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Social Stratification in Mexico: Disentangling Color, Ethnicity, and Class

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In a 2010 *American Sociological Review* article, Andrés Villarreal (hereafter AV) presents evidence of dramatic skin color stratification and indigenous disadvantage in contemporary Mexico based on the 2006 MIT Mexico Panel Study. AV uses regression models to predict educational attainment, occupational status, and household income for Mexicans according to three interviewer-reported color categories. For all of these outcomes, he finds that individuals with the darkest skin tone have the lowest socioeconomic status, followed by those with intermediate skin colors, even after controlling for individual characteristics. AV does us an important service by drawing our attention to the role of skin color in Mexican social stratification, which has generally been denied or overlooked. He also notes the need for more research to address two issues that his data did not allow him to investigate. First, whether the color categories he uses are affected themselves by class (as in "money whitening"). Second, whether socioeconomic status (SES) differences by color are a product of color discrimination in the current generation or the result of class origins, which may capture accumulated disadvantage due to racial discrimination in previous generations.

In this comment, we address these two points and use two innovative datasets that allow us to reanalyze the effect of color and ethnicity on SES in Mexico and address the data limitations that AV notes. We sought to replicate AV's analysis on most variables because we believe it is excellent methodologically, but we now have innovative and new data that includes controls for class origins, a more comprehensive definition of indigeneity, and a more objective measure of skin color. Although we find general support for AV's conclusions about the effect of skin color in the Mexican stratification system, especially in educational attainment, we find that the color categories AV uses are affected by class. Moreover, class origins appear to be more important, and they seem to mitigate some of the inequality that AV attributes to skin color differences. In the case of educational attainment, by controlling for class origins and using more accurate measures of color and indigenous ethnicity, we discover that the magnitude of indigenous and skin color disadvantage is smaller than AV finds. Regarding occupational status, class origins and education largely explain color differences, and color and indigenous status do not

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seem to have an independent effect. Our comment builds upon AV's work by trying to disentangle the role that color, class, and ethnicity play in Mexican social stratification.

CLASS, ETHNICITY, AND COLOR IN MEXICO

For decades, the dominant view of Mexican society, powerfully expressed by González Casanova (1965), was that class was the most important social cleavage, ethnicity was important but transitory, and race (or color) was largely insignificant. More recently, intergenerational mobility studies have demonstrated that the Mexican class system is particularly rigid and family class origins are particularly important for predicting socioeconomic outcomes (Behrman et al. 2001; Torche and Spilerman 2009; Zenteno and Solís 2006). For example, Behrman and colleagues (2001) found that children of white-collar workers are 3.5 times as likely as children of blue-collar workers to enter white-collar jobs in Mexico; this is higher than any other Latin American country they studied and far higher than in the United States. However, these studies have mostly ignored race and ethnicity. As AV notes, the idea that race is unimportant in Mexico's social stratification system is widely entrenched, along with a post-revolutionary and elite-led ideology of non-racialism and *mestizaje* (Knight 1990; Villarreal 2010).

Another body of scholarship has studied indigenous disadvantage in Mexico (Knight 1990), but the topic has not been addressed in more general stratification or mobility studies. The traditional view acknowledged discrimination against indigenous peoples but expected they would integrate into mainstream Mexican society, mostly as the traditional "regions of refuge" broke down (Knight 1990; Náhmad Sitton 2008). Despite such apparent integration, including declines in the use of indigenous languages, residence in segregated rural communities, and use of traditional dress (markers that AV uses), indigenous ethnicity has persisted (Martínez Casas and de la Peña 2004; Yashar 2005). Indeed, in the 2010 Mexican Census, 38 percent of indigenous language speakers lived in urban or semi-urban locations. Furthermore, close to 15 percent of Mexicans identified as indigenous and 58 percent of those were Spanish monolinguals (INEGI 2011).

As AV notes, many of the remaining 85 percent of Mexicans (over 90 percent in AV's survey) are dark-skinned mestizos who also suffer discrimination because they bear the mark of Mexico's stigmatized indigenous people. Nevertheless, we believe that AV may have overstated the effect of skin color by omitting class origins and using a stereotyped definition of indigenous ethnicity. To this end, we seek to more accurately model the combined effects of color, class, and ethnicity in the Mexican social stratification system.

VARIABLES, DATA, AND METHODS

For our analysis of SES, our primary data source is the Mexico survey of the 2010 America's Barometer by the Latin American Public Opinion Project (LAPOP 2010), which, like AV's MIT survey, is nationally representative. The LAPOP sample is smaller, 1,562 respondents compared to 2,395 for the MIT survey. The LAPOP survey deals specifically with social and race variables by introducing an ethnicity module, designed by the Project on Ethnicity and Race in Latin America (PERLA) at Princeton University, that includes a color-palette-based skin color variable and several variables that allow us to better identify indigenous status, including self-identity, parents' language ability, first language spoken, and mother's ethnicity.

Our color variable, hereafter referred to as the PERLA skin color variable, is based on interviewer ratings of skin tones using a palette that depicts 11 realistic skin tones ranging from very light (1) to very dark (11), although the Mexican sample included very few persons with a color rating over 7. During the interview, each survey taker had a color palette with precise instructions to match, as best

they could, the colors on the palette to the color of respondents' faces, without actually showing it to them. Any external measure of skin color might involve some degree of subjectivity, but we consider the PERLA skin color variable a more objective color indicator than the MIT skin color variable that AV uses. The MIT scale relies solely on interviewer ratings of respondents' skin color according to interviewers' own conceptions of three commonly verbalized "colors" (*güero* [white], *moreno claro* [light brown], and *moreno oscuro* [dark brown]), but the PERLA rating directly matches respondents' skin color with a color chart.

Prior to our SES analysis, we first examine the extent to which the MIT and PERLA skin color variables are correlated and whether social factors like income or gender might affect how interviewers categorized respondents' skin color. We are fortunate to have the *Termómetro Capitalino* (2009), a random sample dataset of Mexico City that focuses on political issues but also includes data on the MIT and PERLA skin color variables.[1] Specifically, we use multinomial regression analysis to regress the MIT color variable on the PERLA color variable, sex, age, household income, and indigenous ethnicity. Although AV finds "considerable agreement" (p. 652) among interviewers about who was categorized into each color category over the three waves of the MIT survey, we suspect this could be due to a common understanding of color categorization that considers class and other social factors in the calculus of assigning color. For example, scholars have found a "money whitening" effect for Latin American countries, including Mexico, currently and in the past (Cope 1994; Knight 1990; Telles and Flores forthcoming).

In the second part of our analysis, we use ordered logistic regression to predict the effect of color and several control variables (columns 1 and 4 in Table 2) on years of education and occupational status, we then add indigenous ethnicity (columns 2 and 5 in Table 2) and parents' occupation (columns 3 and 6 in Table 2). For our dependent variable of education, we transform our continuous educational variable into the same categorical variables used by AV. For the dependent variable of occupation, we rank 10 occupational groups in a similar way as AV, based on the International Socio-Economic Index of Occupational Status (ISEI). However, some of the occupational groups in our data are distinct from AV's so that exact replication is not possible. As in AV's data, the ranking of specific occupations in each group often overlaps with other groups, and we thus had to make decisions on what we believed were the average ratings for each group. Although one might be concerned that this could lead to the different results from AV's, we find that despite ranking occupations in many possible ways and running the same regressions, our substantive results remain robust in all models. Finally, we do not examine affluence and poverty (i.e., household income in the highest or lowest quartiles) as AV does, mostly because LAPOP does not provide adequate income data.[2]

For this part of our analysis, we collapse the PERLA 11-color variable into three color categories in an effort to replicate AV's three-color variable, as much as possible. We are able to closely match AV's distribution, in which light-complexioned persons (1 to 2 on the color palette) are 13.5 percent of the sample, compared to 18.8 percent in AV, light-brown persons (3 to 4) are 49.5 percent, compared to 50.5 percent in AV, and dark-brown persons (5+) are 37.0 percent, compared to 30.7 percent in AV. We also tried using a continuous variable based on each color rating, but that transformation did not make a substantive difference to our findings.

Although indigenous ethnicity and class origins are not the primary independent variables for AV, we believe that an ethnicity variable using a more comprehensive conception of indigeneity and the introduction of a class origin variable are likely to affect estimates for skin color disadvantage. We identify indigenous people using four dimensions—language, self-identity, and language and ethnicity of parents—so that it is similar

Table 1. Determinants of MIT Interviewer Classification as White (*blanco/güero*) or Dark Brown (*moreno oscuro*) Compared to Light Brown (*moreno claro* = reference), Mexico City, 2009

		Multinomial Logistic Regression			
		White		Dark Brown	
Predictor	Means	Coefficient	(SE)	Coefficient	(SE)
PERLA Skin Color	4.98	−1.152***	(.209)	1.050***	(.142)
Female	.48	−.029	(.235)	−.319	(.243)
Age	40.41	−.000	(.007)	.010	(.007)
Monthly Household Income					
$181 to 300 USD	.32	.103	(.390)	.521	(.378)
$301 to 600 USD	.38	.363	(.356)	.252	(.386)
$601 USD and more	.14	.882*	(.390)	−.606	(.483)
Indigenous	.06	−.972	(.545)	−.039	(.446)
Constant		3.564	(.937)	−7.327	(.953)
Chi Square (df)		70.90 (14)			
Pseudo R^2		.290			
Observations	589	587			

Source: Termómetro Capitalino (2009).
Note: Robust standard errors reported.
*$p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$ (two-tailed tests).

to the definition used by the 2000 and 2010 Mexican Censuses (INEGI 2011).[3] Although AV recognizes the importance of culture and identity in defining indigeneity, he relies on interviewer decisions to classify indigenous Mexicans based on "factors such as respondents' language ability, the use of traditional attire, and characteristics of the communities in which respondents lived" (p. 659). By relying on these stereotypical traits, AV probably captures only the most disadvantaged and traditional segment of the indigenous population, which could have led him to overestimate a color disadvantage. Indeed, only 8.6 percent of AV's sample is indigenous under his definition, compared to our 13.3 and 14.9 percent in the 2010 Mexican Census.

We model class origins based on parents' occupation, that is, the head of household's occupation when a respondent was 14 years old. Although studies of stratification and mobility in Mexico clearly show the importance of parents' class origins, the MIT dataset does not include such crucial information. By not controlling for parents' status, AV cannot make a strong case for ongoing discrimination on the basis of color or indigeneity, because he cannot rule out class disadvantages inherited from the previous generation. We present parents' occupation with a single continuous variable based on values from the ISEI, which we (and AV) use to construct respondent occupational status as the dependent variable. The survey provides 15 occupational categories, but we collapse these into 10 hierarchically distinct occupational groups based on their ISEI scores.

ANALYSIS

Table 1 shows our results modeling the relation between the relatively subjective MIT skin color categorization used by AV and the PERLA color variable, as well as sex, age, income, and indigenous ethnicity. We find that both systems of color classification are closely related, at a high level of statistical significance. A negative coefficient for PERLA skin color predicting MIT categorization as white indicates that lighter-skin persons are

more likely to be considered white rather than light brown, and a positive coefficient predicting MIT categorization as dark brown shows that darker persons are more likely to be rated dark brown than light brown.

However, Table 1 also reveals that high-income persons are more likely to be classified as white, regardless of their skin color. By transforming the regression coefficients into percentages, we find that high-income persons are nearly twice (exp 1.94) as likely as low-income persons of the same color to be classified as white, revealing a money whitening effect in how the Mexican interviewers rated color in the MIT-like survey color item. Specifically, we find that the *güero* category refers not only to light-skinned respondents but also to light-brown Mexicans with high income. By incorporating income in his color variable, AV could thus be overestimating the effect of color on SES outcomes.

Table 2 presents results from three models predicting educational attainment (Models 1, 2, and 3) and another three models predicting occupational status (Models 4, 5, and 6). The respective education and occupation models use the same sets of independent variables for each of the two dependent variables. Using our improved skin color and indigenous ethnicity variables, Models 1 and 4 are the basic models for the effect of skin color, sex, age, education, region, and urban/rural status. Models 2 and 5 add the indigenous ethnicity variable to the previous two models, and Models 3 and 6 add the parents' occupation variable to Models 2 and 5.

Model 1 replicates AV's Model 3, Table 4, using the same dependent and independent variables except we use a different skin color variable and we do not include a mixed urban/rural variable. The age and female variables in Model 1 are remarkably similar to those in AV's model, suggesting that our data, methods, and variables closely match his.[4] The regional variables are generally insignificant and the rural variable is probably different because of the absence of a mixed rural/urban variable in our model.

Model 1 of Table 2 reveals a strong association between respondents' skin color and their educational attainment, at similar levels as AV finds. Despite a money whitening effect, the MIT and PERLA color variables have similar effects on education once basic demographic variables are taken into account. Model 2, however, shows that the indigenous ethnicity variable we employ had virtually no effect on education, while the MIT indigeneity variable that AV uses is negatively related to education at a highly significant level. In a separate analysis, which we do not show for space reasons, we included each of the four operationalizations of indigenous ethnicity that we described earlier separately, but none were statistically significant. Finally, addition of a parents' occupation variable in Model 3 shows that class origins are very strongly related to educational attainment, and its inclusion diminishes the effects of color. Most importantly, Models 1, 2, and 3 of Table 2 show a consistent color gradient, in which dark-brown Mexicans have the lowest levels of education, and light-brown Mexicans are intermediate between them and the lightest skin-toned Mexicans, independent of the three sets of controls.[5]

However, unlike the strong negative relation between color and indigeneity with occupation that AV finds, we find that skin color does not have a statistically significant effect on occupational status in any of the models, although the coefficients are consistently but slightly negative. This suggests little, if any, contemporary color discrimination in the labor market. By contrast, parents' occupation strongly predicts occupational status and indigenous ethnicity is not significant. A regression coefficient of .132 for parents' occupation indicates that the odds of any upward occupational mobility for the average Mexican along the 10-point occupational scale is 14 percent (exp(.132)), compared to virtually none (0 percent) for skin color. Nevertheless, we cannot rule out differences in income within the same occupation (as AV finds). Furthermore, color discrimination may still occur, but only in the highest-level occu-

Table 2. Ordered Logistic Regression Models Predicting Educational Attainment (Models 1, 2, and 3) and Occupational Status (Models 4, 5, and 6)

	Educational Attainment			Occupational Status		
Variables	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6
Skin Color						
Light brown	−.468***	−.450***	−.354**	−.282	−.272	−.291
	(.129)	(.128)	(.139)	(.201)	(.201)	(.208)
Dark brown	−.931***	−.886***	−.708***	−.406	−.382	−.261
	(.148)	(.146)	(.159)	(.218)	(.217)	(.221)
Female	−.459***	−.461***	−.431***	.546**	.556**	.584**
	(.082)	(.082)	(.087)	(.159)	(.162)	(.172)
Age	−.064***	−.063***	−.057***	.003	.003	.006
	(.003)	(.003)	(.003)	(.005)	(.005)	(.005)
Indigenous		−.361	−.128		−.196	−.133
		(.213)	(.212)		(.199)	(.197)
Education						
Incomplete primary				.229	.215	.232
				(.459)	(.456)	(.477)
Complete primary				.853	.838	.756
				(.464)	(.464)	(.479)
Incomplete secondary				1.143*	1.133*	1.209*
				(.470)	(.471)	(.480)
Complete secondary				1.437**	1.420**	1.390**
				(.418)	(.417)	(.433)
Incomplete high school				1.970***	1.932***	1.866***
				(.447)	(.451)	(.477)
Complete high school				2.186***	2.160***	2.029***
				(.422)	(.422)	(.429)
Some college				3.847***	3.834***	3.595***
				(.493)	(.491)	(.532)
Complete college				5.054***	5.046***	4.846***
				(.507)	(.504)	(.520)
Region						
Northwest	−.352	−.373	−.420	.408	.394	.419
	(.269)	(.267)	(.278)	(.365)	(.362)	(.366)
Northeast	−.386	−.432	−.445	−.030	−.069	−.145
	(.247)	(.246)	(.231)	(.282)	(.287)	(.285)
Center	−.104	−.105	−.105	.232	.228	.181
	(.187)	(.186)	(.178)	(.182)	(.181)	(.182)
Center-West	−.642**	−.675**	−.563**	−.016	−.038	−.002
	(.203)	(.207)	(.192)	(.210)	(.210)	(.215)
Rural	−.598**	−.586**	−.373*	−.613**	−.609**	−.490*
	(.171)	(.171)	(.163)	(.215)	(.213)	(.224)
Parents' Occupation			.277***			.132**
			(.027)			(.040)
Pseudo R^2	.081	.082	.105	.117	.117	.124
N	1,554	1,554	1,460	797	797	765

Source: LAPOP (2010).
Note: Robust standard errors reported (using Huber-White technique) and adjusted for sample clustering.
*$p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$ (two-tailed tests).

pations. Based on a separate analysis (not shown), we find that a dark-brown skin color is negatively associated with being in the professional occupations (although the statistical significance is marginal, $p = .06$).

CONCLUSIONS

Our primary aim has been to reexamine AV's findings regarding the effect of skin color on educational and occupational attainment. Our methods depart from AV in that we use an improved dataset, including a more objective measure of skin color. While AV argues that the MIT color variables are reliable over time and across raters, we discover that they are also subject to a money whitening effect, resulting in a color measure that is endogenous to the SES outcomes he sought to explain. Indeed, what AV seems to have captured are socially assigned color categories grounded in skin color as well as in status cues (Telles and Lim 1998; Telles and Paschel 2012). Thus, we argue that it is important to make the conceptual distinction between color (as popularly understood) and (actual) skin color as Guimarães (2012) notes for Brazil. We also consider class background and use a more comprehensive conceptualization of indigenous ethnicity. We thus better identify and more fully measure the social mechanisms that shape contemporary Mexican social stratification.

Based on our findings, we generally agree with AV that skin color is important to predicting socioeconomic status in Mexico but, unlike AV, we find that color shapes SES primarily through education. Despite the effect of color that both our studies find, we find that class, too, exerts a powerful effect. Specifically, we find that parents' occupation, which AV does not include in his analysis, strongly predicts occupation and education, as the traditional literature shows. Dark skin color and class origins are related to lower educational attainment, but for occupation, our results point to parents' occupation or class origins as the primary determinant of occupational attainment. Our evidence thus suggests that stratification of Mexicans by color occurs prior to entrance into the labor market, that is, during education and through parents' occupation or class reproduction, which may reflect accumulated disadvantages from color discrimination in earlier generations.

We conclude that skin color and class origin are central social factors that work in conjunction with each other to produce and reproduce social inequality in Mexican society. However, color is mostly important in education probably because darker children are especially likely to attend lower quality schools where graduation rates are lower, because their (also darker) parents are more likely to be poorer (which could be a reflection of discrimination in earlier generations). Selection effects of color are probably compounded by different teacher expectations, stereotype threats, and other differentiating mechanisms inside the classroom. As a result, by the time they reach the labor market and choose occupations, lighter-skin children have a considerable educational advantage. By then, the relatively few dark persons selected into higher occupational levels may be particularly talented and motivated individuals, so that further color discrimination in the labor market may be especially counterproductive. However, color barriers could still occur in the highest strata of the Mexican labor market, where a light complexion seems to be particularly valued.

Finally, although indigenous ethnicity is commonly considered a disadvantage in Mexico, we discover that indigenous ethnicity, using either the official Census definition (INEGI 2011) or any of a number of other definitions based on identity or language of respondents or their parents, does not have an independent effect on SES. Our findings suggest that indigenous disadvantage, which we find in bivariate analysis, derives largely from skin color discrimination, class origin, and rural residence. By contrast, AV finds a strongly negative association between indigenous ethnicity and SES but his definition seems to miss the many Western-attired,

monolingual Spanish-speaking, and urban indigenous peoples. We recognize the merit of AV's findings in that they suggest that indigenous people who fit the indigenous stereotype may experience the most discrimination. His results are also consistent with findings that external categorization and self-identity do not necessarily match and this discrepancy can have important consequences for measurement of inequality (Campbell and Troyer 2007; Cheng and Powell 2011; Telles and Lim 1998). We believe, however, that selecting only the most stereotyped sectors of the population, and substantially reducing the population as measured by other means, represents a break from previous research and is tantamount to selecting only Mexican Americans with accents and residing in Southwest *barrios* to investigate whether there is an ethnic effect on SES.

Nonetheless, our findings are generally consistent with AV's. In summary, we find deleterious effects of having a dark skin color in Mexican society, disentangled from indigenous ethnicity and class.

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Notes

1. The *Termómetro Capitalino* is a rolling survey of Mexico City residents over the age of 18 conducted several times a year since 1997. It includes only Mexico City respondents, but given the centrality and preeminence of the Mexican capital to the country's social, cultural, economic, and political life, we expect that similar patterns might be found elsewhere in the country.
2. In addition, we believe that AV's income variable is weaker than education and occupation as an indicator of social status because it is based on household income (divided by number of household members), it has a relatively large number of missing cases, and missing cases are greater among the least educated, darker persons, and individuals classified as indigenous.
3. As a robustness check, we ran all of our models predicting educational attainment and occupational status using these four dimensions of indigenous ethnicity separately, but our substantive results did not change. None were statistically significant once class origin, color, and rural context were taken into account.
4. Our color coefficients also appear to be somewhat close to AV's, but we do not consider this to be a validation of the MIT color system. On the contrary, because color has a negative linear relation with educational attainment in Mexico, the bigger the white category used, the darker and more disadvantaged the brown categories will be. In this case, because AV's white group is almost 40 percent larger, educational deficits for his brown categories should have been significantly larger than ours. However, because his color categories are intertwined with class, this trend is somewhat reversed because wealthier light-brown respondents probably made it into his white category (due to a money whitening effect) and thus depressed the socioeconomic indicators of the light-brown and dark-brown categories.
5. By converting the regression coefficients into predicted probabilities and combining the three highest-ranked occupational groups into a professional group, and seven urban and rural manual occupations into a working-class group, we find (in a separate analysis) that 50 percent of dark-brown Mexicans of professional origins attend college, compared to 68 percent of light-complexioned Mexicans of the same origin. More starkly, among Mexicans with working-class backgrounds, only 13 percent of the darkest persons attend college compared to 24 percent of the lightest.

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