practice is like in such a

country, like the United States for example? Is skin bleaching/skin lightening experiencing a prevalence rate similar to many of the above countries? The next section will use current product availability and historical content to attempt to answer this question, given the absence of available studies on the exact prevalence of this phenomenon in the United States.

### **The Prevalence and history of Skin Bleaching in the United States**

There have been few studies, if any that present information on the current rate of skin bleaching/lightening among black women in the United States. Despite the paucity of information on exact prevalence rates, one can infer the popularity of the practice from the many brands and variations of skin lightening/bleaching products available in many stores in cities in the United States. In a study examining derogatory representations, Charles (2011) through use of a convenience sample located 45 skin bleaching/skin lightening products from 24 different brands being sold between three stores in Harlem, New York City. Forty-six percent of the products were manufactured in the United States (Charles, 2011), thus supporting the idea that there is a strong demand in the United States for skin bleaching products.

In many countries and communities around the world, much value is placed on the benefits of lighter skin. For many women, light skin is representative of beauty, confidence and power. Charles (2011) in a study on skin bleaching in Jamaica found that “light skin people in Jamaican culture are deemed by some people to be beautiful and sexually attractive” (p.376). In considering the United States’ own history, lighter skin, or whiteness specifically, was linked to benefits such as beauty, wealth and even power (Hall, 1996). According to Glenn (2008),

Skin color is a symbolic form of capital that affects, if not determines, one’s life chances...although skin tone is seen as a form of fixed or unchangeable capital, in fact, men and women may attempt to acquire light skinned privilege (p. 282).

The emergence of skin bleaching within the continental United States can be traced back to the cosmetic boom that occurred among many white women in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. Many of these cosmetic practices, painting, powdering, beautifying and whitening the skin, were said to have been influenced “from a variety of sources...and reached back through the centuries” (Peiss, 1998, p.12), with one such source being the cosmetic practices of Englishwomen in the 1600 and 1700’s (Peiss, 1998). As a result many early immigrants from Europe and Britain could have brought these practices and continued them in the States. The publishing rise in the mid 1800’s increased the spread of these practices among white Anglo communities and by extension African American communities throughout the country.

Within the African-American community references to skin lightening/skin bleaching were seen from the 1850’s (Glenn, 2008). The origin of the concept of skin lightening, in fact, the beginning of the process of skin bleaching among black women in the United States can be historically located within the context of institutional slavery (Hunter, 1998) and its’ ideological counterpart of racism. This system was largely predicated on maintaining racial differentiation. Light skin, especially of the pale variety, was the Anglo American conception of beauty at this time and was standardized as the ideal in American culture (Peiss, 1998; Hall, 2006). This ideal also operated within populations of color, especially the African American community (Hall, 2006). Lighter skinned blacks were automatically afforded certain privileges within the slavery system, namely, becoming house servants and having increased opportunities for education and skilled labor (Glenn, 2008; Russell, Wilson & Hall, 1992). This preference for light skin continued well after the end of slavery as evident in “a skin-tone stratification” that privileged lighter skinned African Americans towards a higher socioeconomic social status than those who were darker skinned (Coard, Breland & Raskin, 2001).

Skin bleaching became a more public phenomenon in African American communities in the United States in the early 1900's as seen from beauty and cosmetic advertisements as well as general public discourse. Advertisers specifically marketed these beauty products to African American communities as seen from the advertisements for skin bleaching creams that were found in black newspapers (Peiss, 1998; Dorman, 2011; Lindsey, 2011). Despite the specific target of the African American communities, it was still a white aesthetic beauty ideal that was marketed. Cosmetics and paints helped to further create and highlight "distinctions between and within social classes; they also reinforced a noxious racial aesthetic" (Peiss, 1998, p.31). Dorman (2011) referenced Kelly Miller's, then Dean of Howard University, article written in a newspaper column in 1926, which addressed the issue of skin bleaching for the "American negro" (p.48). Nadinola, a popular skin bleaching brand during this time, "promised 'White Skin While you sleep' and asserted 'you can secure the light-toned beauty that all your friends will admire and envy with this double-quick extra-powerful bleach'" (Dorman, 2011, p.56). This advertisement perpetuated the white beauty ideals and privileged light skin over dark.

The New Negro Movement during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries essentially aimed to change the American image of the African American individual and community as well as instill pride. This movement highlighted self-determination, autonomy and the re-creation or transformation of the Negro individual and his/her community. It is therefore not surprising that one form of this re-creation took on the aesthetic form of altering one's physical appearance, especially for African American women (Lindsey, 2011). "African Americans could literally reconstruct and refashion themselves and create new models of black aesthetic identity. Aesthetic practices were integral to African Americans in shedding the vestiges of enslavement and for asserting their place within the modern world" (Lindsey, 2011,

p.98). Skin bleaching/ skin lightening provided a very obvious way of shedding this dark memory of slavery into a more lightened modern identity.

The 1960's and era of the Civil Rights Movement was another important time for African Americans in the United States, as it re-established the importance of black culture by highlighting black power and promoting the "black is beautiful" movement (Coard et al., 2001). This emphasis on black power and black beauty during this time helped to deconstruct some of the more racist stereotypes associated with black skin color. However, these stereotypes were not completely destroyed as seen in the continuation of colorism, which may be considered a muted form of racism that places light skin at a higher social advantage than darker or black skin and operates within communities of color (Charles, 2011; Jones, 2000). In considering many of the women of color and specifically black women in the media, a large number are lighter skinned.

After conducting several studies premised on the idea of colorism within the black community and other communities of color in the United States, Ronald Hall, coined the term the "bleaching syndrome" (Hall, 2006, p.27). According to Hall, there are three aspects to the bleaching syndrome:

They consist of the following: (a) perceptual according to internalized ideals; (b) psychological according to reactions to those ideals; and (c) behavioral according to the "bleached" ideals manifested (p.27).

The process of skin bleaching or skin lightening in using Hall's (2006) perspective would be the actual manifested behavior of a larger "bleaching syndrome." In the United States today, the popularity of skin bleaching or lightening is evident by the wide variety of brands of products available with over the counter access within the market such as: "Palmer's, DR Daggett and Remsdell (fade cream and facial brightening cream), Swiss Whitening Pills, Ultra Glow, Skin

Success, Avre (which produces the Pallid Skin Lightening System and B-Lite Fade Cream), and Clear Essence (which targets women of color more generally)” (Glenn, 2008, p.289). Recent research conducted by Charles (2011) lists products such as: 55H+ Paris, Clear Fast, Rosance, Sure White, Clair and White, Body White, Ami White, Maxi White, Xtreme Brite, Miracle Maxitone, Palmers Skin Success, Dermovate, Clovate, African Queen Beauty Cream, Dr. Fred Summit Skin Whitener, Nadinola Skin fade cream, Porcelana skin lightening cream, Concha Nacar de Perlop, Othine Skin Bleach, Madre Perla, Genuine Black and White cream, Dermisa Skin Fade Cream, Ultra Glow Cleansing Bar and skin Tone Cream, Clear Essence Complexion Soap.

It is important to note that here in the United States, skin lightening appears in many forms and in other communities. Concurrent with this practice of skin lightening/bleaching in communities of color is a similar process of lightening or brightening in more dominant communities. The increased use of “spot correctors” and “brighteners” in the mainstream cosmetic and beauty industry within the United States is evident in the many products on the market manufactured by companies like, Garnier, Proactive, Ambi, Chanel and Loreal. These products purport to “help fade acne scarring, lighten dark spots and give aging skin a youthful glow” (p.1), in a similar way to some of the skin lightening/bleaching products discussed prior, however, the key difference is a low percentage of hydroquinone (usually adhering to the 2% limit required by the FDA) or even the absence altogether of hydroquinone (Felder, 2012). These “brighteners” in the United States are compared to those that are manufactured and distributed in Asia. Felder, (2012) quotes a representative of Chanel as saying:

In Asia, there are a lot of whitening products, and that's what the category is called...in the U.S. it's different because it's more about evening the complexion, and it's for all ethnicities. We call it brightening. It's not about the color of the skin (p.1).

While the promoted use of spot correctors and brighteners in the dominant culture and various groups is not the focus of this study, its connections and possible influence on the skin bleaching/lightening practice in women of color is not to be ignored.

While it is hard to gauge the exact prevalence here in the United States, the amount of different skin lightening creams, gels, lotions and soaps on the market bears testament to a high rate of usage today. In some ways, one may presume that the current presence and possible rate of skin bleaching as a practice in the United States today, was influenced by the historical context of slavery that has favored and benefited lighter skin over dark skin. Despite the eradication of slavery and the establishment of a new black pride, the remnants of the racist system still continued via colorism, which still favored a lighter skin amongst individuals in the black community.

While the influence of slavery and its direct offspring, racism, on the emergence of skin bleaching, as a practice in the black community in the United States is evident, a deeper understanding is needed of what leads an individual to engage in this practice. Frankly, what are people's motives? Many of the studies done on skin bleaching have found that mostly women tend to engage in the practice, although Charles (2003) and Ajose (2005) conducted their studies with both males and females in Jamaica and Nigeria respectively. Several researchers have conducted studies among populations of color that looked at the individual's motivations, particularly young women, behind engaging in a process that may result in permanent damages to the body (Adebajo, 2011; Lewis et al., 2011; Charles, 2011; Charles, 2009; Charles, 2003;

Hall, 2006; Kpanake et al., 2010; Menke, 2002). These studies and some motivations for this practice will be presented next.

### **Women's Motivations for Skin Bleaching**

Many of these studies found that some of the most common motivations for skin bleaching in communities of color fall within the categories of idealized beauty (Hamed, Tayyem, Nimer & AlKhatib, 2010; Lewis et al., 2011; Charles, 2011; Charles, 2009), internalized racism, colonial legacies and ethnic identity (Hill, 2002; Charles, 2009; Hall, 1995; Hall, 2006), and finally the desire to achieve higher social class and benefits within a homogenous population (Lewis et al., 2011; Kpanake et al., 2010). The idea of beauty or idealized beauty seems to be a popular motivation for skin bleaching among many women. This is not surprising, as phenotypic characteristics, skin color for example, have always valued lightness over darkness. According to Fokua (2009), for many Ghanaians “lighter skin tones were equated to desirability, beauty and higher status” (p.130). Many aspects of local Ghanaian culture, colloquialisms and songs, views lighter skin more favorably than dark skin. An unfortunate yet pervasive offspring of colonial history are racist ideologies that associate dark skin with ugliness and white skin with beauty (Hunter, 1998).

According to Hamed et al. (2010) among 310 Jordanians, 62.3 % of participants associated lighter skin color with being beautiful. In another study conducted among 355 female participants in Tanzania, Lewis et al. (2011) found that 38 % of the participants engaged in skin bleaching out of a desire “to be white, beautiful and more European looking” (p.33). This desire also echoed by Hill (2002) is a motivation that is both a manifestation of idealized beauty and an effect of colonial legacies. In using a convenience sample Charles (2009) found that among 58 high school students and young adults in Jamaica, there were nine categories/stated reasons for

bleaching one's skin. Of the nine categories, 72% of participants' responses for engaging in skin bleaching fell into three main categories: to remove facial blemishes, to get lighter skin since the participant's skin was too dark, and to look/become beautiful (as darker skin was equated to being ugly). Skin bleaching in Jamaica, according to Charles (2009) occurred irrespective of age, gender, social class and rural-urban locations.

Fokua (2009) in a study exploring skin color and skin bleaching in Ghana found that lighter skin women were perceived to be more attractive and more desirable to the opposite sex than darker skin women. In interviewing 30 women from the market place, Fokua (2009) discovered that most of this sample believed that in general Ghanaian women engage in skin bleaching to have lighter skin color to be attractive. While Fokua's (2009) study supports this idea of idealized beauty as a motivation for skin bleaching, it is important to note that the 30 women interviewed were not specifically engaged in the practice of skin bleaching and the study was based on these women's perceptions.

In considering countries such as the United States, Jamaica, Ghana, Togo, Nigeria, Suriname, India, Mali and Senegal, one notes that many if not all of them were, at one point in their respective histories, under some form of European or colonial rule. This historical context created a society with white Anglo or Caucasian Europeans at its summit and placed all other groups, including local citizens at its base. Lewis et al. (2011) refer to this as a "psychological colonization" (p. 30). She further elaborated on this point in emphasizing that colonization itself creates "an institution of a racial hierarchy, [where] race and consequently skin color, gained significance and importance within society" (p. 30). A similar phenomenon is seen in Jamaica, through the construction of a racial hierarchy (white, brown and black) as a remnant, or rather a deliberate establishment of psychological colonization, as reported by Lewis et al. (2011).

Through this psychological colonization, the Anglo, European, white individual, who is at the summit, became the ideal for all other groups; creating a society based on Anglo, European, white cultural standards. Conceptions of beauty, therefore, followed this Anglo, European, White standard, placing the white, female and thus lighter skin as the beauty ideal for women from all communities.

Other studies conducted have found that motivations for skin bleaching occurs as a result of poor self-representations and some internalized racism (Hall, 1995). However, it is important to consider that self-representations are constructed based on the ways in which one is socialized. Family ideals and beliefs help to place one in the context of the larger society. Ideals reflected from the larger society and usually the dominant culture(s) also contribute to the development of one's own self- understanding vis-à-vis the environment. According to Coard et al. (2001) skin color preference as a value was passed down through multiple generations in African American families in the United States. These findings can also be linked to some of the effects of colonial legacies and misconstruction of ethnic identity.

Charles (2003) conducted a study in Jamaica exploring identity, self -esteem and skin bleaching. Charles (2003) used a convenience sample of 18 individuals, 11 females and 7 males. Charles (2003) divided the sample into two groups, self-identified bleachers and non-bleachers. Both groups were administered the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale, where Charles (2003) defined self-esteem as “a person's overall positive or negative attitude towards himself or herself” (p.712). Charles (2003) posits: “a person with high self- esteem thinks that he or she is a person of worth. On the other hand, low self-esteem indicates contempt, rejection or dissatisfaction with the self” (p.712). There were no salient differences in self-esteem between self-identified

bleachers and non- bleachers. Charles (2003) did find however, that self-identified skin bleachers hold Eurocentric ideas on beauty.

In looking at the United States, motivations for skin bleaching among black women result from the effects of colonial legacies and misconstruction of ethnic identity as well as a desire for increased social status and capital (Hunter, 2002; Hunter, 2011). Historically, differentiations in skin color was used as a means to secure different forms of labor (field slaves versus indoor servants) as well as a form of social control by engendering distrust within both groups for each other (Hunter, 2002). Within this context lighter skin individuals were perceived as being better educated, receiving more opportunities for better employment and even being regarded as more attractive, thereby ensuring their possibility of securing a mate. Concurrently, however, this lighter skin status was predicated on the history of colonialism and very specifically slavery in the United States. Much of the rhetoric in contemporary society has remained the same. Skin color and overall physical representation is still a major determinant in how black women navigate society.

The studies presented above, identify and discuss motives for skin bleaching. The motive common to most of the studies was that of becoming lighter skinned or white, as this was regarded as being more attractive. Another common motive for engaging in skin bleaching/skin lightening indicated in the studies was to remove pimples. It is interesting to note that the majority of the studies seemed gendered in that they were geared towards more of a female population. On one hand this is understandable as the studies present a phenomenon that is mostly classified as a beautification process and as such in our society is relegated to one end of the gender spectrum. However, a small amount of these studies also included men who engage in this process. This indicates that perhaps there may be additional motivating factors, which are

moving individuals towards this process than simply a need to be beautiful. The next section will present various theoretical constructs that have been presented or that may be considered as influences for the process. Exploring these theories and identifying the ways they may connect with the motives presented will bring further profundity and understanding to this popular practice.

### **Theoretical Explanations for Skin Bleaching**

There have been several theories suggested to explain the rising popularity and use of skin bleaching practices. Internalized racism (Bivens, 2005) and Black Identity Development theory (Jackson, 2005), Social Representation Theory (Charles, 2009), and Apter's Metamotivational theory (Kpanake et al., 2010) support the three main ideas of skin bleaching as motivated by colonial legacies and ethnic identities (Charles, 2009; Menke, 2002), an intersection of motives towards gaining higher social class and capital (Kpanake et al., 2010) a manifestation and result of objectification, for example idealizing a specific notion of beauty (Lewis et al., 2011).

In Jackson's (2005) theory of Black identity development there are five stages that black people move through with regards to the development and establishment of their identity: naïve, acceptance, resistance, redefinition and internalization. The naïve stage marks a period in a person's life where "there is no conscious awareness of race, per se" (Jackson, 2005, p.19). This naïve stage usually occurs in childhood. The second stage of acceptance "represents the internalization, conscious or unconscious of an ideology of racial dominance and subordination, which touches all facets of one's private and public life" (p.19). The third stage resistance brings recognition of the existence and occurrence of racism on several different levels and a questioning of the ways in which it may manifest. This questioning eventually results in a

rejection of the racist standards that have governed black identity and encourages a transition towards the next stage, redefinition. In this fourth stage one sees, the black woman or man consciously redefining their own concept of black identity, with practices and ideologies that either emulate or reject aspects of the dominant culture. The last and final stage according to Jackson (2005) is that of internalization, which sees the black male or female integrating many of these ideologies into all aspects of their lives.

In considering the theory of black identity development with respect to skin bleaching, the second stage of acceptance seems to be of particular importance. It is during this stage, according to Jackson (2005) that the black individual becomes aware of racial difference, more specifically white supremacist attitudes and the idea that white is better. It might be suggested that in this stage the idea of internalized racism is fostered and continues to develop. Internalized racism, as defined by Bivens (2005):

Is the situation that occurs in a racist system when a racial group oppressed by racism supports the supremacy and dominance of the dominant group by maintaining or participating in the set of attitudes, behaviors, social structures and ideologies that undergird the dominating group's power and privilege and limits the oppressed group's own advantages. (p. 46)

Internalized racism, according to Bivens (2005) gives a limited sense of self for people of color. It may be possible to even venture a step further and suggest that it offers a limited sense of self and opportunities for people of color in a society filled with limitless resources and conceptions of self for individuals within the dominant group. Skin bleaching/ skin lightening as conceptualized through the lens of internalized racism theory could be seen as a way to access

resources normally reserved for members of the dominant group who claim (and benefit) from white privilege.

The social representation theory (Charles, 2009), which employs concepts such as anchoring and objectification - objectification theory (Lewis et al., 2011), plays a role in shaping the skin bleaching/skin-lightening phenomenon. The premise of this theory is that women view themselves primarily through the internalized perspectives of others. Women (and perhaps men too) end up engaging in self-objectification as they internalize, from a young age, the socialized expectation to objectify their own appearances as well as their own exposure to objectification. Self-objectification has been viewed as perhaps one of the underlying motivations for women to engage in body altering practices.

As skin bleaching produces a physical and corporeal transformation, it can be viewed as a body altering practice. In viewing the development of skin bleaching through the lens of objectification theory, the woman (especially the former colonized woman) is exposed to the objectification of whites at an early age. The white female is equated with beauty and even power. This view is then perhaps internalized and held as the ideal in the self-objectification process. Skin bleaching, therefore becomes the route to beauty and thus power. Hunter (2011) presents this idea of white beauty or desire for lighter skin as a form of racial capital.

Racial capital is more closely related to phenotype and how others perceive an individual, rather than how that individual defines him or herself. Racial capital...makes sense in a racist society where light skin and Anglo bodies are valued over dark skin and African or Indian/Indigenous bodies. (Hunter, 2011, p. 145)

Hunter (2011) continues with this idea that light skin operates in society as a form of social, symbolic and even economic capital. It makes sense therefore that in some ways many dark skin

people of color could be motivated to access this racial capital, as in many communities subtle and overt messages valuing and privileging light skin are conveyed daily in areas such as business, politics, education and the media. This desire for light skin privilege and “the reality of color based discriminations” may be strong motivators for skin bleaching/skin lightening practices.

Similar to the Social Representation Theory (Charles, 2009), Apter’s Metamotivational Theory (Kpanake et al., 2010) also supports this idea of objectification as a motive for engaging in skin bleaching practices. The theory essentially purports that there exists a set of contrasting psychological motives, four pairs that underlie certain behaviors. These motives are identified as the *telic-paratelic*, *conformist-negativist*, *mastery-sympathy* and *autic-alloic* (Kpanake et al., 2010). The *telic-paratelic* looks at people’s motives from the perspective of valuing achievement or progress versus immediate enjoyment. *Telic* refers to whether or not one is motivated to engage in a practice because of a long term goal that would result from said practice. *Paratelic* refers to whether one is motivated by the immediate benefits or results that one can see and enjoy. So, one could explain a person’s motivation for engaging in skin bleaching practices as a way to increase one’s chances of getting a job versus engaging as a result of a popular fad.

The *conformist-negativist* motive pair of Apter’s theory aligned more closely with objectification and internalized racism. *Conformist* is defined as either motivated by a desire to be included and be a part of a practice, whereas *Negativist* is defined as motivations that are negative (towards oneself or a group) and that are also challenging. The *conformist* motive values the idea of fitting in; this can be seen in the extent that the “white ideal” is the model to conform to as it is representative of the dominant culture to which all others have to ascribe;

while, the *negativist* motive (which is still conforming in nature) is rooted in the idea of challenging. Kpanake et al. (2010) identify cultural self-hatred (or internalized racism) and cultural dislocation as negativist motives.

*Mastery – sympathy* explores motives from a perspective of power and control versus intimacy and tenderness. *Mastery* in this context is defined as a need to control, or a desire for power either within oneself or in a specific context, while *sympathy* is defined as a desire for love or intimacy. This could explain skin bleaching from a point of gaining more control in a society where dark skin is devalued (Charles, 2003; Charles 2009; Hall 1995), or from a point of view of bleaching one's skin to gain favor with one's spouse or to gain a spouse (Lewis et al., 2011). The final motive pair *autic- alloic* explains behavior from the perspective of the individual and his/her benefits, versus identification with others and their benefits (Kpanake et al., 2010). *Autic* motives are defined as those that affect the individual specifically and *alloic* motives are defined as doing things for the sake of others, a more others oriented motivation.

These theories, Black Identity development (Jackson, 2005), Internalized Racism (Bivens, 2005), The Social Representation Theory (Charles, 2009) and Apter's Metamotivational Theory (Kpanake et al., 2010) seem to work jointly none can exist completely on its own, and all influence the development of specific behavioral motivations for skin bleaching. The social and historical context of many countries/communities, especially former colonized states and those that have experienced European or American imperialism, play a powerful role in the socialization of its inhabitants. The end result is those historical contexts that placed the white female as the ideal image of female beauty and power in addition to other things becomes the aim to strive for or the motivation to achieve (Brown-Glaude, 2007; Hall, 1999).

Several of these studies have presented consistent and competent research that has identified women's motivations for engaging in skin bleaching and lightening practices. These motivations among women are primarily linked to conceptions of beauty. Black Identity development (Jackson, 2005), Internalized Racism (Bivens, 2005), The Social Representation Theory (Charles, 2009) and Apter's Metamotivational Theory (Kpanake et al., 2010) ground skin lightening practice in an historical context and as one of the many effects of racism that benefits lighter skin. Notably, the one main weakness found in the literature presented is the lack of information on the results obtained by persons who participate in the practice of skin bleaching/skin lightening.

In summary, much of the information presented in this chapter gives a very descriptive outline of the skin bleaching process and the ways in which it has become a veritable phenomenon, even trend around the world. Most of the research presented above proved to be a clear testament of the prevalence and trend as seen by the mere statistics in some Western African countries and the market of distribution in East Asian countries. Despite a paucity of exact statistics for the United States, the pattern of use of skin bleaching products seems no less different and in fact has a lot of historical basis in slavery. Having an understanding of previous studies, in addition to the theories that have been developed helped to shape the design and the methods that were used for this study. A precise breakdown of the parameters of the study and how it was accomplished will be given in the following chapter.

## CHAPTER III

### Methodology

#### Research Design

An exploratory qualitative research study was selected as the most appropriate research design to use to assess the results of skin bleaching/skin lightening in black women between the ages of 21 and 65 years. Therefore, the aim of this research was to examine the results – physical, social and psychological- of skin bleaching/skin lightening practices among black women in New York City. The study was specifically aimed at addressing the following questions, a) What do women hope to get from the practice of skin bleaching/skin lightening; b) What do women actually get from the practice –i.e. what are the results on a– physical, social and psychological level; c) Are the hopeful expectations of the practice and the actual results the same; d) How do these results influence or reinforce the continuation of this practice within black women in the United States.

The study employed a cross-sectional design and used semi-structured in-person interviews with individuals who engaged in skin bleaching/skin lightening practices, as this allowed for more in depth access to information from participants. It also allowed participants to feel more at ease and to share more about their experiences with the process in a way that was not minimizing.

For the purposes of this study, actual and expected results was defined as any physical, psychological or social effect or change seen or experienced by participants after use of skin

bleaching or skin lightening products. Additionally the terms skin bleaching and skin lightening are used interchangeably throughout this study as a way to minimize the harsher impact that the term “bleaching” may evoke in participants. For the purposes of this study, New York City was used as a site of convenience as well as a site with a diverse population of individuals who engage in this practice. While this is a consistent practice worldwide, as seen from the above information, much of the previous research on skin lightening has been conducted in the Caribbean, Africa and some Asian countries. Of these studies many of them and especially those conducted in countries such as: Ghana, Tanzania, Jamaica, and Togo have employed either a qualitative or a quantitative method. Unlike many of these countries, there were very few available studies on skin bleaching within the United States, thus, the qualitative research format was chosen as the best format to achieve the aims of this study.

A detailed Human Subject Review Application was submitted to the Smith College School for Social Work Human Subjects Review Committee, prior to data collection process. The application submitted included information regarding all stages of this research process including information on the purpose of the study, recruitment of participants (See Appendix A and B), participants rights and protections. The project was approved by the Smith College Human Subjects Review Committee following a few changes. (See Appendix H).

### **Sample**

Considering the goals of the study, to identify and explain the expected and actual results of skin bleaching among black women in New York City, as well as ascertain what connection if any exists between these two, it was important to identify the specific population of interest, sample size and characteristics as well as how they were recruited. Previous empirical studies

(Lewis, Robkin, Gaska & Njoki, 2011; Charles, 2009; Charles, 2003; Kpanake, Munoz Sastre and Mullet, 2010) served as a guide in identifying the above for this present study.

In a study on skin bleaching among women in Tanzania, Lewis et al. (2011) used qualitative methods to understand women's motivations for skin bleaching. This method, as conducted via interviews with 42 urban women allowed for more of an exploration of the reasons behind skin bleaching in Tanzanian society. Lewis et al. (2011) also used both a random selection and a snowball sampling technique to obtain participants. This present study used the snowball sampling technique to recruit participants.

A non-probability sampling format (the snowball method) was chosen, specifically to obtain participants, as the sample selected was very specific and also dependent on the availability of the individuals. The sample was taken from a population of interest: the black community (whether individuals identified as African American, West Indian, Caribbean or African). The study population were black women in New York City, as this location has a high percentage of black identified – African, West Indian, African American, and bi-racial - individuals, thereby increasing the feasibility of this study. The sampling frame used to generate this population comprised of friends and acquaintances living in New York, who recommended others who engage in skin bleaching/ skin lightening practices.

As this study aimed to gain more first person understanding of the results of skin bleaching/skin lightening, in-person interviews were used to collect data and a qualitative analysis format, specifically a thematic analysis was used to analyze the information received. Although the qualitative research format seems appropriate, there are a few concerns that may be encountered when choosing a sample of participants. Some of these concerns are directly related to the way in which possible participants are chosen.

One of the primary concerns in choosing this population was how to locate participants who identified as “skin bleachers” as this may be a topic that still evokes shame in many communities. It was then crucial to use a less stressful sampling technique, such as snowball sampling (Rubin & Babbie, 2010), which is “appropriate when the members of a special population are difficult to locate” (p.149). The use of the snowball sample method allowed the researcher to recruit participants through her social circles, which helped individuals feel less stigmatized and more at ease. The data collection method of in person interviews allowed for a wealth of information from this population while at the same time minimizing the possibility for shame and discomfort to participants. On the same note, it was also be important to emphasize confidentiality in order to gain participation from women in some communities in New York City.

New York City is a very diverse location with individuals from many different populations. In looking at the black community there are several areas such as Brooklyn, The Bronx and Queens that have a high population of African Americans, West Indians, Africans and others from the Diaspora. In considering this aspect the study was feasible as there was a direct population with whom to gain contact and whose personal perspectives contributed much valuable information to this study.

For the purposes of this study and this sample, skin bleaching/lightening was defined as the use of any product on the face, or entire body for the purposes of obtaining a lighter complexion or skin color. Women who met the age requirement were considered appropriate for the sample if they were currently engaged in the practice and used these products repeatedly or have done so in the past. This list of women, or a sub section of this list, served as the sample for the research study. As the study was focused primarily on black women, women who did not

self- identify as black, for example Hispanic, Native American, Caucasian or Asian women were excluded.

It is acknowledged that the sample, black women in New York City, excluded many other groups despite the fact that the research has shown that women belonging to many other communities (Hispanics/Latinas, East and South Asians) also engage in skin bleaching activities. However, the researcher chose to focus on black women primarily because of their high melanin pigmentation and the very drastic difference in pigmentation change that can occur through this practice versus women from other ethnic/cultural groups. Additionally, New York City's large black population (African American, and other groups from the African Diaspora) cemented its use as a location and was useful in recruiting participants. Another important factor in deciding to focus on black women was the physical and historical contexts of this practice of skin bleaching/skin lightening. Moreover, historically, skin color and "colorism," in general, has been and still is a very controversial issue for many black women and has been a deciding factor in determining social access.

### **Ethical Considerations**

There were a few ethical issues that were considered with regards to conducting a study of this nature. One of the primary ones was that of confidentiality versus anonymity. The topic of skin bleaching may evoke shame in some who identify as users as they may perceive or experience judgment from others. As a result, the ability to offer anonymity would have been ideal; however this was not possible as the researcher participated in the general recruitment and data collection. However, in an attempt to minimize this shame, the researcher conducted all interviews with warmth and asked questions from a very objective stance. Additionally, the researcher assured participants that information that they gave was confidential. The researcher

also used the process of an informed consent (See Appendix C), so that participants understood their rights throughout this process. The informed consent contained a brief explanation of the study for participants. It also gave them information on who they (the participants) could contact with questions and also that they could leave the study in cases of extreme discomfort.

Participants were also told that their information and identifying information will be kept confidential and that all data will be destroyed in a period of three years if that information is no longer needed.

### **Data Collection Methods**

The stated aim of this study was to identify and obtain a better understanding of the expected and actual results of skin bleaching among black women in New York City between the ages of 21 and 65 years, as well as to ascertain what the connection, if any, existed between the expected and actual results of the process. In order to accomplish this aim, participants were given four screening questions (See Appendix D) to confirm their eligibility for the study. Following this a semi structured (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006) in person interviews, or a general guided interview approach was used. The 'interview guide' (Rubin & Babbie, 2010) allows the researcher to have more structure to the data collection process, which helps in judging the quality of the interview, than a natural conversation approach. Concurrently, the interview guide is also flexible enough "to follow up on important unanticipated circumstances or response" (Rubin & Babbie, 2010, p.104). Similarly, DiCicco-Bloom and Crabtree (2006) describe the semi-structured interview as having a guide in the nature of some open ended questions but is also open to additional questions that may emerge in the process between the researcher (interviewer) and participant (interviewee). The nature of semi-structured/guided

interview/ interview guide, in person interviews along with a small sample size, allowed participants to share more in depth information.

The semi structured interview questions (See Appendix F) are designed to gain information within the following areas: a) Reasons and motives for engaging in skin lightening/skin bleaching, b) The specific process of skin lightening for each participant, c) Expectations of the process prior to commencing, d) The actual results of the process and e) How expectations of the process before lined up with the actual results. Certain demographic information (See Appendix E), age, ethnic group identification and history of engaging in skin bleaching, were used to screen participants for inclusion in the study.

Other demographic data specifically on education level and marital or intimate relationship status was also collected. Existing literature (Hamed, Tayyem, Nimer, & AlKhatib, 2010; Kpanake et al., 2010; Lewis et al., 2011) has shown desire for prospective spouse as a motive for engaging in the practice. A person's relationship status with regards to this was informative in analyzing the results of the process for participants. Participants were also asked a series of open-ended questions focusing on three main areas: introduction and beginning of the skin bleaching/ skin whitening process; b) their expectations of the skin bleaching process; c) and the results of the process. Participants were asked specific questions about whether or not they have stopped or continued their practice of skin bleaching. For those who have continued specific inquiries were made as to what factors influence their continued use. The researcher also asked participants whether or not their expected results and actual results align.

### **Data Analysis**

All data received from interviews were audio recorded and notes were taken throughout each session. Each interview was transcribed and coded by the researcher. The "open coding"

(Rubin & Babbie, 2010) format was used to organize the data collected. Open coding takes the data and breaks it down into smaller discrete aspects, based on specific concepts (or themes under which the data is organized). These were then examined and compared against each other (Rubin & Babbie, 2010). Demographic data, such as age, was reviewed to obtain an overview of the characteristics of the interviewees. A thematic analysis was used to explore the meanings of reported expectations of skin bleaching and the actual result as well as the connections between the two.

A thematic analysis allows the researcher to identify, analyze and show patterns or themes within the data collected; it may also allow for interpretations of different aspects of the topic being studied (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In addition, it is considered one of the foremost foundational methods for qualitative analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) as it is “flexible and provides a rich and detailed, yet complex account of data” (p.78). Using a thematic analysis is especially appropriate in studying skin bleaching in the United States as this is an under researched topic. A thematic analysis offers the benefit of a “contextualized method” (Braun & Clarke, 2006). According to Braun and Clarke (2006), the contextualized method in qualitative analysis sits:

between the two poles of essentialism and constructionism, and characterized by theories...which acknowledge the ways individuals make meaning of their experience and in turn the ways the broader social context impinges on those meanings, while retaining focus on the material and other limits of reality. (p.81)

Qualitative analysis proved to be especially useful in exploring the results of skin bleaching as it acknowledged both the social and personal contextual possibilities. The theories discussed in the literature review chapter were used as background for an inductive thematic

analysis. The themes that were identified in this analysis were driven by the data collected, especially the verbatim transcripts collected from the interviewees. As such it was not necessarily guided by a specific theory (Braun & Clarke, 2006), although the researcher recognized that these theories or others may still have some bearing on this process.

## CHAPTER IV

### Findings

This chapter presents the findings from interviews with women between the ages of 21 and 52 years of age who had experiences using or having used externally applied skin lightening or skin bleaching products. The aim of this study was to explore the phenomenon of skin lightening/skin bleaching among women of color. In accordance with this aim, the specific research questions that were posed were 1) What are the reasons and motives for engaging in skin lightening/skin bleaching, 2) What are the expectations of the process, 3) What are the actual results of the process, and 4) How do the expectations of the process before lined up with the actual results. The data was analyzed in order to generate responses to these questions. The analysis also resulted in the identification of several additional themes.

The questions posed in the semi-structured interview are contained in Appendix F. The interviews began with four questions aimed at obtaining demographic information related to age, educational background, parental educational background, relationship status and average annual income range. The interview questions that followed were open ended and semi structured. Participants were asked sixteen questions that were designed to address participant's motives for engaging in this practice, participants' expectations of the process prior to engaging, participants' actual experience of what happened, and finally how they compared the expectations to the actual experience of what happened. Two questions were used to gather data regarding participants' motives for engaging in the practice of skin bleaching– 1) *How did you come to*

*start using skin lightening/skin bleaching products? 2) What was your reason for using skin lightening/skin bleaching products? One main question was designed to address participants' preliminary expectations for using skin bleaching/skin lightening products – 3) What did you expect to happen after you used the skin lightening products? There were four questions that focused on participants' actual experience of what happened as a result of their using skin bleaching products – 4) What actually happened after you used the skin lightening products? 5) How many applications of the skin lightening products were completed before you began to notice results? 6) What were the physical changes that resulted from your using the skin lightening products? Please describe them? 7) How long did it take for you to see these physical changes once you have started the skin lightening process?*

One final question was used to prompt a comparison between what participants expected from their use of skin bleaching products vs., what participants actually experiences as a result of using skin bleaching products – 8) *How would you compare what you expected to happen before you started the skin lightening process with what actually happened after engaging?*

There were also additional questions posed to determine how participants felt about themselves after going through with this process, as well as whether or not, and how others (spouse, family members, friends, co-workers/associates) responded to their undergoing this process and the changes (if any) in their appearance.

The findings and themes that emerged from the data collected are presented in the following sections: a) Demographic information, b) Participants' reasons for engaging in this practice, c) The process and frequency of use as specifically described by each participant, d) Participants' expectation of the process prior to engaging, e) Participants' description of the reality of what happened or the actual results, f) Whether or not participants' expectations met

the reality of the process and g) Personal and external responses to the skin bleaching process. Specific themes that emerged across these descriptive areas will also be addressed.

## **Demographics**

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with nine women. Of the nine women, six were using skin lightening products at the time of the interview and three though not currently using, admitted to having used products in the past two or more times. The ages of the participants ranged from 25 to 51 with a mean age of 35 years. With regards to ethnic identification, three participants identified themselves as “African American,” two as Jamaican, three as Caribbean, and one as a Haitian American. Of the nine participants, four women identified high school as their highest level of education, three identified college (or obtaining a bachelor’s degree) as their highest level and two identified the graduate or master’s level as the highest level of education that they have obtained. In considering the education background of their parents, the majority of the participants (n= 6) noted college as the highest level of education for both their parents. One participant identified high school as the highest level for both of her parents. Two participants had parents who achieved different education levels. One participant shared that her mother had a master’s degree and her father had a high school diploma. Another participant shared that her father had her Bachelor’s degree and her mother a master’s degree.

The majority of participants (n= 6) were employed. These participants identified roles as community engagement coordinator, teacher and resident hall advisor, administrative/clerical personnel, hair stylist, clerical personnel, and hair dresser/home attendant as their respective professions. The remaining participants (n=3) were all full-time students in higher education (undergraduate and graduate) and as such were not employed. Of the six working participants,

half of them located their average annual income between \$ 15, 000 and \$ 30, 000; one identified her average annual income range as between \$ 30,000 and \$ 35,000 and the remaining two as between \$ 1,000 and \$ 15,000. With regards to their current relationship status, the majority of the participants (n = 7) identified themselves as single and of this number three noted that they were considered single but with a boyfriend. One participant indicated her relationship status as “in a relationship.” Only one participant noted that she was married.

**Table 1**

**Demographic Information: Ethnic Background, Age, and Education**

Demographic Characteristics	Categories	Number of Participants (n=9)
Age	20- 30	2
	30 – 40	5
	40 – 50	1
	50 - 60	1
Ethnic Background	African -American	3
	Caribbean/West Indian	6
	African	0
Participant’s Education Level	High School	4
	C= Undergraduate	2
	C = Graduate	2
Parents’ Education Level	High School	1
	C= Undergraduate	8
	C =Graduate	

**Table 2****Demographic Information: Employment, Income and Relationship Status**

Demographic Characteristics	Categories	Number of Participants (n=9)
Relationship Status	Single	7
	In a relationship	1
	Married	1
Annual Income Range	No Income	3
	1,000 – 15,000	2
	15,001 – 30,000	3
	30,001 – 45,000	1
Use of Skin Bleaching Products	Currently Using	6
	Previously Used	3
Profession/ Means of Employment	Administrative/Clerical	2
	Community Engagement Coordinator	1
	Hair Dresser & Home Attendant	1
	Hair Stylist	1
	Student	3
	Teacher And Resident Hall Advisor	1

**Motives for Engaging in Skin Bleaching**

Participants listed several reasons for engaging in this practice. The majority of participants (n=7) gave one reason or motive for engaging with the remaining three listing two or more reasons. Some of the reasons cited by participants included a desire to be lighter skinned, a desire to remove facial pimples or the resulting scars, and finally as a desire to be more popular. Interestingly, an equal number of participants listed the desires to remove facial pimples or acne (n=4) or the desire to become lighter – skinned (n=4) as reasons for starting to use skin lightening or skin bleaching products. One participant noted: “I started because I had really bad

adult acne.” Another participant explained that she had “teenage bumps” on her face and decided that she wanted to use the products to get rid of them.

The motive to become lighter, or have lighter skin was expressed in different ways by four participants. One participant noted quite clearly: “I felt I was getting too dark in the summer, the sun made me too dark. People used to say ‘you look so dark’ and I noticed in my pictures I look darker than my real color.” When asked what her main reason was for engaging in this process, she expressed unequivocally “to get white.” Similarly another participant cited her motive as to obtain light skin, saying: “I think because I was too dark.” Another participant, who cited acne as her main reason for engaging, also expressed the idea of liking lighter skin. According to her, the process of skin bleaching/skin lightening would make: “my skin, my color more visible.”

Only one participant cited a desire to be in “style” as her reason. The practice of skin bleaching/skin lightening was viewed as, “a la mode,” or a way of being socially in style and as such appealed to her for just that purpose:

I guess it was the style at the time, you could say style or ‘the in thing’ at the time. I don’t know, I try it and I guess it appeal to me... I don’t know, I swear there was nothing like I can say. I don’t wish to be brown; I don’t wish to be white. At first everyone was doing it, so I just do it.

Overall the participants were motivated to engage in skin bleaching, either by a desire to become light skinned (n=4) or by a desire to remove facial imperfections, such as acne and acne scars.

## **The Frequency of the Skin Bleaching /Skin Lightening Process**

The process and frequency of use for participants was on a continuum, ranging from the lowest amount of products used a few times a week to that of a variety of products used for three to four times a day. The majority of participants (n=6) used at least three different products at least two or more times per day. One participant shared:

...when I use the *bio clear*, I put the boil oil in there and I put like a *omic gel* in there. But the *caro* now I just use it, just that, by itself...but I don't use them same time like I use the *bio*, like this month I'll use it, next month I will change and use the *caro*.

The remaining three participants used only one product, often only once a day.

An interesting theme that emerged was that participants who displayed a higher frequency of use were introduced to or began their process at an earlier age (anywhere from 11 or 12 years of age to around. The majority of the higher frequency users (n =4) had used at least 8 -15 different products since starting and have established a clear start and stop pattern depending on the desired degree of lightness.

## **The Expectation of Engaging in Skin Bleaching/Skin Lightening**

Prior to the first time using skin bleaching/skin lightening products the majority of participants (n = 6) expressed an expectation to become lighter in complexion, skin color, or skin tone. Of the remaining three participants, one participant explained that she expected to get an even tone, "that the color of my face would stay even...have an even tone, not so much discoloration, a little bit more youthful I guess." The other two participants shared a similar expectation of the disappearance of acne/acne scars/spots. When asked about her expectations of the process, one of these last two participants expressed: "I just hoped that my spots would go away." Whereas the other shared hoping: "that my acne scars would go away...I expected the

marks to get lighter and my complexion to stay the same.” Of the participants who expressed a desire to become lighter skinned, two of them noted that in addition to becoming lighter skinned they were also expecting to gain something. One noted that she wanted to get lighter as she was hoping to get better treatment and more attention. The second participant also echoed this expectation of getting more attention via becoming lighter skinned.

### **The Actual Results Obtained from Skin Bleaching/Skin Lightening**

In thinking about the results that each of them obtained from using these products, the majority of participants (n = 8) expressed having a mixed response to the actual results obtained from the process. Their positive responses were very nuanced with some of the more negative or disadvantageous aspects of the process. When asked what actually happened after using the skin bleaching/skin lightening products, one participant in this group noted that she became fair and gained a lighter complexion, but that when she stopped using the products, she became darker. In addition, she realized that when she was lighter she did not get the added attention that she thought would come once she was lighter. Another participant shared that her “teenage bumps went away and it cleared up my skin good, but it is good and bad. It can thin your skin if you use it too much.” Another participant shared that for her “it got rid of the spots on my skin and I get a smoother or even tone. [However] you have to continue using or doing it or the result is not lasting and it do make your skin dry and strip.”

In thinking about the actual results, one participant spoke about some of the more nuanced parts of the process saying:

I think it really works, it really had. Sometimes you might try something that’s too strong for you and so you might get two tones or three tones...yeah I was just doing it, so I wasn’t even maybe looking for results and then it become so addictive. If I am on the

road, I can't wait to reach home to do it because I just wanna get that tone. At one point I was saying I just wanna be white, just wanna get white. But over the years, its like just nothing anymore to me...it's like right now I can't stop.

The results of the process were that she became lighter but also addicted to the process of becoming white. Another participant's dark spots actually got lighter and the rest of her skin became lighter as well even though that was not her intention. She began her process by applying creams to the spot then the spots would become lighter than her skin, so she applied it to the rest of her face "so it all blends in." According to this same participant, "my skin looked more toned and less spotted and of course it gets a little brighter."

The remaining participant shared more of a negative and less nuanced response to what actually happened after using these products. When asked what actually happened after using the products, she noted: "my skin just started to get blotchy, it was in spots and it wasn't evened out and I guess it was just looking a little freakish, like two toned."

There were three interesting themes that emerged in this discussion of actual results of the process. Most notably, half of the participants (n = 5) shared that they did not expect to have to use the products continuously to gain the results that they wanted. Secondly, over half of the participants noted that when they stopped using their creams/gels/lotions that their skin color went back to being dark and sometimes even became darker than their original complexion. The final theme that emerged was this concept of being "toned," whether two-toned, three-toned or even toned. A few participants indicated that a result of the process was that sometimes one's skin could often have different shades or tones. One participant noted that this occurred sometimes at the beginning of the process as different products work for different people. This

sometimes resulted in the use of many different products over a period of time until the desired effect or a more even “tone” is obtained.

### **The Expected Results When Compared With the Actual Results of Skin Bleaching/Skin Lightening**

In comparing the expected results with the actual results of the skin lightening/skin bleaching process, several participants (n = 7) found that they did actually receive their expected aims. Whereas, a few participants in this group reflected a resounding “yes it worked; I got what I wanted,” as seen in Table 3, some of the participants explained that although they did receive their expected result, it was not all that they thought it would have been. One participant expressed:

I got what I wanted. It helps for what I wanted it to do. I wish I didn't have to keep doing it all the time. I wish it would make the spots go away and they stay gone but unfortunately it doesn't work like that.

Of the two remaining participants, one noted that she did not get what she was hoping for at all. She wanted to become lighter skinned and that did not happen, her skin became two-toned and blotchy. She noted: “I guess I expected to get noticed like the light skin people but I really didn't.” The other participant expressed uncertainty in thinking about whether or not her expectations of the process were in line with the actual results that she obtained. When asked, she shared the following with the researcher:

I don't know. I got fair. After the [first] month I was happy. I was like yes, I'ma get the color that I want. We going somewhere. I became light, then lighter, until I had to stop. I was becoming too light. But people didn't treat me any different when I got light. I mean I was getting conceited, feeling myself too much then I started thinking Im white. I

expect to happen, was I'd get more better treatment at work, right, maybe like a different type a guy would look at me, not just the bums, the deadbeats, the bottom of the rack ones. I guess if I really think, what I expected didn't really happen.

**Table 3**

**Participants Assessment of the Match Between the Expected and Actual Results of Skin Bleaching/Skin Lightening**

Participants (P)	Expected Results	Actual Results	Participants Assessment of the Match
P1	To become lighter skinned, or white. "I would use it once and become fair." To get more attention and better treatment. "People would look at me differently. I would get the same treatment as white people if my skin was lighter."	Became fair but darker when stopped using. Did not get treated any differently or treated as a white person. <u>Physical Changes Experienced:</u> skin striping and turning pink, smooth skin.	Uncertain. "I became fair and after the first month was happy I became light and lighter. I started feeling myself and thinking I'm white." But becoming lighter didn't bring the attention or better treatment. So in some ways actual results did not meet expectations
P2	To lose "teenage bumps. (acne)." To get an "even tone" and to get lighter skin.	Obtained a smoother and "even tone." Lost "teenage bumps (acne)." Got lighter skin. <u>Physical Changes Experienced:</u> "If used too much it can thin the skin"	"Yeah. Definitely."
P3	To become lighter and To get rid of spots on skin.	Got rid of spots. Got a smoother, "even tone." "I noticed the results don't last and that you have to keep doing it." <u>Physical Changes Experienced:</u> dry skin, and stripping/peeling skin.	"Yes. I wanted a lighter shade and I got that."

Participants (P)	Expected Results	Actual Results	Participants Assessment of the Match
P4	“To lighten my skin tone from what I had before	<p>Skin got lighter, started liking it more and more. “ Yeah I was just doing, wasn’t really looking for results and then it become so addictive...I just wanna get that tone, I just wanna get white...I wanted to get browner, white, Michael Jackson White.”</p> <p><u>Physical Changes Experienced:</u> increased hair follicles on legs, thinning of the skin.</p>	Yes. “I think it really works. It really had.”
P5	To become light skinned. To get “noticed” like other light skinned individuals especially light skinned females.	<p>Skin became blotchy, spotted, some areas still dark, looked a little two-toned. “It wasn’t evened out and I guess I was looking a little freakish.”</p> <p><u>Physical Changes Experienced:</u> oily skin.</p>	No. Did not become light skinned.
P6	To tone the skin. Get the same even tone all around. Expected face to be a little tighter with “not so much discoloration.” To be more youthful.	<p>Face is not so tired looking. “My face is a little youthful.”</p> <p><u>Physical Changes Experienced:</u> None</p>	Yes. “I wanted to even out my skin color...I’m really happy with it.”
P7	To have lighter skin. “I expected that once I used the product that my skin would stay lighter and that I wouldn’t have to use it again. It would stay whiter.”	<p>“My face actually did get whiter. When I stopped using it I got patches on my face and my face got darker.”</p> <p><u>Physical Changes Experienced:</u> None</p>	<p>“I would say that what I expected to happen definitely happened. I wanted to get lighter. I expected my face to be a different skin tone and that did happen for a short period</p>

Participants (P)	Expected Results	Actual Results	Participants Assessment of the Match
			of time. [but] I didn't expect to get the patches on my skin or for my skin to get darker after using it."
P8	To remove acne/ acne scars and even out my skin tone. "I expected that the marks would get lighter and my complexion to stay the same."	Acne scars went away/got lighter." "That's what happened. I noticed the results in a month and a half." <u>Physical Changes Experienced: None</u>	Yes. "It took longer than expected but, scars were gone and skin became even."
P9	To remove skin spots/ acne/ acne spots. "I just wanted the spots to go away."	"The spots got lighter and the rest of my skin got lighter too but that wasn't the intention. The spots started becoming light and then that's like no good, so I applied the creams to the whole face so it all blends in." Skin is more toned and less spotted and "brighter." <u>Physical Changes Experienced: None</u>	Yes. "It helps for what I want it to do. I wish I didn't have to keep doing it all the time."

Overall the majority of participants (n= 7) shared that their expectation of the skin bleaching process was met.

### Responses to the Results Obtained from the Skin Bleaching/ Skin Lightening Process

Responses to the process was explored on four main levels: a) personal responses (how the participant felt about herself) b) spousal or intimate partner response, c) familial response d) friends' and co-workers' response after engaging. Several participants (n = 5) shared positive

responses when asked how they felt about themselves after experiencing the results. One participant noted: “I felt good.” Another shared:

I like the way my skin was becoming, I didn't like it before, cause I felt I was too dark and no I'm not prejudiced. I feel more me, when my skin is lighter. Like that's me, I feel like I am pretty.

Two participants responded in neutral tones, saying that they did not really feel any one way or another towards themselves. In fact, one shared said that although she likes the results she doesn't really “see myself anyway, to be honest.” Sometimes she questions why she does it or wonders what she was thinking before she started, but for the most part does not feel one way or another towards herself. Only one participant responded negatively towards herself saying that she didn't feel good after doing it, because of the results.

With regards to partners/spouses responding to participants' use of skin lightening products, or the changes/ results, four participants said there was no response, as there was no partner or spouse around at the time of use. Five participants noted that there was some response from partners/spouses or boyfriend. One shared that her partner was somewhat critical; saying that she was trying to be something that she wasn't and that she should be satisfied with what God gave her and stop trying to become more man made. According to her: “I don't think he really cared, I think he was just making fun of me. It didn't really matter to him.” In a similar way, another participant noted that her boyfriend would also make fun of her at times.

Another participant noted that her boyfriend knew about her use but did not comment on it. A fourth participant mentioned that she would sometimes ask her boyfriend to rub her back with the cream and when he asked what it was, she would just tell him that it was lotion.

Interestingly, another participant shared that her boyfriend noticed what she looked like when

she was not using her products. She shared the following: “He noticed how strenuous it is [being in school]... and how it’s taking a toll on my body, he did mention how my face looked at one point.”

The majority of participants (n = 6) shared that family members had responded in some way to the results of the process. One participant noted that her sister had noticed her use and commented to her “what you doing, bleaching your skin? I know you wanted to be white but not so bad that you change your skin.” However, this participant added that she did not believe that her sister really cared whether or not she did it. Another participant shared that her father commented on a picture she was in and noted that the participant “looked white,” but besides that did not respond positively or negatively to her process. A third participant shared that for the most part her family did not respond to her use of skin lightening products or the results. However, she told the researcher that her mother would often comment when she was not using the products by making a note of how dark the participant’s skin had become.

In a similar vein, another participant shared that her family also commented when she was not using products: “They would mention how my faced looked stressed out and at that point I know I was neglecting my regimen.” One other participant shared that her family – her mom, her cousins, and other members of her extended family- would comment on her light skin. She shared with the researcher that “they would compliment me on my skin looking lighter...it was kinda like,wow! Your skin looks better, it looks prettier.” Similarly another participant expressed being complimented by her mother. “My mother kind of noticed and she definitely saw the difference, she was like oh you look so good!” The three remaining participants responded that no family members commented on their use, the results, or said anything.

The final group of responses was those of friends/ associates and co-workers. Five participants noted that their friends commented on the changes or the results of the process, noting that they liked it and would even sometimes ask what product(s) the participant was using at the time. The majority of participants (n =4) within this group also shared that friends would also note when participants were becoming too light which allowed them to “slow down.”

Of the remaining four participants, three noted that their friends did not really respond to their use of the products or the results that occurred. One participant shared that her friends did comment and one friend, specifically, commented with a negative response about the process which caused her to stop using it completely. According to this participant, “My friend that was looking at me from outside and saying that’s not a good look. And I valued her opinion so then I stopped.”

Overall it appeared that the responses from family and friends seemed to have some impact on participants’ continued use of skin bleaching products. The positive responses received from friends of participants’ seem to offer some validation to their use of skin bleaching/ skin lightening products. The response from family members for most of the participants seemed to be framed in more negative connotations, which also influenced participants’ continued use of products.

### **Themes that emerged across groups**

In addition to the above findings in response to each of the research questions, there were several themes that emerged as a result of the data analysis. There were three major themes identified: a) The concept of an even tone or “skin toning” as a variation or further clarification of the process of skin lightening as defined in this study; b) A desire for lighter skin and its possible connection to the quantity and frequency of the use of skin bleaching/skin lightening

products as well as the amount of time over which the process has been used ; c) A clear awareness of the health concerns related to using skin bleaching/skin lightening products.

The first theme that emerged across the responses to the above noted research questions was this concept of “toning.” The words “even tone,” “smooth tone” and “skin toning” were words that were used by the majority of the participants (n = 6). Obtaining “an even tone” was a motive or reason for skin lightening/ skin bleaching, an expectation of the process, as well as a result for some participants. Interestingly half of the participants did not accept the term skin lightening or skin bleaching in describing their process despite the fact that their process followed the skin bleaching/skin lightening definition used in this study. These participants (n =4) described their process as skin toning. Although, this practice of “skin toning” and this idea of “even tone” was expressed by several participants (n = 6) it often took on different meanings for each of them. For one participant having an “even tone” meant having her “complexion lighten and blend until it [her complexion] combined into one.” A second participant shared that her process, using these products “is more for toning than for bleaching.” Another participant gave her understanding and definition of toning in the following excerpt:

Toning meaning like, like if you skin tone uneven and you use it then it will bring, it will even out your skin tone, rather than make you white like per se, you know how some people really obsesses and them wanna be white? Yeah I don’ wanna be white.

While yet another participant, was clear that having an even tone does not necessarily have to mean lightening one’s complexion. According to this participant:

Skin toning is to actually get the same tone of your skin color. We are constantly, well me, I’m constantly in the sun and so there are certain areas of my face that are darker

than my actual skin color. Therefore, I wanted to achieve the same skin color. It's not lightening; it's trying to achieve the same skin color on my face.

For a fifth participant having an even tone meant having no discoloration to the skin.

Another interesting pattern that emerged was that the participants who expressed becoming lighter skinned as a reason or motive (n=5) had a longer history, more detailed and complex process as well as a higher frequency of skin lightening than participants who did not express this desire as a motive. Almost all of the participants in this group (lighter skin as a motive) had begun using skin-lightening products at an earlier age, from as early as 11 or 12 years to as late as 19 years of age, as compared to the remaining participants who began their process in their mid to late twenties and early thirties. In addition, many of them have used a range of products since starting a trial and error process in an attempt to obtain their aims, versus the remaining participants (n = 4) who used and stayed with one set of products. When asked about the products she has used, one participant shared:

Since then, oh my, this one *caro white*, so much (laughs) *neprosone, betnovate, hydro gel, tambrind cream, tangerine, fair and white, MJ, neo prosone, lemonvate, movate, hot movate*, let me see because you have some new ones now like, extreme bright. You have one named *tretinone, hydroquinone maxi peel*. Hmmm, is that good enough, there's a whole lot you know. I've tried so much because every time, because, like after a while, I think it like it stop and not working like if you using the same one for a while. So you just try something else.

Another participant shared that she has used approximately eight different products since she started and noted that these were only the ones that she remembered.

Participants who stated “lighter skin” or expressed a desire for lightness as a motive (n = 5) described a more detailed process of skin lightening. One participant noted:

Alright, when I use the *Bio Clear*, I put the *Bio Oil* in there and I put like a *Omic Gel* in there. But the *Caro*, now I jus use it, just that, by itself...but I don't use them the same time like I use the *Bio*. Like this month I'll use it, next month I will change and use the *Caro*.

Another participant also mixed products together stating: “I use the *extreme glow* on my face and then the *Caro* on my body with the *bio oil*...I mix them, I put the two of them in my hand together and rub them.” A third participant shared:

I'll mix the *skin whitener* and, ahm *the tangerine* and the *tamarind* together, and the *skin light*. Those like the *skin light* it's thicker, if you use that alone it give you a mask on your skin. Like, alright if I'm using it going to bed, you understand, before I go to bed, the cream is thick, so I'll just mix other softer creams, like gels...to just blend it out so when it goes on it just glides on smooth.

Concurrently all these participants (n = 5) shared a higher frequency of use ranging from using the products twice a day to even four times a day as compared to once a day for the remaining four participants.

A second theme that emerged was centered on the idea of pattern or cycle of use. The participants, who expressed an original motive of becoming lighter (n = 5), seemed to have established a common pattern of use throughout the years. These participants explained that they would start the process and maybe use the products for some time (this ranged from 3 – 6 months) with varying frequency of use, until the desired skin color or tone is reached. They would then stop using these products for a while (again varying times from one month to three)

but would have to start again due to the pigment or original hue returning to the skin. Five of the nine participants in the study spoke about this return of color to the skin and actually with a darker hue than the individual may have previously had. One participant shared the following: “when it reaches a certain level, you have to take a break, you understand...because you don’t want to get too white. You don’t want it to fully take away the pigmentation from your skin, so you just ease up.” For another participant, her pattern was driven by mood at times. She shared:

I don’t know, I guess when I am in the mood to do it. Like, last year, I was using it for a couple of months then I stop. Cause I don’t want to get too white. So I stop. But then when I stop your normal complexion comes back so...

**Table 4**

**Participants’ Reasons and Patterns of Usage of Skin Lightening/Skin Bleaching Products**

Participants	Reasons for Use	Age Use Started	Number of Products Used	Frequency of Use (Times per day)
P1	Skin color too dark. Wanted to become white/light	19	Past – 5 Current - 3	2 or more times per day (sometimes 3 or 4 when just starting)
P2	Wanted to get rid of “teenage bumps” and get an even tone, get lighter.	15 -1 6	Past – 5 Current - 3	2 or more times per day(sometimes 3)
P3	“It was popular, a style and I guess a lighter shade appealed to me.”	19	Past – 8 Current- 3	2 or more times per day (sometimes 3 when just starting)
P4	Wanted to “lighten or tone my skin.” Wanted light skin as it stood out, was different.	15 - 16	Past - 18 -20 Current - 4	2 or more times per day (sometimes 3 or 4 when just starting)

Participants	Reasons for Use	Age Use Started	Number of Products Used	Frequency of Use (Times per day)
P5	Wanted to be light skinned “I didn’t like being dark skinned”	32	Past – 1 Current - 0	1 time per day
P6	Wanted to tone my skin and get same color, even tone, and remove pimples.	32	Past – 2 Current - 1	2 times per day
P7	“I was too dark.” Other family members were using the products.	11 - 12	Past – 3 Current – 0	1 (or more) times per day
P8	Wanted to get rid of adult acne and acne scars so “that my skin would be even.”	30	Past – 0 Current - 1	2 times per day
P9	Wanted to get rid of acne scars. “I didn’t want any dark spots. I wanted my skin to be all the same color.”	25	Past – 2 Current – 1	1 time per day

The final theme that emerged was that of health concerns related to this practice of skin lightening/skin bleaching. Of the nine participants, five indicated some awareness of health concerns associated with the skin lightening/skin bleaching practice. This awareness has come for these participants either as a result of their own trial and error efforts with it and the development of dermatological issues, or is based on things that they have heard that have happened to others. It is also interesting to note that these health concerns have influenced the process and frequency of use. One participant shared in the interview:

It's good and its bad, you know. It can thin out your skin a lot and they say it can give you skin cancer. They say it can give you all types of sickness. I know people who do it and one of them said it's because of it [bleaching] why she has lupus in her skin. She can't go in the sun too much.

This same participant continued to share that the possibility for health issues was one of the consequences from her perspective of "going to the extremes." She was not going to the extremes; she knows her: "breaking point, when it is at a certain level" and she stops. This participant continued:

While, other people "when them do the bleaching, they do it in depth you know, they take things inside and outside...like medication, the pill, you understand. Toning is different, Bleaching is all sorts of things...sometimes when you do it it goes way into your skin.

Another participant shared that other than dry or peeling skin she has never had any health issues and as such does not really feel too concerned for herself despite hearing about problems for others. However she also notes that she will use the products and then take a break for a few months, again because she is simply toning to get a shade or two lighter, not bleaching.

A third participant expressed being aware of health concerns from her experience with products, as well as her thinning skin. She also admitted to "hearing all these things about skin cancer" as well. She noted:

I've slowed down over the years...because over the period of time, that's another thing I have to consider. The way I used to go, I think it's a lot, cause two, three times a day everyday for a period of like ten years that's a lot.

Another participant shared that she was aware of the health concerns from a friend who told her that the products “messed with the melanin in our skin and isn’t good.” For this participant, her negative experience of blotchy skin and this health concern influenced her decision to stop using these products.

In summary, the analysis of data in response to the study’s research questions indicated that for the majority of the participants the expectations prior to engaging in skin bleaching/skin lightening and the results of the process are very much aligned. Several important themes emerged from the analysis that also suggested that the process and frequency of use for the majority of participants influenced how they perceived and understood their process and the degree to which they needed to be concerned about their health. The next section will provide a more detailed discussion of these concepts as well as present general implications of these overall findings.

## CHAPTER V

### Discussion

#### **Purpose of Study**

This qualitative study explored the practice of skin lightening/skin bleaching in black women. The study's aim was to gain more information on these women's: motives/reasons for engaging in the practice, expectations of the skin lightening/skin bleaching process, the reality of the process, and finally whether or not the expectations aligned with the actual results. In identifying and understanding the connection between the expected and actual results of skin bleaching/skin lightening, this study, as discussed in the Findings chapter, also sought to discover the ways in which black women continue to engage in the practice of skin bleaching/skin lightening and the meaning that this holds for them.

This chapter will examine how key findings and themes which emerged from this study can be compared and contrasted with those obtained from previous studies. It will also look at how the study's findings might be used to support or apply the theoretical frameworks discussed in the Literature Review chapter. Finally this chapter will explore the study's limitations, and its implications for clinical social work practice and for future research.

#### **The Relationship of Key Findings to Previous Studies and to the Theoretical Frameworks**

With regards to motives and reasons for engaging in the practice, the findings showed that there were two main motives, the desire to become light skinned and to remove facial imperfections such as acne/acne scars. The findings also demonstrated that participants'

expectations of the process were in line with their motives and were confirmed, or better yet, achieved in the actual results of skin bleaching/skin lightening.

In addition to supporting the information contained in previous studies and providing data which responded to the research questions posed, the study revealed several unexpected, yet key findings. These were that 1) “Skin toning” was used as a chosen description of the process among participants as compared to the terms of “skin bleaching” or “skin lightening;” 2) There was an awareness by many participants of the health concerns associated with the practice and finally 3) The responses of others to participants’ practice of skin lightening/skin bleaching had a clear impact on the participant engaging in this practice.

Similar to the findings in this study, previous literature has explored women’s motives or reasons for skin bleaching/skin lightening and found that the desire to be white/ light, and the desire to remove facial blemishes imperfections (scars, acne, etc) have been two of the more common ones. These two motives are not at all far fetched, in considering the aesthetic role of beauty, and the very gendered way that it is and has been viewed and valued historically in our society. Light, clear and smooth skin has always been seen as a benefit and advantage as a result of this historical valuation. This is evident in the fact that several participants had begun using the skin lightening/skin bleaching products from an early age. In fact several participants had been using these products for more than ten years. So there is a clear level of investment in the results of the process, which is usually becoming lighter in complexion.

Interestingly, the majority of participants, used the idea of “skin toning” or obtaining an eve- tone” to describe their process versus using the terms skin lightening/skin bleaching. There are many possibilities that may explain the use of this term. It could have been used to emphasize a specific style of lightening or even a different process altogether. However, for the most part it

seemed in some way that it was used to create distance between the two concepts. The majority of participants who used the term, noted: they were “not prejudiced or anything,” they “liked darker skin,” they “liked their own skin color but...” they “like dark skin people but prefer a lighter tone for [them] self.” In the explanations that were given, one had to ask whether or not there was some element of shame or embarrassment, either in the fact that they were dark skinned in complexion or because they were using. It was clear that it was important not just to differentiate, but to distance their process from that of “bleaching.”

Another possible reason for the use of the term “toning” could be linked with another finding that of awareness of health concerns. For many of the participants who were using these products for a while, there was a risk of developing serious health concerns including the possibility of dermatological problems and skin abnormalities. Although many of the participants were aware of these health consequences, many participants denied being affected by them or even the possibility of being affected by them in the future. It seemed as if several of the participants seemed to create distance between the risk and their actions. One of the ways that participants created this distance was seen in the use of the term “toning/ skin toning.” Several participants chose to use the word skin toning to describe their use of products.

A dichotomy was created between “toning” and bleaching where, the main goal in toning is to create a “smooth even tone” but in bleaching it is to become white. In creating this difference some participants were able to view their process of toning as less harmful and less extreme as they “weren’t going as hard” as other individuals and that “bleaching is something completely different.” As a result they [these participants] were not at risk of developing serious health problems because their process was different. They seemed able to distance these health concerns by understanding their process as just getting an even complexion, albeit a lighter but

even one for some. Although some participants explained, that they had experiences of thinning skin, or of blotchy skin, few viewed it as a health concern. For the remaining participants who experienced these physical effects, they were not viewed as a health concern or a reason to stop but as a reason to change products and continue their process.

In some ways one might say there was some element of magical thinking in the way that participants viewed some aspects of this process. The cognitive dissonance that participants displayed in using the word toning as an escape from some of the consequence of skin lightening/skin bleaching indicated the presence of some type of immunity from the harmful effects. Many participants seemed unaware prior to beginning the practice of skin bleaching/ skin lightening of how much of a regimen they would have to follow with this process. Although participants did become lighter, did lose their scars, there was an additional expectation that they would stay light. Many participants did not expect that their complexion would return, nor did they expect it to return so quickly and severely. As for many participants their original complexion did return, and often much darker than their original hue, within a month of non-use, and thus contributed to the establishment of a pattern of continuous use.

Another theme that emerged from the study was a clearer understanding of the social factors, which influenced participants' continued practice of skin bleaching/skin lightening. There were specific questions that were asked in the interviews that aimed to answer this question. Questions were asked that assessed whether there was a social response that influenced participants skin bleaching/ skin lightening process. Participants were asked about their family's response, their spouse/partner's response and their friend's response. Strangely enough many participants expressed that there was no response from their family. The researcher was surprised by this response perhaps due to a presumed closeness, both emotionally and

physically between participants and their family members that would have evoked some response. Some participants noted that when their families, specifically their mothers did respond, it was usually a negative response. In one case, a participant noted that her mother seemed to comment during one of her “two month breaks” when she got darker. In her case this served as a trigger to restart her cycle of using.

The response given by friends was not a surprising finding. The responses given to participants by their friends seemed to offer some validation with regards to their process of bleaching/lightening. In other words, the validation and support was not provided to them by their families or intimate partners, but by those persons (the friends) who were a little more connected to either the participants’ social pulse or the social pulse of the larger community. This was compounded by the fact that in some cases participants indicated that some of their friends were also using these products, offering an additional level of validation, which could definitely influence participants’ continued use.

Although this finding was a strong indicator in some ways of continued use, it was an unexpected result, or physical change in participants’ skin tone after not using that seemed to be the strongest factor influencing continued use/practice of skin bleaching/skin lightening. Almost half of the participants reported starting back their process of lightening/bleaching when their skin became “too dark.” This concept of the dark skin being somewhat negative echoes Charles (2009) findings on skin bleachers’ representations of skin color. In this study, which used the Social Representation Theory as a framework, Charles (2009) found that a strong group of the participants in his study believed their skin complexion was too dark, thus supporting the representation that “dark skin is unacceptable” (p. 163) and also the representation that dark skin is less beautiful or appealing. With regards to this present study, the researcher recognizes that

for participants it may not be a representation of dark skin on the whole, but perhaps, a place on the skin color spectrum that marks the beginning of “too dark” which signals a negative representation of being black.

### **Limitations**

One of the more obvious limitations to this study was the fact that this study was based on a very racially homogenous group: black women. Although, this was a deliberate choice it still did not show much representation of this practice among other groups, and with regards to ethnicity and gender. The findings were therefore not generalizable to other racial groups. However, it is important to note that the sample was not homogenous with respect to representations of women from different parts of the black Diaspora, as there were participants from both North American black communities, as well as Caribbean and West Indian communities.

Another limitation of this study was the small sample size. The sample size of nine women used in this study met the Smith School for Social Work requirement; however, it was not a large enough one to ensure complete validity and reliability of the data obtained. As it was a somewhat controversial/taboo topic there was often some anxiety on the part of the researcher in obtaining participants. Despite this anxiety, the researcher sent a recruitment letter (See Appendix A) to individuals in her social circle who also distributed this, via a domino effect to their own social circles. The researcher also distributed flyers (See Appendix B) to women in beauty supply stores, cosmetic stores, in hair salons and even on the street. These recruiting efforts were successful as fifteen women who met screening criteria volunteered to participate. However, six of them declined after initially volunteering, apologizing that their time was no longer available or declining to respond to follow up calls. As a result only nine participants

were available for this study. While, this is an acceptable number the researcher recognizes nine participants falls short of the recommended twelve participants.

Other limitations to this study included a lack of incentive, financial or otherwise. The researcher recruited in communities in Queens, the Bronx, and parts of Brooklyn, which were some distance from the researcher's office space in Manhattan. It would have perhaps helped participants to feel more at ease committing to participate in this study if there was some travel compensation for those far away. The lack of black men as participants in this study was also another limitation. Although it was a deliberate exclusion criterion, not having men in the study ended up becoming a limitation, as it would have perhaps increased the number of participants. It also served as a limitation as perhaps it gave the impression that this practice of skin bleaching/skin lightening was only done among females in the black community.

### **Implications for Theory**

Much of the findings presented in this study were in line with the theoretical frameworks used and confirmed previously established concepts. Participants' main motives for skin bleaching/skin lightening were to remove facial imperfections and to obtain a lighter skin color. These motives supported the theoretical frameworks of Social Representation Theory (Charles, 2009) and Internalized Racism and Identity Development Theory (Jackson, 2005) respectively. For participants who expressed a desire to be light skinned, several of them denied being prejudiced against their own skin color, or disliking darker skin in general. While this may reflect aspects of internalized racism for one participant who expressed "a desire wanting to be white" and wanting to be "treated like white people," the extent to which this may be the same for other participants was unclear from the data collected.

Light skin is viewed from a more dominant and privileged capacity in society and non-light skin especially when one considers degrees of lightness, becomes less dominant on such a continuum and subjected to more oppression. Persons who identify as black are therefore often perceived first by themselves and then by others at being at the very end of this continuum where the possibility of suffering oppression, either internalized oppression or socially imposed oppression, is very high. In expressing a preference for light or lighter skin participants may be reflecting a socialized objectification of skin color. This idea also aligns with the conformist pole of Apter's Metamotivational Theory (Kpanake, Munoz Sastre & Mullet, 2010), which posits that individuals are motivated by the desire to be included and be a part of a practice, such as conforming to the dominant ideal.

It is important to note that although all these theories, Social Representation Theory (Charles, 2009), Internalized Racism (Bivens, 2005) and Black Identity Theory (Jackson, 2005), as well as Apter's Metamotivational Theory (Kpanake, Munoz Sastre & Mullet, 2010), seem to be supported by the motives participants gave for engaging in skin lightening/ skin bleaching, it is the Social Representation Theory (Charles, 2009) and the Internalized Racism (Bivens, 2005) and Black Identity Development Theory (Jackson, 2009) that mostly influence the continued use of this practice. Participants re-engaged in their use of the skin bleaching/skin lightening products when their skin color began to return to a darker hue; thus indicating that there was something about having a darker complexion that participants found less appealing or even unappealing on the whole.

### **Implications for Social Work Practice**

The findings in this study show that the majority of participants used skin lightening products to remove facial imperfections and to become lighter skinned. They also showed that

many of these participants may experience some embarrassment and shame and attempt to distance themselves from some of the more negative aspects of the process, especially the possibility of health issues that may arise. The findings are useful for clinical social workers in the field working within communities of color, as it gives them an idea of some of the social dynamics that drive persons to participate in the practice of skin bleaching. It would be important for clinicians to not respond in a judgmental manner to this practice, but rather to first seek to understand what it might mean to the individual. Otherwise, the clinician surely might risk triggering the client's feelings of shame around this practice, and this would most likely engender a rupture in the work, thus leaving the client with a strong sense of isolation.

In clinical situations, there is a strong possibility for transference issues to arise between clients who engage in skin lightening/ skin bleaching and their social workers who may be either, lighter skinned or darker skinned. In considering some of the theoretical underpinnings, it is clear that there may be issues of identity, perhaps aspects of internalized racism, and overall messages about the benefits of lighter skin that individuals who engage in this practice may be attempting to obtain. It is incumbent on social workers, to not view this process as a practice of a marginalized group but one that is directly influenced and perhaps driven by messages from the larger society and specifically by members of the dominant group.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

There were several ideas for further research and new research that emerged from this study. As mentioned previously, this study did not focus on obtaining information about skin lightening/skin bleaching practices amongst and within other communities of color such as Asians and Hispanics. It would be interesting to explore what the response to and results of skin lightening/skin bleaching process represent for South Asian or Hispanic and Latino women, for

example. What does it mean to lighten one's skin within those cultural groups? Another area for future research could also be to compare the skin lightening process as practiced by Hispanic women with the process as done by black or African American women, specifically, what is the difference or similarity in responses, in results, in the meaning of lighter skin within and between these groups? It is important to highlight that this focus on women's practice of skin bleaching/skin lightening in no way implies that men do not engage in skin lightening or skin bleaching practices. Consequently this would be another area for future studies, i.e. skin bleaching/skin lightening among males and among males who identify as belonging to communities of color.

The desire for light skin, or perhaps even whiteness, as said before, is an initial attractor for many for engaging in skin bleaching/skin lightening practices. This motive was not surprising as it has been supported by several studies (Charles, 2009; Kpanake et al., 2010; Lewis et al., 2011). When this motive of light skin is obtained it also serves as reinforcement, sometimes at the cost of possible health risks to continue this practice, as seen in the findings in this study. One of the natural questions that arise as a result of these two important findings is what does it mean in these communities and society in general to have light skin? Furthermore, what is the subjective meaning of lighter skin and why is it a desired objective for women who engage in skin bleaching/skin lightening practices? An interesting fact that emerged in this study was that although many people indicated wanting to get lighter, it was not always clear why they wanted to become lighter. There was some benefit or something appealing about "lighter skin" and "lightness" itself that was alluded to but not completely explained. Although a small number of participants in this study spoke to this question, and alluded to this possible benefit, possibly validation, it was not the main focus of this study and therefore was not fully explored. Future

studies focusing on this meaning of lighter skin among individuals who engage in skin bleaching/skin lightening are therefore encouraged.

Skin bleaching/ skin lightening as a practice has slowly garnered more attention in many countries around the world and here in the United States as seen in the increase in availability of products. This study was developed and carried out to explore and better understand the results of skin bleaching/skin lightening among black women between the ages of 21 and 65 in the United States, specifically New York City. The findings from the study showed that desires to be light skinned or lighter skinned and to remove facial imperfections are big motivators in engaging in this practice. Additionally, the findings also indicated that participants' results seemed to influence continued engagement in the practice of bleaching/skin lightening. Although many participants denied being concerned about health risks, many of the physical changes that participants experienced indicated a possibility of this occurring. While this study did reveal additional information about the results of skin bleaching/skin lightening for participants, further research that focuses on the practice of skin bleaching/skin lightening in other communities and with male participants, as well as studies exploring the meaning of light skin among individuals who practice skin bleaching/skin lightening is encouraged.

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## **Appendix A**

### **Recruitment Letter**

Dear Friend,

I am currently completing my Master's degree in Social Work. As a part of this process, and in order to graduate, I am doing a qualitative research study for which I am now recruiting participants. Through this research study, I would like to explore the results of skin lightening/ skin toning in women in New York City. I am hoping to interview women between the ages of 21 and 65 years about their experience using skin lightening or toning products. I am hoping that some of you may be able to help me with this process by recommending women you may know who use skin toning/ skin lightening cosmetics to participate in this study. Eligible participants must:

- + Currently use (or have used in the past) skin toning/ skin lightening cosmetics/products
- + Identify themselves as a black woman or a woman of African descent (whether African American, African, Caribbean or West Indian)
- + Be between 21 and 65 years of age
- + Be able to communicate in English

Those who meet these requirements and are interested in participating will be asked to complete an interview for approximately 30 - 45 minutes. To begin this participation process, individuals can contact me via email or they can leave me a confidential voice message with their preferred first name and telephone number. I will then contact participants in order to schedule a time to meet.

Thank you for your time and your assistance is greatly appreciated.

Sincerely,

Alcia Jackson

## Appendix B

### Recruitment Flyer

“CRÈME ECLAIRISSANTE!” “EVEN TONE!”

HAVE YOU EVER USED CREAMS, GELS OR LOTIONS TO  
GET CLEAR, OR EVEN SKIN COLOR OR TONE?

**ARE YOU:**

\_\_\_\_\_ **FEMALE**

\_\_\_\_\_ **IDENTIFY AS AFRICAN AMERICAN, AFRICAN, WEST  
INDIAN/CARIBBEAN**

\_\_\_\_\_ **BETWEEN THE AGES OF 21 AND 65**

\_\_\_\_\_ **INTERESTED IN SHARING YOUR EXPERIENCE WITH SKIN  
LIGHTENING**

**MASTER’S STUDENT RESEARCHER SEEKING PARTICIPANTS FOR A RESEARCH  
STUDY ON THE USE OF SKIN LIGHTENING/TONING PRODUCTS.**

**PLEASE CONTACT ALCIA VIA EMAIL OR TELEPHONE WITH YOUR CONTACT  
INFORMATION IF INTERESTED.**

## **Appendix C**

### **Informed Consent Form**

Dear Participant,

I am a master's level student at Smith School for Social Work and I am doing a study looking at the results of skin lightening in black women. Skin lightening has become popular within the black community; but not many people talk about the results. Any information that I get from this study, I will share with other social workers in the form of an MSW (Masters in Social Work) thesis presentation and use for possible presentation and publication.

I will ask you to participate in an in-person interview, to talk about your experiences. The interview will last 30-45 minutes and will include questions about your age, ethnic/cultural group, and education level. I will also ask open-ended questions where you can give more details. Participants for this study should be black, female and competent with reading and speaking English.

There is no physical risk in participating in this study. However, talking about the topic may cause some emotional discomfort. I will provide a list of affordable therapists as a referral resource to participants. As a participant in this study, you may get the chance to educate others on aspects of this practice. You will also be able to give others a better and true understanding of this practice. Unfortunately, there is no compensation for this study.

In doing this study you can expect confidentiality of all information that you give during the interview. I will audio-record all interviews and write down the information from the recordings. Interviews will be numbered and all personal information (name, age and address) separated from the contents of the interviews. My research advisor will have access to the

information after all identifying information has been removed. I will keep all tapes and documents from the interviews in a secure location for three years according to Federal regulations and after that time I will destroy them. If I need the information after three years, I will keep the tapes and documents secure. When I no longer need the information, I will destroy it. Your participation in this study is voluntary. You have the right to withdraw before and during the course of the interview. Once the interview is over, you can still withdraw at any time up until April 30, 2013. I will destroy any information that you give before withdrawing from the study. If you have any questions about your rights or any aspect of this study, please call me at (XXX) XXX-XXXX, or the Chair of the Smith College School for Social Work Human Subjects Review Committee at (413) 585-7974.

**YOUR SIGNATURE INDICATES THAT YOU HAVE READ AND UNDERSTAND THE ABOVE INFORMATION AND THAT YOU HAVE HAD THE OPPORTUNITY TO ASK QUESTIONS ABOUT THE STUDY, YOUR PARTICIPATION, AND YOUR RIGHTS AND THAT YOU AGREE TO PARTICIPATE IN THE STUDY.**

Please keep a copy of the form provided for your records.

Thank you for your participation.

**Participant's Signature:** \_\_\_\_\_ **Date:** \_\_\_\_\_

Investigator's Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

**Appendix D**  
**Screening Questions**

**ARE YOU:**

- 1) A black woman or woman of color?
  
- 2) African American, West Indian/Caribbean, or African,
  
- 3) Between the ages of 21 – 65 years?
  
- 4) Using (or used in the past for two or more times) any creams, gels, lotions (or other products) to help to lighten specific parts of your body?

## Appendix E

### Demographic Data

The following questions are asked to get an understanding of your identity and background; you may skip any questions that you choose not to answer.

1. Please state your age \_\_\_\_\_
2. Please state your relationship status \_\_\_\_\_
3. What is your current profession or means of employment \_\_\_\_\_
4. Please state the highest level of education that you have completed  
\_\_\_\_\_
5. Please state the highest level of education completed by:  
Your father \_\_\_\_\_ Your Mother \_\_\_\_\_
6. Please choose your current average annual income range below:
  - a) 1,000– 15,000 \_\_\_\_\_
  - b) 15,001 – 30,000 \_\_\_\_\_
  - c) 30,001 – 45,000 \_\_\_\_\_
  - d) 45,001 – 60,000 \_\_\_\_\_
  - e) 60,001 – 75,000 \_\_\_\_\_
  - f) 75,001 – 90,000 \_\_\_\_\_
  - g) 90,001 – 105,000 \_\_\_\_\_
  - h) over 105,000 \_\_\_\_\_

**Appendix F**  
**Interview Guide**

- 1) How did you come to start using skin lightening/ skin toning/ skin bleaching products?
- 2) What was your reason for using skin lightening/skin toning or skin bleaching products?
- 3) What skin lightening products have you use (d)?
- 4) How do you (or did you) use the products? (i.e. together, as a lotion or as a gel are they mixed, after you shower etc?)
- 5) When was the last time you engaged in skin lightening process?
- 6) Up to this point how many times (average) have you engaged in a skin lightening process?
- 7) If still actively engaged in a skin lightening process...on average how frequently do you use skin-lightening products?
- 8) What did you expect to happen after you used the skin lightening products?
- 9) What actually happened after you used the skin lightening products?
- 10) How many application of the skin lightening products were completed before you began to notice results?
- 11) What were the physical changes that resulted from your using the skin lightening products? Please describe them.
- 12) How long did it take for you to see these physical changes (if any) once you had started the skin lightening process?
- 13) What did you think of the results?
- 14) How did you see or think of yourself after doing this process/practice?

15) a) How did your spouse/significant other/partner respond, if at all, to these changes in your appearance?

b) How did your family members respond, if at all, to these changes in your appearance?

c) How did friends and associates respond, if at all, to these changes in your appearance?

d) How did coworkers respond, if at all, to these changes in your appearance?

16) How would you compare what you expected to happen before you started the skin lightening process, with what actually happened after engaging in the skin lightening process?

## Appendix G

### Referral Sources for low Cost Therapy Services

**1. The New York Counseling and Clinical Social Work Service, P.C.**

160 West End Avenue, Suite 1N

New York, NY

212 362 1086

**2. The Training Institute for Mental Health**

115 W 27<sup>th</sup> Street,

4<sup>th</sup> Floor, New York, NY 10010

212 627 8181

**3. The Institute for Contemporary Psychotherapy**

1841 Broadway @ 60<sup>th</sup> street,

4<sup>th</sup> Floor, New York, NY, 10023

212 333 34444

**Appendix H**  
**HSR Approval Letter**



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**School for Social Work**  
Smith College  
Northampton, Massachusetts 01063  
T (413) 585-7950 F (413) 585-7994

February 14, 2013

Alcia Jackson

Dear Alcia,

Thank you for making all the requested changes to your Human Subjects Review application. Your project is now approved by the Human Subjects Review Committee.

*Please note the following requirements:*

**Consent Forms:** All subjects should be given a copy of the consent form.

**Maintaining Data:** You must retain all data and other documents for at least three (3) years past completion of the research activity.

*In addition, these requirements may also be applicable:*

**Amendments:** If you wish to change any aspect of the study (such as design, procedures, consent forms or subject population), please submit these changes to the Committee.

**Renewal:** You are required to apply for renewal of approval every year for as long as the study is active.

**Completion:** You are required to notify the Chair of the Human Subjects Review Committee when your study is completed (data collection finished). This requirement is met by completion of the thesis project during the Third Summer.

Good luck with your project.

Sincerely,

Marsha Kline Pruett, M.S., Ph.D., M.S.L.  
Vice Chair, Human Subjects Review Committee

CC: Victoria Winbush, Research Advisor