

RESEARCH NOTE

PSYCHOLOGICAL ASPECTS OF ALBINISM: AN EXPLORATORY STUDY WITH NIGERIAN (IGBO) ALBINO SUBJECTS

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Abstract—This paper reviews some studies done on the psychological aspects of albinism. Studies on the intellectual ability of albinos produce equivocal results. Results from personality studies seem more consistent and show albinos to be more emotionally unstable than non-albinos. This paper also reports a study by the author which examines the phenomenon of albinism from the albino's viewpoint. It examined the responses of three undergraduate albino subjects—one female and two males—to the author's request for each to write an essay on 'the merits and demerits of being an albino based on personal experiences'. All consider being an albino to be more of a demerit than a merit. The demerits include conspicuous colour, delicate skin which blisters under the sun, defective sight, interpersonal, especially heterosexual, problems and society's unkind attitude.

The paper ends with a discussion of possible future research in the area and a recommendation of the need for psychological rehabilitation as part of the management programme for albinos.

INTRODUCTION

Several observations are made about the psychological characteristics of albinos but there seems to be a dearth of empirical studies to back up the statements.

This paper first reviews the few reports on the intelligence and personality characteristics of albinos. This is followed by the report on an exploratory study by the present author in which three albino subjects projected their feelings about being albinos in response to a request to 'write an essay on the merits and demerits of being an albino based on personal experience'.

The intellectual ability of albinos

Results from studies on the intellectual ability of albinos seem equivocal. Segers [1] concluded that the single albino child he studied showed intellectual retardation. Later and better designed studies by Beckham [2] and Steward and Keeler [3] however did not confirm that observation. Beckham, for example, reported that the 42 Chicago negro albino boys and girls he studied showed no intellectual deficit when compared with their non-albino siblings.

Stewart and Keeler compared the responses of albino and non-albino Cuna Indians (in San Blas Province, Panama) to an intelligence test battery comprising Draw-A-Person test; the IPAT Culture Free test of 'g', Scale 2; three subtests from the Weschler Adult Intelligence Scale (arithmetic, similarities, and block design); and Arthur Adaptation of the International Performance Scale, Tray 2. They found no statistically significant difference in the 10 scores of the two groups of subjects.

One is inclined to believe then that albinos do not differ intellectually from non-albinos if given

the same opportunity, especially in view of the various achievements by Nigerian albinos in the fields of music, academics (including PhDs), medicine—both Western and African traditional. If an albino does not reach the height of his/her non-albino counterpart then non-intellectual factors need to be considered.

Personality characteristics of albinos

Studies on the personality characteristics of albinos seem to produce unequivocal results. Segers [1] noted that the albino child he observed showed emotional instability, and a tendency towards combativeness. The Beckham [2] study cited earlier showed that albinos exhibited a general feeling of insecurity when compared with non-albinos. Beckham attributed this to the albino's maltreatment at home and by society, because of the stigma of being different.

In comparing the personality characteristics of albinos and non-albinos, Steward and Keeler administered the Rorschach Psychodiagnostic Test.

The subjects were 12 male (6 albinos, 6 non-albinos) San Blas Cura Indiana (Panama). Five judges ranked these subjects in terms of psychological health. The albinos ranked lower in psychological health. They revealed a passive, dependent, feminine orientation, showed little active interest in the opposite sex, and were more anxious and insecure. These feelings were handled either through extreme religiosity or through intellectualization.

Another defence mechanism used by the albinos was denial which breaks down under moderate stress leading to hostile, resentful and angry responses. This may result in withdrawal.

Their albino subjects showed less accurate perception of reality. Steward and Keeler also found them

more immature and unstable emotionally than the non-albino subjects.

Keeler [4] also reported the outcome of psychiatric examination of 6 albinos (by Spanish speaking psychiatrists) which covered relations between parents, mother and patient, father and patient, siblings and parents, sexual development and functioning, social development, relations to women, adaptational responses and psychosomatic disorders. This showed Cuna Moon albinos, especially males, to be restrained in many activities by their physical condition. Four albinos, three in their late twenties, had no sexual experience, whereas the other two had been able to attract girl friends by music or dancing. In homosexual relationship with dark skinned males, Keeler reported that the albinos played the feminine role.

All these studies tend to suggest that the albinos showed much weaker, more emotionally unstable and less assertive personalities than non-albinos.

To the best knowledge of the present author, no study on the psychological characteristics of albinos has emanated from Africa and Nigeria in particular. The present study was motivated by the need to fill this gap. Specifically, the study aims to examine some psychological aspects of albinism as perceived by the albinos themselves.

METHOD

The subjects were the two male and one female undergraduate albinos (all Igbo) available at the University of Nigeria Nsukka during the period of the study. Their ages ranged from 20 to 25 years. Each subject was requested by the author to 'write an essay on the merits and demerits of being an albino based on your personal experiences'. There was no time limit for submission but the essays were all submitted within one week. This method of obtaining the data was used for practical reasons. Besides, it allows the subject to project his or her own feelings into the material with less inhibition. The contents of the essays were analysed thematically, the common features identified and differences noted.

RESULTS

The subjects are labelled MA, MB (both males) and FA (the only female subject). MA and MB start writing about albinos then switch to writing about themselves. FA writes about herself all through her essay.

Merits

MA sees no merit at all in being an albino. MB describes albinos as being very intelligent. He states that he has the envy of non-albinos in his class whom he excelled academically.

FA considers her skin beautiful and attractive to the males whose advances she had often bluffed. MB and FA consider themselves as having better auditory sense than non-albinos.

Demerits

Both MB and FA state that the demerits of being an albino far outweigh the merits. MA perceives only the demerits.

Physical appearance

All stated that their skin colour attracted name calling, ridicule, chanting from people around and MB was thrown pebbles at by children. MA states "one reference to his physical state will shatter all the man and fight in him" (referring to the albino).

Defective sight

All subjects agree that, their defective vision—myopia—is a serious handicap. This placed a limit to their academic pursuit and choice of career. MA consequently spent 3 years in primary one until his father got some aid (eye glasses). He had to switch from a medical career which he considered demanded clear vision to a business career which does not make such demands. All subjects had difficulty seeing the blackboard. MB took to the arts; FA chose arts subjects instead of the sciences. MA notes the albino is photophobic so he almost closes his eyes while walking.

Skin

All subjects state that their skin is a source of problem, for it is prone to sunburn and sores. MA states his skin turns red under physical exertion. MB regrets his inability to engage in manual labour like farming since his father is a hard working farmer.

Interpersonal and social relations

All state they tend to withdraw from social situations to avoid being noticed. Besides in social gatherings MB states, like a ball-room dance, "some people find it almost impracticable to dance with an albino of the opposite sex".

MA and FA also noted the sexual problem of the albino. MA has no girl friend nor had he any sexual experience. He states "No girl will ever accept me. It is not good for a girl to mix with an albino." He does have sexual excitement but has to suppress it. MA is not attracted at all to an albino girl. FA has had boy friends who she later rejected because of their desire to exploit her sexually rather than relate to her affectionately. Most were curious to see, touch and take her to bed "in anticipation of what it would be like to sleep with a European (Caucasian) woman".

All subjects prefer non-albinos to fellow albinos in interpersonal relationship.

Society's attitude

All subjects consider society at large to be unkind and rejecting. At the same time all had close friends who helped them with their work. Only FA states she was the favourite child in her family. MA and MB made no mention of their family's attitude.

Coping mechanism

MA considers the albino very apprehensive. He states "An albino is in perpetual apprehension. His composure is very unstable." He copes with his problem through anxiety. MB adopts an intellectual and emotionally detached approach to his discussion. There are very few references to the self or feelings. No mention is made to reactions to problems. FA

seems very expressive. She initially coped with her interpersonal problems through repression and crying, later her siblings encouraged her to be more assertive. She then turned to both verbal and physical aggression in later childhood. She now copes with her anger through verbal aggression.

DISCUSSION

This study had examined the phenomenon of albinism from the viewpoint of albinos themselves. The results to a great extent confirm the findings of previous workers. It is generally observed that the attitude of society to albinos is clearly perceived and felt by the albino subjects, who used terms like 'unkind', 'lacks understanding', 'insults' to describe the treatment they receive from society.

Although the conspicuous skin colour, delicate sensitive skin and defective sight may constitute a great source of emotional distress for the albino since they place great limitations on their social relationships and their choice of career, what seems of more importance to their personality characteristics is society's negative attitude. One would expect that how the individual learns to cope with this attitude would depend on the family environment and the socialization process. If the albino, like any other child, is nurtured in a home where he/she is regarded and treated as an individual rather than a stereotype; if the albino child is raised to be assertive and be self confident, then the albino may strive towards their self actualization rather than to easily succumb to society's negative attitude.

Psychological rehabilitation

What is the implication of the finding for the rehabilitation of the albino in Africa? It is being recommended that psychological rehabilitation begins when the albino is born. This should involve assessing the attitudes of the parents to the albino child, and educating the parents of albinos on the early management of the physical defects associated with albinism. If the attitude of the parents is negative, efforts should be made at changing this to a more positive one. The child's personal assets as he/she develops should be nurtured with the aim of helping him/her develop his/her potential.

Psychological rehabilitation of the older albino should include proper psychosocial assessment followed by appropriate psychotherapeutic procedures.

It is also being recommended that public enlightenment programmes be instituted to educate the public on the phenomenon of albinism with the aim of reducing public prejudice and hostility which result from ignorance and lack of familiarity.

The African albinos themselves have a great role to play both individually and as a group as is done elsewhere. They need to perceive themselves as individuals with some potential abilities. It is for them to identify and develop these potential abilities to the full. Self concept theories maintain that the way an individual sees, thinks and feels about him/herself will influence how people around him/her perceive and respond to him/her. If the albinos in spite of their physical and visual problems perceive themselves more positively and learn to be more assertive, then society may gradually learn to relate to them more positively.

There is a need to establish registration centres for albinos, where albinos should be registered and their physical, social and psychological care co-ordinated.

It is hoped that with the implementation of these recommendations, life would be more meaningful for the albino in African society.

Future possible research

In view of the exploratory nature of this study, no generalization can validly be made on the psychological characteristics of albinos based on present findings. Future work in this area should aim at comparing specific variables in albinos and non-albinos using valid instruments. Besides, detailed clinical psychological assessment procedures would help determine empirically the differences, if any, between albinos and non-albinos in life events experienced, personality characteristics and coping mechanisms.

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