



GLOBE PHOTO/SARAH BREZINSKY

Keith Maddox, an assistant professor at Tufts, conducted studies on racial stereotyping.

Skin tones and racial stereotyping

By Gareth Cook

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Some things are hard to talk about, and some things you just don't talk about at all.

Race in America is hard to talk about. The nation was built in part with the blood of African slaves and, centuries later, Americans are still so divided that they can't seem to discuss race without feeling uncomfortable, frustrated or angry.

Then there is what Keith Maddox, an assistant psychology professor at Tufts University, has chosen to talk about — stereotypes of light- and dark-skinned blacks, including stereotypes in the African-American community itself. Despite the evidence — from history, from striking studies of inequality, from individual stories — that skin tone is a factor in how blacks are perceived and treated, it is an area avoided in polite conversation, Maddox said, and an area where most scientists have feared to tread.

"It is something that in the past has been thought of as divisive and explosive and something we shouldn't ever talk about in public," Maddox said. "But, if you don't try to understand it, then things will never get better."

Recently, Maddox, an African-American himself, published the results of a set of experiments that showed for the first time that both blacks and whites unconsciously categorize blacks by their skin tone, and that both blacks and whites are well aware of the stereotype that paints dark-skinned blacks as inferior. His work is unusual, other researchers said, not just for his bravery, but because he is using a basic experimental approach, in some ways quite ingenious, that hasn't been brought to this question before.

"This is a good thing he is doing," said Kendrick Brown, an assistant professor of psychology at Macalester College in St. Paul, Minn., who studies

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how a person's skin tone affects their own psychology. "With experiments, you can get a much better handle on cause and effect."

During the slave trade, light-skinned blacks were sometimes treated better by slave owners, becoming "house slaves" with more responsibility and privileges if they could pass the "Brown Paper Bag Test" — that is, skin lighter than a brown paper bag. Well after abolition, light-skinned blacks formed exclusive social clubs, Brown said, keeping the distinction alive.

In modern times, research has uncovered compelling evidence that inequality moves on a sliding color scale among blacks in America. In 1991, two scientists analyzed data from the National Survey of Black Americans, an extensive survey conducted a decade before, that revealed how blacks of different skin tones fared in society. The findings, reported in the *American Journal of Sociology*, were disturbing: Darker-skinned blacks fell lower, on average, than fairer-skinned blacks in measures of income and education.

"These facts suggest," the authors wrote, "that the effects of skin tone are not only historical curiosities from a legacy of slavery and racism, but present-day mechanisms that influence who gets what in America."

Maddox wants to understand precisely how the stereotypes behind this inequality function — in whites as well as blacks. It is diffi-

cult research to do, though, because it is hard to get honest answers from people about how they feel, and because people are often not even aware of subtle prejudices that shape their view of the world.

So Maddox recruited college students from the Boston area, but didn't tell them precisely what he was looking for. He showed them recorded pieces of conversation while they looked at pictures of black men, some light-skinned and some dark-skinned. The students were later asked to match statements with the face of the person who made them.

What he was interested in is the identification mistakes they made — particularly the kinds of mistakes they made. There is a substantial body of psychological research that shows people are more likely to mistake one thing for another if they belong to a mental category the person uses.

In this study, Maddox found that the students were more likely to mistake the comments of a light-skinned black man for those of another light-skinned black man. Maddox also proved the students were not unconsciously noticing some other common facial feature. In some cases, for exam-

ple, he digitally altered the picture of a dark-skinned man to make him appear light-skinned. When this was done, students categorized him by his new skin tone.

Both white students and black students showed the same tendency to unconsciously categorize people by their skin tone, according to the study, which was published in the February *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*. In the same paper, coauthored by Stephanie Gray of Tufts, Maddox also described the results of another test that showed that blacks and whites are aware

of harsh stereotypes about darker-skinned blacks as more likely to be criminal, poor, or unmotivated.

The next step in the research is to try to show how people's attitudes are shaped, and how they manifest themselves. The goal, Maddox said, is to develop a clear picture of how racial stereotypes operate. That way, he said, we should all feel more comfortable talking about them — and, by talking about them, eventually getting beyond them.

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