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English 9-?

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The Skin We’re In

**What I Already Knew/ What I Wanted to Know**

“Amor, por que todo el mundo aqui piensa que soy Mexicano?” After working only a week, my husband Jose came home asking me this question: “Dear, why does everyone here think I am Mexican?” I tried to explain to him why I thought his coworkers assumed he is Mexican instead of Costa Rican. America has been dubbed the “melting pot” of the world. Unfortunately, because of our relationship with our neighbor to the South, many Americans assume that because someone appears Hispanic that they are automatically from Mexico.

Before Jose even arrived in America, I knew he would probably encounter some racial prejudices and cultural misunderstandings. I encountered this when I was studying in Costa Rica, which is where I met Jose in 2005. “Hola, Gringa,” was a phrase I often heard. Without even hearing me talk or learning more about me, many Ticos (nickname for Costa Ricans) assumed that I was an American based on my appearance.

I need to know why people assume a person’s ethnicity solely from appearance. Will people ever be able to look beyond appearances instead of making assumptions? As Americans, will we ever understand that just because someone looks Hispanic that they may be from one of over twenty other Spanish-speaking countries?

Based on my own experiences, I have formed a research question: *Why do so many people think Jose is Mexican even though he is Costa Rican?* After doing research, I hope to find the answer to this important question.

**The Story of My Search**

Before I even begin researching, I find it beneficial to brainstorm so I can get my ideas out on paper. In class we did some brainstorming as a group first under the topic “...prejudice obscures the truth,” which is a major theme in the drama we read last month titled *Twelve Angry Men.* After this brainstorming session, I had a clearer idea of what I might want to look into further. All research must begin with a question, and in order to stay interested, I knew it would be important to pick a topic close to me. Initially I wanted to find out why so many people think my husband is from Mexico instead of Costa Rica. It is obvious to me now the major reason people respond this way toward him is due to his skin color. As I began digging deeper on the topic of skin color and connotations of different skin tones, I realized that my research question expanded and morphed into something much different.

I began my research on the databases, which I have been told is the most credible place to find information since Elkhart Central purchases the rights to use them. We were told to look at the Student Resource Center, SIRS, and Opposing Viewpoints first. I began with SIRS. I discovered that if I put too many words into the search box, then only a few articles would come up. The more general I was, the more articles I had to chose from. The first keyword search I did was “Stereotypes.” Even before I finished typing out the entire word, possible matches appeared, so I went with “Stereotypes, Psychological.” There were a few interesting articles, but nothing that really seemed to help me regarding my topic. However, there are some really great features to this database. For example, especially since we must do a Works Cited page, many of the articles had the MLA citation already created at the bottom of the page, so all I had to do was copy and paste it into a Word document. It made that part of the process uncomplicated! I also found out that under each article were suggestions of other keyword searches. Sometimes they yielded interesting results, and other times, not so much.

After doing similar searches on the two other databases, I found myself returning to SIRS, and I decided to try searching something a bit different. I typed in the word “Skin” and again got several ideas. Clicking on “Skin color,” I was intrigued by all of the different articles that appeared, and this is where my research question began to shift. I found articles on skin bleaching in Jamaica and the class struggles in India due to skin tone. Then I remembered something—I had a similar conversation with my good friend Varuun, who is from Mumbai, India. I decided it might be beneficial to interview him on this topic. In addition, I remember this being an issue Jose and I have discussed before as well. I lived in the city of San Jose, the capital, when I was studying abroad. There was an obvious difference between the people living in the city versus the people living in the more rural areas. That difference was skin tone.

At this point, I realize my research question has morphed into something a bit different, but I am confident I have enough information and resources to begin answering my new question: *What can a person’s skin color reveal about them?* Based on the articles I have found so far, it appears that skin color can put people into groups, which can have negative effects.

**The Search Results**

As a result of my research, I have discovered that people around the world will go to extremes to escape society’s judgment of them. It seems that America is not the only country in the world where one’s outward appearance is being manipulated to fit what society considers “normal.”

Skin bleaching is a growing epidemic, but it can have negative side effects for the user. According to the article “Skin Bleaching a Growing Problem in Jamaica Slums,” impoverished Jamaicans are turning to the black-market to purchase skin-altering creams. Dermatologists say these products can cause harm to the skin: stretch marks, yellow tinting, allergic reactions, mercury poisoning, disfigurement, and blemishes (McFadden). It is obvious these creams have an array of negative side effects; however, users hope the cream will help them fit into a higher social class. Like Jamaica, skin bleaching has also become a popular practice in India. According to the article “In India, Fairness Is a Growth Industry,” many dark skinned men are hoping a “magic cream” will change their status in life. This is because “...fair skin has long been a symbol of affluence and status...” (Wax). In India it is the women who bring a dowry to the marriage. The more affluent and successful a man appears on the outside, the more likely they will marry into wealth. A lighter skin color may be their only ticket to an improved life. Society creates pressures for people to conform, but is acceptance from others worth body manipulation, which could result in permanent damage?

**My Growth as a Researcher**

I have been researching for quite some time now, but I learn something new each time. For example, I was surprised that once I began researching, my research question ended up changing. I was so dead set on finding the answer to my original question, but as I searched around more on the databases, my interests began to change, which was kind of a cool thing! I still believe brainstorming is one of the best things to do prior to actually beginning any kind of writing; it always seems to help me get my ideas out there first. I also learned the importance of proofreading because I tend to miss little details, such as removing vague words when they are not needed. In the end, I learned a lot about my topic and I feel like my question was answered.

**Works Cited**

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