

## Coloring the Narrative: How to Use Storytelling to Create Social Change in Skin Tone Ideals

Case Writers: Ayesha McAdams-Mahmoud and Eric Weinberger

<https://www.hsph.harvard.edu/striped/teaching-cases>

Two immigrants from Nigeria (Rebecca Obafemi) and Thailand (Piti Bunyasarn) arrive in Hamilton, capital of the fictitious U.S. state of Columbia, and one issue on their minds is the shade of their skin. For as long as they can remember—like millions of others in their home countries and for many in other countries—the message for all genders, but particularly felt by women, is that the lighter their skin, the better their prospects: They are more likely to be seen as affluent, powerful, educated, socially elevated, and desirable with the “help” of creams and soaps that lighten their dark skin. This is the message of the relentless and aggressive advertising they have grown up with, which made it seem normal, easy, and natural for dark-skinned women and men to pursue a lighter color than the one they were born with. This messaging goes back still farther to an unresolved racist legacy of colonialism, where locals with lighter skin tones were cast as closer to those at the top of the pile: namely, white Europeans.

The phenomenon of “colorism” is now fairly well understood in the U.S., but far less so is the problem of skin lightening (really, it’s “skin bleaching”) and its associated health risks. In many countries, there are few restrictions on the sale or handling of what is basically a dangerous carcinogen. In this way, the skin bleaching industry has many parallels with the UV tanning industry: Although they may differ in terms of target audience (with the former targeting people of color, and the latter largely targeting white populations), both are part of a multi-billion dollar global beauty industry that peddles toxic and carcinogenic products and profits from racist, sexist beauty ideals with vastly inadequate governmental regulation.

Meanwhile in Hamilton, Pastor Boateng has expressed support for loving the person “that you are” and has rejected skin lightening, while members of his congregation have expressed worry about the impact of skin bleaching on their loved ones’ health. Rebecca’s sons belong to a youth group at the same church and are pursuing a year-long project to promote “healthy living” for their community. However, the confusion and stress are significant for immigrants like Rebecca and Piti who have used these products for most of their lives. In the case narrative, two health communications professionals are invited to teach the youth group storytelling methods in service of a larger public health strategy to make a difference in their community.

### **Here is an illustrative excerpt:**

[**Scene:** Sally Kreisberg, a physician who focuses on patient education, meets with a church youth group that is pursuing a year-long project to promote “healthy living” for the community. In this scene, they play a game called Opera...]

Sally held up a tube of *Fair and Lovely* cosmetics; the humming and murmurs suggested that she had struck something.

“My mother uses something like this,” one of the children said.

“My sister,” said another.

“Show me how you see it used each day,” Sally said.

The girl went to the center of the circle formed by the chairs, and took the tube.

“I feel pretty,” the girl said.

“Opera!” Sally shouted. “Big emotions, big demonstration. What are you *feeling*?”

The girl started to exaggerate her motions, as if she were a vain or bedazzled princess, and she shouted, in a kind of singing voice, “I feel pretty!” Many of the children laughed.

“And what do you feel, Isaac?” Sally turned to her host, Rebecca’s son.

“I feel nervous. I have seen my mother do this in the bathroom. But I think she is pretty already and my father says, ‘We are all one color in the family and for you that’s not enough?’”

It was the children’s decision to devise their own “healthy living” project and they had an idea: a short play “about health,” as Isaac put it, in which each child would perform a tiny skit that linked with the next skit. “We are demonstrating bad habits,” Isaac said.

One of the performers did the bathroom skin-lightening skit from the Opera game to general applause and laughter. One member of the audience, however, was unhappy...

### Target audience

Graduate students in public health, community-based research, gender and health, adolescent/young adult health, mental health, communications, racial disparities, or health policy.

### Learning objectives

The **public health learning objectives** specific to preventing health risks facing product users:

1. Describe the public health threats associated with trends in use of skin-lightening products.
2. Describe how cosmetic skin-lightening corporate messaging creates media environments that reinforce body image pressures and standards of beauty for girls and young women – and increasingly, for boys and men -- and for society at large.
3. Identify counter-narrative strategies for disrupting dominant narratives about skin tone ideals.
4. Demonstrate skills in media advocacy and strategic storytelling techniques by creating a media- and storytelling-based campaign in response to the skin-bleaching discourse described in the case.

### Teaching components

- **Teaching case narrative:** a 16-page fictitious story about a group of individuals who experience and seek to confront colorism in their community. Includes synopsis and examples of real-world campaigns involving the skin-lightening industry.
- **Technical documents** about using storytelling as a strategy for social change.
- **Peer reviewed and news articles** about colorism (industry, history, and impact).
- **Pre-discussion homework:** adopt the role of one fictitious character and develop a story-based strategy (i.e., community intervention) that reframes the dominant narrative to facilitate social change. Draw inspiration from real-world advocacy campaigns to describe the primary campaign message, method of distribution, plan for community engagement, and an impact evaluation strategy.
- **Teaching note:** a suggested lesson plan, which can be modified to meet course design needs.
  - **PowerPoint mini-lecture:** a brief introduction to colorism and strategic storytelling.
  - **Discussion questions:** to review the fictitious story, discuss impact on health, and identify assumptions and opportunities for intervention.
  - **Group assignment:** adopt the roles of the fictitious characters to develop a storytelling approach to target skin bleaching. Include: vision and campaign goal-setting; identify targets and audiences; construct and deconstruct the narratives; define use of your story; design primary campaign narrative; define your intervention; propose an evaluation strategy. Present the strategy to others and then engage in personal reflection.