

Skin Tone and Mexicans' Perceptions of Discrimination in New Immigrant Destinations

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Abstract

Colorism literature examines how skin tone—alongside prototypical group features and hairstyles—correlates with socioeconomic, health, and political outcomes. Yet few studies have explicitly operationalized how skin tone shapes Latinos' experiences of racialization in “new” U.S. destinations. Here, we draw on a large, representative sample of Mexican immigrants (N = 500) living in two large metropolitan areas (Atlanta and Philadelphia) to investigate how skin tone shapes their perceptions about the frequency and sources of discrimination. Even after controlling for demographic, economic, and immigration-specific factors, including ethnoracial self-identification, we show darker skin tone is significantly associated with higher reports of racial discrimination, discrimination specifically from U.S.-born Whites, and a stronger tendency to struggle internally in response. Together, these results support colorism literature's argument that skin tone is distinct from race and offer new insights into how skin tone shapes the lived experiences of Mexican immigrants outside the U.S. Southwest.

Keywords

colorism, discrimination, immigration, new destinations, race/ethnicity, racialization, skin tone

Colorism literature examines how skin tone, alongside prototypical group features and hairstyles, correlates with socioeconomic, health, and political outcomes. Largely based on scholarship about African Americans (e.g., Klonoff and Landrine 2000; Stewart, Cobb, and Keith 2020), researchers are increasingly examining colorism gradients among other non-Black U.S. minority groups—including immigrants (Han 2020; Hersch 2011) and Mexican Americans, the latter using national and Southwestern regional samples (Allen, Telles, and Hunter 2000;

Montalvo and Codina 2001; Murguía and Telles 1996). This literature has even expanded globally, including in Latin America, where studies show that skin

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tone shapes socioeconomic status (Bailey, Saperstein, and Penner 2014; Campos-Vazquez and Medina-Cortina 2019), health (Ortiz-Hernández et al. 2009; Perreira and Telles 2014), and perceptions of discrimination (Canache et al. 2014; Telles and Flores 2014).

Here, we draw on key insights from the colorism literature to examine how skin tone shapes Mexican immigrants' experiences of discrimination in "new immigrant destinations" in the United States (Flippen and Farrell-Bryan 2021). The meaning of skin tone varies across place (Landale and Oropesa 2005), and Latinos in new immigrant destinations have undergone an emergent process of racialization over the last two decades (Omi and Winant 1992). Distally, this process is grounded in punitive federal immigration laws and a growing enforcement apparatus, both alongside the U.S.-Mexico border and within the interior, which have created a vulnerable class of undocumented and quasi-documented immigrants lacking access to material goods and political rights (Massey 2013; Menjivar and Abrego 2012). Proximally, new destinations' foreign-born communities have high proportions of undocumented members, and many have witnessed increases in restrictive state- and local-level policymaking, enforcement activity, and anti-immigrant public opinion since 2005 (Coleman 2012; Marrow 2020). Today, "Hispanics/Latinos" in new destinations are commonly framed as "Mexicans," "illegals," "criminals," and "threats" (Brown, Jones, and Becker 2018; Jones 2019).

COLORISM IN NEW DESTINATIONS

Nevertheless, few studies have operationalized the unique role of skin color within Latinos' everyday experiences of racialization in new destinations. This may not

be surprising, given that various factors, including illegality (Flores and Schachter 2018; Menjivar 2021), Spanish language (Davis and Moore 2014), and working-class status (Browne, Tatum, and Gonzalez 2021), have become tightly interwoven in Americans' "common sense" understanding of racial differences today (Omi and Winant 1994); indeed, racialization can "indirectly mark a broad range of in-group members" regardless of their individual attributes (Asad and Clair 2018:19). Still, scholars like Bonilla-Silva (2004) maintain that skin tone shapes Latinos' positioning in an emerging "triracial" U.S. racial hierarchy, with lighter-skinned members experiencing less stigmatization and discrimination than their darker-skinned counterparts.

Consistent with this hypothesis, a survey of Dominicans living in the new destination of Reading, Pennsylvania (Oropesa and Jensen 2010), showed that respondents with darker skin tone and African heritage did perceive greater racialization and discrimination. Likewise, a few novel qualitative case studies find that the association between Whiteness and citizenship affords greater protection to some lighter-skinned Latinos in new destinations, while indigenous-origin and non-White or "Brown" Latinos who "look Mexican" or "Hispanic" get left "at the hands of immigration control" (Gómez Cervantes 2021:100; see also Cebulko 2018; Licona and Maldonado 2014). We expand on those studies by drawing on an original, representative survey that allows us to examine skin tone as a unique contributor to perceptions of discrimination among a large sample (N = 500) of Mexican immigrants living in two large metropolitan new destinations. Even after controlling for respondent demographics, socioeconomic status, ethnorracial self-identification, and immigration-specific factors, we show that darker

skin tone is significantly associated with higher reports of racial discrimination, specifically from U.S.-born Whites.

SKIN TONE, PERCEIVED DISCRIMINATION, AND HEALTH

We begin by acknowledging that skin tone, defined as “gradations of a physical characteristic (ordered from light to dark or white to black)” (Dixon and Telles 2017:406), is distinct from ethnoracial identity. Although often conflated with nationality and race in Latin America, skin tone can produce different social experiences among members of the same ethnoracial group and sometimes works better to predict sociological outcomes (Bailey et al. 2014; Telles and Flores 2014). Thus, we measure both variables and control for ethnoracial identity when testing for skin tone’s unique prediction of perceived discrimination.

While the four indicators of skin tone most commonly used in survey research on ethnoracial stratification (i.e., self-assessment, interviewer-observed, reflectance spectrophotometer, and photo elicitation) all have strengths and weaknesses and carry some potential for bias, we draw on Monk’s (2015) finding that self-assessed skin tone is a stronger predictor of perceived discrimination among African Americans than is interviewer-observed skin tone. Indeed, Monk argues that self-assessment is particularly useful for understanding how individuals might internalize a society’s stereotypes and considerations about skin tone, plus how they understand and interpret their own embodied social status and experiences related to skin color.

Lastly, we draw on scholarship demonstrating that through perceived discrimination, darker skin color can act as a mediating stressor to worsen physical, emotional, and mental health, especially when it is frequent and ongoing (Cobb

et al. 2016; Klonoff and Landrine 2000; Monk 2015; Perreira and Telles 2014; Stewart et al. 2020). People are often well aware of how stigmatizing attributes like Black race can affect their social interactions (Page-Gould, Mendoza-Denton, and Berry 2014), which in turn shapes their expectations for race-based rejection (Mendoza-Denton, Page-Gould, and Pietrzak 2006) and possible responses to discrimination (Lamont et al. 2016). Relatedly, we posit people are likely aware of other potentially stigmatizing attributes such as darker skin tone or immigrant status. We therefore measure and control for a range of demographic-, economic-, and immigration-related factors to isolate how skin tone uniquely shapes Mexicans’ perceptions of and responses to discrimination in new destinations. Controlling for acculturation and legal status is especially important because illegality and language are both racialized and because greater economic and linguistic integration has been shown to increase Latino immigrants’ perceptions of racial discrimination (Flores 2015; Oropesa and Jensen 2010), whereas having legal status sometimes reduces it (Flippen and Parrado 2015).

DATA AND METHODS

We draw on an original, representative survey and semistructured interviews conducted in 2013–2014 with Mexican immigrants living in two new destinations at the turn of the twenty-first century. In the emerging immigrant gateway of Atlanta, Mexicans are the largest national-origin group, comprising one third of the total foreign-born population (Atlanta Regional Commission 2015). In Philadelphia, a reemerging immigrant gateway due to its prior history of European and Asian immigration, Mexican immigration is smaller and more recent. Nevertheless, paralleling their ongoing

geographic dispersion into the historically non-Mexican northeast, Mexicans are now the second largest national-origin group in the wider metro area (Singer et al. 2008). Mexicans play a similar role as a predominantly low-skilled labor migrant group in both economies, and while anti-immigrant opinion and policymaking is somewhat stronger in Georgia, federal immigration enforcement is intense across both (Sontag and Russakoff 2018).

In 2013, we fielded the main survey component by telephone, including a sample of 500 foreign-born Mexicans. To be eligible for inclusion, Mexican respondents had to be at least 18 years old, reside in 1 of 10 counties in the Philadelphia or Atlanta metropolitan areas, and be born in Mexico. The survey employed a stratified sampling design, drawing a random sample of Mexican immigrants through random-digit dialing of both landlines and cell phone numbers (to minimize selection bias) and Spanish surname dictionaries, in conjunction with oversampling high-density census tracts based on American Community Survey block-group-level estimates of Mexican residential concentration. One year later, we recontacted 58 of these survey respondents to conduct follow-up semistructured, in-depth interviews to explore their life histories and experiences more deeply. All interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed, and de-identified to protect respondents' anonymity.¹ Here we focus mainly on the survey findings, buttressed by an illustrative interview excerpt.

Outcomes

Our key dependent survey measures concern respondents' frequency, sources of, and typical responses to perceived discrimination. To assess frequency, we

asked whether "in the past five years" you have ever "felt you have been treated unfairly or poorly because of your race, ethnicity, or skin color" in three sets of social spaces: "at your job," "around your home or in your neighborhood," and outside of your neighborhood such as "at restaurants, stores, and malls." This yielded three item responses we coded either 1 = yes or 0 = no. These scores were averaged to create a composite measure of perceived racial discrimination, with scores ranging from 0 = none reported in any of the three domains to 1 = reported in all three domains; Cronbach's α for this measure ($\alpha = .719$) suggests sufficiently high internal consistency.

Next, to assess sources, respondents were asked, "Thinking about your experiences in [greater Philadelphia/Atlanta], how often have you felt you have been treated unfairly or poorly by U.S.-born [Whites/Blacks]?" Item responses ranged from 0 = never to 3 = often.

Finally, to assess responses, we asked, "During the times you have felt that you were treated unfairly or poorly, what has been your general response?" Response options included two operationalizations that lean toward what Brettell (2011) calls "confrontation"—(a) "say something and defend yourself" or (b) "report it"—while three lean more toward her definition of "forebearance"—(c) "work harder to prove the person or group wrong," (d) "struggle with it internally but end up not saying or doing anything," or (e) "ignore it" (see also Feagin and Sikes 1994; Lamont et al. 2016; Noh et al. 1999). Responses to this question were recoded into five dichotomous variables, with scores of 1 = yes or 0 = not selected, for each possible response.

Predictors and Covariates

Respondents were also asked to report their gender, socioeconomic status (e.g.,

¹Characteristics of the two samples are summarized in Online Supplemental Tables S1 and S2, respectively.

level of education and homeownership status), ethnoracial self-identification (according to official U.S. Census bureau categories), and skin tone (on a scale from 1 = very light, through 4 = medium, to 7 = very dark). Item responses to gender were recoded as either 1 = male or 0 = female and homeownership status as either 1 = homeowner or 0 = renter or other. Responses to ethnoracial self-identification were recoded into three categories (White, other race, and Black or Indigenous), which imperfectly but still usefully approximate a scale running from lightness through mixedness/*mestizaje* to darkness in Mexico; this allowed us to consider the potential ethnoracial distinctiveness of both Black- and Indigenous-identifying Mexicans from their *mestizo*-identifying counterparts (Flores and Telles 2012; Hooker 2005; Martínez Casas et al. 2014; Moreno Figueroa 2010; Sue 2013). Responses to self-assessed skin tone were recoded into light-skinned (values 1–2), medium-skinned (values 3–5), and dark-skinned (values 6–7).²

Respondents also reported on the number of years they have lived in the United States, their self-reported linguistic proficiency in English (on a scale from 0 = not at all to 3 = very well), and their citizenship and immigration statuses. Item responses to the first were divided by respondents' ages and recoded into proportion of total time spent living in the United States, while item responses to

three tiered questions on citizenship and legal status were recoded into a residual measure of currently undocumented status, coded 1 (currently undocumented) versus 0 (anything else).

Multivariate analyses include two control variables—the first for *survey location* (Philadelphia = 1; Atlanta = 0) and the second for *survey modality* (telephone interview = 1; face-to-face interview = 0). The latter was included to control for differences in mode of surveying that introduced some variation in sampling, which could be reflected in the results. Collinearity tests show no danger of collinearity: bivariate correlations between predictors and covariates are all under .5, and variance inflation scores in multivariate models are between 1 and 2.4.

RACE VERSUS COLOR

By race/ethnicity, fully three-quarters (75 percent) of our Mexican respondents self-identify as other race, while only 15 percent self-identify as White and 10 percent as Black or Indigenous.³ By skin tone, almost two-thirds (62 percent) of respondents identify as medium-skinned (response category 4), while approximately one-quarter (24 percent) identify as lighter, and a little over a tenth (14 percent) identify as darker.⁴

Consistent with colorism literature, although the two variables are positively correlated, $\chi^2 = 21.107$, $p < .05$, they are not identical. Among the 14.9 percent of respondents who self-identified as White, only 7.4 percent also reported having a light skin tone (response categories 1–2), whereas 88.2 percent reported having medium skin (response categories 3–5), and 4.4 percent reported having dark skin (response categories 6–7). Similarly, among the majority of respondents who

²In 2017, just under three-quarters of the national population in Mexico (59.2 percent) self-identified as being medium-skinned (response categories 6–7 on an 11-point scale running from 1 = darkest to 11 = lightest). Just under one-third (29.4 percent) self-identified as being lighter-skinned than that (response categories 8–11), whereas about one-tenth (11.4 percent) self-identified as being darker-skinned (response categories 1–5; INEGI 2017:35; see also Martínez Casas et al. 2014; Telles and Flores 2014).

³See Online Supplemental Table S3.

⁴See Online Supplemental Figure S1.

self-identified as other race, 81.6 percent also reported having a medium skin tone, yet another 14.6 percent and 3.8 percent reported having light or dark skin, respectively. Finally, among the 9.7 percent of respondents who self-identified as either Black or Indigenous, just 6.8 percent reported having a dark skin tone. Instead, 90.9 percent reported having medium skin, and the other 2.3 percent reported light skin.

These findings are consistent with other data in the United States and Mexico. Roth (2010) and Telles (2018) have identified discrepancies between Latinos' skin tones and answers to the official U.S. Census race question. So too has Dowling (2014) shown that many Mexican Americans identify themselves ethnoracially as other race regardless of skin tone, primarily as a way of signaling their politics or identities or that they feel they do not fit well within the American Black-White binary. In Mexico, colorism scholars argue the Mexican state was especially "successful in promoting and implementing a single national ethnic identity of *mestizo*" during the nineteenth century (Telles and Flores 2014:220; Villareal 2010) such that most Mexicans today—especially highly educated ones—still identify as "mixed" or *mestizo* (Martínez Casas et al. 2014:56–60). Even still, interviewers in one study there categorized 58 percent of White-identifying Mexicans as having light to dark brown skin color and plus found that *mestizo*-identifying Mexicans fall "across the full color spectrum," a quarter of them into lighter color categories (Martínez Casas et al. 2014:55–56).

In sum, Mexican survey respondents exhibit a range of skin tones *while also* self-identifying according to a dominant pattern of ethnoracial mixedness. We therefore control for the latter in our multivariate analysis to help isolate the role of the former.

BIVARIATE FINDINGS

Overall, 23.8 percent of our respondents perceive they have been discriminated against for their race, ethnicity, or skin tone, and they perceive similar levels of discrimination from U.S.-born Whites and Blacks. That is, relatively few perceive they are frequently discriminated against by either group (4.2 percent by Whites, 4.4 percent by Blacks), and over half perceive they have never been (51.0 percent by Whites, 54.2 percent by Blacks).⁵

Finally, respondents are most likely to report ignoring discrimination when it occurs (37.3 percent), followed by saying something to defend yourself (24.3 percent)—plus sometimes reporting it, too (6.7 percent), for a total of 31.0 percent—and then working harder to prove the person or group wrong (25.9 percent). Notably, while roughly-one quarter to one-third of respondents chose one of those behavioral responses, very few (5.9 percent) reported that they would struggle with it internally but end up not saying or doing anything in response.⁶

MULTIVARIATE FINDINGS

Does skin tone uniquely contribute to discrimination perceptions? Results of ordinary least squares regression models (see Table 1) show that darker-skinned respondents are more likely to perceive racial discrimination ($\beta = .102, p < .05$) and discrimination from Whites ($\beta = .130, p < .05$) relative to lighter-skinned respondents. Furthermore, darker skin tone is more strongly predictive of both outcomes than is ethnoracial identification. As a robustness check, we included a measure of perceived similarity with U.S.-born Blacks in supplementary

⁵See Online Supplemental Figure S2.

⁶See Online Supplemental Figure S3.

Table 1. Predictors of Frequency and Sources of Perceived Discrimination

Independent variables	Frequency of perceived racial discrimination	Source of perceived discrimination			
		U.S.-born Whites		U.S.-born Blacks	
	S1	S1	S2	S1	S2
R^2 change	.118	.161	.172	.154	.154
F change	4.426	6.399	6.249	6.064	5.432
p	***	***	***	***	***
Age (older)	-.009	-.114	-.117*	-.083	-.080
Male (dummy)	.007	.068	.056	.018	.014
Level of education (higher)	.122*	.068	.069	.191***	.202***
Homeownership (dummy)	-.011	-.045	-.047	-.043	-.039
English language ability (higher)	.011	.076	.055	-.003	-.011
Percentage life lived in the United States (higher)	-.042	-.028	-.045	-.081	-.084
Currently undocumented (dummy)	.105	.026	.018	.010*	.011
Racial self-identification (darker)	-.093	-.070	-.054	-.086	-.076
Skin tone (darker)	.102*	.130*	.111*	.006	-.007
Robustness check					
Perceived similarity with the other U.S.-born group	—	—	.143**	—	.051
Philadelphia metro (dummy)	-.237***	-.272***	-.257***	-.352**	-.344***
Face-to-face method (dummy)	-.066	.096	.092	-.003	-.007

Note: Standardized coefficients (β) from ordinary least squares regressions predicting more frequent or higher composite perceived discrimination.

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

(Table 1, S2) models predicting perceived discrimination from U.S.-born Whites, anticipating the possibility that respondents' perceived discrimination from Whites might simply reflect respondents' feelings of (dis)similarity vis-à-vis African Americans as an historically disenfranchised domestic racial minority group. Although respondents who perceive greater similarity with U.S.-born Blacks do report more frequent discrimination from U.S.-born Whites, the coefficient for darker skin tone remains significant ($\beta = .111$, $p < .05$).

Finally, results of binary logistical regression models (see Table 2) show that darker self-identified skin tone uniquely contributes only to one behavioral response to perceived discrimination—that of struggling with (discrimination) internally but

ending up not saying or doing anything ($B = .887$, $p < .05$). Even in a supplementary (Table 2, S2) robustness check, where we again include a measure of perceived similarity with U.S.-born Blacks, the coefficient for skin tone remains significant and large ($B = .882$, $p < .05$). Indeed, darker skin tone is the *only* factor beyond currently undocumented status that contributes significantly to Mexican respondents' likelihood of struggling internally in response to perceived discrimination. Ethnoracial self-identification is nonsignificant in all five models.

We think Lucía, a self-identified Indigenous legal permanent resident from our qualitative interview sample who originally migrated to the United States without authorization from Mexico City,

Table 2. Predictors of Behavioral Responses to Perceived Discrimination

Independent variables	Behavioral response (dummies)					
	Say something (but not report it)	Say something (plus report it)	Work harder	Ignore it	Struggle internally	
	S1	S1	S1	S1	S1	S22
<i>N</i>	191	191	191	191	191	189
χ^2	28.550**	13.59	44.408***	41.036	23.525**	23.639*
Pseudo <i>R</i> ²	.130	0.06	.183	.171	.248	.250
Age (older)	.013	.021	-.024	.013	-.076	-.071
Male (dummy)	-.079	.106	.290	-.411	.204	.213
Level of education (higher)	-.140	-.055	-.164	.208	-.042	-.027
Homeownership (dummy)	-.942	-1.045	-.057	.719	.581	.558
English language ability (better)	.342	.256	.162	-.212	1.049	1.076
Percentage life lived in the United States (higher)	1.444	1.986*	-2.249*	.422	-.406	-.583
Currently undocumented (dummy)	-.981*	-.783	-.177	.562	1.796*	1.763*
Racial self-identification (darker)	.082	-.186	.010	.278	-.128	-.148
Skin tone (darker)	-.015	-.013	.098	-.142	.887*	.882*
Robustness check						
Perceived similarity with U.S.-born Blacks	—	—	—	—	—	-.001
Controls						
Philadelphia metro (dummy)	.740	1.191**	-.253	-.578	.054	.027
Face-to-face method (dummy)	1.216**	1.851***	-.622	-1.684***	1.790*	1.827*

Note: Unstandardized *B* values from binary logistical regression models predicting an affirmative response. **p* < .05. ***p* < .01. ****p* < .001.

illustrates all three relationships well. Lucía feels she must be careful in upper-class White spaces around Atlanta because she gets followed by staff and security guards in higher-end department stores. This insulting surveillance, in her opinion, is clearly about her darker skin tone and Indigenous phenotype because mall authorities do not give the same treatment to her “White-passing” Colombian friend, even when they are out shopping together. “They follow me [*Me siguen*],” she told us. “You know how. I haven’t ever stolen anything!” Pondering it retrospectively during our interview together, Lucía seemed to struggle in quiet resignation: “Yeah, it sucks. Because we’re both Latinas, but obviously only one of us can pass off as White.”

CONCLUSION

How does skin color shape Mexican immigrants’ experiences and understandings

of racialization in new immigrant destinations? To date, most colorism scholarship on U.S. Latinos utilizes either national samples or regional ones conducted in traditional gateways (Gómez 2000) or Southwestern communities with large Mexican American populations. For its part, despite a rapidly growing literature on immigrants’ geographic dispersion into nontraditional areas of settlement (Flippen and Farrell-Bryan 2021), few studies have explicitly operationalized skin tone although skin tone is theorized as a key factor, alongside class and legal status, stratifying Latinos’ positions along an emerging triracial U.S. racial order (Bonilla-Silva 2004). Building on novel case studies that do attend to skin tone variation in new destinations (Browne et al. 2021; Cebulko 2018; Gómez Cervantes 2021; Licona and Maldonado 2014; Oropesa and Jensen 2010), we have uncovered, using a larger and reasonably representative sample of

Mexican immigrants living in two large metropolitan new destinations, that darker self-identified skin tone uniquely contributes to perceptions of more frequent racial discrimination, more frequent discrimination by U.S.-born White adults, and a stronger tendency to struggle internally in response, even after controlling other factors.

Our interpretation of these results is consistent with Monk's (2015) argument that self-identified skin tone is a useful measure of how African Americans interpret stereotypes about skin color and, accordingly, internalize their own embodied social status. In our study, darker-skinned Mexican respondents appear to be more conscious of how their skin tone is stigmatized and treated, especially by U.S.-born Whites. Furthermore, we suspect this consciousness is shaping their coping mechanisms in an "undermining" way (Hoyt et al. 2007), encouraging more of what Lamont et al. (2016) call the complementary combination of *management of self* (e.g., deliberation about what to do) and *self-isolation*. While we lack direct measures of health outcomes, other literature shows that these coping mechanisms can contribute to outcomes like withdrawal, stress, fatigue, alcohol consumption, and lowered self-esteem (Ortiz-Hernández et al. 2009; Pinel 1999).

Future research can expand on our findings in several ways. Namely, we employ only *self-reported* measures of both skin tone and discrimination. Doing so has its advantages, but future research can also examine how outside observers consider Latino immigrants' skin tones (Roth 2010) and how this may be related to observable measures of differential treatment. For example, Chirco and Buchanan (2021) find that undergraduates in the U.S. Pacific Northwest are more likely to see people with brown (compared to white or black) skin color

as undocumented immigrants and that doing so increases support for restrictionist immigration policy. These findings depart from our own, where darker skin tone shapes Mexican immigrants' own perceptions of and responses to discrimination in a more linear fashion, in line with Bonilla-Silva's (2004) predictions. Future research can also build on our analyses by employing longitudinal instead of cross-sectional research designs; expanding into other new destination locales, which are diverse (Flippen and Farrell-Bryan 2021); and focusing on a range of national-origin immigrant groups. We hope our findings inspire work in these directions.


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SUPPLEMENTAL MATERIAL

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

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