

**Skin Color and Social Inequality:
A Comparative Exploration of Race's Multidimensionality**

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Abstract

The comparative study of “race” across Latin America, the Caribbean, and the United States often highlights deep variation: from official schemes of racial classification to contrasting social understandings of categorical vs. continuous phenotypic variation. Yet scholarship on comparative racial discrimination and inequality suggests stark similarities, as well. In this paper, we draw on novel nationally representative surveys, most centrally the *AmericasBarometer* series, that capture both skin color and official racial classification schemes across a wide range of national contexts. Though it is often treated as such, we argue that skin color is not the functional equivalent to any of the racial classification schemes prominent in Latin America, the Caribbean, or the United States. Thus, we aim to compare and contrast their effects on individual socio-economic outcomes, and explore variation in the extent of skin-tone stratification and racial inequality not only within countries but also between them.

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The comparative study of “race” across Latin America, the Caribbean, and the United States often highlights deep variation. Research on contrasting norms of racial identification is a prime example. In the United States, ancestry has long been the core notion of racial group membership. Most distinctively, the rule of hypodescent historically excludes from whiteness all individuals of any discernible African ancestry (Davis 1991). In countries of Latin America and the Caribbean with significant segments of African descendants, a color continuum often sorts individuals between poles of whiteness and blackness and intermediate categorization and category ambiguity are common (Harris 1964; Andrew 2004). In parts of Latin America where *mestizo* and indigenous identifications dominate, culture and language take center stage in ethno-racial classification schemes (Graham 1990; Wade 1997). These comparative glances support the idea of the race construct's multidimensionality and context dependency, for some a welcome contribution to a US-centered field of study where race is often treated as static and singular.

Nonetheless, even amid these differences, scholarship on racial discrimination and inequality suggests stark similarities as well. Viewed as a social construct based largely on unequal power relationships, race appears to capture important stratification dynamics across these countries and regions. This unifying element of racial hierarchy is due in large part to common histories of European conquest and colonization involving the African slave trade and the subjugation of indigenous populations. Yet, because of the differing dimensions of race involved, for example, in the numerous classification schemes across these regions, quantitative comparative analysis of racial stratification has been somewhat hamstrung; that is, race's multidimensionality and context dependency appear to work against comparative modeling.

One way to confront this dilemma is through the use of multiple measures of race.¹ Although official schemes reflect national understandings and can vary in the dimensions of race each captures—ancestry, color, culture—alternative measures that compliment official schemes might facilitate finding some base commonalities across contexts (Bailey et al, forthcoming). One example of an alternative is the measurement of skin color. Though it is often treated as such, skin color is not the functional equivalent to any of the racial classification schemes prominent in Latin America, the Caribbean, or the United States. For example, even in countries such as Brazil, where researchers view color as closely tracking official classification schemes, racial identification dynamics are significantly affected by socio-economic status; hence the adage, “money whitens” (Schwartzman 2007). Color in the United States involving European and African descendants is generally framed as black versus white, as if these two categories exhausted the color variation in the population. In reality, as studies show, racial

¹ On the value of focusing on multiple measures of race for quantitative studies of racial inequality, see Telles and Lim 1998, Saperstein 2006, 2012, Campbell and Troyer 2007, Loveman, Muniz, and Bailey 2012, and Bailey, Loveman, and Muniz, forthcoming.

categories in the US act as umbrella terms housing a wide range of skin colors (e.g., Branigan et al. 2012). In *mestizo* and indigenous Latin America, although color may seem not to organize racial hierarchies as neatly, scholarship strongly suggests the greater value placed on whiteness and the disadvantage associated with darker skin tones (Sue 2010).

There are already some important quantitative studies using skin color measures with regards to certain population segments or particular national contexts, especially in the United States. In the US, scholarship strongly suggests, for example, that among African Americans, skin color indeed affects socio-economic outcomes (Huges and Hertel 1990; Keith and Herring, 1991, Gullickson 2005). In Mexico, where *mestizo* identification strongly dominates, research shows that skin color also orders privilege and disadvantage (Villarreal 2010). In Brazil, using photo comparisons techniques to capture skin color variation beyond official racial classification suggests its significance there, too (Bailey et al., forthcoming). What has been lacking, however, are nationally representative data that standardize the measurement of skin color for cross-national comparison. Thus, the question of whether skin-tone stratification and racial inequality function similarly not only within countries but also between them remains unanswered.

In this paper, we draw on novel nationally-representative surveys, most centrally the *AmericasBarometer* series (LAPOP 2010), that capture skin color in addition to official racial classification schemes across a wide range of national contexts in order to explore its effects on several socio-economic outcomes, including education, occupation, and income.² Skin color in the *AmericasBarometer* surveys was measured through the use of a color palette with 11 values ranging from very light to very dark. Respondent skin color along that continuum was rated by interviewers. We use advanced survey methods to parse out skin color effects controlling for common correlates of socio-economic well-being. In addition, we compare the effects of skin color not only cross-nationally, but also to that dimension of race captured by national ethno-racial classification schemes. Initial analyses of the effect of skin color on racial inequality using the *AmericasBarometer* datasets on a limited number of national contexts and/or outcomes suggest it plays an important role (Telles, Urrea, and Flores 2011; Telles and Steele 2012; Flores and Telles 2012). We look to build on these analyses, extending beyond Latin America and the Caribbean to the United States, and engage the emergent literature on the utility of the methodological shift towards comparing multiple measures of race (Telles and Lim 1998; Saperstein 2006, 2012; Campbell and Troyer 2007; Loveman, Muniz, and Bailey 2012; Bailey, Loveman, and Muniz, forthcoming). Multiple-measure comparisons may better capture the varied ways in which racialized understandings and dynamics continue to structure social outcomes. In addition, the use of the skin color dimension may allow a new approach to cross-national research on racial inequality by helping to mitigate the difficulties that come from disparate national racial classification schemes.

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