

DISCRIMINATION AND EXCLUSION OF ALBINOS IN NIGERIA: EDUCATIONAL IMPLICATIONS

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Abstract

One of society's severest ways of stigmatizing persons with albinism is by dehumanizing them, which invariably forms the basis for several other horrendous attacks on them. The unimaginable rate at which albinos are unjustly treated tends to have created an atmosphere of panic for these 'at-risk' persons, making them live in unbridled state of fear. Apart from their distinctive appearance, a total ignorance about albinism seems to have led to serious ill treatment against them. Yet, this talk about albinos being stigmatized and maltreated in parts of Nigeria sounds like a fable to many. The painful part is that it appears so unnoticed making the problem even more pathetic. However, evidences tend to show that being an albino in Nigeria is often linked with a deep feeling of hopelessness, worthlessness and insignificance just like some other forms of disabilities. In most parts of Nigeria, including Imo State, albinos are treated differently from other people; oftentimes with disgust. This has the tendency to instill intense trauma and anxiety in the albinos themselves and their lives already loaded with the tension of their circumstance, creating continuous feelings of inferiority complex and uneasiness. Stigmatization of people living with albinism has made them face serious unfair treatment especially in the areas of schooling, employment, social relationships, marriage, and so on. The justification for these ill treatments is founded on many superstitious beliefs, notable among which is the false narrative that albinos are cursed specie that brings bad luck to the community. This study therefore is a cursory exposé on the educational implications of discrimination and exclusion of albinos in Nigeria

Key words: Discrimination, Albino, Albinism, Exclusion.

Introduction

Stigmatization of people living with albinism has made them face serious unfair treatment especially in the areas of schooling, employment, social relationships, marriage, and so on. The justification for these ill treatments in Nigeria is founded on many superstitious beliefs. Notable among them is the fact that albinos are believed to be cursed specie that brings bad luck to the community. They are also assumed to be

sterile, subhuman and that their presence in a family portends evil. There is a widely held misconception that certain body parts of albinos posses and can transmit magical powers. Many also accept it as true that albinism is a punishment from the gods or ill luck, and for such beliefs, PLWA are seen as carrying disease and so it is feared that they could infect others with their purported disease.

Albinos seem to be among the most discriminated groups (Obinna, 2017).

Merely seeing an albino creates some form of fear and negative feelings in some people due to the mistaken belief about them. In most parts of Nigeria, some persons believe that albino body parts are effective for rituals; others assume that albinism is a spiritual thing. Attitudes of society towards albinism usually have great impact on persons with albinism; but it is regrettable that these impacts are not usually positive (UNICEF Reports, 2011). Most of the stigma-induced negative attitude towards PLWA is often upheld by assumed societal rules (Under The Same Sun, UTSS, 2016).

Physical threats to the lives of albinos are innumerable. Their condition often makes them easy target for bullying, physical molestation and false accusation and in most cases murder (UNICEF Report, 2011). These dehumanizing practices have given rise to the murder of albinistic persons in some parts of Nigeria, while it has resulted in stigma, misinterpretation and marginalization in almost all other parts. It is this reality, in a present-day world, that must be squarely dealt with (Under the Same Sun, 2016).

Statement of the Problem

Stigmatization of albinos comes in various but unclassified forms and it is also not impossible that albinos may experience traumatic experiences as a result of this stigmatization. Situating or categorizing the stigmatization of albinos into various areas within which they occur, seems to have been an issue in research bothering on albinism. It is yet to be ascertained whether previous studies have tried to discuss the educational implications of stigmatizing albinos. This study, which was motivated by real life experiences and evidence-based researches tries to explore the educational implications of stigmatisation of albinos.

Concept of Albino/Albinism

The word “albino” or “albinistic person(s)” refers to the individual living with the condition, albinism describes the condition itself. Albinism is non-transmittable, genetically inherited condition which occurs universally irrespective of gender or ethnicity. It is an anglicized derivative term for the Latin word “albus”, which is white. It therefore refers to a heritable disorder whereby the body of an individual is unable to produce melanin- a photo-protective protein that prevents damage in the skin by absorbing ultraviolet (UV) light in the skin. It is a group of hereditary diseases where melanin biosynthesis is reduced or is absent. Absence of melanin in the skin makes it more prone to sunburn and skin cancer, giving rise to the following tripartite indications– pale skin, light hair and pale iris colour (McBride, 2014; Summers, 2009; and Okulicz, Shah, Schwartz & Janniger, 2003).

Transmission and Genetics of Albinism

Albinism is passed on to children because the defects in the pigment-making genes are transmitted from at least one of the parents. There is a matched set of genes in each cell in the human body; one that comes from each parent. They are a kind of a blueprint because they perform the action of guiding the development of a fetus when there is pregnancy. However, when these pigment-creating genes are incorrect, it results to albinism. The effect is that there will be no pigment, and so the colour of the eye, skin, and hair may become pale (HealthResearchFunding.org, 2015).

The cells of the human body contain genes on which chromosomes are found (threads of genes that are long). Human beings have scores of genes which supply information for growth and development of the body, as well as helping the body stay healthy. The genes

convey information to the cell to create chemical products that are essential, like proteins (realhistoryww.com,n.d). Now, each cell usually contains 46 chromosomes fixed into pairs of twenty three (23). Both parents respectively transfer one of each pair on to the offspring. Of these chromosomes are 22 pairs that are numbered and are referred to as the autosomal chromosomes. The sex chromosomes (X and Y) are contained in the 23rd pair. While the males have an X and a Y (XY) chromosome, the females have two X (XX) chromosomes. Given that the chromosomes appear in paired form, each of the genes has two copies also. However, the genes carried on the sex chromosomes known as X and Y are exempted from this rule (Realhistoryww.com,n.d).

A disparity in a gene which brings about a fault is referred to as pathogenic mutation or variant. Any form of genetic alteration or mutation differently affects the body depending on the extent to which the resulting protein is changed, how essential to the body which that protein is, and how much of that protein is needed in the body. Any health condition caused by a change in the DNA on only one of the gene pairs is called a *dominant mutation*, while *recessive mutation* is when a health condition takes place only on a change in both pairs of the gene (Realhistoryww.com (n.d),).

Classification and Types of Albinism

Most types of albinism result from the biological transfer of genetically recessive genes from both parents of an individual, although some exceptional forms may be inherited from only one parent. There are also other genetic transformations confirmed to be linked with albinism. However, all alterations result to changes in the production of melanin in the body, (Boissy, Nordlund, Vinson, Perry, James,

& Ortonne, 2014) and (John Hopkins Medicine, 2016).

1. Ocular Albinism (OA): As implied in the name, this type of albinism affects the eyes alone and not the skin or hair. It results from an X-linked chromosomal inheritance and so occurs mostly in boys. It is the outcome of a genetic alteration on the X chromosome, almost exclusively occurring among males (Kivi, and Solan, 2015). The skin, hair, and eye colours of persons who have Ocular Albinism are often normal, however their retina, that is the back of their eye, has no colouring. The condition is genetic in nature and associated with insufficient melanin pigment in the iris, the area of the eye that is coloured and the retina, the tissue that is light-sensitive located at the back side of the eye.

2. Oculocutaneous Albinism (OCA): This type of albinism, according to Kivi and Solan (2015) results due to a mutation in one of four specific genes and persons with this type of albinism are faced with skin, eye and hair colour problems. It is the type arising due to a defect in the tyrosinase enzyme that converts tyrosine (an amino acid) into melanin- the chemical that colors human hair, eyes and skin. That is, the type of albinism that affects the hair, eye and skin.

3. Hermansky-Pudlak Syndrome (HPS) is a rare type of albinism; it is caused due to a deficiency in one of eight genes. It may involve bleeding disorders, bruising, lung problems and intestinal disorders. It has a high prevalence rate among those of Puerto Rican descent.

4. Chediak-Higashi Syndrome is another uncommon form of albinism typified by an abnormality in certain types of white blood cells (a defect in white blood cells), reducing resistance to infection

(emedicine.com/derm/topic704.htm.) Its symptoms are almost similar to those of Oculocutaneous Albinism, but it may possibly not affect all skin areas. There is usually blond or brown hair with a silvery sheen; the skin is also usually creamy-white to greyish.

5. Griscelli Syndrome (GS): This is an extremely rare albinism type. It is due to a defect in one of the three genes (emedicine.com/derm/topic926.htm), but may not affect the whole body. Only about 60 known cases of GS is known worldwide since 1978 (The Vision For Tomorrow Foundation, 2015). **Griscelli Syndrome**, like Chediak-Higashi Syndrome is associated with immunodeficiency and may also be linked with neurological problems. GS usually results in death within the first decade of life.

Concept of Stigma and Stigmatisation

Goffman's (1997) explained that someone is stigmatised when that person possesses undesirable qualities which are not within the confines of the usual characteristics within the group he/she is a member of. Such a person is consequently reduced in the minds of the people from a normal and complete human being to a contaminated, reduced person. Dovidio, Major and Crocker, (2000) noted that most descriptions of stigma consist of two essential components; recognizing disparity and devaluation. They further stressed that stigma takes place within social relationships. Consequently then, stigma may not be regarded as residing in the individual, but instead within a particular social environment (Crocker, Major, & Steele, 1998; Hebl & Dovidio, 2005).

Over time, the term stigma has been associated with, and also implied many things. For Goffman, (1963), stigma refers to a mark involving moral inferiority

on the bearer. Even though the idea of physical marks may no longer be common, there seems to have emerged a strong replacement in the form of social markings which have given rise to the social exclusion of persons with Oculocutaneous albinism. Use of derogatory and undignifying languages to address persons with albinism has further exacerbated the matter. Okoro (2006) corroborated this when he noted that persons with albinism are subjected to stigma with language; and these social markings are expressed using the same language.

For Stafford and Scott (1986), stigma refers to a personal attribute different from any social rule. While Crocker et al (1998) pointed out that people who are stigmatized have or are believed to have some devalued characteristics within a social context. Goffman (1963) is believed to have pioneered the concept of stigma which possibly, is the most largely used until present day. In his view, stigma may be perceived as a link between an attribute and a stereotype and is an indication of devalued qualities, disadvantage or weakness. What this implies, according to Fernandes et al (2004) is that stigmatized persons are regarded as people who possess attribute different from those accepted within a given society and so are differently dealt with by the society, who already have misconception and wrong believes about the stigmatized person.

The word *stigma* is traced to the Greeks who, at a time, engraved or carved marks on the bodies of slaves, traitors and criminals so that they can be identified as corrupt or polluted persons that people should keep away from (Goffman, 1963). However, today, stigma is not simply a physical mark but a quality that results in a pronounced social censure - a dishonouring social disparity that gives rise to a stained social identity. Stigmatization takes place on individual,

interpersonal and societal levels (Bos, Pryor, Reeder, & Stutterheim, in press). Pryor and Reeder (2011) put a conceptual model together, that tries to clarify the modern but varied literature on stigma. While expanding on earlier theories, such as those of (Corrigan, 2004; Herek, 2007), this model identifies four interconnected expressions of stigma: *Public stigma*, *Self stigma*, *Stigma by association* and *Structural stigma*.

Public stigma as presented by Pryor and Reeder signifies people's reactions, socially and psychologically, to somebody they perceive as having a stigmatized condition. According to them, Public stigma consists of the cognitive, affective, and behavioral responses of the perceivers (those stigmatizing). In Public stigma, stigmatisation usually arises due to the way people (perceivers) hold their views about persons (targets) possessing the stigmatized condition. This mental imagery of a stigmatized condition may spark off negative behavioral and emotional reaction towards a person being stigmatised (Dijker & Koomen, 2003; Weiner, Perry & Magnusson, 1988).

Self-stigma is a reflection of the psychosocial impact of being a possessor of stigma. It comprises both the anxiety of having been exposed to stigmatization and the probability to internalize the defeatist feelings and beliefs related to the stigmatized state. Stigma has damaging effect on the psychological well-being of the persons being stigmatized (Meyer, 2003; Stutterheim, Pryor, Bos, Hoogendijk, Muris & Schaalma, 2009). When individuals become aware of public or social devaluation associated with their condition, self-stigma may result.

Stigma by association is about the social and psychological attitudes towards persons connected with another who is stigmatized; for instance family and

friends. It also entails the reactions of people towards being linked with someone who is stigmatized. In this case, the person who bears the stigmatized condition is not only the one being stigmatized, but it has impacts on those he/she is associated with. Family members, caregivers or friends are usually devalued because of their relationship with a person who possesses a stigmatized condition (Hebl & Mannix, 2003; Neuberg, Smith, Hoffman, & Russell, 1994).

Structural stigma as explained by Pryor and Reeder, (2011) is the process by which the institutions and ideological systems of a society legitimizes and perpetuates a stigmatized status. Pryor and Reeder averred that these four expressions of stigma are interconnected. Corrigan and Lam (2007) said that it is the ways which institutional and societal ideologies maintain or intensify a stigmatized status. To examine structural stigma therefore calls for examining the social milieu within which the stigma takes place, as well as the internal system that add to structural stigma (Foucault, 1977).

Aspects of Stigmatization of Albinos

Social: Most of the stigma-induced negative attitude towards PLWA is often upheld by assumed societal rules (Under The Same Sun, UTSS, 2016). Social stigmatisation of PLWA is very prevalent and prominent in Nigeria that Oriji (2014) declared that, apart from the effects of albinism on people living with albinism, they equally face social discrimination. Mission Lights (2013) noted likewise that this appears thus because people living with albinism (in Nigeria) have to put up with scapegoat activities, ridicules or suspicions from their peers. The attitude of society towards albinism as pointed out by Dlamini (2015) is most times related to those experienced by other disabled and minority group. Such attitudes Dlanmini noted, include fear of the unknown,

prejudice based on appearance and lack of understanding.

Economic: Albinos equally face serious economic challenges as a result of stigmatisation. Loss of self-esteem for instance, makes them feel inferior, and when this happens, it becomes difficult for them to move out and search for a living. This degenerates into a cyclical suffering for them. The situation is even so pathetic that Richard Kelani, leader of The Albino Network Association (TANA) lamented that many albinos have lost their jobs due to high rate of discrimination, while others who are eligible to be employed were deprived of such opportunities just because of their skin colour.

Cultural: Cultural stigmatisation of albinos consists mostly in the wrong and false beliefs held about them. Under the Same Sun (UTSS, 2016) averred that stigmatisation of people living with albinism most times does not only happen because they have pale skin and low vision issues; but because of false beliefs and mystification regarding their entire albinistic state. These beliefs and myths have been held for centuries, and still continue to thrive. They are seen in cultural attitudes and practices against albinos around the world. The belief that people living with albinism are ghosts and possess supernatural powers, for instance, lends credence to this fact.

Physical: Physical threats to the lives of albinos are innumerable. Their condition often makes them easy target for bullying, physical molestation and false accusation and in most cases murder (UNICEF Report, 2011). These dehumanizing practices have given rise to the murder of albinistic persons in some parts of Nigeria, while it has resulted in stigma, misinterpretation and marginalization in almost all other parts. It is this reality, in a

present-day world, that must be squarely dealt with (Under the Same Sun, 2016).

Psychological: Psychological stigmatisation faced by albinos also causes them severe trauma and stress. Certain unfriendly attitudes towards them make them feel inferior and worthless. According to the UNICEF Report (2011), such degrading remarks as taunting, shunning and name-calling, are the major forms of unfairness to which albinos are exposed, and which bears lots of psychological torture. For instance, they are being given such names like, Afin (Yoruba), Anyali, (Igbo), Mbakara-Obot-Ikot (Efik), Eyaen (Bini), Ugobu (Idoma), Zebia (Hausa) (Okoro, 1975). These acts transcend different locations, gender or age. Emotional response to albinism may likely occur all through life because of the many frustration and challenges which the condition presents (Dlamini, 2015). Globally, most albinistic people have been victimized because they are seen as an odd group that does not fit into the mainstream (Albinism Worldwide, n.d.). This detrimental status accorded to them, has resulted in very derogatory mindset and pervasive stigma coming from members of their society and culture.

Theory of Stigmatization and Labelling (Erving Goffman 1963)

Goffman (1963) made a clarification on how stigmatized persons manage what he called their "Spoiled identity", which implies that the stigma prevents the Stigmatized from being completely accepted in the society. This disqualification gives rise to the stigmatization of such affected person. This concept of "spoiled identity" is used by Goffman to explain a characteristic feature that makes an individual experience stigma.

Goffman contends that stigma is a relationship of devaluation wherein a

person is disqualified from complete social acceptance. His study centred on the challenges brought about by stigma both for individuals and groups, as well as on the strategies they employ to cope with it. There are various forms which stigma can take; including physical deformity, documented evidences (example a prison records), or contextual cases (such as associating with “bad gang”). It can also arise by default as ascribed identity (e.g. father is a liar, therefore son could equally become one), or one can achieve it (by becoming a delinquent). Consequently, stigma concerns the application of a label to depict a person’s perceived (or otherwise) degenerate, non-conformist, or just different behaviour.

The crux of Goffman’s definition of stigma lies in its applicability as a conceptual framework, a prototypic blue print for the analysis of stigmatizing illness conditions. Stigmatization appears in the medical context very often. It can be apparent for patients with various kinds of infectious diseases or for those with physical deformities. It can also arise because of chronic illness or from one’s medical record, which may prevent future employment. Inherent in the process of stigmatization is the issue of social control. Stigmatizing patients is one of society’s ways of controlling their actions and activities. In some cases, the label is never removed, thereby making such stigmatized person never to be fully accepted in the society. Even in medical institutions like hospitals, stigma also influences the attitude toward patients. People with certain illness are usually stigmatized by the health workers. In some cases, patients are often ignored when asking questions or seeking to clarify information regarding their condition or treatment.

Educational Implications of Stigmatization

In addition to external societal influences, the idea of stigmatization of albinos has very strong implication on their educational attainment. There is always the tendency for emotional responses to albinism to occur almost all through the life of a person with albinism due to the many problems inherent in the condition and the numerous societal influences (National Organization for Albinism and Hypopigmentation, 2015). The existence of albinos among other students with dark skin is usually fraught with assorted kinds of feelings; at first, as migrants and then as weird beings. An albino or even a white person seen among any black neighbourhood often generates questions that are most times not answered without prejudice (Ikuomola, 2015). Therefore, for albinos in school, several explanations abound regarding this purported abnormality and in most cases; such explanations are justified by folklores and myths (Blankenberg, 2000; Baker, Lund, Nyathi, & Taylor, (2010).

Most times, teachers themselves do not help matters. Rather than being friendly and showing understanding, they will rather perpetrate the discrimination of albinos either by taunting them or screaming at them in class. Most student-albinos have described their stigmatization and labelling as painful. Such degrading names as over ripe pawpaw, foreigner, black-English man, etc were often used, although in some cases as a humorous tease, while at other times during a heated conversation or dispute (Ikuomola, 2015), but these negatively affect their education. The albinos themselves described cases like these as disturbing and distracting to their educational pursuit. It is believed that albinos are among the least educated and most marginalized of all vulnerable groups in Nigeria (UNICEF Report, 2011). They are often excluded, derided, uncared for

and unloved by teachers and fellow students. In Nigeria, there seems to be no empirically-based research evidence that keep record of all these, which makes the matter worse.

People's mental perception about albinism is usually a conjured-up picture of something mysterious. There is good number of fresh reports indicating that these wrong beliefs, which ultimately play out in form stigmatization and prejudice, have greatly caused poor performance and overall educational achievement to persons with albinism. Attitudes of most schools towards albinistic persons have been noted as a major contributor to their poor educational and social adjustment. There is often no difference in societal attitude towards albinism and those with other physical disabilities, due to the role physical look plays in formation of attitude (NOAH, 2004b; Vander Kolk & Bright, 1983).

Therefore the distinctive quality of albinism that permits some schools to treat albinos the way they do is the fact that their genetic condition itself is mystified. Whereas these dehumanizing treatments have given rise to the improper or inadequate education of persons with albinism, it has also manifested in marginalization, and this tends to be the most common in most parts of the globe

Under the Same sun (n.d.). It is important to observe that these perilous taunts of albinos in school, does not just happen because of their white skin colour and poor vision; but more because of mistaken belief about their entire condition.

Due to mistaken beliefs about albinism and what causes it, sometimes fellow students tend to avoid contact with them. During some school activities, they are often segregated, thereby reinforcing the already prevalent mistaken belief concerning albinism. The outcome of all these is withdrawal, which makes them lose their self esteem, become frustrated, and possibly drop out of school. In some cases too, they are starved of love, acceptance and care; sometimes even by family members.

School children dramatizing the need to accept an albino



<http://albino.foundation.org> (2014)

Conclusion

This study tried to explore the stigmatization educational implications of stigmatizing albinos. It has become worrisome that albinos are silently, but profoundly stigmatized in our society. It was discovered that various aspects of stigmatization of albinos occur; socially, economically, culturally, physically and psychologically. The major spur to these dehumanising acts and stigmatization against them may be attributed to unfounded superstitious beliefs and ignorance which now pose severe threat to their lives.

Recommendations

This study makes the following recommendations

1. As people who have an important role to play in the lives of students with albinism, teachers and educators need to be well informed on the need to accept albinistic children in their classes and schools and treat them as fairly as every other student.
2. The idea of violence and discrimination against albinos should be made a criminal offence by the Government.
3. Special teaching and learning facilities should be provided for albinistic children.
4. In the event that they are put in regular schools, teachers should pay special and particular attention to them.
5. Parents and families of children with albinism should be educated to accept their children with albinism and understand that albinism is genetic and not supernatural.

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