

White Children: Where Did They Come From?

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Ever wonder why we're different colors—why some of us are black, some white, some creamy chocolate, like my coffee sitting here beside me? Of course you have, unless you're a racist. Racists lack the wonder gene. Well, here it is, you don't have to wonder any longer. But be forewarned, it's Darwin all over again (sorry you evangelical Christians out there), and of course it's an out-of-Africa story.

People who study these things tell us that hominids evolved in Africa, during the Pleistocene, then moved out. Not everyone of course. I would bet only the ones who had to—because no one moves voluntarily like that, or didn't back then. Then, through eons of such migrations, skin color began to lighten. Why? Answer: natural selection, nature's winnowing process.

The sun emits something called UV rays. (I'll be the first to admit, I know little about UV rays.) As it turns out, there are several types of UV rays—three to be exact: UVA, -B, and -C (these are arbitrary labels I'm told, mnemonic aides), ranging from weakest to strongest, from most benign to most lethal (from our own biological perspective of course). Of the three, we don't have to worry about UVC—it never reaches the ground. And thank god, because that would kill us. Well, when UVA and -B hit us, what happens is, they disturb the skin's molecules, shaking them, if you will, which over time can cause skin damage (which is what “getting a nice tan” *actually* means). Remember that woman who was accused of putting her child in a tanning booth? Her skin (the mother's), that's the work of UV rays.

But UV rays are not morally evil. They do have a positive role to play in our biologies. Specifically, they activate the synthesis of vitamin D, and the result of this is healthy bones.

Now back to skin color and Africa. The sun is strongest at the equator, something we all learned way back when, and dark skin is best suited to deal with this—something many of us may not have learned—because it better reflects light, including light in the ultra-violate range. Thus in Africa dark skin was favored through natural selection.

So how do African bodies get the UV rays they need for bone growth and health? Answer: UVB, the stronger of the two types. UVB is strong enough to penetrate dark skin, doing much of the work of synthesizing vitamin D. This would be disastrous for a person with white skin however, because they have no reflection-protection.

Now this is interesting: African babies are born with lighter skin than their parents, *and* become darker as they mature. What's going on *here*? Well, all children, African or otherwise, need larger amounts of vitamin D in their little bodies in order to accomplish bone growth—thus the lighter skin in African babies. With lighter skin they can absorb greater quantities of both UVA and UVB. Then as they mature, and growth slows, their skin becomes darker, for protection.

Well, when these African populations moved north out of Africa the individuals with darker skin were suddenly at risk because the sun's rays were too weak and their dark skin too efficient as UV filters. Thus, these individuals began suffering from vitamin D deficiency and were eventually selected out. Those with lighter skin then began to dominate, because their skin was able to “drink in” the weaker amounts of UV rays still available, which is why European populations today are white. Notice too that the further north one travels in Europe, populations become even whiter—with one exception: Eskimos (always a fly in the ointment.) Well, the explanation for this is diet—fish, whale, and such, which are already rich in vitamin D, so Eskimos could remain dark yet still survive.

Needless to say, the scientist who put all the pieces of this puzzle together were ecstatic. Not only had they finally solved the riddle of skin color variance, they had explained away racism!

Had they? Racism isn't about skin color, not fundamentally, it's about belonging—who belongs, and who doesn't. You can explain away racism to your colleagues and friends maybe—who, in the case of these scientists, probably aren't racist anyway—but you're never going to explain away unfounded, or unfair, prejudice—because it *isn't* unfounded, even though, yes, it can be profoundly unfair. Racism based on skin color (racism can be based on many things) is simply group preference, a way to foster and maintain group cohesiveness, and just another form of prejudice. What needs to be explained is what *purpose* prejudice actually plays in human societies, in spite of the fact it might be more difficult now to base it on skin color, at least for many of us. It therefore seems that favoring one's own group is *not* a prejudgment, but a *post-judgment*, a rational choice, because there is safety in numbers: Aristotle saw it, Hobbes said it, and we practice it. Favoring one's own group promotes survival, plain and simple, even though this fact remains one of the deepest sources of our unhappiness. Alas, every coin has two sides.

Well, that's my take on it. Time for me to put on some sun block and cut the grass.