

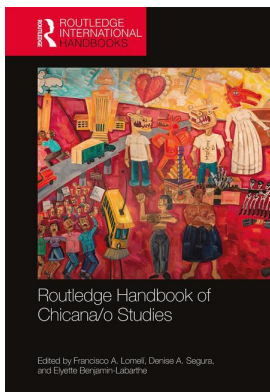
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The challenge of colorism in the Chicana/o community

Margaret Hunter

Introduction

In 2015, a group of Latina/o hotel workers won a suit against their employer claiming discrimination based on national origin and skin color. The Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) charged that the housekeeping staff and security workers had been subjected to derogatory comments regarding their skin tone from supervisors and co-workers for nearly a decade. The Nevada hotel agreed to pay \$150,000 and furnish other relief to settle the case (*EEOC v Pioneer Hotel*). This case is just one among an increasing number of legal cases claiming color-based discrimination. What is color-based discrimination and how does it affect the Chicana/o community?

Institutional racism is intimately connected to color-based discrimination, or colorism. Racial discrimination remains an intractable problem in the United States. Structural inequalities and institutional policies routinely deny access to resources and fair competition for jobs and schooling for people of color. Despite this pattern of exclusion, people of color have made great progress in combating persistent discrimination in housing, the labor market, and education. However, built into the process of racial discrimination is a corollary process, often referred to as colorism. Colorism is a form of discrimination that privileges light-skinned people of color over their dark-skinned counterparts (Hunter 2005). Colorism is concerned with actual skin tone, as opposed to racial or ethnic identity. That is to say, among Chicanas/os, there is a variety of skin tones, although they all may identify as Chicana/o. The distinction between racial category and skin color is important because race is a social concept, not significantly tied to biology. Lighter-skinned people of color enjoy substantial privileges that are still unattainable by their darker-skinned peers. On the whole, lighter-skinned people of color earn more money, have higher-status occupations, complete more years of schooling, and live in more integrated neighborhoods than darker-skinned people of the same race or ethnicity.

Racism and colorism are separate but closely connected systems of discrimination. Racism operates at the level of racial category (i.e., Latina/o, Black, Asian, etc.). Regardless of physical appearance, Latinas/os of all skin tones are subject to certain kinds of discrimination, denigration, and second-class citizenship, simply because they are Latina/o. Racism in this form is systemic and has both ideological and material consequences. Colorism, in contrast, operates at

the level of skin tone: darker skin or lighter skin within a racial group. Although all Latinas/os experience discrimination as Latina/o, the intensity of that discrimination, the frequency, and the outcomes of that discrimination will differ dramatically by skin tone and national origin, among other variables. For example, darker-skinned Chicanas/os may earn less money than lighter-skinned Chicanas/os, but both groups earn less, on average, than do whites. The two systems of discrimination (race and color) work in concert. A light-skinned Mexican American may still experience racism, despite her light skin, and a dark-skinned Mexican American may experience racism and colorism simultaneously. Racism is a larger, systemic, social process and colorism is one manifestation of it.

Discussions of colorism have often been denied or shamefully hidden in Chicana/o communities and other communities of color (Jones 2004). Although many people believe that colorism is strictly a “Black or Latina/o problem,” colorism is actually practiced by whites and people of color alike. Given the opportunity, many people will hire a light-skinned person before a dark-skinned person of the same race (Espino & Franz 2002; Mason 2004; Telles & Murguía 1990), or choose to marry a lighter-skinned woman rather than a darker-skinned woman (Hunter 2005). Many people are unaware of their preferences for lighter skin because that dominant aesthetic is so deeply ingrained in U.S. culture. Often referred to as “implicit bias,” colorism is a widely shared practice that many people unknowingly participate in. Recognizing the role of whites is particularly important because it is much more likely to be a white teacher of Chicana/o students or a white supervisor of a Chicana/o employee who may be in a position to show favoritism by skin tone. Chicanas/os and other people of color are much more likely to be aware of their own skin tone bias, but white ignorance of the practice does not ameliorate their participation in it.

This chapter outlines the historical roots of colorism in the Chicana/o community, as well as its current form and practices. It describes the ways that colorism operates in employment, education, housing, politics, and interpersonal relationships. A significant body of social science research now exists on this topic and this chapter reviews that research in order to illustrate the complex relationships between skin color and other social dimensions for Chicanas/os.

Historical origins of colorism in the Americas

Colorism in the Chicana/o community has a long and complicated history. Because colorism is part of a larger system of institutional racism, its genealogy stems from European colonialism in the Americas and is currently reinforced by U.S. and European cultural dominance today. Colorism is, therefore, both a legacy and a current practice. In Mexico’s history, and in much of Latin America, white Spaniard elites ruled the colonies and created and maintained white domination in social/economic/political institutions and in the culture more generally. European control was maintained at first by force and violence, and later by ideology, coercion, and symbolic violence.

As Spaniards took over the Americas economically, they also imposed their own culture. The European colonial project in the Americas had, as its foundation, an ideology of European superiority that included intellectual contributions, language, religion, culture, and even bodily aesthetics. Consequently, pale skin, blonde hair, and blue eyes were often elevated in status by the Europeans and eventually revered by both the colonizers and the colonized as the colonized began to internalize the dominant colonial ideology (Darity, Dietrich & Hamilton 2005; Hall 2011; Hunter 2005). Colonizers defined the bodily aesthetics of the Indigenous people and the enslaved Africans as deficient by comparison. Although many Indigenous people and enslaved Africans resisted ideologies of European superiority, European cultural norms became

ubiquitous across the society. The legacy of colonialism looms large around the globe where former European colonies often have vestiges of the oppressor's ideology still remaining. Skin bleaching products are very popular in former colonies such as much of Latin America, the Philippines, the Caribbean, and many countries in Africa.

European colonizers enlisted the assistance of the "colonial elite," a small, light-skinned class of colonized people. Although Mexico experienced a high degree of miscegenation, the color-caste system was firmly in place with the light-skinned Spaniards enjoying the most power and resources, while darker-skinned Indians were routinely oppressed, dispossessed of their land, and rendered powerless in the early colony. Vestiges of this history are still visible today in Mexico's current color-class system. The ethno-racial hierarchy of New Spain, and later of Mexico, set the stage for contemporary colorism today where darker-skinned people in Mexico still experience disadvantages in employment and lower social status (Sue 2013).

The value and status of light skin and Anglo features persisted in Mexico and in the Chicana/o community in the United States. The informal social status of children, relative to other family members, is often linked to their skin tone. Family nicknames such as "negrita" (black/dark-skinned) or "la güera" (white/light-skinned) are common in many families and, while they may be intended as benign markers of identity, they are actually connected to a clear social color hierarchy. This can be especially true for girls where light skin is additionally important because of its connection to beauty. Beauty remains an important form of capital for women, especially in heterosexual marriage markets where a woman's beauty functions as a status characteristic much like her educational attainment or her family's wealth (Hunter 2011). Language use in Spanish and English belies these implicit values. For example, to be fair-skinned in English means both to be beautiful and to be light. *La güera*, in Spanish, has the same dual meaning of lightness and prettiness, revealing the interconnectedness of light skin and beauty in both Mexico and the United States. The implicit value of light skin and light eyes is often on display during the introduction of new babies to the extended family when families, regardless of race, comment on the beauty of blue eyes or light skin. In some communities of color, family members may express relief that the baby is not dark, if she is light, or gratitude that the baby has "good hair" if it is curly or straight instead of kinky. All of these informal communications reinforce ideals of European aesthetics and a hierarchy of skin color.

The "yearning for lightness" described by Glenn (2008) is predicated on the notion that dark skin represents savagery, irrationality, ugliness, and inferiority. White skin, and, thus, whiteness itself, is defined by the opposite: civility, rationality, beauty, and superiority. In today's globalized world, whiteness and Anglo features carry the additional symbolism of modernity and cosmopolitanism, crucial traits for women of color in a global job market. These contrasting definitions are the foundation for colorism and they are reinforced throughout many cultures and economies in the Americas. It is both the historical legacy of colonialism and the current practice of U.S. and European cultural power around the globe that reinforce contemporary experiences of colorism for Chicanas/os.

Colorism: income, education, and political attitudes

Substantial research documents skin color stratification among Chicanas/os on a number of dimensions (Montalvo & Codina 2001). Lighter-skinned Chicanas/os and other Latinas/os are more likely to earn higher incomes (Arce, Murguía & Frisbie 1987; Fears 2003; Gómez 2000; Telles & Murguía 1990), work in higher-status occupations (Espino & Franz 2002; Morales 2008), gain increased educational attainment (Murguía & Telles 1996), and live in more racially integrated neighborhoods (Alba, Logan & Stults 2000; South, Crowder & Chávez 2005) than

their darker-skinned counterparts. Skin tone is just one of a few key variables that affect inequality for Chicanas/os and other Latinas/os. Skin tone, in concert with national origin, nativity, English proficiency, and educational attainment, all make a significant impact on stratification outcomes for Chicanas/os. However, color differences within ethnic or national origin groups have uneven effects across time and circumstance (Golash-Boza & Darity 2008; Rodríguez 2000). This section describes the ways that income, occupational status, educational attainment, housing access, political attitudes, and other key factors are influenced by skin tone discrimination for Chicanas/os.

Over the past decade social science researchers have found that Chicanas/os who identified as white consistently earned more money per year than Chicanas/os who identified as “some other race” or Black (Allen, Telles & Hunter 2000; Fears 2003). A clear income hierarchy is evident among Latinas/os, more generally, with white Latinas/os at the top, “some other race” Latinas/os in the middle, and Black Latinas/os at the bottom. White Latinas/os also had lower unemployment rates and lower poverty rates than Black Latinas/os (Fears 2003). Although most Chicanas/os identify as either “white” or “some other race” on U.S. Census documents (Vaquera & Kao 2006), the pattern of inequality still holds true: dark skin has real costs for Chicanas/os in terms of income (Telles & Murguía 1990) and occupational prestige (Espino & Franz 2002).

Income is not the only measure of inequality in employment. Occupational prestige, the perceived status of one’s job, is another important measure of hierarchies in employment. Espino and Franz (2002) compared the employment experiences of Mexicans, Puerto Ricans, and Cubans in the United States. They found “that darker-skinned Mexicans and Cubans face significantly lower occupational prestige scores than their lighter-skinned counterparts even when controlling for factors that influence performance in the labor market” (2002, p. 612). Dark-skinned Puerto Ricans did not face this disadvantage in the labor market. This means that lighter-skinned Mexicans and Cubans have a better chance at attaining a high-status occupation than their darker counterparts who are similar to them in other ways. Income and occupational prestige gaps by skin tone are a significant finding of color-based discrimination among Chicanas/os. Little ethnographic research has been conducted on the micro-level processes of discrimination in places of employment, but some of the recent EEOC lawsuits that demonstrate employer preferences for light-skinned workers shed some light on the issue.

As the debate over affordable and safe housing grows in the United States, it is increasingly important to examine how race and color affect access to desirable neighborhoods. While it is clear that light skin is an advantage in terms of income and occupational prestige, little research has been done on skin tone and housing access. Alba, Logan & Stults (2000) studied housing access, ownership, and segregation in the United States. They found that

Hispanics who describe themselves as black are in substantially poorer and less white neighborhoods than their compatriots who describe themselves as white. The penalty they absorb in neighborhood affluence varies between \$3500 and \$6000 and thus places them in neighborhoods comparable to those occupied by African Americans.

(p. 9)

Alba’s, Logan’s, and Stults’ study of immigrant adaptation and spatial-assimilation theory reveals that despite their immigrant status and identity as Latinas/os, Black Latinas/os’ housing experience more closely resembles that of native-born African Americans than that of other Latinas/os. That is, Black Latinas/os live in more racially segregated neighborhoods with less exposure to non-Hispanic whites and lower property values (South et al. 2005). This not only socially

isolates darker-skinned Latinas/os, but also stunts the opportunity for the accumulation of wealth through home ownership (Oliver & Shapiro 1995).

Educational institutions also create unequal outcomes by skin tone. Because educational attainment is such an important predictor of income inequality, unequal outcomes by skin tone created in educational institutions are important to understand. Murguía and Telles (1996) demonstrated that lighter-skinned Chicanas/os complete more years of schooling than darker-skinned Chicanas/os even when their family backgrounds are similar. This is an important detail because it suggests that schools themselves play a role in creating or exacerbating skin tone inequality. This is a particularly important finding in relation to the steady stream of immigration from Mexico. New immigrants who come to the United States face not only racial/ethnic discrimination, but discrimination by phenotype or skin color. Arce et al. (1987) even included a variable on facial features in their analysis of skin color and education. They found that dark skin color coupled with Indian facial features (as opposed to Anglo) produced a significant depression of educational attainment. Although most studies do not include variables on facial features, it is an important note that most people make sense of skin tone differences within a larger context that may include facial features, hair texture, and other bodily aesthetics.

How does skin-color stratification actually operate in schools? Skin-color hierarchies reflect deeply held cultural beliefs about civility, modernity, sophistication, beauty, and virtue. In a U.S. context, light skin and Anglo facial features have been equated with these positive characteristics. Ideologies of skin tone get translated in the classroom in particular ways. Teacher expectations exert a powerful influence on student achievement. If teachers, of any race, expect their light-skinned students of color to be smarter, more academically prepared, from better families, and better behaved than their darker-skinned classmates, the students may rise and fall to meet those racialized expectations (Hunter 2016). Teachers and principals may respond more positively to light-skinned or white parents of children in their classrooms.

Understanding classroom dynamics is a critical part of exploring how colorism operates in schools, because children spend many hours every day interacting with teachers and other students in school classrooms. Skin tone can operate as a kind of symbolic capital, where status is conferred on light-skinned students within peer groups. Researchers have shown that the “halo effect” phenomenon in psychology is central to understanding how people evaluate one another. The halo effect is a propensity to allow positive evaluations about one trait in a person (often physical attractiveness) to influence the appraisal of other aspects of that person’s characteristics, such as intelligence, kindness, and likeability (Nisbett & Wilson 1977). People routinely attribute other positive traits (like competence or integrity) to people they perceive as physically attractive. A color-based halo effect operates in the same way, but is influenced by the skin tone of the person being evaluated. Lighter-skinned people of color, who are often viewed as more physically attractive because of racist beauty standards, are more likely to be judged as intelligent and kind (Wade 2008). In this way, the “halo” of physical attractiveness (or light skin) affects our judgment about the other traits of the person we are evaluating.

Classroom dynamics may be significantly influenced by the halo effect of color and race. Lighter-skinned Chicana/o students may seem more attractive to teachers because of racialized beauty standards. Teachers may unconsciously favor Chicana/o students with light hair, light eyes, or other Anglo features. The halo effect can then extend from notions of physical attractiveness to perceptions of intelligence, competence, and integrity. If the Chicana/o students with light hair and light eyes are more likely to be viewed by teachers and peers as the “good kids” in the class, then they are more likely to perform at higher levels because of strong teacher expectations. Those students may also have the benefit of being perceived as “well behaved” as the positive evaluation of their appearance bleeds over to the positive assessment of their behavior

and other characteristics. If lighter-skinned Chicanas/os are more likely to experience the halo effect with their teachers because of their color, then they are also more likely to have positive relationships with those teachers, leading to more positive schooling experiences overall. Further ethnographic research on the interpersonal dynamics of colorism in the classroom is critical to understanding these classroom processes.

Income, occupation, and education are all status markers affected by colorism, but what about politics? Participation in the political process affects individual and group status and may also reflect feelings of incorporation or self-efficacy among Chicanas/os. Racial identity has a strong influence on political attitudes. African Americans, Latina/os, Asian Americans, and whites exhibit clear voting preferences and patterned responses to political issues (Fraga et al. 2010). Interestingly, while skin tone exhibits a significant effect on the economic, educational, and personal outcomes for people of color, skin color has largely been ignored as a predictor of voting patterns and political efficacy. In 2007, Hochschild and Weaver (2007) conducted an analysis of how skin color affected the political attitudes of African Americans. They found that although skin color continues to predict social structural variables such as education, income, and occupational status, it demonstrates little effect on African Americans' attitudes about U.S. politics. Hochschild and Weaver called this finding the "skin color paradox" because, for African Americans, skin color exerts as large an influence on life outcomes as does race, but African American voters do not differ in their political attitudes by skin color. Their racial identity as African Americans overwhelms any differences by color.

In 2012, Faight and Hunter sought to replicate this study with Latinas/os. Will Latinas/os have larger differences in their political attitudes by skin color than do African Americans? Our analysis revealed support for an incorporationist argument of Latina/o political attitudes. We found that, among Latina/o voters, skin color also had a minimal effect on political attitudes. However, control variables such as citizenship, education, and English proficiency consistently predicted an increased sense of political efficacy. This pattern suggests that the more culturally and structurally incorporated into the United States respondents are, the more they feel a sense of connectedness to and competence in U.S. politics, and that these traits are much more influential in predicting political attitudes than differences in skin tone (Faight & Hunter 2012).

Although a skin color paradox also exists for Latinas/os, other variables, like national origin, did predict several different political attitudes. In fact, national origin had a more pronounced and consistent effect on political attitudes than any of the other primary variables in the analysis. For example, both Salvadorans and Central Americans were less interested in U.S. politics than were Chicanas/os. Dominicans were more likely to feel a shared fate and political commonality with African Americans than any other group. Perhaps most interestingly, all national origin groups reported feeling more competitive with African Americans for jobs than did Chicanas/os (Faight & Hunter 2012). In these ways, national origin continues to play an important role in shaping political attitudes and perceptions of the racial/ethnic landscape in the United States.

Skin color and ethnic identity

While many Americans view race and skin color as fixed characteristics passed on from their ancestors, social science research demonstrates that, in fact, racial identity changes over the life course, over generations, and in different social contexts (Rodríguez 2000; Telles & Ortiz 2008; Telzer & García 2009; Vásquez 2010). Similarly, perceptions of actual skin tone (as light or dark) may also change in response to a changing social context. Immigrants to the United States may be particularly affected by the changing social and racial contexts of their home countries and the United States. As immigrants move to the United States they are likely to reconcile racial

identities and perceptions of skin color from their home country with those in their new U.S. context (Frank, Akresh & Lu 2010). Consequently, self-designation of skin tone may be less static than researchers once thought. Immigrants may perceive their skin color differently once in the United States or they may view it differently as their time in the United States increases and American racialization increases.

Evidence suggests that perceptions of skin tone are connected to age and decade of arrival in the United States (Hunter & Faught 2012). Racial socialization occurs over the life course, but may be most influential during childhood and young adulthood. A recent analysis of the Latino National Survey data found that those who came to the United States at a younger age were more likely to describe their skin color as dark than were those who immigrated as adults (Hunter & Faught 2012). It is possible that young Latina/o immigrants come to see themselves as a unique racial/ethnic group and articulate that by describing their skin color as darker. It is also likely that Latina/o immigrants who came of age in the United States are less likely to associate strong negative feelings with dark skin, and therefore are more willing to identify as “dark” than the immigrants raised abroad.

How might a changing social and racial context affect this shift in self-reported skin color among Latinas/os? Anti-immigrant sentiment, and especially anti-Mexican sentiment, has dominated political discourse in the United States for the past two decades. From fears about jobs, to blocking access to public schools and emergency health care, to requiring identification to prove legal status, to removing birthright citizenship, to building a wall on the U.S.-Mexico border, public discourse has become increasingly hostile towards the Mexican and Mexican American community. This litany of political actions may have contributed to a climate that encouraged some Latina/o immigrants to distinguish themselves from whites, both by identifying as “some other race,” as opposed to white, and by self-describing as darker in skin tone, rather than lighter (Hunter & Faught 2012).

National origin also plays an important role in influencing immigrants’ perceptions of their own skin color. Immigrants bring racial ideologies with them when they immigrate and they both adapt to and transform the U.S. racial structure. When compared to Mexicans, Cubans and Central Americans are most likely to identify themselves as light-skinned, while Dominicans and Salvadorans are least likely to do so (Hunter & Faught 2012). Women are more likely than men to identify as white and to report a lighter skin color. This finding is consistent with the literature on gender and skin color that demonstrates strong cultural preferences for women with light skin and Anglo features (Hunter 2005). In the United States and abroad, light-skinned women are perceived as more competitive in job and marriage markets (Hunter 2011).

While U.S. hostility and racialization processes may be leading Mexican immigrants to identify as darker-skinned, rather than lighter, the economic and social advantages of light skin remain strong. In societies like the United States, where resources are divided by race and color, light-skinned people get a disproportionate amount of the material benefits. However, light skin may be viewed as a disadvantage when it is considered in the context of ethnic identity. Ethnic identity, a key social-psychological variable, is connected to notions of ethnic legitimacy or authenticity, often informed by skin tone (Hunter 2005). In many ethnic communities, people view darker skin tones as more ethnically authentic. For example, light-skinned and biracial people often report feeling left out or pushed out of their own racial groups. They report other people’s perceptions of their racial identity as a common source of conflict or discomfort in co-ethnic settings (Brunsma & Rockquemore 2001).

The task of “proving” oneself to be a legitimate or authentic member of an ethnic community is a significant burden for the light-skinned in the Chicana/o community (Hunter 2005;

Tafuya 2005). Light-skinned Chicanas/os are often viewed as more assimilated and less identified with the Mexican American community (Mason 2004). Chicanas/os report using Spanish-language ability as a way to re-establish their Mexican identity, when light skin casts doubt on it (Jiménez 2004). Suggestions of not being authentically ethnic enough, in any ethnic community, is a serious insult to many. This tactic has particular power against those lighter-skinned people who are from racially mixed backgrounds. It implies that they do not identify with their fellow ethnics, that they do not care about them, that they think they are better than their co-ethnics, or, in extreme cases, that they wish they were white (Ono 2002; Vázquez et al. 1997).

For many Chicanas/os, dark skin and Spanish-language ability are key identifiers of Chicana/o and Mexican identity. Conversely, light skin and English monolingualism are typically identified with Anglo assimilation and thus devalued by many in Mexican American communities (Jiménez 2004). Although some may interpret this finding as “the grass is always greener,” an interpretation that implies that the light-skinned wish to be darker and the dark-skinned wish to be lighter, there is actually little evidence to suggest this is true. In fact, while the lighter-skinned Chicanas/os express discomfort with identity and inclusion in the Chicana/o community, there is little evidence that any actually wished to give up their light skin status in order to be accepted. On one hand, dark skin is associated with being Indian and rural, and therefore low status. On the other hand, dark skin is evidence of being India/o and, therefore, of being truly or authentically Mexican American (Hunter 2005).

Conclusion

Colorism among Chicanas/os is similar to that of other Latinas/os, in that light skin bestows important advantages on some community members, while dark skin disadvantages others. Colorism in the Chicana/o community, however, is a complicated phenomenon. Factors such as length of time in the United States, national origin, phenotype, region, and levels of cultural assimilation all influence how people experience color-based discrimination. For most Chicanas/os, the dark-skinned reference group is often Indigenous or Indian, while for some other Latina/o communities the dark-skinned reference group is African. While Indians and Africans have unique histories and relationships to Latin America, both serve as a negative reference point in hierarchies of color. In either case, European and Anglo aesthetics are elevated in status both structurally and culturally. From language to religion, to bodily aesthetics, European/Anglo identities are high status. Discrimination based on skin tone is embedded within the social, political, and economic structures, and consequently has a far reach into the employment sector, educational institutions, the political sphere, and even into interpersonal relationships.

Skin tone connotes meanings of status that harken back to European colonialism, but the color-based hierarchies are also reinforced in contemporary media and discriminatory practices in the United States and Latin America more broadly. Global ad campaigns and global job markets reinforce the high status and desirability of light skin as a mark of cosmopolitanism and modernity. The cultural ideologies that support the hierarchical meanings of skin tone are deeply entrenched in both the United States and Mexico. Mass migration from Latin America and Asia has shifted the racial discourse tremendously in the United States, but racial discrimination remains persistent. Despite shifting hierarchies by race and ethnicity, skin color hierarchies remain constant, where lighter-skinned members of communities of color enjoy consistent advantages over their darker-skinned counterparts. On the whole, darker-skinned Chicanas/os pay a social, political, and economic price for their skin tone. Colorism will be a persistent feature of the U.S. landscape as long as institutional racism remains firmly entrenched.

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