
THE SIGNIFICANCE OF SKIN COLOR AMONG AFRICAN AMERICANS AND MEXICAN AMERICANS

Margaret Hunter, Ph.D., Assistant Professor, Department of Sociology, California State University, Dominguez Hills

Walter R. Allen, Ph.D., Professor, Department of Sociology, University of California, Los Angeles

Edward E. Telles, Professor, Department of Sociology, University of California, Los Angeles

Introduction

As W.E.B. Du Bois predicted in his July, 1900 speech before the Pan-African Conference in London, race continues to challenge our society. Du Bois asserted that:

The problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the colour line, the question as to how far differences of race, which show themselves chiefly in the colour of the skin and the texture of the hair, are going to be made hereafter, the basis for denying to over half the world the right of sharing to their utmost ability the opportunities and privileges of modern civilisation (Lewis 1995:639).

What Du Bois did not anticipate, and what for the most part social science has failed to address adequately, is how race in this country would be affected by immigration. Immigration has had profound consequences for how this country thinks about and responds to race. The dramatic demographic increase in cultural, racial and ethnic diversity over the past quarter century—linked with the politicization of race, ethnicity, and culture—has compelled an elaboration of the country's racial construct beyond the historically simple (and never completely accurate) Black-White dichotomy (Almaguer 1994; Omi and Winant 1994). Previous research has shown that a skin color continuum is an important component of how race is conceived and how race determines life chances for two of the largest U.S. minority groups (Keith and Herring 1991; Telles and Murguia 1992). This study seeks to advance our understanding of the complexities of race by taking a comparative look at how skin color, ethnic identity and racial discrimination operate in the lives of African Americans and Mexican Americans.

Over the past twenty years, the study of race in the U.S. has taken a dramatic turn. This trend is perhaps best marked by the publication of William J. Wilson's (1978)

pivotal book *The Declining Significance of Race*. Wilson advances the controversial premise that the place of race in society had changed in fundamental ways so that now, unlike before, the life chances of African Americans are determined more by economic factors and less by race. A spirited debate ensued in the literature. While this debate focused primarily on Wilson's thesis and his supporting evidence, it eventually broadened to encompass reconsideration of the very meaning of race itself as concept and reality.

Omi and Winant's (1994) book *Racial Formation in the United States* contends that race continues to be significant in American society. Moreover, they argue that race is in fact a social artifact: racial concepts are manufactured and change against backdrops provided by shifting social, cultural and political factors. Omi and Winant (1994:55-56) define race formation as "the sociohistorical process by which racial categories are created, inhabited, transformed, and destroyed." In turn, they argue racial formation becomes part and parcel of hegemony, or the way society is organized and ruled.

Racial boundaries in America have always been delineated and emphasized in terms of easily identifiable physical attributes. The most extreme expression of this tendency was the "one drop rule" (rule of hypo-descent) which defined a person with any known African heritage or identifiable features as Black, no matter how small the fraction relative to the person's European heritage and/or features (Drake 1987; Davis 1991; Brown, Ward, Lightbourn, and Jackson, forthcoming). In turn, this rigid system of racial hierarchy linked supposed failings in moral character, intellectual capacity and achievement drive with skin color (Drake 1987). Variation in skin color and phenotype provided the basis for a system of racial stratification in America that placed European Americans at the top and African Americans and Mexican Americans at the bottom (Drake 1987; Omi and Winant 1994). In parallel fashion, there developed within the various racial/ethnic groups color hierarchies that assigned higher status to persons with lighter skin tone (Drake 1987).

African Americans

The connection between skin color and social status in the African American community dates back to slavery when white male slaveholders frequently gave their illegitimate, mulatto offspring greater opportunities (Reuter 1918; Frazier 1957; Berlin 1975; Williams 1980). Some light-skinned slaves were assigned the privileged status of house servant or skilled artisan where they received better treatment than darker-skinned field slaves (Freeman, Armor, Ross, and Pettigrew, 1966). Still other mulattos were designated free by their affluent white fathers and thus enjoyed access to education as well as property ownership. Before emancipation, light-skinned African Americans had become leaders in free Black communities and dominated in both

numbers and political power. As Williamson (1980:15) notes, "Affluent, free mulattos were treated as a third group by whites in the lower South, which placed them in an intermediate position between white and black, slave and free." Thus, lighter-skinned African Americans served as a buffer between whites and the potentially volatile Black slave masses. It is interesting to note in this connection that U.S. Censuses until 1920 actually included a separate category for mulattos. From this unique status of circumscribed privilege, lighter-skinned African Americans strived to advance their skin-color group interests and the larger interests of Black people as a whole. How these at times conflicting interests were reconciled varied, depending on the person, the historical moment and the circumstances.

Despite the racial oppression that in some degree affected all African Americans, free Negroes managed to create and sustain their own community institutions, establishing "Brown Bag Societies" (i.e., those who were lighter than brown paper bags) that maintained an exclusive membership of light-skinned elites. Emancipation saw the evolution of the three-tiered caste system into the Black-White racial dichotomy. Mulattos were joined more explicitly with the larger African American population. Due to their privileged history and access to education, economic resources and political power, light-skinned elites maintained their position of dominance in the African American community despite the diminishing relationship between skin color and status. In disproportionate numbers, light-skinned African Americans secured positions among the upper and middle-class ranks within African American society (Frazier 1957; Freeman et al. 1966; Berlin 1975; Williamson 1980; Hughes and Hertel 1990).

Early studies of the relationship between skin color and socioeconomic status among African Americans indicated a continuation of the traditional association of light skin color with privileged stratification outcomes (Seeman 1946; Glenn 1963; Freeman et al. 1966; Ransford 1970; Keith and Herring 1991). This pattern was repeated across nearly all areas (i.e., educational attainment, income, occupational status) and suggested that a high value on light skin made it easier for light-skinned African Americans to enter higher status occupations (Ransford 1970). Attempts to draw an association between skin color and race consciousness or racial attitudes have yielded inconsistent results. Several researchers found that, compared to light-skinned African Americans, dark-skinned African Americans harbored stronger anti-white sentiments and hostilities (Freeman et al. 1966; Ransford 1970; Edwards 1973), were more critical of racial integration (Ransford 1970), and exhibited higher awareness of racial discrimination and racial pride (Edwards 1973). However, Hughes and Hertel (1990:1115) report conflicting evidence: they found the overall effect of skin color on Black consciousness to be weak and inconsistent. In their view, socioeconomic status better explained sociocultural divisions among African Americans.

Mexican Americans

Colonial Mexico was organized around a social hierarchy based largely on a continuum of color, in which Indians were at the bottom and Spaniards and their descendants were at the top (MacLachlan and Rodriguez 1980; Acuna 1988:32-33). With the defeat of Mexico in the Mexican American War in 1848, persons of Mexican descent in the Southwest territories emerged as a distinct racialized group in the U.S. Thus, the historical foundation was created in which discrimination against Mexican Americans was determined in part by their phenotypic traits which served as a basis for creating and maintaining an occupational status hierarchy (Barrera 1979; Takaki 1979; Arce, Murguia, and Frisbie 1987; Acuna 1988).

Although the historical record has focused on Mexicans as a group, it is quite likely that color stratification within the Mexican population may have been maintained to some extent (Murguia and Telles 1996). It is clear that being Mexican, as opposed to being white, was an important determinant of Mexican life chances in the U.S. Southwest; however, skin color stratification within the Mexican population is likely to have also played a significant role. Soon after the Mexican-American War, a small landed "Castilian" elite maintained distinctions from the masses of landless Mexicans, often incorporating the "money whitens" strategy found in much of Latin America (Barrera 1979; Montejano 1987). However, these distinctions were not always respected by Anglos and by the 1920s, according to Montejano, these distinctions became obsolete, or at the very least sizably muted. Although Mexican origin people in the U.S. run the range from European- to Indian-looking and light to dark, the group today has been racialized into a single group in ordinary discourse and in most academic discussions (Barrera 1979; Omi and Winant 1994). However, the large number of Mexican immigrants throughout the twentieth century likely renewed or reinforced ideas about color and status by bringing with them pigmentocracy ideas, which persist in Mexico (Knight 1990). The extent to which skin color made a difference presumably varied at different historical periods but, unfortunately, there is little or no evidence to support this speculation.

While literature addressing the relationship between skin color and the socioeconomic status of Mexican Americans is desperately sparse, a review of the existing research shows striking similarity to what we know about the skin color/social class nexus among African Americans. Relethford's 1983 study of San Antonio residential patterns showed that the Mexican American people living in low income neighborhoods tended to have darker skin than the Mexican American people living in middle class neighborhoods who tended to be lighter skinned. Codina and Montalvo's (1994) study found that dark-skinned, U.S.-born Mexican American men had a higher rate of depression than phenotypically European-looking Mexican Americans, in part due to their more frequent encounters with discrimination and socioeconomic depriva-

tion.

Data collected from the 1979 Chicano Survey revealed that lighter Mexican Americans with phenotype features resembling those of the dominant group enjoyed higher socioeconomic status than their darker, phenotypically Indian counterparts (Arce et al. 1987). In addition, dark-skinned subjects reported more experiences of discrimination by whites than did those with light skin. Researchers attribute such patterns of phenotypic bias to structural barriers which favor the phenotypic traits of the dominant group while discriminating against traits perceived to be more characteristic of racial minority groups (Arce et al. 1987).¹

Statement of the Problem

It is clear that many similarities exist between the African American and Mexican American communities where issues of race, phenotype and skin color discrimination are concerned. However, the existing literature has yet to sufficiently address the question of skin color discrimination within and across these respective communities. We ask, are the effects of skin color on education and income consistent across race? We frame this comparison along the lines of understanding how skin color constrains and privileges personal earnings and education differently in the two communities. Our intent is to understand how a combination of structural and social psychological factors operate independently to influence the relationship between skin color, racial group and socioeconomic status, as measured by education and income.

Data and Methods

The data for this project are from two national probability surveys, the National Survey of Black Americans and the National Chicano Survey. Both surveys were conducted by the Institute for Social Research at the University of Michigan in 1979-80. The National Survey of Black Americans (NSBA) data represent a cross-section of the adult African American population living in the continental United States. This sample resulted in 2,107 completed interviews. The National Chicano Survey (NCS) was the first national probability sample of the Mexican origin population in the U.S. There are 991 completed interviews. Because 90 percent of the Mexican origin population resided in only five U.S. states, the sample was limited to those five states—Arizona, California, Colorado, New Mexico, and Texas.

¹ These studies and those by Telles and Murguía use a composite of skin color (light to dark) and physical features (European- to Indian-looking) variables.

The structural variables included in our model are education, income, age, marital status, gender, skin color, region, mother's education, and urban residence. Education is a continuous variable, scaled 0 to 17+ years of education. Income was coded as medians of income categories for both African American and Mexican American respondents. The skin color variables in both the NSBA and NCS data sets were assessed by interviewers who were trained with a color palette to rate respondent skin color on a scale from 1 (very dark brown) to 5 (very light brown). The social psychological variables included in the model are locus of control, perceived discrimination, personal worth, ethnic shopping, ethnic labeling, and religiosity. We included these variables in the model in order to estimate and examine the effects of social psychological factors. We then used multivariate regression analysis to examine the relationships between the structural and social psychological variables and the outcome variables of education and income.

Findings

The first of the regression analyses predicts educational attainment for African Americans using structural variables (Table 1). For both males and females, educational attainment was significantly associated with mother's education, urban residence, age, marital status, and skin color. While the other variables associated here with educational attainment (i.e., mother's education, urban residence, age) are commonly reported in the literature, the strong positive association of light skin color with educational attainment represents a notable departure. Interestingly enough, the structural variables model accounted for 32 percent of the variance in educational attainment for both African American men and women. Turning our attention to educational attainment among Mexican American men and women as examined by the structural model, we see that the model accounts for slightly more of the variance among males than females: 37 vs. 34 percent. Skin color was a significant predictor of educational attainment for women, but it was not for Mexican American men (Table 1).

Structural variables were also used in initial runs to examine personal income. For African Americans, the values routinely associated with income are of course statistically significant, such as education, region, mother's education, urban residence and marital status. The annual earnings of women were strikingly lower than those for men (\$7,420 lower)—a clear commentary on the relentless reach of sex discrimination in this society across and within racial/ethnic groups. African Americans with lighter skin color earn \$777 more annually, per level of lightness, than other African Americans with similar structural attributes.

The latter finding can be compared to a similar finding from the analysis using structural variables to examine Mexican American personal earnings. We see that Mexi-

Table 1: The Impact of Skin Color on Educational Attainment and Personal Income for African Americans, 1979 National Survey of Black Americans and Chicanos, 1979 National Chicano Survey

	<u>Total</u>		<u>Male</u>		<u>Female</u>	
	Structural ^a	Social ^b Psych.	Structural	Social Psych.	Structural	Social Psych.
NSBA						
<i>Education</i>	.32***	.34***	.33***	.37***	.32***	.32***
<i>Income</i>	777.30**	837.31***	727.67	963.82	736.73*	700.74*
NCS						
<i>Education</i>	.21*	.16	.09	-.02	.34*	.30*
<i>Income</i>	68.62	102.86	113.98	112.12	114.51	140.78

^a Controlling for the effects of age, gender, education, marital status, skin color, region, mother's education, and urban residence.

^b Controlling for the effects of age, gender, education, marital status, skin color, region, mother's education, urban residence, locus of control, personal worth, perceived discrimination, religiosity, ethnic label, and ethnic shopping.

can Americans with lighter skin color earn an additional \$68 annually per level of lightness, compared to dark-skinned Mexican Americans. Though this finding is not statistically significant, we can interpret its positive direction to mean that light-skinned Mexican Americans are more likely to have higher incomes. For both African Americans and Mexican Americans, light skin color is an advantage relative to income, but the skin color bonus is much greater for African Americans. Personal income is higher for Mexican Americans who are older, better educated, married, and whose mothers had more schooling. Again gender differences were by far and away the most glaring evidence of inequality. Chicanas earned \$4,748 less per year than Mexican American men with similar structural characteristics.

Next, social psychological variables were added to the multivariate analyses predicting educational attainment and personal income. As discussed above, these variables include items such as locus of control, perceived discrimination, personal worth, and racial consciousness measures. For African Americans the relationship between skin color and educational attainment is largely unaffected by the addition of social psy-

chological variables (Table 1). In both the combined and structural models, lighter skinned people are rewarded with about one third of a year more education per level of lightness. For Mexican Americans, however, skin color is not a statistically significant correlate of income in the structural or social psychological models, though the direction of the coefficient remains positive when the social psychological variables are added to the model.

Discussion

Over the past thirty years, social movements (primarily the Civil Rights Movement), immigration (most notably from Mexico, Asia and Latin America), court rulings (e.g., *Brown v. Topeka Board of Education*) and legislation (e.g., Civil Rights Bills and California State Propositions 187 and 209) have combined to redefine race and ethnic definitions/relations in the U.S. William Wilson (1978) concludes that the significance of race has declined and that the life chances of African Americans (and by inference other racial minorities) are now determined more by economic and personal capital factors (i.e., education, social networks, acculturation) than by race. On the other hand, Omi and Winant (1994) argue that race continues to shape the life chances of discriminated minorities separate from—and in concert with—economic and personal capital resources.

For certain there have been fundamental changes in the definition of race/ethnicity and in racial/ethnic relations. It is therefore a given that racial viewpoints, the meaning of race, and how this society “does” race have changed both Wilson and Omi and Winant agree on this general point. Where they part ways is in the estimation of the degree to which color prejudice and race discrimination continue to exert undue, negative influence in shaping the life trajectories of African Americans and other people of color in contemporary society.

This study offers a modest test of this proposition, that is, we examine whether color prejudice and race discrimination continue to retard the economic status of people of color in the U.S. What is most striking from the focus in this paper is the demonstrated significance of skin color. Consistently, across—and within—race and gender groups, dark skin incurs a learning and earnings penalty. Although the magnitude of its negative impact may vary, darker skin is associated in each instance with lower socioeconomic status. Our findings showed skin color to be a more significant determinant of education and income among Blacks than among Chicano/as.

This simple but clear-cut finding associating dark skin with low education and low income argues persuasively for the view that race discrimination, manifested in this instance through the vehicle of skin color discrimination, influences social relations in contemporary American society. African Americans and Mexican Americans rep-

resent distinct cultural groups, each with their own history and patterns of encounter with the largely Eurocentric mainstream of this society (Takaki 1979). However, the shared experience of color discrimination joins African Americans and Mexican Americans, in this instance blurring their differences and reducing them to a common denominator. For both, skin color operates to define the limits of their possibilities. This is especially so for Blacks and for women—presumably producing an amplified, compounded, multiplicative effect for Black women (King 1988; Collins 1990).

Whiteness—and by association, lightness—is privileged now, and has been historically in the U.S. As a result, one sees distinct color gradations from top to bottom in the status hierarchy both between and within groups. This study provides indisputable evidence of the strong relationship between lighter-toned skin and higher socioeconomic status for African Americans and Mexican Americans. By so doing we replicate, with empirical, nationally representative data from two racial ethnic minority groups, findings from Almaguer's (1994) historical study of race relations in late nineteenth and early twentieth-century California. He concludes, "What stands out most clearly from this comparative history is that European Americans at every class level sought to create, maintain, or extend their privileged access to racial entitlements in California" (1994:210). Frankenberg (1993:236-237) offers a similar, albeit more contemporary, perspective when she concludes after her recent study of white women that "'whiteness' signals the production and reproduction of dominance rather than subordination, normativity rather than marginality, and privilege rather than disadvantage."

This paper tells a story that is not only about how white skin is privileged over Black or Brown skin. It also tells about the privileging of lighter skin within racial categories. The respective color hierarchies are culturally and historically related. Skin color discrimination is a complex, multilayered process that reaches across many contexts and situations. Skin color discrimination is an integral cog in this society's machinery of racial stratification. Institutionalized norms and patterns use skin color to disadvantage African Americans and Mexican Americans relative to whites; these same norms and patterns also privilege lighter skin among African Americans and Mexican Americans. To the degree that this is true, the relationship between whites and Mexican Americans, whites and African Americans, and between lighter-skinned and darker-skinned Mexican Americans and African Americans is predicated on the assumed superiority of white over Black, of light skin over dark.

Findings from this study confirm the persistent problem of the color line in American society over the twentieth century. Now, like before, race and the color line divide this society into "haves" and "have-nots" (Farley and Allen 1989; Hochschild 1995; Massey 1996). True to Du Bois' prediction, racial differences, revealed largely by differences in skin color and hair texture, continue to be a major basis for restricting

the aspirations and opportunities of African Americans and Mexican Americans. As we stand at the threshold of a new century, darker-hued individuals in both groups continue to pay a “color tax” in both learning and earning.

References

Acuna, Rodolfo. 1988. *Occupied America: A History of Chicanos*, Third Edition. New York: Harper and Row.

Almaguer, Tomás. 1994. *Racial Fault Lines: The Historical Origins of White Supremacy in California*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

Arce, C.H., E. Murguia, and W.P. Frisbie. 1987. “Phenotype and Life Chances Among Chicanos.” *Hispanic Journal of Behavioral Sciences* 9:19-32.

Barrera, M. 1979. *Race and Class in the Southwest: A Theory of Racial Inequality*. London: University of Notre Dame Press.

Berlin, Ira. 1975. *Slaves Without Masters: The Free Negro in the Antebellum South*. New York: Pantheon Books.

Bobo, Lawrence and Vincent Hutchings. 1996. “Perceptions of Racial Competition in a Multiracial Setting.” *American Sociological Review* 61:951-972.

Brown, Kendrick T., Geoffrey K. Ward, Tiffany Lightbourn, and James S. Jackson. Forthcoming. “Skin Tone and Racial Identity Among African Americans: A Theoretical and Research Framework.” In *Advances in Black Psychology*, edited by R.L. Jones. Hampton, VA: Cobb and Henry Publishers.

Codina, E. and F. Montalvo. 1994. “Chicano Phenotype and Depression.” *Hispanic Journal of Behavioral Sciences* 16:296-306.

Collins, Patricia Hill. 1990. *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*. Boston, MA: Unwin Hyman.

Davis, F. James. 1991. *Who Is Black?: One Nation’s Definition*. University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press.

Drake, St. Clair. 1987. *Black Folk Here and There, Volumes I and II*. Los Angeles, CA: UCLA Center for African American Studies.

Edwards, O.L. 1973. “Skin Color as a Variable in Racial Attitudes of Black Urban-

ites.” *Journal of Black Studies* 3:473-483.

Farley, Reynolds and Walter R. Allen. 1989. *The Color Line and the Quality of Life in America*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Frankenberg, Ruth. 1993. *White Women, Race Matters: The Social Construction of Whiteness*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.

Frazier, E.F. 1957. *Black Bourgeoisie: The Rise of a New Middle Class in the United States*. London: Collier-Macmillan.

Freeman, H.E., D. Armor, M. Ross, and T. Pettigrew. 1966. “Color Gradation and Attitudes Among Middle-Income Negroes.” *American Sociological Review* 31:365-374.

Glenn, N. 1963. “Negro Prestige Criteria: A Case Study in the Bases of Prestige.” *American Journal of Sociology* 68:645-657.

Hochschild, Jennifer L. 1995. *Facing Up to the American Dream: Race, Class and the Soul of the Nation*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Hughes, M. and B.R. Hertel. 1990. “The Significance of Color Remains: A Case Study of Life Chances, Mate Selection, and Ethnic Consciousness Among Black Americans.” *Social Forces* 68:1105-1120.

Keith, V. and C. Herring. 1991. “Skin Tone and Stratification in the Black Community.” *American Journal of Sociology* 97:760-778.

King, Deborah. 1988. “Multiple Jeopardy, Multiple Consciousness: The Context of a Black Feminist Ideology.” *Signs* 14:42-72.

Knight, Alan. 1990. “Racism, Revolution and *Indigenismo*: Mexico, 1910-1940.” Pp. 71-113 in *The Idea of Race in Latin America, 1870-1940*, edited by Richard Graham. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press.

Lewis, David Levering (Ed.). 1995. *W.E.B. Du Bois: A Reader*. New York: Henry Holt.

MacLachlan, C.M. and J.E. Rodriguez. 1980. *The Forging in the Cosmic Race: A Reinterpretation of Colonial Mexico*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

Massey, Douglas. 1996. “The Age of Extremes: Concentrated Affluence and Poverty

in the Twenty-First Century.” *Demography* 33 (November):395-412.

Montejano, David. 1987. *Anglos and Mexicans in the Making of Texas, 1836-1986*. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press.

Murguía, Edward and Edward E. Telles. 1996. “Phenotype and Schooling Among Mexican Americans.” *Sociology of Education* 69:276-289.

Omi, M. and H. Winant. 1994. *Racial Formation in the United States*. New York: Routledge.

Ransford, E. 1970. “Skin Color, Life Chances, and Anti-White Attitudes.” *Social Problems* 18:164-178.

Relethford, J.H., P. Stern, S.P. Caskill, and H.P. Hazuda. 1983. “Social Class, Admixture, and Skin Color Variation in Mexican Americans and Anglo-Americans Living in San Antonio, Texas.” *American Journal of Physical Anthropology* 61:97-102.

Reuter, E.B. 1918. *The Mulatto in the United States*. New York: Negro University Press (1969 reprint).

Seeman, M. 1946. “Skin Color Values in Three All Negro School Classes.” *American Sociological Review* 11:315-321.

Takaki, Ronald. 1979. *Iron Cages: Race and Culture in 19th Century America*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Telles, Edward E. and Edward Murguía. 1992. “The Continuing Significance of Race Among Mexican Americans.” *Social Science Quarterly* 73:120-122.

Williamson, J. 1980. *New People: Miscegenation and Mulattoes in the United States*. New York: The Free Press.

Wilson, W.J. 1978. *The Declining Significance of Race: Blacks and Changing American Institutions*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.