

The Case for Taking White Racism *and* White Colorism More Seriously

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The Case for Taking White Racism *and* White Colorism More Seriously

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. Results from a variety of statistical analyses indicate that African American and Latina/o respondents perceived to have light skin are significantly more likely to be seen by whites as intelligent. The paper concludes that a full accounting of white hegemony requires an acknowledgment of both white racism and white colorism.

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, Vera, and Batur (2001:3) note 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 *inter-* and colorism as *intra-*racial discrimination. Moreover, rarely is there any acknowledgment of the historical origin of within-race colorism or its potential role in maintaining white hegemony.

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, Bonilla-Silva, Ray, Buckelew, and Freeman 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 ANOVA analysis 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 lack 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 U.S. and (2) methodological concerns about the ability of whites to perceive differences in skin darkness among non-whites (Hannon and DeFina 2014; Hill 2002a).

For example, consider Aaron Gullickson’s (2004) hypothesis about a potential decline in the impact of skin tone on stratification outcomes in the U.S. in the post-civil rights era. Gullickson (2004:22) notes, “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 colorism was more of an issue in

an earlier era of segregation where, for example, black workers were more likely to be solely hired by black managers. Gullickson's argument further implies that white people in positions of power are guided by racial prejudices but are not significantly guided by biases associated with skin tone because they do not differentiate between light-skinned and dark-skinned blacks.

The present paper argues that while it is certainly true that race is a master status in the U.S. and African Americans are likely better able to distinguish nuanced variation in African American skin tone than whites, neither point constitutes an acceptable justification for ignoring or downplaying white colorism.

Racism vs. colorism?

An argument can be made that discussions of colorism detract from the more central issue of racism. A key component of this 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. Discussing such weak effects for the sake of completeness might dilute the more important message regarding racism's powerful impact. Along these lines, Jennifer Hochschild (2012) notes 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) concludes that for most of U.S. history, traditional operationalizations of race have led to appropriately broad generalizations. However, in the 21st century various demographic and cultural shifts, especially related to Latino/a immigration and

multi-racial identification, tip the balance of utility towards greater specificity and the need for heightened attention to colorism.

Eduardo Bonilla-Silva (2009) makes a similar argument regarding the importance of recent demographic shifts in the U.S. for an emerging racial hierarchy where variation in skin lightness plays a crucial role. Bonilla-Silva (2003:352) refers to this evolving hierarchy as the “Latin Americanization of Whiteness in the United States,” and notes “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 non-group 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 to white interviewers, a statistically significant difference. Still, it is important to recognize that Hill’s study and more recent research (Hannon and DeFina 2014) does not actually report that whites are “largely tone-blind” as suggested by Gullickson (2004:22), just that assessments of skin tone exhibit somewhat less variation when the interviewer and respondent are of different races.

Moreover, as noted earlier, study after study utilizing cross-race observation of skin tone data has demonstrated 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, Arthur Goldsmith, Darrick Hamilton and Sandy Darity (2006) show that the intra-racial wage gap between light and dark-skinned African Americans is nearly the same magnitude as the inter-racial 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 solely 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 non-white skin shade, the effects of colorism by white gatekeepers appear nonetheless very pronounced. Therefore, ignoring colorism in order 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 U.S. 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/a respondents differently depending on perception of the respondent’s skin tone. The analyses make use of recent additions to the American National Election Study.

Data and variables

One of the most widely used social science datasets, 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. There are two unique features of the survey that enable the current analysis: a measure of perceived intelligence and a measure of perceived skin tone (with a color palette guide) where interviewers were required to rate respondents at the end of the survey. Given that the American National Election Study has many questions concerning U.S. politics, it is perhaps unsurprising that interviewers were asked to assess the respondent's apparent knowledge of political matters. 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 here 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 factors like respondent educational attainment are held constant.

The total sample includes 240 individuals who self-identified as African American or Latino/a in the survey and were interviewed by a person identifying as Non-Hispanic white. 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, respondents were perceived to cover the entire spectrum of possible skin tones (from 1 to

10) in both the African American and Latino/a samples. Complete description of the data and variables can be found at <http://www.electionstudies.org>.

As Villarreal (2012:500) has argued, it would be “rather naïve to assume that because interviewers are given a sheet with a color palette” skin tone assessments will be “objective.” Indeed, it is important to note that the present analysis utilizes the 10-point skin tone scale (Massey and Martin 2003) not as an objective measure of respondent skin darkness, but rather as a measure of interviewer *perception* of respondent complexion. Ultimately, the research question explored here is whether appraisals of respondent skin tone by white interviewers are related to their appraisals of respondent intelligence. To simplify presentation, appraised skin tone is collapsed into light (1-3), medium (4-7), and dark (8-10), and appraised intelligence is collapsed into above average (4-5) and not above average (1-3).

Results

Table 1 summarizes how perceived skin tone is related to the probability that African American and Latino respondents will be viewed as having above average intelligence by white interviewers. As can be seen, respondents deemed to be light skinned were more than twice as likely to be assessed as above average in intelligence compared to those deemed to have dark skin (55% versus 23%). While the percentages displayed in Table 1 are based on the combined sample of Latinos and African Americans, the general relationship between skin lightness and intelligence appraisal could also be seen for both groups separately. For example, while 63% of African American respondents considered light skinned were rated above average in intelligence only 31% of those not viewed as light skinned were judged as particularly intelligent.

Table 1. Skin Tone and the Percentage of Black and Latino Respondents Perceived by White Interviewers to be Above Average in Intelligence

Interviewer Perception of Respondents' Skin Tone	Respondents Seen as Intelligent
Light (sample size=47)	55%
Medium (sample size=150)	34%
Dark (sample size=43)	23%

Note: The source is the 2012 American National Election Study.

Table 2 replicates the procedure used to produce Table 1 but focuses on a subsample of African American and Latino respondents that have earned a bachelor’s degree as their highest level of educational attainment. Unsurprisingly, interviewers were more likely to assess respondents as having high intelligence in this highly educated sample. Still, skin tone continued to influence interviewer judgments for this select group; a larger percentage of those considered light skinned were thought of as intelligent relative to those considered dark skinned (86% versus 50%). The same pattern emerged for other subsamples based on educational experience. For example, focusing exclusively on African American and Latino respondents whose highest educational credential was a high school diploma or equivalent, 47% of respondents deemed light skinned were also deemed more intelligent than average, while only 21% of respondents perceived to be non-light skinned were perceived to be intelligent. 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 findings tell us about an important potential source of that reality; white observers can look at two identically qualified minorities and assess the one perceived as lighter-skinned as more intelligent.

Table 2. Skin Tone and the Percentage of Black and Latino Respondents with Bachelor’s Degrees Perceived by White Interviewers to be Above Average in Intelligence

Interviewer Perception of Respondents’ Skin Tone	Respondents Seen as Intelligent
Light (sample size=7)	86%
Medium (sample size=15)	67%
Dark (sample size=4)	50%

Note: The source is the 2012 American National Election Study.

Future research can improve on these analyses by employing a larger and broader 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, as well as vocabulary test score, political knowledge assessment and several other factors (see Hannon 2015). 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 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) echo this argument in reference to colorism in the criminal justice system. As they point 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 U.S. and discussions of a "post-racial society," eugenicists like 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, since 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, especially those with known white heritage (Burton, Bonilla-Silva, Ray, Buckelew, and Freeman 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 initiative (Eradicate Racism and Colorism from Employment).

The legal foundation of colorism claims lies with Title VII of the 1964 Civil Rights Act, which prohibits employment discrimination based on “color” (separately from “race”). However, perhaps due to the historical rigidity of racial classifications in the U.S., 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 (Nance 2005; Jones 2010). 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 *intra-* group discrimination. Extending the reasoning behind sociology's focus on institutionalized power dynamics and "white racism," it is important for future research to give special attention to "white colorism."

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