Skin Color and Colorism: Global Research, Concepts, and Measurement

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Abstract

We examine a vast, interdisciplinary, and increasingly global literature concerning skin color and colorism, which are related to status throughout the world. The vast majority of research has investigated Western societies, where color and colorism have been closely related to race and racism. In Latin America, the two sets of concepts have particularly overlapped. In the rest of the world, particularly in Asia, color and colorism have also been important but have evolved separately from the relatively new concepts of race and racism. In recent years, however, color consciousness and white supremacy appear to have been increasingly united, globalized, and commodified, as exemplified by the global multibillion-dollar skin lightening industry. Finally, we document the growing methodological attention to measurements of skin color and social science data that incorporate skin color measures.

INTRODUCTION

We review the now extensive skin color literature, which is primarily about the United States, but we also seek to decenter it and emphasize the convergence of multiple sources of colorism that lead to a globalized preference for whiteness and/or lightness. We begin this discussion by tracing the multiple roots of colorism throughout the globe and by highlighting the growing confluence of Eastern colorism with Western racism. We use the example of the multibillion-dollar skin lightening industry, which capitalizes on the demand for lighter skin in exchange for massive profits, to demonstrate that light-skin preference and white supremacy have become increasingly united, globalized, and commodified. Next, we discuss how skin color has been conceptualized in social science research globally, and we argue that attempts to neatly distinguish between the concepts of race and color would privilege perspectives from the United States or the English-speaking world. Finally, we examine methodological issues including how skin color is measured and how bias may affect its measurement. We conclude with thoughts about future directions for the sociological inquiry into skin color.

RACE AND COLOR GLOBALLY

Throughout the world, ideas of white or light-skin supremacy have long been associated with status and privilege for light-skinned individuals and disdain for dark-skinned ones. Scholars of the West often trace light-skin color preferences, sometimes called colorism, to the origins of race and racism associated with European colonization, Western slavery, and white supremacy (for an exception, see Frost 1990). Scholars focusing on the East and Middle East more often point to a distinct set of forces revolving around class status and Arab slavery, respectively, as the source of distinct strands of colorism.

In sociology, most of the empirical research on skin color concerns the United States, where the idea of colorism has developed as a concept separate from racism. Although such research has set an excellent standard for empirical analysis, the focus on the United States has also led to a framing of color and colorism that cannot be simply extended globally. The idea that color and colorism are distinct from race and racism depends on particular histories and linguistic understandings. In the English-speaking world, race and color may be more easily distinguished, but this distinction is less clear in the non-English-speaking West (Banton 2012, Glenn 2009, Monk 2016). Moreover, in the context of social and power relations in the West, skin color and race are closely related concepts, but the relation between them differs widely across societies. For example, in Latin America, where both race and color are often seen as a continuum, color and colorism are sometimes equivalent to race and racism. In much of Latin America, the word “race” is hardly used today to categorize people, and color is a primary way to describe ethnoracial categorizations (Telles & Paschel 2014) analogous to what is considered race in the United States.

For the sake of a working definition, “race” generally refers to categories of people divided by physical type, based on appearance or descent and real or putative characteristics, that are named, defined, and ordered by a racial ideology originating in Europe in the eighteenth and nineteenth century; this ideology puts whites at the top of the social hierarchy and blacks and other nonwhites at the bottom. “Skin color” generally refers to gradations of a physical characteristic (ordered from light to dark or white to black) that, in the Western world, are also based on ideas of race and of a racial or color hierarchy.

European Colonialism and Slavery

Scholars focused on the Americas tend to trace the origins of colorism to European colonization and slavery. Under colonialism, whiteness and one’s proximity to it in terms of ideology, culture,

ancestry, and phenotype afforded greater access to social and economic privileges and opportunities. In the Western world, during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Europeans justified the growing slave trade from Africa to Europe and the Americas using biblical interpretations of the very dark color of Africans (e.g., the curse of Ham), until dark skin became a generalized symbol of human worth and of the potential to be enslaved (Jablonski 2012). Consequently, for many scholars focusing on former European colonies, racism birthed colorism. In this section we trace the history and consequences of skin color in the context of the Americas.

The United States. Despite the one-drop rule (Davis 1991), which categorizes persons with even one African ancestor as black, social science literature consistently shows that skin color differences among African Americans have been important throughout US history. Many scholars trace the preferential treatment of lighter-skinned (nonwhite) persons to the institution of US slavery (Keith & Herring 1991, Monk 2014, Norwood 2013, Russell et al. 1992). In the antebellum South, lighter-skinned slaves, who were often the children of black female slaves raped by their white owners, were more likely to be assigned desirable jobs (for instance, as house slaves), learn a skilled trade, receive some schooling, or be manumitted (Drake & Cayton 1993, Reuter 1917, Russell et al. 1992). Mulattos comprised most of the free black population and were perceived as more intelligent, attractive, and generally superior to blacks because of their European ancestry (Myrdal 1944, Reuter 1917). After the Civil War, newly freed mulattos, who often had acquired greater skills, achieved greater upward mobility in terms of wealth, occupation, income, educational attainment, and social connections through white parentage (Frazier 1957, Herring et al. 2004).

With the disappearance of the social status distinction between slaves and free blacks, social closure increased among light-skinned blacks through color homogamy; color exclusionary practices, such as "blue vein" societies and "paper bag" tests for entrance into social spaces, churches, business organizations, and schools, spread after the Civil War (Bodenhorn & Ruebeck 2007, Bond & Cash 1992, Drake & Cayton 1993, Herring et al. 2004, Russell et al. 1992). For example, using data from the 1850–1870 censuses, Bodenhorn (2006) shows that mulattos were more likely to marry other mulattos and were substantially wealthier than mulatto-black or black-black households, leading to an intergenerational transmission of light-skinned privilege. Despite efforts toward differentiation, light-skinned blacks who were unable to pass for white were still subject to segregation and discrimination under Jim Crow because of the one-drop rule.

During the civil rights and Black Power movements, community leaders and activists sought to organize blacks as a racial group and to downplay potentially divisive skin color differences. Researchers also largely abandoned examinations of intraracial colorism within the black community, instead focusing on what was believed to be the more pressing issue of black/white interracial inequality (Monk 2014). On the surface at least, it appeared that these efforts helped to reduce color tensions within the black community. In the famous dolls experiment, Clark & Clark (1947) found that black children tended to prefer white dolls, with the lightest children showing the strongest preferences; by the late 1960s, however, Hraba & Grant (1970) found that black children preferred black dolls and the differences by skin color had disappeared. However, Anderson & Cromwell (1977) showed that black adolescents still harbored preferences for light brown skin (although not light skin), despite agreeing with the notion that "Black is beautiful."

Following the end of de jure discrimination, there has been an ongoing scholarly debate about the importance of skin color in the lives of African Americans. Some early evidence suggested that the significance of skin color was waning over time (Goering 1972, Udry et al. 1971). More recently, Gullickson (2005) has argued that the importance of skin color has declined substantially over time to the point of being no longer associated with educational attainment and occupational status, although the relationship between skin color and spousal education remains. Gullickson's

(2005) findings, however, have been challenged on methodological grounds (Goldsmith et al. 2006). The vast majority of studies suggest that color preferences and stratification have persisted throughout and in the aftermath of the civil rights and Black Power movements, both within the black community and in society more broadly, although the strength of the relationship between skin color and various life outcomes has varied over time and by gender (Monk 2014). For example, previous work has established associations between skin color and life outcomes for African Americans in terms of income, educational experiences, occupational status, and wealth (Goldsmith et al. 2006, 2007, Hersch 2006, Hunter 2005, Keith & Herring 1991, Seltzer & Smith 1991); marital prospects (Hamilton et al. 2009, Hunter 2005, Udry et al. 1971); and mental and physical health, including self-esteem and blood pressure (Harburg et al. 1978, Klag et al. 1991, Monk 2015, Thompson & Keith 2001; for an exception see Borrell et al. 2006). Additionally, the skin color of political candidates has been shown to shape white voter preferences (Weaver 2012), but interestingly, voting patterns are not stratified by skin color among African Americans (Hochschild & Weaver 2007). Many scholars assert that color inequality results from both the intergenerational transmission of privilege and contemporary discrimination (Keith & Herring 1991, Monk 2014), but such claims could be strengthened by the availability of better data (Branigan et al. 2013).

Although much of the US literature has focused on African Americans, a growing literature suggests that lighter skin is often, though not uniformly, associated with better life chances for other nonwhite groups in the United States (see Hall 2010, Keith & Monroe 2016). Previous research on Latinos has examined the relationship between skin color and outcomes such as occupational status, educational attainment, and income (Arce et al. 1987, Costas et al. 1981, Espino & Franz 2002, Hunter et al. 2001, Murguia & Telles 1996, Telles & Murguia 1990); segregation (South et al. 2005); health (Codina & Montalvo 1994, Costas et al. 1981, Gravlee et al. 2005, Montalvo & Codina 2001); and the marriage market (Hunter 2005). A smaller body of work focuses on Asian Americans, Arab Americans (Abdulrahim et al. 2012, Grewal 2009, Kiang & Takeuchi 2009, Rondilla & Spickard 2007, Vaid 2009), and Native Americans (Bakken & Branden 2013, Hall 2010). Research also shows that darker immigrants from diverse origins coming to the United States tend to be worse off in terms of wealth (Painter et al. 2015) and income (Hersch 2008, 2011a; Rosenblum et al. 2016).

The limited research also shows that skin tone variation is consequential for US whites (Van den Berghe & Frost 1986, Blair et al. 2004, Branigan et al. 2013, Frost 1990, Hersch 2011b, Thompson 2009). For example, Blair et al. (2004) show that among individuals racially classified as white, possessing Afrocentric features is associated with harsher criminal sentences. Further examinations of the meaning of skin color for whites will hopefully increase, aided by the broader use of skin color measures stretching across the full color spectrum in recent survey data (Massey & Martin 2003, Telles & PERLA 2014).

Two other promising and incipient areas of skin color research of particular note are related to the growing multiracial population and the criminal justice system. With increasing international immigration and the subsequent ethnoracial mixing in the United States and elsewhere, the role of skin color in racial identification, classification, and perceived racial authenticity will likely increase in importance (Golash-Boza & Darity 2008, Gonzales-Backen & Umaña-Taylor 2011, Hunter 2005, Jiménez 2004, Rondilla & Spickard 2007, Roth 2010, Stokes-Brown 2012). Whereas some analysts expect that the growing multiracial population will lead to a color-blind society (see Bonilla-Silva & Dietrich 2011), others argue that a black/nonblack society will emerge (Lee & Bean 2007, Yancey 2003); still others, such as Bonilla-Silva (2004), argue that skin color will become increasingly important for understanding inequality. As a result of racial mixing and intermarriage, racial distinctions may become increasingly blurred, making skin color more salient in racial stratification, as in Latin America (Telles & Sue 2009).

Researchers have found that the criminal justice system discriminates by skin color and Afrocentric features (including hair texture, nose, and lips) in various ways, including the priming of black stereotypes and perceptions of criminality (Dixon & Maddox 2005, Eberhardt et al. 2004, Maddox & Gray 2002), the likelihood of being stopped or arrested by the police (White 2015; for an exception, see Hersch 2011b), the likelihood of being incarcerated (King & Johnson 2016), sentencing lengths and time served (Blair et al. 2004, Pizzi et al. 2004, Viglione et al. 2011), and the odds of receiving the death penalty (Eberhardt et al. 2006).

Latin America. Despite notable differences, Latin American countries share with the United States a common history of European colonization, slavery, and racism. An extensive body of literature traces the development of a hierarchy based on race and color throughout colonial Latin America (Andrews 2004, Knight 1990, Telles & PERLA 2014). Spanish and Portuguese colonizers explicitly (through *castas*) or implicitly adopted a racial/color hierarchy that put indigenous and black populations at the bottom and European colonizers at the top. The absence of racial classification laws and the widespread race mixture among white, indigenous, and black populations resulted in blurred racial boundaries and a relatively small white population in much of Latin America. Notably, one-drop rules were never consolidated in Latin America, as far as we know.

As a result of scientific ideas of white superiority gaining prominence by the late nineteenth century, many Latin American countries sought to "whiten" their populations through European immigration. However, with the decline of scientific racism, progressive Latin American elites in places like Brazil and Mexico embraced their race mixture (*mestizaje*) as a way to distinguish themselves from the United States and other explicitly racist societies and proclaim they were united and color-blind societies. For example, nation-making narratives in early-twentieth-century Mexico claimed that extensive race mixture had made most Mexicans into mestizos or mixed-race persons, leading to the creation of a Mexican race (Knight 1990, Martínez Casas et al. 2014). However, wide skin color differences among the mestizo population along with persistent ideas of racial hierarchy nevertheless resulted in a status hierarchy, with light-skinned mestizos at the top and darker mestizos at the bottom (Flores & Telles 2012, Martínez Casas et al. 2014, Villarreal 2010). Yet, unlike what happened in the United States, where race was clearly defined, categorical, and based primarily on descent, in Latin America racialization has relied largely on phenotypic appearance and shades of skin color. Although Latin American national ideologies disavowed racism, a rapidly expanding body of empirical literature shows that darker individuals have experienced persistent disadvantage throughout the region with regard to education, income, health, marriageability, and discrimination (Andrews 2004, Canache et al. 2014, Costas et al. 1981, Flores & Telles 2012, Gravlee & Dressler 2005, Gravlee et al. 2005, Perreira & Telles 2014, Sue 2013, Telles 2004, Telles & PERLA 2014, Travassos et al. 2011, Villarreal 2010). Recent work shows that skin color often predicts sociological outcomes better than self-identification in the census ethnoracial/color categories (Bailey et al. 2016, Monk 2016, Telles & PERLA 2014, Telles et al. 2015). Telles & Paschel (2014) show that skin color is central to measuring self-identified race/ethnicity, though this varies across national and class contexts.

Middle East and North Africa. The devastating imprint of European domination and slavery on former colonies in terms of race relations and color hierarchies is undeniably clear. However, preferences for lighter skin predated extensive European contact in numerous societies (Van den Berghe & Frost 1986, Jablonski 2012). The body of literature exploring colorism outside of the Americas is not well developed, and the historic evidence is particularly weak in sub-Saharan Africa. There is some evidence, however, of the existence of light-skin preferences throughout Asia, but considerably less concerning East Africa and the Middle East, where Arab domination

spawned notions of light-skinned superiority (Jablonski 2012, Lewis et al. 2013). The available evidence suggests, however, that these early color preferences often lacked the hierarchical and racialized meanings that would later emerge as colonialism and white supremacy spread.

Jablonski (2012) does an excellent job of bringing together a diverse body of literature to trace the meaning of skin color in societies throughout the globe. She argues, for example, that the ancient Egyptians, Greeks, and Romans were cognizant of color differences, but skin color itself was not a marker of slavery and did not determine one's worth or life chances. Among the Greeks and Romans, the climatic theories of human difference, developed by Hippocrates and Herodotus and refined by Aristotle, explained skin color variations as resulting from the physical environment. Jablonski (2012) argues that this approach led not to a color hierarchy going from lightest to darkest skin, but to privileging an intermediate Greek, and later Roman, skin color as superior to all others. Yet, even with these notions, citizenship, not skin color, determined one's status and value.

The Arab trade in enslaved black Africans influenced the spread of color preferences throughout the Indian Ocean and North Africa (Jablonski 2012, Lewis et al. 2013). By the tenth century, prior to the outset of a heavy European presence, Avicenna, a prominent Islamic philosopher, had adopted a version of Greek climatic theories, and the Arab slave trade had spread notions of dark-skin inferiority, primitiveness, and powerlessness throughout the region. Arab features, including lighter skin, were associated with status, privilege, and cultural superiority (Van den Berghe & Frost 1986, Jablonski 2012, Lewis et al. 2013).

The European colonization of East Africa and the Middle East grafted Western racism onto the already present color consciousness of Arab society (Lewis et al. 2013). How and to what extent the two systems came together was probably highly variant in the Middle East and North Africa (Barkey 2008, Cronin 2016). Much of the Middle East was also colonized or had extensive European contact, leading to what Grewal (2009, p. 330) calls an "intimate history with regimes of white supremacy"; this shaped understandings of race and skin color in the region, and Grewal further argues that "contemporary ideologies of colour in the post-colonial Muslim world are racial, although they are categorically different from western racism since they are fundamentally reactionary, derivative discourses" (Grewal 2009, p. 330).

Asia. Much of the current literature on Asian societies highlights the role of classism and aesthetics in the formation of early color preferences, prior to any Western contact, which were often based on status and sun exposure. Persons in low-status occupations labored in the sun, whereas high-status persons tended to work indoors. Moreover, for women in particular, lightness has been associated not just with the leisure class, but also with femininity, beauty, and purity (Hall 2010, Rondilla & Spickard 2007) in India (Vaid 2009), China (Dikötter 2015, Keevak 2011), Indonesia (Saraswati 2013, Sorokowski et al. 2013), and Japan (Arudou 2013, Wagatsuma 1967). For example, in Japan, whiteness has for centuries, if not more than a millennium, held symbolic meanings and associations with class privilege, spiritual purity, and feminine beauty (Wagatsuma 1967). Japanese art often portrayed Japanese people as whiter than Europeans, who were sometimes portrayed as gray or fleshy (Jablonski 2012, Keevak 2011, Wagatsuma 1967). The idea of Japanese and other East Asians as "yellow" only emerged in the nineteenth century, when yellow was associated with the mongoloid race (Keevak 2011).

With regard to India, there is an ongoing scholarly debate regarding the relationship between colorism and the caste system. Ayyar & Khandare (2013) argue that skin color is implicated in ancient Hindu deities and texts that formulated caste hierarchies and Brahmin hegemony. Other scholars contend that the caste system was not initially focused on categorization by skin color. Rather, each class had an associated color that was not simply a gradation on a linear white-to-black

continuum; color was not deterministic, because dark-skinned individuals were also members of higher castes and some deities were depicted with dark skin (Jablonski 2012, Vaid 2009). Despite their possible separate origins, over time the caste system and colorism became linked as light skin grew to develop caste and class connotations, due to the fact that upper-class individuals who could avoid outdoor labor were often lighter; Western ideas of race, accompanying European traders and then British rule strengthened this association (Jablonski 2012, Khan 2009, Vaid 2009).

The Philippines, on the other hand, provides an example of Western racism (in both its Iberian and North American variants) morphing with a more recent Eastern colorism. During the colonial period, Spanish colonizers imposed on the native Filipino population a color-caste system resembling the system in Latin America; a Jim Crow–influenced American colonization followed. More recently, these systems were compounded by the growing influence of East Asian ideas about success and beauty and by aesthetic preferences transplanted by the global diaspora of Filipinos in the twentieth century (Rondilla 2009, Rondilla & Spickard 2007). Today, many Filipinos idealize "East Asian beauty," defined by the typically lighter-skinned economic powerhouses of Japan, China, and Korea (Rondilla 2009, p. 64). Throughout Asia, lighter-skinned East Asians, especially mixed individuals possessing European features, are idealized and contrasted to darker-skinned Filipinos, Cambodians, and Vietnamese. The privileging of a mixed European/Asian phenotype—including other bodily features in addition to skin color, such as lips, mouths, noses, eyes, and, notably, eyelids (Hunter 2007)—results in what Rondilla (2009, p. 64) calls "Asian beauty according to the white imagination." The recourse to cosmetic surgery to achieve Anglo features is spreading rapidly not only in Southeast Asia but also globally, allowing consumers a means for "buying racial capital" (Hunter 2011).

The Global Skin-Bleaching Industry

A number of scholars point to the strength of the skin-bleaching industry as material evidence of a globalized preference for lighter skin. Whiteness and light skin are now worldwide commodities that can be obtained for the right price (Glenn 2009, Hunter 2011). The twentieth century saw the explosion of skin lightening and racialized cosmetic surgeries as a multibillion-dollar global industry (Hunter 2007, Khan 2009, Thomas 2009). Many scholars point to the role of globalization and mass media in helping to spread white/light supremacy throughout the world (Glenn 2009; Golash-Boza 2015; Hunter 2005, 2011).

Most scholars also contest the notion that preferences for lighter skin should be interpreted as neutral individual preferences, as is often suggested in advertisements. For example, Grewal (2009, p. 330) argues that "dismissing the fetishization of fair skin as a random or benign aesthetic preference among post-colonial peoples neglects the power and continuing vitality of the rhetoric of white supremacy throughout the world." Hall (2013, p. 3) argues that a "bleaching syndrome," which is the "conscious and systematic process of self-denigration and aspiring to assimilation on the basis of alien ideals, resulting from colonial domination," emerges as a result. Therefore, for Hall (1995), desires and actions to acquire lightness/whiteness are pathological.

Other scholars, including Hunter (2007), understand such desires not as driven by an internalized pathology but instead as a rational response to the perceived (and often real) association between whiteness/lightness and better life outcomes that is promoted by multinational corporations and the mass media. These images of a "new global beauty" (Hunter 2005, p. 57) are either explicitly white or rooted in whiteness and are portrayed by entertainment and advertisement industries throughout the globe, from India's Bollywood to Latin America's telenovelas (Glenn 2009, Jha & Adelman 2009). The formulation of skin-lightening practices as rational draws strength from conceptualizations of skin color as a form of capital. Hunter (2011, p. 145),

for example, argues that light/white skin is an aspect of racial capital and that "light skin tone can be transformed into social capital (social networks), symbolic capital (esteem or status), or even economic capital (high-paying job or promotion)" (see also Glenn 2009, Hunter 2005, Jha 2015, Vaid 2009). More recently, Monk (2015, p. 415) has conceptualized skin color as a form of "bodily capital." Hunter (2005, p. 37) also argues that "light skin tone is interpreted as beauty" and that beauty itself functions as a form of social capital that is traded for access to goods such as jobs, education, social networks, and romantic partners.

Skin lighteners are popular among young, urban, educated women from formerly colonized countries (Hunter 2011, Lewis et al. 2013, Thomas 2009). In Nigeria, South Africa, and Togo, 77%, 35%, and 59% of women, respectively, regularly use skin-lightening products; in China, Malaysia, the Philippines, and South Korea, approximately 40% of women use such products (WHO 2011). If skin color is a form of capital, then individuals may rationally seek to acquire lightness/whiteness in the same way they seek to acquire other forms of capital, although in doing so they replicate the ideologies, and the material consequences, of light/white supremacy (Hunter 2007).

Moreover, most individuals who engage in this modification practice assert that becoming/passing for white is not their goal; instead, they cite the desire to be a lighter, improved version of themselves and their own race/ethnicity (Hunter 2005) or to emulate the upper class (Rondilla & Spickard 2007), messages often promoted by advertising. Yet, this modified version of one's phenotype is usually based on a "new global beauty" (Hunter 2005, p. 57) that is often of mixed race, racially ambiguous, and can be easily mistaken for European. Hunter (2005, p. 57) contends that "this is the paradoxical discourse of the new beauty regime. It is simultaneously inclusive, multicultural, and new, while remaining exclusive, Eurocentric, and old. . .[it is] in fact, old-fashioned, white beauty repackaged with dark hair."

Skin Color, Gender, and Beauty

The disproportionate use of skin-lightening creams by women highlights that both ideas of beauty and the consequences of skin color are undeniably gendered. Hunter (2005) argues that beauty is an ideology that perpetuates both white privilege and patriarchy. English, Spanish, and Hindi all possess interchangeable words for "pretty/beautiful" and "light" (fair, *güera*, and *Gourangi/Gori*, respectively) (Hunter 2005, Jha & Adelman 2009). Indeed, Jha & Adelman (2009) contend that *Gori* also means "girl/woman," which strips away both the femininity and the attractiveness of darker women. Hunter (2005, p. 69) argues that women are subject to what she terms the "beauty queue," defined as "a rank ordering of women from lightest to darkest where the lightest get the most perks and rewards, dates for example, and the darkest women get the least." Hamilton et al. (2009) highlight the beauty queue in action: In neighborhoods with a greater shortage of marriageable black men, darker black women are particularly disadvantaged, because the shortage allows the men to be more selective and obtain a lighter and higher-status spouse.

On the other hand, slight darkening through tanning can further benefit persons of European descent. While lightening is a sign of privilege and status for most nonwhite persons, the tanning industry profits from those who seek a slight brown color, a sign of leisure among white American women since the 1920s (Glenn 2009, Jablonski 2012). Among medieval European men, while light skin was associated with attractiveness, a tanned look implied manliness and courage (Frost 1990). More recently in the United States, Hersch (2011b) has shown that darker skin is associated with attractiveness for white men. However, tanning has historically been a disadvantage in East Asian societies and evidence suggests this may still be the case. For example, a comparison of American and Chinese fashion magazines revealed widespread evidence of the tanning ideal in the United

States but overwhelming preference for very fair models in China (Xie & Zhang 2013). Rondilla (2009) also notes the cross-cultural complexity of this practice. While Asian immigrants to the US tend to retain affinities for lighter skin, many Asian Americans engage in tanning based on a desire to reflect US standards of beauty or to acquire greater racial authenticity (see also Rondilla & Spickard 2007).

Numerous studies have confirmed that the association between skin color and attractiveness in the West is stronger for women than for men (Van den Berghe & Frost 1986; Hersch 2011b; Hill 2002a; Hunter 2008, 2011; Wade 2008). Hill (2002a) finds that the darkest men, who benefit from stereotypes about their masculinity and sexuality, trail only those in the second lightest category of brown in terms of attractiveness; by contrast, the association between lighter skin and attractiveness is positive and linear for women. Darker-skinned men are able to cash in on other desirable characteristics to marry a high-status (lighter/whiter) woman, but darker-skinned women are often not able to do so (Hunter 2005, Udry et al. 1971). These gendered dynamics highlight the ways that the meaning of skin color is both relational and contextual (Codina & Montalvo 1994, Monk 2015). Indeed, scholars are paying increased attention to the fact that darker skin, especially shades in the medium range for a particular group, is not uniformly associated with negative outcomes, and it can be advantageous in terms of factors such as perceived racial authenticity (Hunter 2005, Monk 2015, Rondilla & Spickard 2007).

Further work is needed to better understand the intersections of skin color with race, socioeconomic status, spatial settings, and other aspects of bodily capital such as height and weight (Monk 2015). Because much of the existing qualitative literature has focused on women, we know much less about how men understand, utilize, and modify their skin color as capital. Given the globalized commodification of beauty and the emergence of male skin-lightening products (Hunter 2011), beauty may become a more consequential form of capital for men in the near future. Lastly, the field could greatly benefit from studies of how skin color dynamics operate in same-sex and gender-nonconforming relationships (Hall 2010, Urrea Giraldo & La Furcia 2014).

CONCEPTUALIZATIONS OF COLOR VERSUS RACE

The terms "color" and "colorism" have been used in inconsistent ways, particularly their distinction from the closely related terms "race" and "racism." Some scholars contrast the discrete boundaries of racial categories with the continuity of skin color (Banton 2012, Glenn 2009). However, such distinctions are not as easily made in Latin America as they are in the English-speaking world. Whereas color is analytically (if not in practice) relatively straightforward, race is not. Being a social construct, race has been defined in myriad ways over time and across societies, based on origins as well as physical appearance, and often using color categories to describe it. The term is rarely used in many non-English-speaking societies; it is not used in reference to humans in much of Latin America, including Mexico today and Brazil historically (Martínez Casas et al. 2014, Telles 2004). So how are we to define race analytically without making the modern US definition the sociological standard? In the following paragraphs, we review various ways in which analysts understand the relation between color and race, with special attention to variation across the Americas.

Color as a Distinction Within Racial Categories

In the US literature, skin color has been generally conceptualized as gradational points along a color continuum bound within racial categories or groups; colorism is thus often viewed as

within-group discrimination. Racial categories tend to be discrete and clearly defined, and color serves only to differentiate members of the same racial category. Therefore, colorism has largely developed as a concept separate from racism in the US context. However, in the legal realm, Jones (2009) contends that the interpretation of color as race has hamstrung efforts to win claims on the basis of colorism (also see Banks 2009). This is probably not surprising given the dominance of race claims over color claims in the civil rights struggle and the construction of civil rights law.

Color Variation Across the Full Human Spectrum

Colorism and racism are less easily separated in much of Latin America, where color is more commonly used to categorize people and the lack of strict classification rules have led to fuzzy boundaries among color/race categories (Bailey et al. 2016, Telles 2004, Telles & PERLA 2014). Moreover, nationalist discourses in Latin America have often used race mixture narratives to homogenize their populations into a national race, downplaying racial distinction. At the same time, skin color distinctions are often made among the majority mixed-race population or across the entire color spectrum; for example, friends and family often value newborn babies based on their skin tone (Telles & PERLA 2014).

Also, multiple racial classification systems may be used. For example, Telles (2004, p. 87) notes that "the racial categories used in the three classification systems [of Brazil] are distributed along a color continuum that runs from the lightest and most European-looking persons. . .to the darkest and most African-looking persons." The three classification systems include:

1. A black/white distinction by the government and the black movement that is similar to the US racial system, although with fuzzy boundaries;
2. Categories of white, brown, and black recorded in the Brazilian census that are based on a color continuum rather than a dichotomous black/white distinction, but may also be referred to as racial; and
3. Popular perceptions based on open-ended questions about self-identification that create numerous and greatly overlapping color/race categories.

Color as Equivalent to Race

The interchangeable use of "color" and "race" is prevalent in the scholarship in Brazil and Spanish America, and "color" has long been the preferred term in Spanish and Portuguese. In Brazil, race, like color, has long been considered continuous, which marks an important distinction from the United States (Harris et al. 1993, Telles 2012, Wade 2009); until recently, the word "race" was rarely used in Portuguese to refer to humans, except when distinguishing nationality or origins. Since its institution in 1872, the Brazilian census has classified persons based on the question "what is your color," with the response categories being white (*branco*), black (*preto*), mixed (*pardo* or *mestiço*), and, since 1980, yellow (*amarelo*). In 1991, the Brazilian census reworded its question to "what is your color or race," because the language of race was reemerging at the time owing to the black movement. The census also began to include the category of indigenous (Nobles 2000, Telles 2012). Similarly, the Cuban census has asked about color (never race) since the colonial period in the nineteenth century, and the response categories have generally been white (*blanco*), mulatto (*mulato*), and black (*negro*) (Loveman 2014). Telles (2004, p. 79) argues that in Brazil, the term "[c]olor is often preferred because it captures the continuous aspects of Brazilian racial concepts in which groups shade into one another. . .[it] captures the Brazilian equivalent of the English language term 'race' and is based on a combination of physical characteristics including skin color, hair type, nose shape, and lip shape" (see also Harris & Kottak 1963, Nogueira 1955).

Color as One Element of Multiple Racial Characteristics and Bodily Elements

Other researchers have noted that skin color is only one feature among a larger set of bodily characteristics associated with race (Roth 2010, Sen & Wasow 2014), although Telles and Paschel (2014) argue that it is the most important characteristic. This approach is in line with calls to view race as a multidimensional, variable concept (Bailey et al. 2013, 2014; Monk 2015; Roth 2010). For example, Sen & Wasow (2014) conceptualize race as a "bundle of sticks." They view skin color as one of the "sticks" that compose a constructivist approach to race, which can also include one's name, dialect, genes, neighborhood, diet, social status, norms, power relations, class, religion, and region of ancestry. Skin color is therefore just one of a number of characteristics used in racial categorization and identification, which according to Roth (2010, p. 1294) may include one's "observed" (defined by others), "internal" (self-identified), "expressed" (self-classified), and "reflected" (based on one's perception of others' perception) race. Indeed, color in Brazil often refers to this broader set of characteristics and not just to skin color, as mentioned above (Harris & Kottak 1963, Nogueira 1955, Telles 2004). For Sen & Wasow (2014), individual "sticks" can be viewed either as a proxy for the entire racial bundle or as one manipulable element of that bundle. Advocates of such an approach call for more experimental and empirical studies that allow the manipulation of specific phenotypic, social, and economic features associated with race in order to isolate the effects of particular racial aspects and to make causal claims about precise mechanisms (Roth 2016, Sen & Wasow 2014).

Similarly, other scholars conceptualize color as a part of a larger set of body characteristics or essences that confer privileges or disadvantages, some of which (e.g., height or weight) are not necessarily perceived as racial (Hersch 2008, 2011b). Monk (2015, p. 415) refers to these characteristics as "bodily capital." Roth's (2010, p. 1294) notions of "appearance-based" and "interaction-based" race also highlight the role of context and social position in interpreting racial and bodily characteristics (see also Saperstein & Penner 2012).

DATA SOURCES, MEASUREMENT, AND METHODOLOGICAL ISSUES

Data and Measurement

Variations in human skin color have been recorded for centuries (Jablonski 2012). The Cuban and Brazilian censuses have asked about color since the nineteenth century (Loveman 2014); research in the United States only began incorporating skin color measures into large-scale surveys in 1979. Two resources for identifying survey research that includes skin color measures are Garcia & Abascal's (2016) review and Bratter et al.'s (2014) online library, which lists publicly available data sets throughout the Americas that take a multidimensional approach to race. Many of these data sets include measures of skin color and other phenotypic features. Focusing primarily on survey data, we review four ways that skin color has been measured and common methodological concerns related to those measures.

The 1979 National Survey of Black Americans (NSBA) and the 1979 Chicano Survey (NCS), both developed at the University of Michigan, were the first national US surveys to include measures of skin color (Garcia & Abascal 2016). Although face-to-face, these early surveys assessed skin color without the use of palettes or guides. Rather, the NSBA and NCS measured skin color on a five-point scale that ranged from "very light" to "very dark."

In Latin America, as noted above, the Brazilian census and numerous Brazilian surveys have regularly used color categories, and the intermediate categories have been interpreted as being both of intermediate color and mixed race. Occasionally, other Latin American censuses have also used an intermediate category like mestizo (see Loveman 2014, Telles & PERLA 2014).

The 1850–1920 US censuses also used categories between black and white for the African origin population such as mulatto and quadroon (suggesting the existence of a color consciousness), but as a result of the US's focus on racial purity, concerns about descent and blood quanta appear to have driven the interest in these intermediate categories (Nobles 2000).

Since conceptions of color may vary widely in the absence of a reference standard, many face-to-face surveys in the United States and, increasingly, in Latin America now assess skin color using palettes or guides. Two prominent guides are the New Immigrant Survey (NIS) Skin Color Scale (Massey & Martin 2003) and the Project on Ethnicity and Race in Latin America (PERLA) Color Palette (Telles & PERLA 2014). The NIS Skin Color Scale is an 11-item scale (10 shades plus a score of zero representing albinism) depicting hands of different skin colors; it was pioneered in the NIS, a nationally representative longitudinal study conducted in the U.S. starting in 2003, and used in large-scale surveys such as the General Social Survey, the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth, and the American National Election Studies. The PERLA Color Palette, an 11-item chart intended to capture variations in skin color found in Latin America with an emphasis on the darker end of the color spectrum, is part of the PERLA data and has been part of the AmericasBarometer surveys, carried out by the Latin American Public Opinion Project, since 2010. In both surveys, interviewers are instructed not to show the guides to respondents.

A third approach to measuring skin color is the use of reflectance spectrometers (or spectrophotometers). Spectrometers assess skin color by measuring the amount of light reflected by the area of skin being evaluated. Although they have been used in medicine and anthropology, the use of these tools in sociology is still limited (Borrell et al. 2006, Gravlee et al. 2005, Jablonski 2012, Krieger et al. 1998, Lasker 1954). Scholars such as Hill (2002b) have proposed spectrometers as an ideal measure that can be used to achieve objective, reliable, and standardized measures of skin color free from human bias across different surveys and over time. Interestingly, skin color measures taken by spectrometers do not necessarily yield the same findings as other measures. For example, Gravlee & Dressler (2005) find no association between spectrometer-measured skin color and blood pressure; however, an association exists when using a self-reported measure, suggesting the possible existence of a reverse causal association.

Yet another approach to measuring skin color is photo elicitation (Harris 1956, Candelario 2007, Garcia & Abascal 2016, Roth 2012, Sorokowski et al. 2013), in which respondents are shown photos and asked to classify the color of other people or identify the color closest to their own. For example, in the 2002 Brazilian Social Survey (PESB), respondents were shown pictures of men of varying skin colors and asked to identify the color closest to their own; they were also asked to classify eight photos of individuals of various skin colors into the categories of white and black (Bailey et al. 2013). Using a more open-ended format, Rondilla & Spickard (2007) instructed respondents to make up stories about three women of various skin colors using the women's pictures as prompts. This less-structured approach allowed the authors to ascertain that, although respondents consistently expressed a desire for light-skinned individuals in the abstract, they chose the medium-colored woman as the preferred spouse and daughter-in-law. Photo elicitation is also likely to supply color ratings based on other facial characteristics that mark race and its association with color.

Selecting the best area of the body to use in these measurements is a challenge in all four approaches. Sociologists are concerned with the social meaning of color: Should they strive for the most objective measure even if it does not translate into the most meaningful social phenomenon? For example, spectrometer readings are typically taken from obscure places, such as the upper arm, because skin color there should be consistent over time due to minimal sun exposure (Krieger et al. 1998). However, such areas of the skin may be less relevant for understanding social interaction and discrimination than areas such as the face (Telles & PERLA 2014) or hands (Massey & Martin 2003), which the interviewers are often instructed to rate. Moreover, darker skin itself, regardless of

tanning, may lead to greater discrimination for nonwhites, perhaps because of its association with class. On the other hand, sociological outcomes correlated with skin color measured at a particular time point may misidentify discrimination at an earlier point. Measuring both exposed and unexposed areas may provide two distinct color measures or an average from which to gauge sociological outcomes; the difference between the two may also capture the extent of lightening or tanning.

Biases in Measurement

The source or method of measurement can introduce bias. Potential biases for both respondents and interviewers can include: underestimation of the variation when evaluating outgroup members, use of oneself or one's social network as a reference category, pressures related to social desirability, and the influence of other bodily or contextual factors (Flores & Telles 2012, Hill 2002a). Interviewers may undergo rigorous training in attempts to mitigate such biases, whereas respondents typically do not. For example, Garcia & Abascal (2016) show that respondents rated pictures of individuals as significantly darker when they were accompanied by a distinctly Spanish first name rather than an English one, and despite the fact that the respondents were shown a skin color palette less than an inch from the picture they were evaluating. Yet, such biases displayed by respondents can be viewed as an interesting phenomenon to be explored rather than as a methodological limitation (Garcia & Abascal 2016).

Monk (2015) argues that self-reported measures may be particularly useful in examining aspects, like perceived discrimination, that are based in part on how individuals view, understand, and interpret their own skin color and experiences. Individual self-reports can capture the respondents' experiences throughout life and across different contexts, and they may reflect how the respondents believe others perceive and treat them. This may not accurately reflect how they are seen by others and may be the result of a reverse causality whereby experiences, including perceived discrimination, determine the perception of one's own color. The substantially lower cost of telephone surveys compared with face-to-face surveys will probably ensure the continued use of self-assessment without guides. To date, the relative biases of interviewer versus respondent ratings and guides versus no-guides ratings are unknown.

The most studied aspect of skin color measurement bias is interviewer reports of respondents' skin color. Udry et al. (1971) find that interviewers' measurements can be fairly reliable, particularly when the race of the interviewer is matched to the race of the respondent. Interviewers' reports of skin color may also better approximate how individuals are perceived by others. Data on respondents' observed race (Roth 2016) can be more useful in studying phenomena such as statistical discrimination (Monk 2015). Hersch (2008) also finds that the interviewer-reported measures of the skin color of immigrants in the NIS reasonably approximated skin color measures taken by spectrometers in the immigrants' countries of origin, suggesting that the interviewer-implemented NIS Skin Color Scale (Massey & Martin 2003) is a valid measure.

Yet, even trained interviewers are not free from biases, regardless of whether they are taking measurements with (Hannon & DeFina 2014) or without the aid of guides (Hill 2002a, Villarreal 2010). Hill (2002a), for example, finds that interviewers for the Multi-City Study of Urban Inequality, who did not use a guide, perceived less skin color variation when evaluating respondents who were not in their same racial category. Moreover, white interviewers classified black respondents as darker than black interviewers, and black interviewers classified white respondents as lighter. Additionally, studies have shown that survey interviewers still bring their own biases into these assessments even when they use guides (Hannon & DeFina 2014, Hill 2002b).

Given the pros and cons associated with each measure of skin color, it appears that sociological studies of skin color measurement will benefit most from taking a multidimensional approach

to color (Roth 2010, Sen & Wasow 2014). The appearance of skin color is both contextual and variable; good scientific measures should thus reflect such complexity.

CONCLUSION

We have reviewed a vast, interdisciplinary, and global literature concerning skin color and colorism, noting important analytic distinctions of concern when addressing the related social constructions of color and colorism, which are often closely related to race and racism. Although all these concepts deal, on some level, with categorizing human difference, their use and meaning are not consistent across societies. What is nearly always consistent is a color hierarchy in which white or light skin is considered more desirable and modern, whereas darker skin is considered less valuable and primitive.

To date, global literature outside the Western Hemisphere is limited and has been largely historical and descriptive. Given Europe's centrality in the spread of white supremacy and colorism throughout the globe, the scant work concerning this region is particularly notable (see Van den Berghe & Frost 1986, Frost 1990). In Europe, difference is often officially conceptualized in terms of nationality, ethnicity, culture, and immigration status, largely obscuring race and especially color. There is much to be learned about the original perceptions of color outside the Western world and their increasing association with Western ideas concerning race. Research on the sociology of skin color in the contemporary non-Western world has seen a notable increase in research on skin bleaching. More research throughout the world, and especially cross-national comparative research, is needed on the meaning of skin color and forms of stratification based on skin color. Such studies may shift emphasis away from the US focus on race toward questions of color. Through more empirical and analytic precision in examining the non-Western world, the sociology of skin color will gain a more complex and nuanced understanding of skin color's meaning in society generally.

In this review, we have argued that making a clear-cut distinction between race and color privileges US or English-speaking world realities. Similarly, although the growing confluence of preferences for light skin in Asia and ideas of white supremacy from the Western world might suggest the making of a global white supremacy, we hesitate to call it as such, because that would give primacy to a Western concept. Asian ideals are based on gradations of color in which lightness is most desirable (and especially an East Asian lightness, though perhaps an increasingly mixed European/Asian one) and not on the racial category of white, which was restricted to those of European origins and deemed superior in the Western world and, incidentally, excluded Asians. Nonetheless, and despite many differences, the overall preference for light skin is notable and an increasingly global phenomenon, exemplified by a skin-bleaching industry that caters to worldwide demands.

We have demonstrated how comparing the US and Latin American cases highlights the semantic and linguistic constraints surrounding the definition of race and color. The United States' conceptualization of color as bounded by racial categories has led to an emphasis on colorism as distinct from racism. We have noted that the rapid increase in non-European immigration over the past 50 years, along with increasing levels of intermarriage, has accentuated the variations in skin color and the stratification by color that has long existed in US society. This may indicate a shift toward a growing importance of gradations in skin color as racial boundaries become harder to construct and enforce (Bonilla-Silva 2004, Telles & Sue 2009).

Finally, we reviewed various data sources and methodological approaches and challenges. Large-scale survey data are particularly sparse outside of the Americas. Social science researchers are still grappling with questions concerning how skin color should be measured. In future

research, we hope scholars will adopt an increasingly multidimensional and intersectional lens in their examinations of color. The increasing interest in understanding race from a multidimensional perspective and in extra-racial bodily characteristics is promising. Most importantly, we are encouraged by the growing interest in skin color research in the United States and globally and by the budding attention to the field's conceptual and methodological development.

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