# Study finds diversity of skin color and skin tone lacking in sex education textbooks

January 13 2022

Credit: CC0 Public Domain

In recent years, attention to diversity of images in visual media—TV, movies, stock photos, children's books and more—has increased. But according to a new Indiana University study, at least one area still seriously lacks representation of Black and Brown people: Sex education.

With support from IU's Racial Justice Research Fund, IU researchers Yael R. Rosenstock Gonzalez, Deana Williams and Debby Herbenick investigated skin color and skin tone diversity in anatomical diagrams

within contemporary human sexuality textbooks. Rosenstock Gonzalez and Williams are doctoral students in the Center for Sexual Health Promotion, a research center based in the IU School of Public Health-Bloomington. Herbenick is the center's director and a professor in the school. Their findings were recently published online in the *Journal of Sex & Marital Therapy*.

The research team found that only 1.1% of diagrams represented dark skin tones, while 83.5% represented light skin tones. Their findings are based on analysis of skin tone and skin color diversity in 182 anatomical diagrams and images from eight contemporary, college-level human sexuality textbooks.

"Our findings demonstrate a pattern of staggeringly uneven representation of darker skin tones in comparison to lighter skin tones," Williams said. "And in some images where skin colors commonly associated with Black and Brown people were presented, the hues were noticeably washed out or lightened with white shading."

"Sex research and education materials—including human sexuality textbooks—rarely reflect racial or skin tone diversity and inclusion in their anatomical imagery," Rosenstock Gonzalez said.

The most frequent skin color coded was white with pink undertones, which comprised 42.3% of the anatomical images. The second most prevalent color was pinkish brown, at 29.1%.

While skin color and skin tone alone are not necessarily definitive indicators of race, they are what we use to quickly categorize individuals, the researchers said. Depicting light skin tones as normative perpetuates not only racism but "colorism," which privileges light skin over dark skin.

"Racism and colorism perpetuate body ideals that have implications for self-esteem, disordered eating, and mental health and well-being, as well as sexual and reproductive health," Herbenick said. "Our findings demonstrate the perpetuation of colorism within sexuality education, and how colorism becomes part of institutional structures and systems of formal education."

The researchers note that such skin color bias has a negative impact on the health outcomes of people with dark skin tones, who may avoid or delay sexuality education opportunities or clinical care if they do not see themselves represented in recommended resources, thereby endangering their sexual and reproductive health.

"Sexuality authors and educators as well as sexuality textbook editors and publishers need to recognize the ways that white supremacy culture affects sexuality education materials and reevaluate how we can create richer, more holistic representations," Rosenstock Gonzalez said.

**More information:** Yael R. Rosenstock Gonzalez et al, Skin Color and Skin Tone Diversity in Human Sexuality Textbook Anatomical Diagrams, *Journal of Sex & Marital Therapy* (2021). DOI: 10.1080/0092623X.2021.1989533

Provided by Indiana University

Citation: Study finds diversity of skin color and skin tone lacking in sex education textbooks (2022, January 13) retrieved 18 April 2024 from https://phys.org/news/2022-01-diversity-skin-tone-lacking-sex.html

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.