

## Skin colour: should it matter?

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By Deborah Gabriel



**"Growing up as a small child in the Midlands in the early fifties, I realised that others defined me by my skin colour. I grew up in a convent and in those days there weren't a lot of black faces. I remember always being asked, 'where do you come from?' and realising very quickly that they didn't want me to answer Birmingham. They were looking at my skin colour."**

Elizabeth Anionwu is head of the Mary Seacole Centre for Nursing Practice at Thames Valley University. Her mother is white, of Irish origin and her black father was Nigerian. She was born and brought up in the UK and is nearly 60. As a young girl she would be told by bemused strangers that she spoke English very well and asked whether she felt the cold, but these questions were not being asked of her friends.

It dawned on her that she was being singled out because she was black. As a result of her experience, Anionwu has always been interested in the historical legacies of slavery and the impact it has left within sections of the black community and sections of the white community. She told Black Britain: "Its how we relate to each other internally and externally and the dreadful legacy that there's much more poverty among people of darker skin than white skin."

Anionwu is also a member of the trustees of the Dana Centre, a trendy venue in London which hosts debates on contemporary science, technology and culture. She suggested it would be a good idea to have a debate on skin colour. Does it matter? To some people it matters a great deal.

Simon Dyson is a sociologist at De Montfort University in Leicester with a special interest in sickle cell. He recently conducted research based on the experiences of African and African Caribbean sickle cell counsellors. Although sickle cell is predominantly found in people of African descent, the genes associated with it are inherited separately from the genes that are associated with skin colour. It is therefore possible to have blonde hair, blue eyes and white skin and either be a carrier of sickle cell, or contract sickle cell anaemia.

During the research the counsellors told Dyson that in some cases, mothers who come for counselling who regard themselves as white English become very hostile and unleash their racial prejudices when they discover they have the sickle cell gene. Women have said: "Oh my God, I feel polluted, I feel contaminated," because they see sickle as a black disease, Dyson told Black Britain.

"They say that it can't be true, I don't have any black blood in me. One of the mothers was so shocked that she went and fetched her husband, her husband's parents and her own parents and brought them to the counsellors office and said 'look, all my family going back generations are white. We can't possibly have this sickle cell gene.'"

Whilst these women are effectively saying they have “something horrible inside me, something that’s to do with black people, they suddenly realise that the professional in front of them is a black woman,” Dyson said. It’s a tough job for the black professionals who have to counsel women who have just insulted them.

In many instances, the only way to calm them down is by distancing the sickle cell from any association with black African ancestry. So they may say that the gene could have come from the Romans, who came to Britain with some black battalions and they might have brought the sickle cell gene to the UK.

Dyson said that associating the gene with Mediterranean groups distances it from African Ancestry, which makes it easier for white women to accept. But is this not perpetuating racism by pandering to their racial prejudices? This action is merely re-affirming the negative view towards blackness and people of African descent, not addressing it.

### **The origins of mankind are black and African, say anthropologists**

But Dyson said that there are five types of the sickle cell gene, one of which originates in India and Arabia: “So it is entirely possible that you could have genes associated with sickle cell and have not African ancestry, but Indian and Arabian ancestry.” He admits: “It’s not a perfect solution, it’s a working solution that a number of them came to in order to manage the tension.”

Skin colour matters dreadfully to some people, or to put it more succinctly, not being black matters dreadfully to some people. Yet as geneticist Mark Jobling explained, most anthropologists believe that the origin of the species was in Africa, therefore the original colour of all people was black.

Jobling was part of the team of genetic scientists at the University of Leicester, whose recent research uncovered a genetic link between ‘indigenous’ white men in Yorkshire and West African ancestors. All the men from Yorkshire have a surname that dates back to the mid 14th century.

It is believed that the rare West African Y chromosome which was present in their genes was inherited by an African ancestor who was living in England at least 250 years ago. So if the history of mankind is of African and therefore black origin, why does skin colour matter today? Is it down to race and racism?

Dyson does not believe that race exists. “As a sociologist, I have difficulty accepting the idea that there is such a thing as race, as opposed to that there is such a thing as racism. Racism is created by culture, but I don’t accept that there is any such thing as distinct biological races,” he contends. So why should skin colour matter?

“For me, skin colour matters. It matters because it’s visible, it’s there, and you can’t change it. Because it’s visible, people will make judgements about you based on what you look like,” Joseph Harker, assistant comment editor of The Guardian told Black Britain.

It also matters to Anionwu, who as a nurse, is extremely concerned about the fate of black women in the health service: “We’re very concerned that while there are a lot of black and minority ethnic health professionals, very few get to the top – and it’s not because they don’t have the areas of expertise.”

Jamaican born human rights lawyer, poet and social justice advocate David Neita, believes it’s important to confront the political realities of race and racism: “You only have to live in this society for even a brief period of time to realise that people of colour are discriminated against. Black people live the reality of a racially divided society every

day," he told Black Britain.

Skin colour prejudice, also known as colourism, exists among people of the same racial group as an internalised form of racism which has its origins in the wider system of white supremacy. When Europeans instituted chattel enslavement, dehumanising people of African descent, the colonies they created in the US and Caribbean were socially structured according to skin colour.

Skin tone hierarchies were enforced by law and custom and aside from individuals being categorised according to the degree of whiteness in their skin, the division of slave labour was based on skin colour. Therefore whilst dark-skinned slaves toiled in the fields, lighter skinned slaves (many of whom were of mixed race, born of the rape by white slave masters of black female slaves) worked mostly as domestics in the household of slave owners.

Many mixed race slaves were allowed an education and inherited money from white relatives and post slavery in both the US and Caribbean formed the elite amongst the black population. Today the legacies of that era still exist and have a damaging impact on relations between some members of the black community.

It is an issue that Neita feels passionately about: "We cannot get away from the fact that [in the Caribbean] when you go into a bank or travel on an airline, you see a stereotypical type of person serving you. If you go to certain countries and you look at who is cutting the lawns and who is getting the lowest wages and you look at the complexion of those people; if you go into the hotels and look at the people serving and look at the complexion of the middle managers – it is a fact [that they are light-skinned]."

### **Skin colour prejudice exists within the black community**

Neita states that it is a rarity to find a black man with a woman who is darker than him: "It's not always the same for the black man. The discrimination that dark-skinned black women face is different from the discrimination that a dark-skinned black man will face," he said. "There is a trend. That is something that doesn't lend itself to random romance. There is no random romance, there's an ordered romance."

Neita believes that the way children are socialised perpetuates colourism: "If you look at children and how they are treated and how they are celebrated, you will see that the light skin child will be treated better than the dark skinned child. The light skinned child will be told 'you're beautiful' and the dark skinned child will be told that they're ugly."

According to Neita, the way to challenge colourism is through a kind of mental rebirth, where individuals re-learn they way that they think about and relate to other people within their community. He told Black Britain:

"We have to try to recapture the true essence of ourselves and not keep living our lives through a white-dictated methodology. We need to become spiritually wiser, spiritually mature, socially, politically and economically mature. What we are doing now is living the script that has been written for us and we need to step out of that script, step off the stage and create our own theatre where we run things."

Neita has created a cartoon called Beaugenie, based on a young dark skinned black girl in secondary school. The name Beaugenie is derived from the words beautiful and genius. He explained: "I deliberately created this dark-skinned black girl comic character

because it's important for youngsters to see dark-skinned black people celebrated and in a position of power."

He continued: "When I look at my auntie and my family members; I see dark skinned black men and women who have made such a tangible contribution and then the [disrespect] that I see dark-skinned people get as a result of their skin colour, is not right. It is not right for us to do it in our community."

He fumed: "When did we pass the point when the oppression that was rained down upon us – that we have taken it up and are doing it to one another? We need to reverse that trend because that will destroy us. So for me I think we have to do little things – whether it's creating a cartoon character or making films and videos –make sure you feature a diversity of black people in it."

So despite the fact that we all descend from black-skinned people, it seems that everyone, including people of African descent, have a hang up about skin colour. The important question that remains is why? How is it possible to ensure that people relate to each other on a humanistic level without understanding what it is about blackness that is so repulsive to some people?

The answer to that lies in history and the way it has been distorted through a Eurocentric lens to denigrate blackness and black people – the very originators of human civilisation and Africa – the cradle of humanity. From European chattel enslavement and colonisation to the justifying theories of scientific racism in the 18th century; to expeditions to Africa to spread commerce and Christianity, laying the foundations for the economic pillaging of Africa – all of these acts to maintain and preserve white supremacy are the reason why skin colour matters.

The aversion towards blackness has become ingrained in the consciousness of all people through the distortion of religion, history, science, academia, the media and popular culture and affects human relations between all people, whether they are of the same ethnic group or not. Until there is a sustained and direct challenge to white supremacy then racism will continue to thrive and skin colour will always matter.

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