

The Continual Significance of Skin Color: An Exploratory Study of Latinos in the Northeast

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Previous studies have shown that skin color matters for Latinos' life chances. Most of these studies have focused on Latinos in the Southwest, specifically Mexican and Chicano males. Using the 1994 Boston Social Survey Data, this study examines the effects of skin color for Latinos in the Northeast, specifically Puerto Rican and Dominican men and women. This exploratory study suggests that having dark skin negatively affects wages for men; however, this was not the case for females in the sample.

Differences in physical appearance, most notably skin color, hair texture and color, body size and shape, and facial features, have marked racial and ethnic differences and differentially affect the life chances of individuals within different groups. Historically, White colonialists have used skin color as a marker of status. Whiteness was considered superior to the dark-skinned indigenous population of Latin America and to the African slaves they brought with them (Murguía & Telles, 1996). Existing research on phenotype differences among minority groups in the United States, specifically African Americans and Latinos, has shown that in general, lighter skinned or more European featured (i.e. thin lips, aquiline nose, blue eyes, blond and straighter hair) individuals do better than darker skinned individuals of the same group. According to some studies, light-complexioned African Americans are perceived as more attractive and fare better economically and educationally than their dark-skinned counterparts (Hughes & Hertel, 1990; Keith & Herring, 1991; Russell, Wilson, & Hall, 1992). Although the Latino population in the United States is made up of groups of many different national origins, much of the research examining phenotype for Latinos has focused on Mexican and Chicano men in the Southwest. Because Chicanos are primarily a mix of Indian and European ancestry, they vary in skin tones from very light



to very dark and with varying degrees of indigenous Native American physical features. The darker skinned Latinos with indigenous features had lower socioeconomic status, received lower earnings, and had less schooling than their lighter skinned, European-looking counterparts (Arce, Murguía, & Frisbie, 1987; Murguía & Telles, 1996; Telles & Murguía, 1990). Like African Americans, some Mexicans in the United States have suffered from racism due to stratification by color.

However, less attention has been focused on another significant segment of Latinos who are mostly from the Caribbean and residing in the Northeast: Puerto Ricans, Dominicans, Cubans, and other Latin Americans whose homelands border the Atlantic coastline. Latinos in the Northeast represent one of the largest and fastest growing populations. In the 1990s, the New York metropolitan area has seen the second largest increase in the number of Latinos in the United States (Frey, 1998), and Latinos in Massachusetts grew faster (in absolute numbers) than any other racial/ethnic group. They are currently the largest minority group in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts (The Mauricio Gastón Institute, 1992). Because Latinos from the Caribbean are a multiracial community from Spanish, Indian, and African origins, they vary even more so in their racial identities and display a complex array of phenotype characteristics. Latinos with African ancestry are sometimes mistaken by the Anglos as being African American with little acknowledgment of their ethnicity or "Latinoness" (Dominguez, 1986; Santiago, 1989). Although it is clear that a darker phenotype has negative consequences for Mexican Americans, the effects of phenotype on groups such as Puerto Ricans and Dominicans is not well known. The purpose of this exploratory study is to examine how skin color affects a group of Latinos in the Northeast.

Phenotype and Its Effects

Using the 1979 National Chicano Survey (the only major data survey at that time to focus on Latinos and ask questions regarding skin color), various studies have found that phenotype does matter. A study by Arce and colleagues (1987) found that Mexican Americans with a European physical appearance had higher socioeconomic status than Mexican Americans with an indigenous Native American physical appearance. Their results also showed evidence that phenotype differences have influenced life chances for Chicanos in past generations, as demonstrated by fathers' and mothers' schooling and occupational prestige. Using the same data set, Telles and Murguía (1990) found that Mexican American males with a dark and Native American phenotype received significantly lower earnings than those with a

lighter and more European phenotype. A third study by Murguía and Telles (1996) found that light-skinned Mexican Americans had about 1.5 more years of schooling than darker Chicanos. This was especially true before World War II and among those schooled in Texas. The authors note,

We found a system of both categorical racial discrimination (exemplified by the U.S. system) and continuum racial discrimination (characterized by the Mexican system). We believe that this racial system exists even today. Specifically, people have paid a penalty for being Mexican, and some have paid an even greater penalty for being both Mexican and dark and Indian looking. (Murguía & Telles, 1996, p. 287)

Research in the health sciences has found that phenotype is related to rates of depression (Codina & Montalvo, 1994). Their study found that U.S.-born and raised Chicano men with darker and more Indian phenotypes, in particular, suffered high rates of depression regardless of education, family income, and their proficiency in the Spanish or English language. These studies have made it clear that skin color matters for Chicano men in the Southwest.

I expected to find similar results for Latinos in the Northeast who were primarily from Puerto Rico and the Dominican Republic. Like their Mexican/Chicano(a) counterparts, Puerto Ricans and Dominicans have faced similar discrimination due to their immigrant or “otherness” status. In fact, research studying Puerto Ricans on the island has shown that blacks and dark-skinned individuals have suffered discrimination (Betances, 1972; Gordon, 1949; Sagrera, 1973). In the 1990s, the continued poverty and discrimination facing Puerto Ricans and Dominicans in New York City have also been well documented (Grasmuck, 1997; Torres, 1995).

But how does skin color influence the chances of these groups on the East Coast? Do lighter skinned Latinos benefit from their physical appearance? Is a dark Latino with African features at more or less of a disadvantage than a dark person of Mexican heritage with indigenous Native American features? In addition, how does skin color affect Latinas? Previous studies have only had men in their data sets, yet Latinas are rapidly entering the workforce. To investigate these issues, this research uses a sample of Boston Latinos that classifies the respondents according to skin color and measures their socioeconomic status.

Method

The data for this analysis comes from the Boston Social Survey Data of Urban Inequality as part of the Multi-City Study of Urban Inequality

(MCSUI). The MCSUI is a four-city study (other cities include Detroit, Atlanta, and Los Angeles) designed to survey racial attitudes, labor-market standing, and housing segregation (see Johnson, Oliver, & Bobo, 1994). The survey contains 759 variables ranging from basic demographics to very specific racial attitude questions to social relationships and neighborhood activities. Conducted in 1993 and 1994, the Boston survey consists of 1,820 adult individual interviews, of which 703 were self-identified Latinos. The sample used for this study consists of respondents who reported themselves as Latina/o, were part of the labor force, and for whom information was available for all variables. Ultimately, the total sample consisted of 354 respondents, with 155 men and 199 women.

Interviews were conducted face-to-face by interviewers of various racial/ethnic groups. Interviews with respondents lasted an average of 1 hour and 48 minutes. Depending on the respondent's preference, interviews were conducted in either Spanish (47%) or English. As in most other studies using skin color, the skin color variable was based on interviewer ratings after the interview was completed. The interviewer was asked to code the respondent as dark, medium, or light based on his or her visual estimation. No training on determining skin color was given to the interviewer; it was solely based on observation. There were no statistically significant differences between skin color and the language of the interview.

It should also be noted that only skin color was coded on all respondents, not physical attributes such as hair texture or facial features. It is difficult to measure the actual precision of this variable because no other instrument such as a spectrophotometer was used on the respondent, and except for medical studies, this method is rarely used. Admittedly, this variable is problematic in nature, because exact reliability is hard to prove. However, interviewer ratings have proved sufficient in other studies (Arce et al., 1987; Ransford, 1970). One recent study of Brazilians (Telles & Lim, 1998) found that interviewer classification was a "more appropriate method for determining racial inequality because of the perceptions of others about one's race weigh more heavily than self-classification in determining labor market outcomes" (p. 473). In other words, it is the interviewer's classification or the perception of others rather than one's own perception that matters in measuring racial discrimination. If we are to view skin color as a socially constructed dimension of race and ethnic stratification, then the perception of the interviewer, although subjective, might constitute a good measure. Other studies in the United States have also shown that because appearances within racial groups vary, racial self-definition might not coincide with the classification made by others (Hahn, Mulinare, & Teutsch, 1992; Rodriguez, 1974; Twine, 1995).

Results

Table 1 presents the mean values of skin color by socioeconomic indicators and personal characteristics, and shows differences in these means across skin color weighted by the poststratification nonresponse adjusted person weight (PADJWGT) adjusted to distribution in the 1990 census. Lighter skinned Latinos had more education, owned their homes at higher rates, were more likely to be married, and used Spanish more often as a language for communication than their darker skinned counterparts. However, only hourly wage (the natural log) was found to be statistically significant at the $p = .10$ level. This level of significance, although lower than what would be conventionally reported, still captures a trend in the negative direction of this exploratory study.

Given this preliminary analysis, it seems that skin color does matter for economic factors for this sample of Latinos. To test this more rigorously and to examine whether skin color affects life chances, an earnings equation is used to measure the degree of labor market discrimination. Following the approach of Telles and Murguía (1990) on Chicano men and phenotype effects, I used similar equations to measure the differences in earnings that are related to individual human capital characteristics. The assumption is that differences in income between phenotype groups that cannot be explained by the variables known to relate to human capital and thus higher earnings (i.e., education, age, language ability) are either a consequence of discrimination or an unmeasured difference in the attributes of members of different groups (Becker, 1971).

The dependent variable hourly wage (the natural log) is used to measure earnings. Logarithmic transformations help bring in high-income outliers (although this is not really an issue for this population) and has been used in prior studies on Latino earnings (for further discussion of statistical techniques, see Bohara & Davila, 1992; Telles & Murguía, 1992). Table 2 shows the results of a regression model using a logarithmic earnings function. The first model includes both men and women. Skin color, education, citizenship, the dummy variable for sex (male = 1), age, marriage, union membership, and industry variables (the omitted category is public administration) are all significant. As in previous studies, these results show that dark skin continues to have a negative impact on earnings when controlling for other human capital variables. However, when the sample is disaggregated by sex, we find that whereas dark skin continues to be significant and negative for Latinos, this is not the case for Latinas. For Latinas in this sample, only union membership and industry variables are significant, whereas skin color, marriage, and union membership are significant for Latinos.

Table 1. Mean Values and Significance Tests of Skin Color by Selected Characteristics

Variables	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Means by Skin Color			<i>F</i>
			Light	Medium	Dark	
Hourly Wage (log)	2.19	0.41	2.30	2.12	2.20	2.24*
Education	11.00	3.24	12.00	10.41	10.74	0.27
Education outside of United States	0.84	0.68	0.93	0.79	0.83	0.80
Home ownership	0.37	0.48	0.68	0.24	0.18	0.44
Spanish usage	0.94	0.24	0.98	0.96	0.80	2.12
Citizen of United States	0.69	0.46	0.74	0.62	0.78	1.22
Age	34.50	9.68	33.35	35.69	33.43	1.24
Marriage	0.66	0.47	0.78	0.68	0.39	0.48
Union membership	0.33	0.47	0.39	0.33	0.24	0.76
Contact with minorities in workforce	0.52	0.50	0.61	0.41	0.67	0.29
(<i>N</i>)	(354)		(106)	(186)	(62)	

NOTE: weighted by PADJWGT, the poststratification nonresponse adjusted person weight adjusted to distribution in the 1990 census.

* $p < .10$.

The nonsignificance of skin color for Latinas may be attributed to several factors that can only be partially examined with the current data set. Although the significance of education would seem to support a human capital versus color bias thesis, the significance of industry type suggests a more complicated account. Latinas are highly concentrated in two industries, manufacturing and professional services (43% and 34%, respectively). Although the Boston Social Survey does not provide detailed occupational information, other research using Census data found that among Latinas in the Northeast, many were employed as factory workers, office cleaners, and other low-skilled jobs (Gómez & Levitt, 1997). These jobs, situated in manufacturing and professional services are also low paying. Consequently, for Latinas, the effect of skin color might be muted due indirectly to the narrower variability in their salaries as a direct result of their concentrations in secondary tier, low-wage jobs (Rodriguez, 1991). In contrast, men have more diversified industry representation and receive higher wages (see Table 3).

Discussion

This exploratory study began with an examination of phenotype for Latinos in the Northeast. Previous studies that focused on Mexicans and Chicano

Table 2. Regression Coefficients and Betas for Models of (LN) Hourly Wages

Variables	All		Men		Women	
	b	B	b	B	b	B
Skin Color						
Medium	-0.023	-0.023	-0.105	0.098	0.040	0.041
Dark	-0.133*	0.104	-0.198*	-0.468	-0.094	-0.072
Education	0.013*	0.086	0.004	0.028	0.017*	0.111
Education outside of						
United States	0.017	0.026	0.031	0.046	0.019	0.030
Spanish usage	0.031	0.013	0.029	0.012	-0.052	0.023
Citizen of United States	0.105*	0.101	0.128	0.118	0.083	0.084
Male	0.130**	0.127				
Age	0.006**	0.125	0.005	0.101	0.005	0.108
Marriage	0.129**	0.125	0.194*	0.181	0.088	0.087
Union membership	0.215**	0.189	0.208**	0.174	0.222**	0.204
Contact with minorities						
in workforce	-0.077	-0.073	-0.117	-0.107	-0.039	-0.038
Industry						
Construction ^a	-0.179	-0.059	-0.392	-0.340		
Manufacturing	-0.370**	-0.337	-0.161	-0.145	-0.557**	-0.515
Transportation	-0.114	-0.045	0.047	0.017	-0.277	-0.200
Wholesale trade ^a	-0.237	-0.069	0.194	0.075		
Retail trade	-0.422**	-0.299	-0.335	-0.254	-0.511**	-0.333
Finance/insurance	-0.076	-0.030	0.050	0.084	-0.187	-0.081
Personal services	-0.402**	-0.269	-0.385	-0.247	-0.424**	-0.297
Professional services	-0.219	-0.180	-0.096	-0.048	-0.326**	-0.322
Constant	1.800		1.946		1.941	
R^2	0.223		0.221		0.266	
Adjusted R^2	0.179		0.118		0.192	
Standard Error	0.461		0.503		0.433	
(N)	(354)		(155)		(199)	

a. For blank cells, N is too small.

* $p < .10$. ** $p < .05$.

men found that phenotype was significant in measuring life chances. Testing this hypothesis for a group of Latinos in the Boston area suggested that dark skin continues to be significant for men. Once controlling for traditional human capital variables, differences in hourly wages persisted between dark-skinned men and the remainder of the male sample. This difference may be attributed to labor market discrimination received by dark-skinned Latino men as it did for Mexican Americans (Telles & Murguía, 1990).

Table 3. Mean Values and Significance Tests of Incomes by Industry and Gender

Industry	Latinos		Latinas	
	<i>M</i> (\$)	% in Industry	<i>M</i> (\$)	% in Industry
Construction	20,961	2	0	0
Manufacturing	16,478	31	15,446	43
Transportation	35,439	6	12,323	1
Wholesale trade	41,868	7	0	0
Retail trade	12,969	27	10,798	7
Finance/insurance	16,474	2	13,085	4
Personal services	16,855	20	5,178	9
Professional services	20,191	5	16,049	34
Public administration	21,372	1	20,529	1
Total <i>M</i>	18,710	100	14,189	100
<i>N</i> (unweighted)		(154)		(199)
<i>F</i>	1.981*		5.075**	

NOTE: weighted by PADJWGT, the poststratification nonresponse adjusted person weight adjusted to distribution in the 1990 census.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

However, this was not the case for women. Although the working Latinas in this sample received substantially less income than their male counterparts, skin color was not a factor. Rather, the type of jobs they were involved in (i.e., manufacturing, personal, and professional services) was significant. The majority of the women in this sample worked in low-paying jobs where there was a concentration of other Latina workers. Consequently, differences in skin color may not matter as much as it would in jobs where there is a more racially diversified workforce.

Finally, it is important to note that overall in this sample, wages are depressed. These Latinos are earning very little irrespective of skin color. As earlier work on Latinos has shown, the complexity of economic restructuring is a complicated story that has affected Latinos in various parts of the country differently (Moore & Pinderhughes, 1993). What is clear from this analysis is that phenotype and gender does matter when investigating differences in earnings. Latino men continue to be hampered in the workforce due to differences in physical appearance. Although this preliminary study did not show significant results of skin color for earnings for Latinas, this may be due to industry concentration. With the continual growth of the Latino population across the United States and the increasing role of Latinas in the labor market, we must be vigilant in exploring variables of race, ethnicity, gender, class,

geographical location, and physical appearance when examining an individual's life chances.

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