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Skin color, sex, and educational attainment in the post-civil rights era

Amelia R. Branigan [a,*], Jeremy Freese [b], Assaf Patir [c], Thomas W. McDade [d], Kiang Liu [e], Catarina I. Kiefe [f]

[a] Department of Sociology, Northwestern University, 1812 Chicago Avenue, Evanston, IL 60208, United States
[b] Department of Sociology, Northwestern University, United States
[c] Department of Economics, Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Israel
[d] Department of Anthropology, Northwestern University, United States
[e] Department of Preventative Medicine, Northwestern University, United States
[f] Department of Quantitative Health Sciences, University of Massachusetts Medical School, United States

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ABSTRACT

We assess the relationship between skin color and educational attainment for native-born non-Hispanic Black and White men and women, using data from the Coronary Artery Risk Development in Young Adults (CARDIA) Study. CARDIA is a medical cohort study with twenty years of social background data and a continuous measure of skin color, recorded as the percent of light reflected off skin. For Black men and women, we find a one-standard-deviation increase in skin lightness to be associated with a quarter-year increase in educational attainment. For White women, we find an association approximately equal in magnitude to that found for Black respondents, and the pattern of significance across educational transitions suggests that skin color for White women is not simply a proxy for family background. For White men, any relationship between skin color and attainment is not robust and, analyses suggest, might primarily reflect differences in family background. Findings suggest that discrimination on the basis of skin color may be less specific to race than previously thought.

1. Introduction

While narrative evidence that skin color matters for minorities in the United States is abundant, accurately measuring the extent to which skin color discrimination affects social outcomes, and for whom, has been a challenge for social scientists.[1] Using the case of educational attainment, in this paper we introduce two important elements into the study of how and to what extent skin color affects social outcomes. First, we use a continuous measure of skin color, assessed as a spectrophotometer reading at the volar upper arm. This method of color measurement is standard in the medical sciences (e.g., Jablonski, 2004; Jablonski and Chaplin, 2000), but in prior work on the relationship between skin color and social outcomes, interviewer-reported categorical skin color data have been used almost exclusively.[2] Our continuous, mechanical measure of skin color not only increases precision and reduces the possibility of interviewer-induced bias, but also can be replicated in future studies

* Corresponding author.
E-mail address: amelia.branigan@northwestern.edu (A.R. Branigan).

[1] For further discussion of the challenges in using interviewer-coded skin color data, see Villarreal (2010), Hersch (2006), and Gullickson (2005); for discussion of difficulties in comparing across studies of skin color and social outcomes, see Hughes and Hertel (1990).

[2] Scarr et al. (1977) is one exception, as we discuss in footnote 9.

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to assess change in the salience of skin color over time. Second, our spectrophotometer measure allows us to observe a degree of skin color variation in White respondents not seen when color is assessed using a categorical scale, affording us the unique opportunity to investigate the relationship between skin color and attainment within-race for native-born White Americans.

1.1. Background

While other physical characteristics have been used to judge racial ancestry, in the American context, skin color has long been the most prominent. At least as far back as slavery, skin color has been conceived not as a marker of dichotomous racial classification, but as a relatively continuous indicator of Caucasian ancestry (Myrdal, 1944). Lighter-skinned 'mulatto' slaves, often biologically related to their owners, were known to receive preferential treatment ranging from additional work-related training to an increased likelihood of earning freedom (Franklin, 2000). Decades after abolition, the effects of these early status differentials were still visible: Hill (2000) found significant differences in school attendance and occupational prestige between individuals identified in the 1920 census as 'mulatto' and individuals identified as 'Black,' controlling for household differences in literacy, parental occupation and family structure.

With legal discrimination by race now decades in the past, whether and how much socioeconomic outcomes still vary by skin color for American minorities is a subject of debate. Gullickson (2005) hypothesizes that skin color became less consequential over the Civil Rights period, as African Americans became more integrated into the formerly White education and labor markets, and the meaning of skin color within the Black community itself evolved. He found that skin color had "virtually no effect" on educational outcomes for cohorts born after 1953 (169). Studies by Udry et al. (1971) and Goering (1972) also support the argument that skin color was growing less significant at the time, showing a decrease in the significance of skin color for social outcomes including spouse selection and 'job-mobility orientation.' On the other hand, Hughes and Hertel (1990) found skin color differentials persisting fairly stably on a number of social dimensions from 1950 through 1980, using the same data as Gullickson (2005), and a number of recent studies have affirmed that differentials by color do still exist. Goldsmith et al. (2006, 2007) found skin color to be significantly related to wage differences among Black men. Hersch (2006) found an association between skin color and educational attainment in which the penalty for being dark-skinned amongst Black men was approximately double the equivalent penalty for Black women.[3] Keith and Herring (1991) found an association between skin color and education, family income, and occupation for Black women only, and an association between skin color and personal income for Black respondents of both sexes.[4]

In this abundance of studies, it becomes quickly apparent that White Americans are not perceived as a relevant population for those interested in within-race effects of skin color on socioeconomic outcomes. A small number of the studies cited use White respondents as a single-category comparison group for interpreting the relationship between skin color and socioeconomic outcomes for Black respondents (e.g. Goldsmith et al., 2006, 2007), while the majority of studies omit White respondents altogether. In both cases, the seeming assumption is that skin color variation within-race is not expected to influence social outcomes among Whites.[5] Hochschild and Weaver (2007) elaborate the rationale behind this assumption in their description of the psychology of colorism, wherein people "attribute higher status and grant more power and wealth to one group, typically those designated as white... [and then] attribute higher status and grant more power and wealth to people of one complexion, typically light skin, within the groups designated as non-white" (646). Goldsmith et al. (2007) term this phenomenon a societal "preference for whiteness," in which minorities gain advantage when they possess phenotypical attributes of the White in-group. In this framework, Whiteness is the homogeneous identity that is privileged in American society and within which relative color is irrelevant, while among minorities there is a benefit to appearing more similar to those who are White. That a preference for lightness may also operate between individuals identified as White is not explicitly considered.

Although the idea that skin variation will not be socially meaningful among Whites is understandable in the American historical context, social valuation of particular skin coloring is far from unique to the United States. Of the 51 societies in the Human Relations Area Files for which skin color is a documented criterion for attractiveness—societies ranging six continents, with great variation in cultural practices, level of development, and colonial history— lightness was preferred in over 90% of cases (Van den Berghe and Frost, 1986). Nor are such preferences a modern phenomenon: in Japan, for example, a bias towards lighter skin in women was evident as early as the eighth century AD, and may have persisted from significantly earlier (Wagatsuma, 1967). Indeed, even within the U.S., an aesthetic preference for lighter skin among White women has been documented (Feinman and Gill, 1978). Although aesthetic idealization of particular coloration does not necessarily imply a relationship between coloration and socioeconomic outcomes, the relative ubiquity with which color is culturally relevant within many and varying societies outside the U.S. makes notable the presumed homogeneity of White

[3] Hersch (2006) analyzed the relationship between skin color and educational attainment in both the Multi-City Study of Urban Inequality (MCSUI) and the National Survey of Black Americans (NSBA); the difference in magnitude by sex was observed in the MCSUI data only, though the association between skin color and education was robust across both samples. Hunter (2002) found a similar association between skin color and educational attainment for women in the NSBA sample, but did not include men in her analysis.

[4] While we focus on non-Hispanic Blacks and Whites in this analysis, past research has demonstrated an association between skin color and socioeconomic outcomes in other groups as well, both domestically (see Murguia and Telles (1996), Darity et al. (2002, 2005), Golash-Boza and Darity (2008), and Frank et al. (2010) on Hispanics in the U.S.) and elsewhere (see Telles (1992) on Brazil; Gravlee et al. (2005) on Puerto Rico; and Villarreal (2010) on Mexico).

[5] As one exception, Hersch (2008) found that for immigrant populations in the U.S., lighter skin color is correlated with higher wages across the full sample, even net of race, education, language proficiency, occupation before immigration, family background, ethnicity, and country of origin. It is unknown whether this finding reflects a phenomenon unique to immigrants, or should be expected to hold for native-born Americans, as well.