Glorification of Things White

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Powell-Hopson (1985) (See also pp. 57–63 of this issue.) provided a methodologically sound demonstration of the modification of doll color preferences in a sample of Black and White preschool children. Importantly, her work underscored the continuing legacy of racism on the psychological functioning of Black and White children.

Nearly four out of five Black children (and the majority of White children) preferred the color and attributes of a light colored doll (i.e., a "White" doll) over a dark colored doll (i.e., a "Black" doll). The majority of these preferences shifted to the dark colored doll, however, after an intervention designed to instill positive attitudes towards the dark colored doll.

It is of interest that Powell-Hopson's study drew tremendous media attention. The day after presenting her study at the 1987 meeting of the American Psychological Association, print, radio, and television news reports were seen and heard across the nation. Daniel Goleman, for example, began his New York Times article with the statement, "...feelings of racial inferiority among young black (sic) children are as strong now as they were 40 years ago..." (Goleman, 1987).

In a sense, it is not surprising that children rejected the dark colored doll. Although this finding is consistent with the amount of advertising devoted to light-colored versus dark-colored dolls (with light-colored dolls typically featured in the advertisements), it is also consistent with a number of other indicators of Black self-rejection.

Hair styles are an indicator of Black Identity. During the "Black is Beautiful" sixties, long and at times flamboyant "Natural" hair-dos were statements of Black pride (and studies of doll preferences in the late 1960s indicated that the majority of Black children selected Black dolls). Currently, "Naturals" are a thing of the past (for both men and women). Indeed, men and women are chemically altering (and dyeing) their hair in an emulation of the straight styles of Whites.

The green and blue contact lenses that are currently available, too, are very popular in the Black community. Indeed, the popularity of these items in the Black community has been somewhat of a surprise, and lens manufacturers are now mobilizing their marketing schemes to specifically target this unexpected clientele.

Finally, important role models are surgically altering their appearance so that their African facial characteristics are attenuated in favor of more European models. Michael Jackson, the phenomenally successful singer, for example, has been reported to have had lip, nose, and eye surgery.

These trends, both experimental and within the broader social culture, are not surprising. The mass media, schools, and other institutions, reinforce the negative values attached to the color black and to Black people. The "beautiful people" on television and in motion pictures are usually White. African Americans, in contrast, are typically negatively stereotyped in media presentations.

Our language is replete with instances of "White is Good" (e.g., Snow White, "White as snow," etc.) and "Black is Bad" (e.g., Black Monday, black deed, denigrates).

This glorification of things white, and derogation of things black, is an instance of cultural imperialism. Just as Europeans captured Africans and forced them to work for no pay, they also defined social/cultural reality in a way that justified these forms of inhumanity.

Powell-Hopson reminds us of these realities, but she also points to the direction for the resolution of these problems. Namely, we can structure schools and the images of Blacks (or even dark colored dolls) in a way that children will prefer dark colored dolls, or perhaps dark colored people.

References
