# What Is Colorism?

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Exactly what is [colorism](http://racerelations.about.com/od/understandingrac1/g/definitionofcolorism.htm)? An old children’s rhyme captures the definition in a nutshell.

*“If you’re black, stay back;  
if you’re brown, stick around;  
if you’re yellow, you’re mellow;  
if you’re white, you’re all right.”*

In sum, colorism refers to discrimination based on skin. Colorism disadvantages dark-skinned people, while privileging those with lighter skin. Research has linked colorism to smaller incomes, lower marriage rates, longer prison terms and fewer job prospects for darker-skinned people. What’s more, colorism has existed for centuries both in and outside of black America. That makes it a persistent form of discrimination that should be fought with the same urgency that racism is.

**Colorism’s Origins**

How did colorism surface? In the [United States](http://racerelations.about.com/od/historyofracerelations/tp/Examples-Of-Institutional-Racism-In-The-United-States.htm)’ colorism has roots in slavery. That’s because slave-owners typically gave preferential treatment to slaves with fairer complexions. While dark-skinned slaves toiled outdoors in the fields, their light-skinned counterparts usually worked indoors completing domestic tasks that were far less grueling. Why the discrepancy? Slave-owners were partial to light-skinned slaves because they were often family members. Slave-owners frequently engaged in sexual intercourse with slave women, and light-skinned offspring were the telltale signs of these unions. While slave-owners did not officially recognize their mixed-race children as blood, they gave them privileges that dark-skinned slaves did not enjoy. Accordingly, light skin came to be viewed as an asset among the slave community.

Outside of the United States, colorism may be more related to class than to white supremacy. While European colonialism has undoubtedly left its mark on countries worldwide, [colorism](http://books.google.com/books?id=t-JLtPfRjnEC&lpg=PA4&ots=89lyC1x48z&dq=colorism%20asia%20dark%20skin%20peasants&pg=PA4#v=onepage&q=colorism%20asia%20dark%20skin%20peasants&f=false) is said to predate contact with Europeans in various Asian countries. There, the idea that white skin is superior to dark skin may derive from the ruling classes typically having lighter complexions than the peasant classes. While peasants became sun-tanned as they labored outdoors day in and day out, the privileged had lighter complexions because they didn’t have to work in the sun for hours daily. Thus, dark skin came to be associated with the [lower classes](http://sociology.about.com/od/L_Index/g/Lower-Class.htm), and light skin with the elite. Today, the high premium on light skin in Asia is likely tangled up with this history along with the cultural influences of the Western world.

### An Enduring Legacy

After slavery ended in the U.S., colorism didn’t disappear. In black America, those with light-skin received employment opportunities off limits to darker-skinned African Americans. This is why upper-class families in black society were largely light-skinned. Soon light skin and privilege were considered one in the same in the black community, with light skin being the sole criterion for acceptance into the black aristocracy. Upper crust blacks routinely administered the brown paper bag test to determine if fellow blacks were light enough to socialize with. “The paper bag would be held against your skin. And if you were darker than the paper bag, you weren’t admitted,” [explained](http://abcnews.go.com/2020/GiveMeABreak/story?id=548303&page=2) Marita Golden, author of *Don’t Play in the Sun: One Woman’s Journey Through the Color Complex*.

Colorism didn’t just involve blacks discriminating against other blacks. Job advertisements from the mid-20th century reveal that African-Americans with light skin clearly believed their coloring would make them more palatable as job candidates. Writer Brent Staples [discovered](http://theboard.blogs.nytimes.com/2008/08/22/as-racism-wanes-colorism-persists/) this while searching the archives of newspapers near the Pennsylvania town where he grew up. He noticed that in the 1940s, black job seekers often identified themselves as light-skinned. “Cooks, chauffeurs and waitresses sometimes listed ‘light colored’’ as the primary qualification — ahead of experience, references, and the other important data,” Staples said. “They did it to improve their chances and to reassure white employers who…found dark skin unpleasant or believed that their customers would.”

### Why Colorism Matters

Colorism yields real-world advantages for individuals with light skin. For example, light-skinned Latinos make $5,000 more on average than dark-skinned Latinos, [according to Shankar Vedantam](http://www.nytimes.com/2010/01/19/opinion/19vedantam.html), author of *The Hidden Brain: How Our Unconscious Minds Elect Presidents, Control Markets, Wage Wars and Save Our Lives*. Moreover, a [Villanova University study](http://www.theroot.com/views/lighter-skin-shorter-prison-term) of more than 12,000 African-American women imprisoned in North Carolina found that lighter-skinned black women received shorter sentences than their darker-skinned counterparts. Previous research by Stanford psychologist Jennifer Eberhardt found that darker-skinned black defendants were two times more likely than lighter-skinned black defendants to get the death penalty for crimes involving white victims.

Colorism doesn’t just play out in the workforce or in the criminal justice system but in the romantic realm. Because fair skin is associated with beauty and status, light-skinned black women are more likely to be married than darker-skinned black women, according to some reports. “We find that the light-skin shade as measured by survey interviewers is associated with about a 15 percent greater probability of marriage for young black women,” [said researchers who conducted a study called “Shedding ‘Light’ on Marriage.”](http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/07/10/AR2009071000022_2.html)

Light skin is so coveted that whitening creams continue to be best sellers in the U.S., Asia and other nations. Mexican-American women in Arizona, California and Texas have reportedly suffered mercury poisoning after turning to whitening creams to bleach their skin. In India, popular [skin-bleaching lines](http://racerelations.about.com/b/2009/09/14/dark-skin-still-considered-troublesome.htm) target both women and men with dark skin. That skin-bleaching cosmetics have persisted for decade’s signals the enduring legacy of colorism.