

White Colorism

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Abstract

Perhaps reflecting a desire to emphasize the enduring power of rigidly constructed racial categories, sociology has tended to downplay the importance of within-category variation in skin tone. Similarly, in popular media, “colorism,” or discrimination based on skin lightness, is rarely mentioned. When colorism is discussed, it is almost exclusively framed in terms of intraracial “black-on-black” discrimination. In line with arguments highlighting the centrality of white racism, the present paper contends that it is important for researchers to give unique attention to white colorism. Using data from the 2012 American National Election Study, an example is presented on white interviewers’ perceptions of minority respondent skin tone and intelligence ($N = 223$). Results from ordinal logistic regression analyses indicate that African American and Latino respondents with the lightest skin are several times more likely to be seen by whites as intelligent compared with those with the darkest skin. The article concludes that a full accounting of white hegemony requires an acknowledgment of both white racism and white colorism.

Keywords

racial and ethnic minorities, Latino/a sociology, inequality, poverty and mobility

The term “white racism” is now an integral part of sociological discourse. Popularized by Joe Feagin, Hernan Vera, and Pinar Batur (2001), the terminology helps draw attention to the fact that not all prejudices are created equal. Historical and institutionalized power dynamics matter for the large-scale consequences of bigotry, and thus it is problematic to implicitly (or explicitly) equate the racist beliefs and actions of whites with the prejudicial attitudes of other racial groups. As Feagin et al. (2001:3) noted about this false equivalency, “Black racism would require not only a widely accepted racist ideology directed at whites, but also the power to systematically exclude whites from opportunities and rewards in major economic, cultural and political institutions.”

The present paper argues that this logic should be extended to sociological analysis of discrimination based on continuous variation

in skin lightness or “colorism.” In the case of colorism, however, the problem is not simply the tacit suggestion that all racial and ethnic groups are equally guilty of intolerance and discrimination. The problem is much deeper, as shown by discussions of colorism in the popular press focusing almost exclusively on preferences for light skin among minority group members and framing racism as between-race and colorism as within-race discrimination. Moreover, rarely is there any acknowledgment of the historical origin of intraracial colorism or its potential role in maintaining white hegemony.

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In contrast, most of the social science research on colorism provides a more complex picture by explicitly noting that skin tone discrimination within the African American community is likely an adaptation to the long history of tone-based exclusionary practices by whites (Burton et al. 2010; Gans 2012; Hagiwara, Kashy, and Cesario 2012; Harrison 2010; Hochschild and Weaver 2007; Hunter 2005; Keith and Herring 1991; Monroe 2013; Nakano-Glenn 2009; Vedantam 2010). In a well-cited study in this area, Keith Maddox and Stephanie Gray (2002) employed a sample of 40 African American and 42 white students from an introductory psychology class to assess the stereotypes associated with skin tone for African Americans. The results from a mixed model analysis of variance (ANOVA) indicated that for both black and white study participants, there was a significant tendency to apply more negative stereotypes to African Americans with darker skin relative to African Americans with lighter skin. Of particular relevance for the current study, darker skinned African Americans were less likely to be seen as intelligent. Maddox and Gray (2002:257) concluded that their results “provide strong support for the hypothesis that both Black and White participants are aware of a cultural distinction between light- and dark-skinned Blacks.”

Still, while social science research on colorism has frequently included whites in the overall sample, there is very little research with a dedicated focus on white prejudice regarding skin lightness. Furthermore, at the time of this writing, there are no sociological studies explicitly centered on white colorism. At one level, the paucity of sociological research in this area is surprising given sociology's general insistence on prioritizing the interrogation of white privilege and white racism. However, on another level, the general lack of attention to white colorism in sociology makes sense given (1) sociology's emphasis on racial categorization as a master status in the United States and (2) methodological concerns about the ability of whites to perceive differences in skin darkness among non-whites (Hill 2002a).

For example, consider Aaron Gullickson's (2005) hypothesis about a potential decline in the impact of skin tone on stratification outcomes in the United States in the postcivil rights era. Gullickson (2005:173) noted, “Integration may have been more beneficial to darker-skinned blacks because it generated new white gatekeepers of opportunity who, while not race-blind, may have been largely tone-blind.” Thus, the argument is that contemporary white gatekeepers are guided by racial prejudices but are not significantly influenced by biases associated with skin tone because they do not differentiate between light-skinned and dark-skinned blacks.

However, while it is certainly true that race is a master status in the United States and African Americans are likely better able to distinguish nuanced variation in African American skin tone than whites, on close inspection these points do not provide a logical justification for ignoring white colorism.

Racism versus Colorism?

An argument can be made that the concept of white racism is sufficient to account for the discriminatory actions of white people against all minorities of varying skin shades. Implicit in such an argument is the notion that the effect of racial category is so strong that any influence that within-group differences in skin lightness might have would be miniscule in comparison. Moreover, discussing such weak effects for the sake of completeness might dilute the central message regarding white racism's powerful impact. Along these lines, Jennifer Hochschild (2012) noted a tension between “lumpers” and “splitters.” While splitters argue for the need to examine the totality of white privilege through the lens of colorism, lumpers argue that dividing broad categories up in the name of specificity limits the ability to communicate crucial information that is more easily seen when people are grouped together. Ultimately, Hochschild (2012:4) concluded that for most of U.S. history, traditional operationalizations of race have been sufficient for capturing social reality. However, in the twenty-first century, various demographic and cultural shifts,

especially related to Latino immigration and multiracial identification, tip the balance of utility toward greater specificity and the need for heightened attention to colorism.

Eduardo Bonilla-Silva (2009) made a similar argument regarding the importance of recent demographic shifts in the United States for an emerging racial hierarchy where variation in skin lightness plays a crucial role. Bonilla-Silva (2003:352) referred to this evolving hierarchy as the “Latin Americanization of Whiteness in the United States,” and noted “preference for people who are light-skinned will become a more important factor in all kinds of social transactions.”

Critics might respond that the likelihood of this new order coming into being is conditioned on the ability of non-Hispanic whites to perceive variation in skin shade among racial and ethnic minorities, and social science research has consistently demonstrated an “out-group homogeneity effect” when it comes to recognizing the unique facial features of nongroup members. For example, Mark Hill (2002a) analyzed the influence of interviewer race on skin color classification in the 1992–1994 Multi-city Study of Urban Inequality and found that, relative to African American interviewers, white interviewers perceived less variation in the skin tones of African American respondents. More specifically, Hill noted that the variance associated with the skin tone measure was 12% higher for African American interviewers compared with white interviewers, a statistically significant difference. Still, it is important to recognize that Hill’s study (and related research) does not actually report that whites are “largely tone-blind” as suggested by Gullickson (2005:173), just that assessments of skin tone exhibit less variation when the interviewer and the respondent are of different races.

Moreover, as noted earlier, study after study utilizing cross-race observation of skin tone data has demonstrated highly statistically significant skin tone effects *despite* this methodological limitation. In addition, the results from these studies are more than just statistically significant; they are substantively significant. For example, Lance Hannon, Robert

DeFina, and Sarah Bruch (2013) found that African American females assessed as dark (by primarily white interviewers) in the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth were about three times more likely to be suspended at school than their light-skinned counterparts. This disparity is roughly equal in magnitude to the difference between African American and white females. Likewise, Arthur Goldsmith, Darrick Hamilton, and Sandy Darity (2007) showed that the intraracial wage gap between light and dark-skinned African Americans is nearly the same magnitude as the interracial gap between African Americans and whites. Given that whites are far more likely to hold positions of power in the labor market, it is highly unlikely that such a significant wage penalty is a product of colorism in the African American community.

In sum, while it is true that the impact of race on social outcomes is powerful, and that whites have a somewhat limited ability to discern differences in nonwhite skin shade, the effects of colorism by white gatekeepers appear nonetheless very pronounced. Therefore, ignoring colorism to provide a more easily communicated assessment of racism can lead to a substantial underestimation of white privilege. Moreover, as Edward Telles (2012) and others have argued, recognizing that continuous variation in skin tone matters does not necessarily diminish the role of race, as the two concepts overlap both empirically and rhetorically. As Janice Inniss (2010) succinctly put it, “Given the importance of race—skin color—in the larger society, why would gradations of color *not* be important?” Colorism and racism in the United States are intrinsically linked in that they share the same historical roots, and white hegemony is central to both.

To further illustrate the potential magnitude of white colorism’s impact and to provide an example of the type of research that sociologists might concern themselves with in the future, the current study asks whether non-Hispanic white interviewers evaluate the intelligence of African American and Latino respondents differently depending on perception of the respondent’s skin tone. The analyses make use of recent additions to the

nationally representative American National Election Study.

Data, Variables, and Method

One of the most widely used social science data sets, the face-to-face American National Election Study offers a plethora of variables of interest, not just to political scientists but also to sociologists, psychologists, economists, and others. Two features unique to the most recently released survey (2012) are particularly important for the current analyses: a vocabulary test and a 10-point continuum of skin tone that utilizes a color chart to help interviewers anchor assessments (Massey and Martin 2003). The “Wordsum” vocabulary test in the 2012 American National Election Study is a slightly modified version of the one included in the General Social Survey (it has occasionally been used/misused as a proxy for intelligence quotient [IQ]). Its incorporation in the current analysis as a control variable helps provide a strong test of the argument that any association between perceived skin tone and perceived intelligence is a product of the interviewer’s racialized stereotypes.

Given that the American National Election Study has many questions concerning U.S. politics, it is perhaps unsurprising that interviewers were asked to rate the respondent’s apparent knowledge of political matters at the end of the interview. But, one remarkable element of the survey is that it also includes an item that directly asks interviewers to state their assessment of the respondent’s intelligence. More specifically, interviewers evaluated the respondent’s “apparent intelligence” on a 5-point scale coded as (1) *very low*, (2) *fairly low*, (3) *average*, (4) *fairly high*, and (5) *very high*. Although survey interviewers obviously have no distinct qualifications to evaluate an individual’s overall intelligence, interviewers were not allowed to opt out by saying that they did not have enough information to judge. Thus, the question can be seen as tapping into deep prejudices, especially when items such as respondent education, vocabulary test performance, and apparent political knowledge are held constant.

The total sample includes 241 individuals who self-identified as (non-Hispanic) African American or Hispanic in the survey and were interviewed by a person identifying as non-Hispanic white. Missing data for all the variables slightly reduced the sample to 223. Not surprisingly, given that a low intelligence label is a strong pejorative, most of the variation in perceived intelligence was between the “average” and high categories. Also, in line with previous results (Hannon et al. 2013), respondents covered the entire spectrum of possible skin tones (from 1 to 10) in both the African American and Hispanic samples. The control variables included education level (5 categories), Wordsum vocabulary test performance (10-point scale), perceived knowledge about politics (5-point scale), perceived income (28 categories), respondent age group (13 categories), and indicator variables for female and black self-identification. Complete description of the data and variables can be found at <http://www.electionstudies.org>.

The present study uses multivariate ordinal logistic regression to estimate the relationship between white interviewer perceptions of skin tone and intelligence for African American and Latino respondents. All models employ the American National Election Study sampling weights to adjust for selection/nonresponse bias. As Hill (2002a) and others have pointed out, the use of interviewer observations of respondents creates an additional complication for estimation, because the grouping of respondents with specific interviewers violates the assumption of independence. All models adjust for the clustering of multiple respondent observations with interviewers using SAS’s Proc Survey Logistic, a procedure specifically designed to incorporate aspects of complex survey designs into logit estimation. In addition, to help mitigate the impact of missing data, variance estimation in the multivariate models is adjusted using the not-completely-missing-at-random SAS code option. While the sample size is relatively small (although consistent with that used in similar research in psychology, for example, Maddox and Gray 2002), it is important to remember that this limitation biases the results against finding statistically significant effects.

Table 1. Ordinal Logistic Regressions of White Interviewer Perception of Latino and African American Respondent Intelligence.

Variable	Model 1	Model 2
	Latinos (<i>n</i> = 100)	African Americans (<i>n</i> = 123)
Perceived skin darkness	-0.860*** (0.269)	-0.480*** (0.127)
Black self-identification	1.265 (1.201)	—
Age group	-0.123 (0.107)	-0.118 (0.089)
Female	-1.511 (0.799)	0.209 (0.559)
Education level	0.650* (0.318)	1.102* (0.440)
Income level	0.026 (0.081)	0.056 (0.064)
Vocabulary test score	-0.183 (0.257)	0.320 (0.242)
Perceived political knowledge	2.746*** (0.653)	2.335*** (0.538)

Note. Data are from the 2012 American National Election Study. The ordinal dependent variable had five response categories (1 = very low intelligence to 5 = very high intelligence). Interviewer-clustered standard errors are in parentheses (25 clusters in Model 1 and 27 clusters in Model 2). Sample weights and adjustments for potentially nonrandom missing data are utilized.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

Results

Table 1 provides the results of two ordinal logistic regression models for the relationship between perceived skin darkness and the degree to which African American and Latino respondents were assessed as intelligent (1 for “very low” intelligence and 5 for “very high” intelligence). For both models, tests for proportional odds indicated that the assumption holds.

The results, listed in Table 1, appear quite similar for African American and Latino respondents. In both cases, the logit for perceived skin darkness was highly statistically significant ($p < .001$). Furthermore, in both cases, the only other statistically significant predictors of intelligence judgment were respondent educational attainment and political knowledge assessment. That skin tone still matters after taking educational background into account suggests that the results do not simply reflect the empirical reality of skin tone stratification in educational opportunities for African Americans and Latinos. Instead, the coefficients tell us about an important source of that reality; white observers will look at two identically qualified minorities and assess the lighter skinned one as more intelligent.

While the benefit of ordinal logistic regression is that it makes use of all of the available information in estimating effects, the interpretation of coefficients is far less intuitive than the interpretation in a traditional binary logistic regression. To illustrate the magnitude of the observed skin tone effects, the two samples were combined and the independent variables in Table 1 were included in a model where the dependent variable was a binary indicator of whether or not the respondent was evaluated as possessing above average intelligence (values of 4 or 5 in the scale vs. all others). As in the ordinal logistic regression model, skin tone was highly statistically related to the perception of above average intelligence ($p < .001$). Converting the log-odds to odds, and then to probabilities, the key result is displayed in Figure 1 where the estimating equation sets the control variables at their sample mean and varies the skin darkness level by one standard deviation. Thus, Figure 1 illustrates how the probability of being viewed as above average in intelligence varies by skin tone across the African American and Latino sample.

As can be seen, the estimated impact of white colorism is quite large. Controlling for several factors (including respondent racial category), a one standard deviation increase in skin lightness roughly triples the probability of

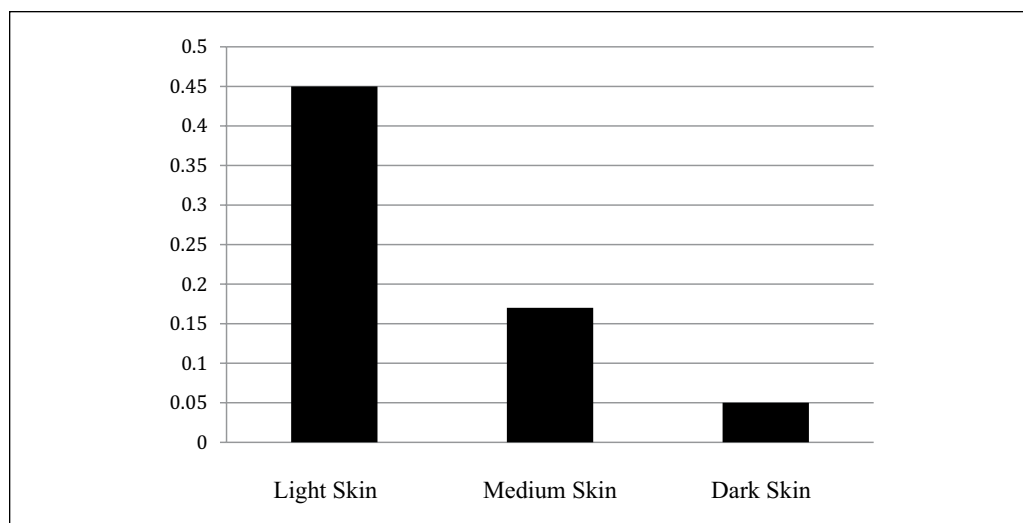


Figure 1. Skin tone and the estimated probability of a white interviewer judging a Latino or African American respondent as above average in intelligence.

Note. “Medium Skin” was defined as the mean value for the 10-point skin darkness scale in the combined African American/Latino sample ($N = 223$). “Light Skin” and “Dark Skin” were a standard deviation below and above the mean, respectively. Control variables, including respondent racial identification and educational background measures, were held constant at their mean. American National Election Study sample weights and adjustments for interviewer clustering and potentially nonrandom missing data were utilized.

being perceived as having above average intelligence (an impact that is greater than a one standard deviation increase in education level).

Future research can improve on these analyses by employing a broad sample and an experimental/audit design that would allow the researcher to better discern the causal direction of the relationship between perceived skin tone and perceived intelligence. While the current study assumes that observers assess the physical characteristics of others before judging their intelligence, some recent research in psychology suggests that perceptions of intelligence can drive how we see a person’s skin color (Ben-Zeev et al. 2014).

Conclusion: What Are the Consequences of Ignoring White Colorism?

The results of the present study indicated that African Americans and Latinos deemed to have lighter skin tones are significantly more likely to be seen as intelligent by white interviewers. Importantly, the effects of skin tone

on intelligence assessment were independent of respondent education level, vocabulary test score, political knowledge assessment, and other demographic factors. Overall, the findings suggest that white prejudicial attitudes related to skin tone could create substantially unequal access to economic, social, and cultural resources.

For example, if white adults have a tendency to equate lighter skin with intelligence, this may impact the quality and level of expectations white teachers and other school authorities have for certain students. While there has been a considerable amount of research in education about a potential Pygmalion effect related to a student’s race and ethnicity (Cohen et al. 2006; Rosenthal and Jacobson 1968), little attention has been directed at examining how stereotypes based on skin tone can create self-fulfilling prophecies in educational achievement and school disciplinary actions. Moreover, while educational institutions frequently keep track of racial and ethnic disproportionality in outcomes, differences by skin shade are not recorded. In this sense, colorism

is the unmentioned and unmonitored “ism” (Harrison 2010).

William Pizzi, Irene Blair, and Charles Judd (2005) echoed this argument in reference to colorism in the criminal justice system. As they pointed out, members of the (overwhelmingly white) legislature and judiciary are acutely aware of disparities between whites and African Americans and Latinos in sentencing. Because of this, steps have been taken to reduce or at least monitor discrimination based on race and ethnicity. The same is not true for discrimination based on phenotype.

More generally, lack of attention to white colorism may enable overly simplistic understandings of white racism. For example, perhaps adapting to a new era of demographic diversity in the United States and discussions of a “post-racial society,” eugenicists such as Richard Lynn (2002) have argued that “Caucasian genes” (operationalized as skin lightness) can explain the considerable variation in IQ test performance *within* the African American population. Central to Lynn’s (and other’s) claims is the argument that even if one was to concede that African Americans as a group are still discriminated against and this harms their test performance, darker skinned African Americans are not singled out to receive less educational resources relative to lighter skinned African Americans. Therefore, from this perspective, because white prejudice cannot account for any within-race significant association between skin tone and test score, genetics must be the explanation. While there are certainly other ways to address this argument, appropriate attention to white colorism would rightfully bring historical and institutionalized power dynamics back into the discussion (Hill 2002b).

The history of white colorism runs as deep as the history of white racism in U.S. society. For African Americans, the skin color hierarchy is firmly rooted in the slavery regime, where white owners gave certain work privileges to slaves with more Eurocentric features (Burton et al. 2010; Keith 2009). Indeed, it is telling that even during a period where racial categorization meant the difference between owner and slave, whites still discriminated

based on nuanced variation in skin tone. Despite this long history, the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (2007) has just recently started to give significant attention to skin tone discrimination with its ERACE (Eradicate Racism and Colorism from Employment) initiative.

The legal foundation of colorism claims lies with Title VII of the 1964 Civil Rights Act, which prohibits employment discrimination based on “color.” However, perhaps due to the historical rigidity of racial classifications in the United States, the general public and the courts continue to have a difficult time distinguishing the concepts of race and color, a distinction that can be important in an increasingly data-driven legal process (Jones 2010; Nance 2005). Consider, for example, a hypothetical case where a white employer discriminates against darker skinned African Americans for customer relations positions. Claiming racism would be insufficient; such a claim could be countered with evidence of past (lighter skinned) African American hires.

Sociologists can play an important role in elucidating the overlapping but distinct social meanings of race and skin color. To do this, future sociological research should continue to dispel the false dichotomization of racism as inter- and colorism as intragroup discrimination. Extending the reasoning behind sociology’s focus on institutionalized power dynamics and “white racism,” it is important for future research to give unique attention to “white colorism.”

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