

Internalized Racial Oppression and Its Effect on Mate Preferences

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Abstract The objective of this study is to explore the relationship between internalized racial oppression (IRO) and mate preferences among heterosexual college students attending Winston-Salem State University (WSSU). Research questions investigate: 1) the relationship between IRO and mate preference; and 2) possible gender or sociodemographic differences in mate preferences. All participants ($N=70$) were between the ages of 18-24 and had at least one parent that identifies as Black/African American. All participants were administered a survey including the following scales: a) Internalized Racial Oppression (Bailey Chung, Williams, Singh, & Terrell, 2011); and b) Romantic Partner Preferences (Rowatt, DeLue, Strickhouser, & Gonzalez, 2001). Results indicate IRO total scores were positively related to the attractiveness subscale ($r = .30$, $p = .02$). There was also a positive relationship between internalization of negative stereotypes and attractiveness ($r = .31$, $p = .01$). Classification was also related to IRO $F(3,62) = 2.74$, $p = .05$.

Keywords: Internalized racial oppression, African-American, college students, mate preference

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INTRODUCTION

Internalized racial oppression (IRO) is a process a person goes through, where they accept and believe negative stereotypes and messages about themselves and embrace the idea of being inferior (Bailey et al., 2011; Jones, 2000). Research (Pyke, 2010) suggests IRO may not always relate to the person's beliefs about himself or herself. Rather, their feelings could extend to their group rather than themselves. The internalization of racial oppression exists on a continuum, and people affected can experience it at different levels (Bailey et al., 2011). The process of internalization comes from African-American's accepting White oppressive actions or beliefs towards other Black people. These actions come from discrimination, racism, falsified history, and the White supremacy ideology (Bailey et al., 2011). This falsified history does not recognize African/African-American contributions to the world's development. The internalization that there was no history before slavery is harmful because one can disassociate him or herself from being connected to Africa, simply because of the harshness of slavery. Everything light and close to White has been characterized with positive adjectives such as 'beauty' and 'civil.' Everything dark has been negatively characterized with negative

adjectives such as 'ugliness' and 'savage' (Harrison, 2010). The practice of mistreating Blacks based on their color of their skin reinforced the feelings of Blacks being inferior. In this study the terms Black and African-American will be used interchangeably due to the demographics using both.

IRO manifests in many ways: embracing Whiteness (Jones, 2000) and/or subscribing to anti-Black ideology (Watts-Jones, 2002). Accepting the negative messages about one's self can cause individuals to ultimately have low self-esteem due to the lack of feelings of self-worth he or she may have. The negativity results in feelings of shame when it comes to being Black, resulting in abandoning their own identity (Watts-Jones, 2002). Experiencing and dealing with IRO can cause cognitive dissonance because people of color were taught to reject racism and embrace their Blackness (Watts-Jones, 2002). In actuality they do not want to accept their Black identity because they have already tried to approximate more with the "superior" group (Watts-Jones, 2002).

Oppression is not as obvious and blatant as it once was earlier in history. Now it is presented to African-Americans in their own culture rather than in a "dominant culture." African-Americans may behave as the oppressor did towards members of the same culture. It affects how a person views themselves as far as what is attractive, which

can cause them to disconnect with their physical features and strive to adopt Eurocentric features.

Mate Preferences

In the process of considering a potential mate, one considers characteristics they prefer in a potential significant other. Physical attraction is a driving force in forming interpersonal relationships or interactions (Poran, 2002). Buss and Barnes (1986) and Conroy-Beam and Buss (2016) suggest that, when considering mate selections, personality traits are considered to be more important than physical traits. Personal preferences, prejudices, and society are instrumental in shaping attraction; however, attraction and preferences vary from person to person. For African Americans, the color of one's skin may be an important factor when looking for relationship partners (Esmail & Sullivan, 2006). Mainstream attitudes have a negative impact on the interpersonal relationships African-Americans form (Ross, 1997) because the idea of physical attractiveness can be a consequence of systemic oppression (Parmer et al., 2004). The purpose of this study is to explore the relationship between IRO and mate preferences, and to identify any possible sociodemographic differences. The relationship between internalized racial oppression and mate preferences and selection are important to examine, particularly because it is believed that gender differences exist. Embracing whiteness, accepting negative stereotypes, and subscribing to anti-black ideology alters a person's beliefs and behavior towards other people of the same race (Bailey et al., 2011). This is very important because once one has internalized racial oppression, their interactions with another person of the same race will reflect actions, beliefs and values of the oppressor.

Accepting the beliefs from White culture causes one to accept being inferior, and also embraces whiteness (Bailey et al., 2011; Parmer et al., 2004; Prilleltensky & Gonick, 1996). Physical attractiveness can be a form of internalized racial oppression because of the high value placed on Eurocentric standards (Parmer et al., 2004) that praise features similar to White culture and criticize features similar to Black culture. The belief that one is inferior based upon their skin color has manifested itself in a different form amongst African-Americans. Instead of inter-racial discrimination because of skin color, intra-racial discrimination is occurring in the African-American community. The current exploratory study examines the relationship between IRO and mate preferences among Black students attending an HBCU in the south. Additionally, we examine any significant differences in sociodemographic variables.

Table 1
Participant Sociodemographic Information

Variable	N	%
Gender		
Male	33	47.1
Female	37	52.9
Age		
18/19	31	44.3
20/21	30	42.8
22-24	9	12.9
Academic Classification		
Freshman/Sophomore	38	54.3
Junior/Senior	32	45.7
Housing Arrangements		
On Campus	56	80.0
Off Campus	14	20.0
Parent Identifying as Black or African-American		
Father	1	7.1
Mother	5	1.4
Both	64	91.4

N=70

METHODOLOGY

Participants

Students (N= 70) were recruited from Winston-Salem State University (WSSU) through IRB-approved flyers, emails, and also by word of mouth. Participants met the following criteria: Had at least one parent that identified as African-American or Black, were between the ages of 18-24, and identified as a heterosexual male or female.

Materials

Sociodemographic Information. Sociodemographic information was collected from students on the survey. Participants indicated their age, sex, racial identity of parent, academic class, and housing arrangement.

Internalized Racial Oppression. Internalized racial oppression (IRO) was measured using the 23-item Internalized Racial Oppression Scale (Bailey et al., 2011). The scale has four subscales: 1) Biased Representation of History- BRH ($\alpha = .55$), three items from this scale were reverse coded; 2) Alteration of Physical Appearance-APA ($\alpha = .61$); 3) Internalization of Negative Stereotype-INS ($\alpha = .71$); and 4) Hair Change-HC ($\alpha = .17$). The Hair Change subscale was removed due to the low reliability. Participants responded to statements using a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). A total score ($\alpha = .73$), along with each subscale score was calculated and higher scores indicated higher levels of internalized racial oppression.

Romantic Partner Preferences. Preferences were measured using a modified Romantic Partner Preferences Scale (RPP; Rowatt et al., 2001). This scale measures the importance of personal attributes in a partner for short and long term relationships. There are eight dimensions of romantic partner preferences: 1) fidelity ($\alpha=.80$); 2)

dependability ($\alpha=.74$); 3) spiritual values ($\alpha=.79$); 4) creativity ($\alpha=.73$); 5) attractiveness, ($\alpha=.82$); and 6) status-wealth ($\alpha=.79$). One subscale, good parenting (6 items), was removed because it was not relevant to intended participants. Another subscale, vitality was removed due to its low reliability. The total scale ($\alpha=.89$) had 30 items, and six subscales. Participants responded to statements/questions using a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 0 (not at all important) to 6 (very important). A total score along with each subscale score was calculated and higher scores indicate greater importance of each dimension.

Procedures

Before completing the pen-and-paper survey, students verified they met the criteria to participate. Students took the survey in various locations on campus such as academic facilities, student centers, and the research lab. Participants were given an informed consent form that the researcher went over with them. All participants were able to complete the survey in less than 15 minutes. Upon completion of the survey, students were debriefed and any questions/concerns were addressed.

RESULTS

Preliminary Analyses

Participants included 37 females and 33 males ($M_{age} = 19$, $SD = 1.49$). Please see Table 1 for sociodemographic information. Participants scoring on the IRO total scale ($N = 65$) ranged from 32 to 61 ($M = 44$, $SD = 7.18$). Participants scoring on the RPP total scale ($N = 64$) varied from 90 to 180 ($M = 140.46$, $SD = 18.85$). Scale descriptives are presented in Table 2.

Internalized Racial Oppression and Mate Preferences

We first tested the relationship between the IRO total and subscales, and the RPP total and subscales using Pearson's correlation (see Table 3). The IRO scale did not significantly correlate with mate preferences (RPP scale), $r = .23$, $p = .07$. However, the IRO total scale was positively related to both the spiritual values (SV) ($r = .27$, $p = .04$) and attractiveness (ATR) ($r = .30$, $p = .02$) subscales of the RPP scale. The RPP total scale was not significantly related to any subscales on the IRO. There were significant correlations between subscales on both the IRO and RPP: BRH and SV are positively related ($r = .28$, $p = .03$), internalizing negative stereotypes and ATR are positively related ($r = .31$, $p = .01$), and both FID ($r = -.54$, $p < .001$) and DEP ($r = -.51$, $p < .001$) are negatively correlated with APA.

We conducted a linear regression and the relationship between internalized racial oppression (IRO) and relationship partner preferences (RPP) was not significant, $F(1,59) = 3.27$, $p = .08$. There were no significant gender differences on the total IRO scale ($p = .41$), nor were there

differences on the three subscales, BRH ($p = .63$), APA ($p = .27$), and INS ($p = .18$). This was also found with the total RPP scale ($p = .96$), and its six subscales, FID ($p = .14$), DEP ($p = .07$), SV ($p = .39$), CRE ($p = .85$), ATR ($p = .26$), and SW ($p = .67$). We used a simultaneous regression model to test the contribution of the two correlated variables, spiritual values and attractiveness, on IRO total scale. This overall model was significant, $F(2,58) = 4.68$, $p = .01$, and the two predictors, together, explained 14% of the variance in IRO.

We were also interested in whether there are any significant sociodemographic differences on the IRO and RPP total scales. Only classification was related to IRO, $F(3,62) = 2.74$, $p = .05$. Sophomores ($n = 19$, $M = 44.68$) had significantly higher levels of internalized racial oppression than juniors ($n = 11$, $M = 36.55$).

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to explore a relationship between internalized racial oppression (IRO) and mate preferences, and to examine the possibility of gender and sociodemographic differences amongst participants. It was anticipated that IRO and mate preferences would be related based on findings in prior research. Unfortunately in this study, there was no significant relationship between the two, only between subscales. Previous research indicates physical attractiveness is a key component in forming interpersonal relationships (Poran, 2002) and can be a form of internalized racial oppression (Parmer et al., 2004). In this study, the internalization of negative stereotypes (INS) subscale measured if participants believed negative stereotypes about Black people to be true. The Attractiveness subscale measured the importance of different aspects of attractiveness (e.g., sex appeal, physically attractive). There was a strong positive relationship between the two, meaning as participants had higher scores on INS, they also found attractiveness to be an important characteristic for their mate. The negative stereotypes they hear about people in their race may impact the value placed on attractiveness in a mate. This also supports Pyke's (2010) finding that accepting negative stereotypes impacts their intra-group interactions and partially supports physical characteristics being over emphasized in mate preferences (Ross, 1997).

The subscale alteration of physical appearance (APA) was used to measure whether or not participants thought it was acceptable to change their skin color or their facial features. The subscales fidelity and dependability measured how important aspects of being dependable and faithful were for a potential mate. The relationship between APA and dependability and fidelity were both negative. As participants disagreed with changing their physical appearance, they also ranked the traits to be important for their mate and vice versa. This relationship partially supports African-American women defining their beauty through aspects of whiteness (Poran, 2002). In this study, women were more likely to rank items on APA higher than men did, indicating the impact on how

people feel about themselves and how it is reflected in traits believed to be important. These findings show that African-Americans are still struggling with their African physical features (Parmer et al., 2004). Both of the previous findings are also similar to Conroy-Beam and Buss's (2016) findings that exposure to another attractive individual has an influence on mate preferences.

As mentioned in the results, there were no gender differences in scores on the IRO or the RPP scales. This finding was not consistent with previous research indicating gender has an impact on preferences or scoring on the IRO (Bailey et al., 2011; Ross, 1997; Buss & Barnes, 1986). Although there were no gender differences on the IRO, the positive correlation between sophomores and IRO indicates sophomores have higher levels of internalized racial oppression than any other group on campus. This could show how their personal beliefs about Black people change. During their first year they may have had pride about blackness and in their sophomore year their feelings turned into negativity. Sociodemographics on scoring on the IRO were not explored by Bailey and colleagues (2011).

Although there was no direct relationship between IRO and RPP, there were many significant findings on items from the subscales. These findings indicate more research needs to be done on exploring the relationship between spiritual values and IRO, based on spiritual values predicting scoring on the IRO. Future research should explore public and private regard of racial identity on the multidimensional model of racial identity (MMRI) scale to identify the beliefs they have about Black people and if it is consistent with scoring on the IRO.

Limitations and Strengths

One limitation to this study is the vagueness of the preferences for a potential mate. The subscale for spiritual values did not address what spirituality meant and how it is different from being religious. Another limitation is the wording on the IRO questions. Some participants operationalized words differently in the same questions. However, one of the biggest strengths of this study is the population. Most studies about mate preferences are conducted on predominately White Institutions and have a fairly low population of Black or African-American students as their participants. This study was able to gain the perspective of traits and characteristics of an understudied population. While looking at the traits, we were able to identify relationships between subscales on the IRO scale and the RPP scale, opening the door for more research to be done.

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Table 2

Scale Descriptives

Descriptives	N	M	SD	Minimum	Maximum
IRO-Total	65	44.0	7.18	32	61
RPP-Total	64	140.46	18.85	90.0	180.0
IRO-APA	65	13.3	3.60	9	24
IRO-BRH	66	19.6	2.97	7	26
IRO-INS	69	12.14	4.63	7	27
RPP-FID	69	28.8	2.47	15	30
RPP-DEP	69	21.9	2.62	12	24
RPP-ATR	67	23.7	6.69	6	36
RPP-SV	66	19.6	4.69	4	24
RPP-SW	69	18.0	5.92	2	30
RPP-CRE	69	13.76	13.7	6	18

N=70

Table 3

Correlations between IRO Subscale and RPP Subscale

Measure	APA	BRH	INS	FID	DEP	SV	CRE	ATR	SW
IRO-APA	1								
IRO-BRH	.264*	1							
IRO-INS	.283*	.327**	1						
RPP-FID	.542*	-.055	-.200	1					
RPP-DEP	-.508**	-.103	-.141	.728**	1				
RPP-SV	-.026	.278*	.115	.247*	.284*	1			
RPP-CRE	-.049	.092	.072	.289*	.350**	.273*	1		
RPP-ATR	.092	.119	.318**	.095	.150	.200	.523**	1	
RPP-SW	.023	.125	.155	.070	.171	.286*	.526**	.669**	1

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

N=70