

Latino Phenotypic Discrimination Revisited: The Impact of Skin Color on Occupational Status*

Rodolfo Espino, *University of Wisconsin–Madison*

Michael M. Franz, *University of Wisconsin–Madison*

Objective. We reexamine the issue of phenotypic discrimination against Mexicans in the U.S. labor market, originally studied by Telles and Murguía (1990) and later by Bohara and Davila (1992). We also seek to explain this topic with respect to the Puerto Rican and Cuban populations in the United States. *Methods.* Instead of using household income as a dependent variable, we use occupational ranking scores computed by Hauser and Warren (1996) in combination with data from the 1990 Latino National Political Survey (LNPS). The occupational rankings more accurately reflect the level of labor market discrimination faced by individuals. Furthermore, the use of the more recent LNPS allows us to update the work of previous scholars and extend the analysis to two previously unexamined Latino groups—Puerto Ricans and Cubans. *Results.* Our findings indicate 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. However, we find no conclusive evidence that skin-color differences impact occupational prestige scores for Puerto Ricans. *Conclusions.* Using earlier data, some scholars found evidence for difference in labor market performance among Mexican Americans as a function of phenotypic variations among Mexican Americans. Today, dark-skinned Mexican Americans and Cuban Americans continue to face higher levels of discrimination in the labor market, whereas dark-skinned Puerto Ricans do not, which may indicate regional differences across the three groups that need to be controlled for.

*Direct all correspondence to Rodolfo Espino, Ph.D. candidate, Department of Political Science, University of Wisconsin–Madison, WI 53706 <rudy@polisci.wisc.edu>. Michael M. Franz is a Ph.D. candidate in the Department of Political Science, University of Wisconsin–Madison <mmfranz@polisci.wisc.edu>. We are grateful for useful comments on early drafts of this article from David Canon, Kathy Cramer Walsh, Ben Marquez, participants in the Research Seminar on Voting and Politics at the University of Wisconsin–Madison, and anonymous reviewers. The data used in this article were obtained from the Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research and the University of Wisconsin–Madison's Center for Demography and Ecology. The files for running the analyses herein are available from the authors upon request.

Introduction

Racial discrimination has been described as a fundamental component of American political culture (Smith, 1993). Indeed, throughout American history, such discrimination has devastated the communities of racial and ethnic minorities. Many racial minorities assert that discrimination based on subordinate group status continues to this day. These acknowledgments raise more complex questions, however, concerning the existence of discrimination based on racial membership—questions that speak to the level, intensity, and direction of discrimination. For example, do darker-skinned minorities face more discrimination than their lighter-skinned counterparts? Furthermore, if such discrimination exists, does it affect all ethnic groups in the same way? This article addresses these two questions by examining whether an individual's skin color is a significant predictor of labor market discrimination.

Background

Discrimination on the basis of race has long been recognized as a reality throughout American history. Indeed, any individual with even the slightest connection to a racial subgroup is often forced to endure the burdens of a society stratified by race. Many studies have illustrated the significance of lighter skin color within the African-American community (Freeman et al., 1966; Ransford, 1970; Silva, 1985; Tidrick, 1973), finding evidence that “improved black life chances are correlated with lighter skin color” (Telles and Murguía, 1990:683). Such a reality raises powerful questions, however, as to whether discrimination varies within the Latino community as well. Are all Latinos treated the same by virtue of being Latino, or are there differences within groups?

In recent years, scholars have examined the importance of phenotypic variations (the physical and skin-color features) within the Mexican-American community. An early study found that darker skin color predicted membership in a lower social class and residence in the inner city (Relethford et al., 1983). Arce, Murguía, and Frisbie (1987) found phenotype variations for Mexican Americans in education, occupational prestige, and income, providing evidence that lighter-skin respondents had better life chances. Telles and Murguía (1990) control for other common predictors of life chances and determine that, all other things being equal, lighter skin predicts higher income. Finally, more recent studies have found phenotype differences in education (Murguía and Telles, 1996), in positions of economic and political power (Zweigenhaft and Domhoff, 1998), and in acculturation and interest in the Latino community (Vazquez et al., 1997).

Such studies have raised important questions, but the issue is far from resolved. Indeed, *some* disagree with the assertion that discrimination be-

comes more severe for darker-skinned Mexicans (Bohara and Davila, 1992; for an opposing view, see Telles and Murguía, 1992); at the same time, limitations in available data have meant that other Latino subgroups have remained unexamined. Nonetheless, we believe that a continued focus on Latinos in determining the existence of phenotype discrimination is ideal because of the extensive skin-color variation within the Latino community.

Indeed, this developing research has created many opportunities for further advancement. This study examines phenotype differences as they relate to an individual's occupational prestige. While past studies attempted to demonstrate Mexican-American discrimination by skin color as it related to differences in household income, such a measure is unable to discern the effects on personal income. In fact, neither the 1979 National Chicano Survey nor the 1990 Latino National Political Survey (LNPS) has data that measure *individual* income for respondents.

At the same time, some have questioned the validity of income as a sign of labor market equity (Warren, Sheridan, and Hauser, 1998). Warren et al. argue that by *ranking occupations* (as opposed to incomes), researchers are better able to systematically estimate life chances. In addition, measures of occupational holding are less subject to survey item nonresponse and hence less likely to exclude respondents for refusing to report their income. In the 1990 LNPS, there was a refusal and nonresponse rate for household income of 6.63 percent (6.82 percent Mexican, 5.10 percent Puerto Rican, and 7.23 percent Cuban). In comparison, there was a refusal and nonresponse rate for occupation of only 0.40 percent (0.37 percent Mexican, 0.34 percent Puerto Rican, and 0.50 percent Cuban). Finally, Telles and Murguía (1990) hint at the value of occupational prestige measures in rooting out the effect of skin color on life chances. They argue that discrimination "may be operating in the channeling of individuals into particular industries or occupations" (1990:694).

Building on previous research, we *hypothesize that darker-skinned Puerto Ricans, Cuban Americans, and Mexican Americans will have lower occupational prestige scores, and by implication face more labor market discrimination, than their lighter-skinned counterparts*. We build on previous work in three ways. First, we update previous studies by using the more recent 1990 Latino National Political Survey (de la Garza et al., 1992). Second, this analysis examines phenotype differences in Mexican-American communities as well as the previously unexamined Puerto-Rican and Cuban-American communities. Finally, we use occupational prestige scores (as opposed to household income) as the dependent variable of interest.

Data and Methods

The data to be used in this project come from the 1990 Latino National Political Survey (LNPS)¹ and the composite Occupational Prestige Ratings as calculated by Hauser and Warren (1996).² The Hauser index attempts to correct for potentially inadequate universal composites of occupational prestige. Most sociological research uses variations and updates of two major occupational prestige composites, first developed by Duncan (1961) and Nam (1963), but these composites, according to Hauser and Warren (1996), “give too much weight to occupational earnings, and they ignore intergenerational relationships between occupational education and occupational earnings” (1996:3).³

As an improvement, the Hauser index measures occupational prestige in a manner that does *not* rely solely on earnings. We employ the composite Hauser-Warren prestige scores using the 1980 U.S. Census job codes, which rank all occupations on a scale from 0 to 100. This measure of occupational status serves as our dependent variable. As an example of how the Hauser-Warren index ranks several well-known occupations, in the index, lawyers score 80.83, physicians rate 74.69, sociologists rate 74.14, taxicab drivers rate 26.25, and farm workers rate 18.13. Although some rankings may appear counterintuitive to some people (e.g., lawyers receiving a higher rating than physicians), we nonetheless feel confident that the overall pattern of prestige scores allows for systematic examination into the potential presence of labor market discrimination; and any apparent nonsensical rankings are merely the result of objective measures determined by the labor market. Furthermore, while one can quibble about differences in scores between similar occupations, there is greater validity in comparing occupations of

¹ The LNPS is a large (N = 3,415) multistage area probability sample of the three largest Latino groups in the United States—Mexicans, Puerto Ricans, and Cubans—conducted between July 1989 and June 1990. Face-to-face interviews were conducted in Spanish or English with a total of 1,546 Mexicans, 589 Puerto Ricans, and 682 Cubans and explored a number of social and political issues. Five hundred ninety-eight non-Latinos from the geographic areas selected were also interviewed for comparative purposes; however, this non-Latino sample was asked a much shorter list of questions. The LNPS purports to be representative of approximately 90 percent of the three Latino populations surveyed. While other Latino groups (e.g., Nicaraguans, Dominicans, Colombians, Guatemalans, etc.) compose a significant portion of the total Latino population (20 percent), these other groups were not selected for interviews because the high variability of this population in terms of residence and high heterogeneity in relation to the study subject matter and rare prevalence in the Latino population would have made the costs of the survey exceptionally high. In this survey, a Latino was defined as one who meets the following criteria: at least one parent must be solely of Mexican or Cuban or Puerto Rican ancestry; or at least two (any two) grandparents must be solely of Mexican or Cuban or Puerto Rican ancestry.

² Hauser and Warren (1996) also compute gender-specific occupational prestige scores. However, they explicitly state not to use these gender-specific occupational prestige scores in any gender-pooled analyses and to only use the composite scores.

³ See Hauser and Warren (1996) and Warren et al. (1998) for good discussions of the commonly used scales and their problems.

different classes (e.g., the difference between lawyers and farm workers is quite high).

As for the measurement of the independent variables, we use the LNPS, which measured the political attitudes and behaviors of three specific Latino groups in the United States: Mexicans, Puerto Ricans, and Cubans. These three groups account for roughly 80 percent of the U.S. Hispanic population. The LNPS includes 1,546 Mexicans, 589 Puerto Ricans, 682 Cubans, and 598 non-Latinos, of which 456 were white. The survey was conducted mainly in the southwest, Florida, parts of the northeast, and Chicago between 1989 and 1990. Latino respondents had the option of responding to the survey in English or in Spanish. For our analyses here, *we only examined those respondents who were employed or who had been recently employed* (e.g., only those respondents in the labor market) at the time of the survey. By restricting the analysis to only those individuals who are actually employed, our findings represent conservative estimates of phenotypic discrimination in the labor market since the greatest form of labor market discrimination would be unemployment. To the extent that any selection bias is introduced, however, it leads to an underestimation of phenotypic discrimination. In addition, we were forced to exclude several respondents for whom there were missing data on variables included in our analyses. Therefore, we were left with a final sample of 1,053 Mexicans, 291 Puerto Ricans, and 392 Cubans, for a total of 1,736 respondents.⁴

The method of data analysis to be used in this project will be multivariate ordinary least squares regression, which allows for easy interpretation of the impact of skin color on occupational attainment.⁵ The dependent variable, occupational prestige, is scored from 0 to 100 and, therefore, is more appropriate for regression analysis than income categories as reported in the 1979 NCS and 1990 LNPS.⁶ The predictor variables are *Skin Color, Female, Education, Age, Catholic, Language, Citizen, and Native Born*. *Skin Color* is scored from 1 to 5 with 1 being “very dark” and 5 being “very light.” These skin-color scores were obtained by interviewer observation during the course of the face-to-face interview. Table 1 outlines the independent variables and their coding specifics.

⁴We also excluded one Cuban respondent who we identified as a significant outlier with respect to the rest of the Cuban sample. This individual is a very-dark skinned, Muslim management analyst whose characteristics, given the history of the Cuban population in Cuba and the United States, do not comport with the rest of the Cuban sample. For example, his occupational ranking of 58.26 is more than two standard deviations above the mean occupational score of all other Cubans and more than three standard deviations above the mean occupational score of all very-dark skinned Cubans.

⁵All analyses in this article conducted in Stata 7.0.

⁶For those who argue that the dependent variable should be perfectly unbounded, we standardized the dependent variable (Hauser-Warren occupation scores) between 0 and 1 and then performed a log-log transformation of the variable (i.e., $\ln(-\ln(1-\text{occupational score}))$). The regression results were no different with the log-log transformation. Therefore, we opt for the untransformed specification to allow for more intuitive interpretations.

TABLE 1
Summary Statistics by Ethnic Group

	Mexican	Puerto Rican	Cuban
Occupational prestige	27.88 (11.69)	29.06 (10.75)	31.56 (12.54)
Skin color (1–5)	3.23 (0.960)	3.37 (1.00)	3.87 (0.865)
Education (years)	9.60 (4.00)	11.08 (3.25)	11.39 (3.72)
Age (years)	34.70 (11.52)	35.11 (10.79)	43.19 (13.71)
Age-squared	1,337 (936.8)	1,348 (822.3)	2,053 (1200)
Female	0.453 (0.498)	0.471 (0.500)	0.469 (0.500)
Catholic	0.783 (0.413)	0.632 (0.483)	0.778 (0.416)
Language (1–5)	2.82 (1.48)	2.90 (1.27)	1.90 (1.09)
U.S. citizen	0.560 (0.497)	0.990 (0.101)	0.505 (0.501)
Native born	0.493 (0.500)	0.344 (0.476)	0.117 (0.322)
Total respondents	1,053	291	392

NOTE: Standard deviations in parentheses.

SOURCE: Data from Latino National Political Survey.

Results

A simple look at the data indicates that there are differences in occupational prestige across skin variation for all three Latino groups represented. Table 2 shows the mean occupational prestige for all three groups in each of the five skin colors. In all cases, very light Latinos have a higher occupational prestige than very dark Latinos, although medium-skinned Puerto Ricans have the highest occupational rankings for their ethnic group. However, this may not indicate that discrimination in the labor market is the causal factor. Indeed, other common predictors of life chances may account for the variation in occupational prestige.

Thus, we include these other predictors, along with a variable for skin color, in a regression model using each respondent as the unit of analysis. We split the analysis by Latino ethnic group, allowing us to examine the results within each group separately. Table 3 shows the results of our model.

As can be seen, the results for Mexicans confirms past studies that indicate lighter skin results in higher occupational prestige scores even when controlling for other factors predicting labor market success. Similarly, lighter-skinned Cubans are more likely to have higher occupational rankings than darker-skinned Cubans, although to a lesser degree of significance than Mexicans. For Puerto Ricans, however, the skin-color variable does not produce statistically significant results. Indeed, the sign is in the opposite direction than expected. Therefore, the analysis for Puerto Ricans does not allow us to conclusively say that labor market discrimination leads to lower occupational rankings as Puerto Ricans’ skin color gets darker.

There are other differences across the three models. For example, education and age are positive and significant predictors of occupational prestige

TABLE 2
Mean Occupational Scores of Respondents by Skin Color

	Mexican	Puerto Rican	Cuban
Very dark	25.00 (25)	26.18 (11)	29.54 (6)
Dark	26.67 (206)	27.99 (39)	25.97 (17)
Medium	27.61 (437)	30.49 (110)	28.88 (88)
Light	28.55 (274)	28.07 (92)	32.14 (192)
Very light	30.15 (111)	29.25 (39)	34.13 (89)

NOTE: N in parentheses.

SOURCE: Data from Latino National Political Survey.

for Mexicans and Puerto Ricans, whereas for Cubans only education is a positive, significant predictor. Language, a five-point measure increasing from only Spanish to only English, is significant and positive for Mexicans and Cubans. The coefficients for the female dummy variable reveal that controlling for all other variables, Mexican females have, on average, an occupational ranking nearly one and a half units below that of male Mexicans. Cuban females fare even worse against Cuban males. Controlling for all other predictors of labor market performance, they are likely to have an occupational ranking two and a half units lower on the Hauser-Warren index. No similar results can be said with any significant degree of certainty regarding differences between language and gender status for Puerto Ricans.

We also see that Puerto Ricans born on the mainland fare better in terms of occupational rankings than island-born Puerto Ricans. Interestingly, we see that at a moderate level of significance, foreign-born Mexicans are likely to have higher occupational rankings than native-born Mexicans, controlling for the other variables in the model.⁷ Based on these results, including the results for skin color, it would be incorrect to assume that all Latinos in

⁷One plausible explanation for this result is unintentional selection bias in the survey sample we use. Evidence for potential selection bias may be found in a 1990 Government Accounting Office report that examined the impact of the Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986. The report found that in areas with high Mexican populations (namely, Los Angeles and California) there were more incidents of employer discrimination against foreign-looking individuals. In fact, the study found that many employers simply refused to interview or hire Hispanics due to the threat of sanctions under the 1986 IRCA. Obviously, those most affected by this would be first-generation Hispanics who immigrate largely for menial jobs, such as agriculture and light manufacturing work. Conversely, immigrants who have already achieved a high level of education in their home country prior to immigration will not only come to the county with the skills to achieve higher occupational rankings but may be less likely to experience the level of employer discrimination occurring in other areas of the job sector. Since our survey sample includes only those individuals who were employed, we automatically exclude a number of first-generation Mexicans and would be overlooking the most severe form of labor market discrimination—not being hired at all. In other words, the sample of Mexicans we examine may be more likely to be an elite segment of the Mexican immigrant population in light of the findings reported in the 1990 GAO report on employer discrimination. Clearly, this is an area for further research.

TABLE 3
 OLS Model Predicting Occupational Prestige Score

Variable	Mexican	Puerto Rican	Cuban
Skin color	0.790 (0.335)**	-0.135 (0.605)	1.073 (0.629)*
Education	1.202 (0.100)**	1.088 (0.205)**	1.301 (0.160)**
Age	0.778 (0.152)**	0.665 (0.335)**	-0.221 (0.227)
Age-squared	-0.008 (0.002)**	-0.006 (0.004)	0.003 (0.003)
Female	-1.374 (0.646)**	1.525 (1.233)	-2.557 (1.075)**
Catholic	-0.805 (0.779)	1.057 (1.287)	-0.842 (1.255)
Language	1.349 (0.325)**	0.429 (0.554)	1.389 (0.543)**
Citizen	1.738 (1.354)	5.190 (6.054)	4.817 (1.238)**
Native born	-2.439 (1.355)*	3.766 (1.586)**	-0.082 (1.937)
Constant	-4.936 (3.294)	-7.213 (8.848)	12.517 (6.105)**
N of observations	1,053	291	392
R ²	0.268	0.176	0.305
Adjusted R ²	0.262	0.149	0.289

NOTE: Values represent OLS parameter estimates with standard errors in parentheses.

SOURCE: Data from Latino National Political Survey.

p* < 0.10, two-tailed; *p* < 0.05, two-tailed.

the United States have the same experience in the labor market, or that certain influences on labor market participation affect all Latino groups in the same way.

To facilitate substantive interpretation of these regression results, we also generated a series of expected values with 95 percent confidence intervals using a statistical simulation program created by Tomz, Wittenberg, and King (2000) in which parameter estimates are specified to come from a probability distribution. This technique is advantageous in that it allows us to generate predicted or expected values that reflect the uncertainty inherent in the point estimates we used to compute those values.⁸ In this presentation, we draw 2,500 values from the parameter distribution to obtain mean occupational rankings from our regression model.

First, we compute first differences by shifting all independent dummy variables to their minimum and maximum values and all other variables by one standard deviation below and above their mean. Table 4 shows how a

⁸The logic underlying this technique is very simple and straightforward. First, we estimate the regression model and obtain the parameter estimates (ρ and α) and the variance-covariance matrix of these estimates. These parameter estimates, of course, have associated estimation uncertainty since our data set is a finite sample. We then stack ρ and α and to create a vector γ $v(\gamma)$ is the variance matrix of these estimates. We then simulate ρ and α by drawing 2,500 values from the vector γ , which is assumed to have a multivariate normal distribution with mean equal to γ and variance equal to $v(\gamma)$, from which we are also able to generate estimated levels of uncertainty in predictions. For more information on simulation techniques for generating standard errors and confidence intervals for predicted or expected values and predicted probabilities, see Herron (2000) or King, Tomz, and Wittenberg (2000).

TABLE 4
Expected Occupational Prestige Scores Varying All Predictors

	Mexican	Puerto Rican	Cuban
Low predictors	17.08 (15.31–18.86)	17.86 (7.65–28.11)	17.42 (13.71–21.27)
High predictors	38.40 (36.63–40.21)	36.55 (33.19–40.00)	44.08 (40.13–47.86)
Difference between high and low	21.32 (18.08–24.66)	18.70 (6.90–30.05)	26.66 (19.87–33.26)

NOTE: 95 percent confidence intervals in parentheses, one-tailed. Values for “low” and “high” represent expected values when dummy variables are set to either 0 or 1 of the hypothesized expected direction and one standard deviation above or below the mean for all other independent variables.

SOURCE: Data from Latino National Political Survey.

respondent who had lower values for each independent variable differed from a respondent with the higher values for each independent variable. As can be seen, the differences are all positive, but with much larger confidence intervals around Puerto Ricans and Cubans. Thus, we are able to conclude that occupational prestige scores significantly increase for all groups when the values of all independent variables in the model shift from low to high values. Cubans show the greatest change, approximately 27 units, between individuals who are at the extreme ends of variables predicting labor market success. The similar degree of change in occupational scores is slightly less for Mexicans and Puerto Ricans but still in the expected direction. The positive confidence intervals around these estimates show these differences to be statistically significant.

Next, we held all variables at their mean for the three Latino subgroups and generated expected occupational scores for degree of skin color. Table 5 shows that the differences for each group, moving from very dark to very light. For Mexicans, this difference produces a 3.21 shift upward. For Cubans, the difference between light- and dark-skinned individuals who are similar in all other respects is 4.31 on the Hauser-Warren index. These differences are statistically significant in the hypothesized direction. However, there are no significant differences in occupational scores across levels of skin color for Puerto Ricans.

Conclusion

While it is easy to argue for a color-blind society that ignores the existence of racial categories, it is impossible to empirically ignore the impact of racial categories on one's participation in the workplace. This analysis has shown that despite efforts to rid the workplace of discrimination, many darker-skinned Latinos continue to experience more discrimination in the

TABLE 5
Expected Occupational Prestige Scores by Skin Color

	Mexican	Puerto Rican	Cuban
Very dark	26.10 (24.80–27.43)	29.36 (26.80–32.00)	28.47 (25.31–31.57)
Dark	26.90 (26.06–27.75)	29.24 (27.56–30.94)	29.55 (27.38–31.70)
Medium	27.70 (27.18–28.23)	29.11 (28.06–30.14)	30.62 (29.40–31.83)
Light	28.51 (27.87–29.19)	28.99 (27.83–30.13)	31.70 (30.86–32.58)
Very light	29.31 (28.23–30.42)	28.86 (26.99–30.72)	32.78 (31.29–34.25)
Difference between very dark and very light	3.21 (1.00–5.40)	-0.50 (-4.46–3.35)	4.31 (0.112–8.56)

NOTE: 95 percent confidence intervals in parentheses, one-tailed.

SOURCE: Data from Latino National Political Survey.

labor market than their lighter-skinned counterpart. More specifically, the data here show that Mexican and Cuban individuals who look more European have higher occupational prestige scores than Mexican and Cuban individuals who have less indigenous or African appearances. This result, based on data from the 1990 LNPS, is especially important in that these results confirm the findings of previous analyses based on the 1979 National Chicano Political Survey. Thus, despite the use of a newer data set, it appears that many Latinos continue to face the burden of labor market discrimination.

At the same time, however, the results do not necessarily hold for Puerto Ricans in the United States. Indeed, the skin-color coefficient for Puerto Ricans is in the negative direction, though insignificant. One possible explanation for this result might lie in a 1990 General Accounting Office report assessing the impact of the Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986. In that study, the government found significant levels of discrimination against Hispanics in the job market, especially Hispanics with distinct accents. The level of employer discrimination, however, varied from region to region. Specifically, analysts found that the areas of Texas and Los Angeles (areas with large Mexican populations) had substantially higher levels of employer discrimination against Latinos than did New York City (an area with a significant Puerto-Rican population). Unfortunately, we do not have the data available to us in the LNPS that would allow us to control for region or state of residence to ascertain whether there are regional job market variations that would explain this result. A further analysis for this group is warranted, though, to be sure, the null result is not attributable to regional job market differences.

This study represents the first systematic test of labor market discrimination for Latino groups other than Mexicans. The results indicate a complexity of labor market participation across all three groups. We can only hope that sometime in the near future more information will be gathered on Latino groups in the United States to allow for more complex and comprehensive tests of the effects of phenotype on labor force participation.

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