

Skin Tone Stratification

Skin Tone Stratification among Black Americans, 2001–2003

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In the past few decades, a dedicated collection of scholars have examined the matter of skin tone stratification within the black American population and found that complexion has significant net effects on a variety of stratification outcomes. These analyses relied heavily on data collected between 1950 and 1980. In particular, many scholars have utilized the National Survey of Black Americans (1979–1980). This leaves the question of whether or not the effect of skin tone on stratification outcomes remains decades later. Newly available data from the National Survey of American Life (2001–2003) are used to examine this question. I find that skin tone is significantly associated with black Americans' educational attainment, household income, occupational status, and even the skin tone and educational attainment of their spouses. Consequently, this study demonstrates that skin tone stratification among black Americans persists into the 21st century. I conclude by discussing the implications of these findings for the study of ethnoracial inequality in the United States and beyond.

Introduction

An incredibly rich literature expertly details ethnoracial inequality in the United States. In particular, much ink has been spilled recounting the complex and enduring history of ethnoracial inequality between white and black Americans. For example, scholars highlight how black Americans face steep penalties in the labor market (Pager 2003), in the criminal justice system (Western 2006), in terms of wealth (Oliver and Shapiro 1995; Conley 2010 [1999]), and in terms of housing and poverty (Massey 2008). In addition to this well-documented inequality between blacks and whites, however, there is considerable *intra-racial* inequality related to skin tone differences within the black population. Evidence shows that skin tone is a significant predictor of

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personal and family income—net of education, occupation, parental socioeconomic status, region, urbanicity, and marital status (Keith and Herring 1991, 772). Darker-skinned blacks have less income and are more likely to be unemployed (Johnson, Farrell, and Stoloff 1998) or in poverty (Bowman, Muhammad, and Ifatunji 2004), have lower occupational prestige and wealth (Seltzer and Smith 1991), and have worse health outcomes, such as high blood pressure (Harburg et al. 1978; Krieger, Sidney, and Coakley 1998). Thus, for black Americans, there are at least two dimensions of inequality: (1) between blacks and non-blacks; and (2) within the black population according to gradations of skin tone (Hunter 2005).

In contrast to work that dominated the latter half of the 20th century, studies of black life from the first half of the 20th century consistently detailed how skin color patterned interpersonal relationships among black Americans and significantly affected their life chances (Johnson 1934; Frazier 1957; Drake and Cayton 1993[1945]). As one scholar explained decades ago: “Within the Negro group every possible shade of color between jet black and creamy white exists; and variations occur even within the same shade ... For Negroes in ‘Cottonville,’ color is highly important socially and hence economically, as well as sexually ... A light skin is considered an asset from all three viewpoints. With the preference for a light complexion is associated a desire for ‘good,’ that is straight, hair ... To make a ‘good’ marriage means to ‘marry light,’ to be ‘well-born’ very often implies being born with a light skin” (Powdermaker 1939, 64).

While work in the early 20th century examined the impact of color among black Americans in detail, with the civil rights movement and the black power movement (which explicitly attempted to address skin color inequality, at least among blacks), scholarship on black life shifted away from matters of color and toward issues of economic inequality, crime, deviance, and life in the inner city. In the shadow of Jim Crow, concerns over black–white equality made sense—scholars critically examined whether “racial integration” was leading to “racial equality.” Unfortunately, such an overwhelming interest in black life telescoped through the lens of social problems, particularly in the latter half of the 20th century, had the consequence of creating a blind-spot in our scholarship—the continuing significance of color. In fact, scholars found that between 1950 and 1980 there was as much socioeconomic inequality between darker-skinned and light-skinned blacks as there is between blacks and whites as a whole (Hughes and Hertel 1990).

Thus, despite studies, cited above, that illustrate how color was an important factor of socioeconomic stratification among black Americans until at least 1980, scholarship on color inequality has often been relatively marginalized in comparison to the study of racial inequality between blacks and whites as a whole. As Herring (2002, 19) puts it: “For the most part, [the importance of skin tone differences] has often been overshadowed by or subsumed within more general issues of racism and race relations.”

As nationally representative data on skin tone in the United States have been limited, the majority of the studies of the significance of skin tone among black Americans have necessarily relied heavily on the National Survey of

Black Americans, 1979–1980 (see Hughes and Hertel 1990; Keith and Herring 1991; Gullickson 2005; Hochschild and Weaver 2007a). Consequently, it has been extremely difficult to ascertain whether skin tone inequality among black Americans persisted to the end of the 20th century and continues to the present day (i.e., the early 21st century). Hersch (2006), for example, uses the Multi-City Study of Urban Inequality (MCSUI 1992) and the Detroit Area Study (DAS 1995), and finds that the socioeconomic significance of skin tone diminished very slightly between 1979 and 1995 (i.e., the relationship between skin tone and wages specifically), but the latter two data sets are not nationally representative. Moreover, even these data are now nearly 20 years old. In contrast to Hersch (2006), Gullickson (2005) argues that the substantial color-related socioeconomic stratification that obtained throughout the first half of the 20th century among black Americans diminished significantly, and on most outcomes nearly disappeared completely between 1950 and the late 1980s, based on his analysis of the National Survey of Black Americans.

This leaves a tension in the current literature: *Does skin tone stratification still persist for black Americans in the early 21st century?* In order to address this question, recently generated, nationally representative data are required. Fortunately, such data have become available, and in this study I address this gap in the literature by analyzing data from the recently conducted National Survey of American Life (2001–2003), which was designed by many of the same principal investigators responsible for the National Survey of Black Americans (1979–1980). Importantly, this data set includes a large number of individuals who came of age a generation or more *after* those individuals surveyed in the original NSBA (1979–1980)—individuals whose experiences are formed by what obtains in the post–civil rights era. Marshaling data from this nationally representative survey, conducted decades after the NSBA, I analyze the relationship between skin tone and a variety of outcomes and assess whether or not skin tone stratification persists among black Americans in the early 21st century, and if so, to what extent.

Specifically, I analyze the association of skin tone with black Americans' household income, educational attainment, occupational status, employment status, marital status, and their spouse's skin color and educational attainment—net of a variety of traditional stratification measures. Most of these findings reveal that significant skin tone stratification among black Americans *does persist* into the 21st century. Before attending to these findings, however, it is important to provide a brief overview of why and how skin tone has affected the life chances of black Americans, as well as current debates regarding the present and future of skin tone stratification among black Americans and in the United States generally.

The Consequences of Color: A Brief Overview

Skin color's importance originated during slavery, where, as Keith and Herring (1991, 761) point out, lighter-skinned blacks were privileged by whites and thought to be more aesthetically appealing and intellectually superior to darker-skinned

blacks—thinking that typically rested on a foundation of “race science,” which held that lighter-skinned blacks (i.e., those who had kinship ties with whites, hence the lightness of these individuals’ skin tones), were *less* African and more European and thus superior to other blacks (Reuter 1917). The adoption of such thinking by whites afforded lighter-skinned blacks advantages in obtaining education, property, and even their freedom (i.e., manumission). Blacks of lighter complexions were more likely to be skilled workers, professionals, and even own their own farms (Gatewood 2000; Bodenhorn and Ruebeck 2007). These advantages, notably their much greater wealth in comparison to all other blacks and their heightened status, were passed down selectively over generations, as many lighter-skinned blacks practiced homogamy (Bodenhorn 2006).

Even churches were not neutral zones; many African American churches operated within a “color caste system,” both during and after slavery, with certain denominations known for allowing only blacks of the fairest complexions to worship there (Frazier 1963, 31). For example, some churches used brown-paper-bag tests to determine who was eligible for admission. Those with skin darker than the brown paper bag were refused entry. Some churches even painted their doors a light shade of brown, and anyone darker than the door was told to worship elsewhere. Drake and Cayton (1993[1945]) dedicated several pages of their seminal work, *Black Metropolis*, to discussing phenotypic distinctions and biases among blacks in Bronzeville. The authors detail the existence of “negro social clubs” with “unspoken” rules regarding how light skinned someone must be in order to join them (Drake and Cayton 1993[1945], 497). They also find, similar to the studies cited above, the high premium that black men put on light skin and “good hair” in the marital market. One black male interviewee states: “I never go out with dark women because they just don’t interest me. I prefer a light person for a sweetheart or a wife. They are more affectionate, lovable, and understanding. They are usually more attractive; they’re prettier; they have good hair. They’re more intelligent. I don’t look for coal mines; I look for gold mines” (Drake and Cayton 1993[1945], 498).

It is important to note the *gendered* nature of skin color dynamics. Much of the current literature suggests that black women face harsher penalties for darker skin tone than black men. Scholars maintain that this is due to the incredible importance of aesthetics and beauty for women’s life chances. Accordingly, Keith and Herring’s (1991, 773) findings from the National Survey of Black Americans (1979–1980) reveal that skin color is a significant predictor of educational attainment, occupational status, and family income among black *women* only. Light skin color, in particular, is strongly associated with notions of beauty that are thoroughly racialized and inextricably interwoven with European aesthetic standards. Beauty, conceptualized as a form of capital (Hunter 2002), can afford women considerable advantages in their lives, from gaining employment, to wages at work, and their treatment in the criminal justice system. Evidence from the NSBA 1979–1980 showed that lighter-skinned black women, for example, tend to marry higher-status spouses (i.e., spouses with higher educational attainment) than all other black women, even after controlling for their own educational attainment (Hunter 2005, 47).

Despite many studies that highlighted the importance of color in myriad realms of black life in America, concerns about racial equality (between blacks and whites) in the aftermath of Jim Crow led to declining academic interest in the impact of color within the black population. For one, some believed that the black power movement, with its explicit message that “Black Is Beautiful,” altered the value of color among black Americans (Hannerz 2004[1969]). Researchers found, however, that even when black adolescents, aged 12 to 18, explicitly professed that “Black Is Beautiful,” they still displayed some of the same color biases of previous generations (Anderson and Cromwell 1977). Anderson and Cromwell (1977) found strong associations between light brown skin being associated with “the smartest girl, smartest boy, nicest person, cleanest person, one best liked to marry, one’s future offspring, one’s own preferred color, the best color to be, prettiest skin, handsomest Negro boy, prettiest Negro girls, and children the father likes best” (Anderson and Cromwell 1977, 80). The authors also found strong associations between dark brown skin being associated with “the dumbest Negro, dirtiest Negro, person one would not like to marry, what one would like one’s offspring not to have, what one would prefer not to be, Negroes with bad hair, person with the ugliest skin complexion, ugliest Negro boys, ugliest Negro girls, children whom the mother dislikes, and Negroes who have the hardest time making friends in school” (Anderson and Cromwell 1977, 80–81).

Thus, evidence suggests that color bias persisted even during the black power movement and color remained a considerable factor of socioeconomic stratification among blacks throughout the civil rights movement and even during the black power movement (Keith and Herring 1991; Hughes and Hertel 1990). It is possible, however, that not enough time had passed by 1980 for the effects of ostensible shifts in the significance of “race” and “color” to take hold. Perhaps, as Gullickson (2005) contends, “racial integration” presented black Americans with “white gatekeepers,” for whom gradations of skin tone were “less salient” than “black gatekeepers,” and consequently, according to his analysis, the significance of skin color among black Americans has continually diminished since the 1950s and made skin color inequality nearly non-existent for blacks by the late 1980s.¹

Moreover, while whites may not make as fine-tuned distinctions of blacks, based on skin tone, as blacks commonly do of one another (Hill 2002), white judges still sentenced blacks with more stereotypically black facial features and darker skin tone to an average of eight additional months of hard time compared to blacks with lighter skin and less Afrocentric features—even after taking account of different criminal histories (Eberhardt et al. 2004; Blair, Judd, and Chapleau 2004). Both lighter-skinned black men and black women received more lenient sentences and served less prison time than darker-skinned inmates even after controlling for their previous criminal histories (Gyimah-Brempong and Price 2006; Viglione, Hannon, and DeFina 2011). In a survey experiment, [white] subjects exposed to Hurricane Katrina victims were less generous in their support for disaster relief assistance if the target they encountered was dark skinned (Iyengar and Hahn 2007). Audit studies of housing and experimental

studies of hiring document differential treatment of blacks by skin tone (Yinger 1995; Wade, Romano, and Blue 2004) where white subjects preferred light-skinned applicants to blacks with a darker appearance in an exercise in which they were asked to hire for an engineering firm. Moreover, both blacks and whites describe lighter-skinned blacks as motivated, educated, and attractive, while being more likely to describe darker-skinned blacks as unattractive, criminal, unintelligent, and lazy (Maddox and Gray 2002).² Consequently, while it may be the case that white gatekeepers may have an increased role in shaping the life chances of blacks, compared to previous decades where black gatekeepers may have had a more direct role (Gullickson 2005), the reality is that white gatekeepers also discriminate among blacks according to gradations of skin color and these distinctions matter a great deal for black Americans' life chances.

Furthermore, some scholars argue that the rise of the Latino and multiracial populations since the 1980s may make skin color in the United States even more significant than it has ever been. That is, in an era where overt racial discrimination has declined considerably (Bobo et al. 2012), efforts to roll back affirmative action have been increasingly successful, and the rhetoric of colorblindness proliferates—according to this thinking—skin color will become even more salient and consequential as a factor of stratification and discrimination than it has ever been, as the US racial order becomes more “complex, multi-layered, and Latin American” (Bonilla-Silva 2006, 179). To be clear, according to their argument, even though overt racial discrimination may be waning, color discrimination will not only survive, but may even *increase*. In fact, recent psychological experiments show that even though subjects can often suppress racial stereotyping and discrimination, they are often unable to do so with skin color bias, *even when they are explicitly told about the problem* (Blair, Judd, and Chapleau 2004, 674).³

While it remains to be seen if the significance and consequences of skin color will *increase* in the United States, evidence does show that skin color stratification among black Americans has existed since at least the 18th century (see Gatewood 2000; Bodenhorn 2006; Bodenhorn and Ruebeck 2007) and seems to have persisted in some form until at least 1980 (Hughes and Hertel 1990; Keith and Herring 1991). Without individuals capable of suppressing color discrimination, it stands to reason that skin color will at least *continue* to be important even as overt racial discrimination may continue to decline (i.e., color and racial discrimination are related, but somewhat distinct). While discussions of ethnoracial inequality and discrimination have become increasingly common in the United States, open discussions of color inequality and discrimination remain rare. This is most likely related to the great sensitivity given to skin color discrimination among black Americans, which makes the topic somewhat taboo and difficult to discuss and address, with the probable consequence of also helping color inequality persist. Given this, I hypothesize that skin color remains strongly associated with black Americans' life chances in the early 21st century. To test this hypothesis, I examine the National Survey of American Life (2001–2003), which shares many of the same principal investigators responsible for designing the often utilized NSBA 1979–1980, and examine whether the

significance of color persists among black Americans in a variety of realms of life in the early 21st century.

Data and Methods

The data set I use to analyze skin tone stratification among black Americans in the early 21st century is the National Survey of American Life 2001–2003. The fieldwork for the study was completed by the University of Michigan’s Institute for Social Research’s Survey Research Center, in cooperation with the Program for Research on Black Americans. The NSAL sample has a national multistage probability design that consists of 64 primary sampling units (PSUs). Fifty-six of these primary areas overlap substantially with existing Survey Research Center National Sample primary areas. The remaining eight primary areas were chosen from the South in order for the sample to represent African Americans in the proportion in which they are distributed nationally. The data collection was conducted from February 2001 to June 2003. The interviews were administered face-to-face and conducted within respondents’ homes; respondents were compensated for their time (Keith et al. 2010).

A total of 6,082 face-to-face interviews were conducted with persons aged 18 or older, including 3,570 African Americans, 891 non-Hispanic whites, and 1,621 blacks of Caribbean descent. The overall response rate of 72.3 percent is excellent given that African Americans (especially lower-income African Americans) are more likely to reside in major urban areas, which are more difficult and expensive with respect to survey fieldwork and data collection. The African American sample is nationally representative of black households in the 48 coterminous states with one adult aged 18 and over (Jackson et al. 2004). The analyses presented here are restricted to native-born US blacks.⁴ Another advantage of this data set compared to the NSBA (1979–1980) is this data set’s much larger sample size ($N = 3,125$). Analyses were also conducted comparing the samples of native-born US blacks and non-native-born blacks, as well as both of these samples combined.⁵

Measures

In order to assess the association between skin tone and a variety of stratification outcomes, I use age and sex as control variables. *Age* is a continuous variable. *Female* is coded as a dummy variable where 0 = male and 1 = female.

Dependent and independent variables *Household income* is a continuous variable ranging from 0 to X_{\max} in number of US dollars (as per standard stratification research practice, I use the log of household income). *Educational attainment* (and *Mother’s educational attainment*) is a continuous variable capturing the number of years of completed education, ranging from 0 to X_{\max} . *South (Region)* is a dummy variable where 0 = non-South and 1 = South. *Rural* is a dummy variable where 0 = non-rural and 1 = rural. *Skin Color* is a scale ranging from 1 to 7, where 1 = “very dark skin” and 7 = “very light skin” (Keith et al. 2010). The distribution of respondents’ skin tones is 2.7 percent “very

dark,” 15.3 percent “dark,” 18.34 percent “somewhat dark,” 41.91 percent “medium,” 12.19 percent “somewhat light,” 7.05 percent “light,” and 2.51 percent “very light.” *Marital status* is a binary variable where 0 = not married and 1 = married/cohabitating.

Next, *Occupational status*⁶ is an ordinal variable ranging from 1 to 10, where 1 = “manual task-based labor” to 10 = “professional/managerial position.” *Employment status* is a binary variable where 0 = unemployed or out of the labor force and 1 = employed. While it may be true that being unemployed and out of the labor force may seem to be distinct states (perhaps for women with children in particular), studies by economists demonstrate that being unemployed and out of the labor force are experienced in psychologically *non-distinct* ways and that these two states are also empirically indistinguishable for the vast majority of the labor force⁷ (Clark and Summers 1979; Goldsmith, Veum, and Darity 1995). In fact, Clark and Summers (1979, 31) estimate that the rate of transition between these two states is so high that they conclude that “many of those classified as not in the labor force are functionally indistinguishable from the unemployed.” Note that descriptive statistics for these variables are reported in table 1.

Findings

The findings presented in this study are the result of OLS, logistic, and ordered logistic regression analyses (for the use of similar measures and models in assessing skin tone inequality, see Keith and Herring [1991]; Hunter 2005; Villarreal [2010]). I present models for the sample as a whole, in addition to men and

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics

Variable	Mean (std. dev.)	Min.–Max.	N
Age	43.04 (16.26)	18–93	3,125
Years of education	12.28 (2.51)	4–17	3,125
Household income (in dollars)	30,797.40	0–200,000	3,125
Occupational status	5.64 (2.51)	1–10	1,999
Employed	0.65	0–1	3,125
Married	0.34	0–1	3,125
Mother’s education	10.74 (3.22)	4–17	2,547
Spouse’s education	12.49 (2.25)	4–17	1,005
Region (south)	0.66	0–1	3,125
Rural	0.21	0–1	3,125
Skin color scale (1 = very dark skin to 7 = very light skin)	3.75 (1.26)	1–7	3,125

women separately (where priority merits), to test the net effects of skin tone on outcomes for men versus women (see [Keith and Herring 1991](#)).

Household Income

The results presented in table 2 demonstrate that skin tone continues to have significant main effects on black Americans' household incomes in the early 21st century. I find that the lighter skinned one is, the higher the family income, even after controlling for the individual's educational attainment, mother's educational attainment, marital status, region, rural residency, and even if the respondent is employed or not. These results are consistent with findings going back many decades ([Drake and Cayton 1993\[1945\]](#); [Hughes and Hertel 1990](#); [Keith and Herring 1991](#)). Most scholars contend that this advantage in earnings can be traced to color discrimination by both blacks and non-blacks in a variety of realms (e.g., schools, work, etc.). Given that these results (as was the case in the

Table 2. Results of OLS Regression, Household Income

	Household income All
Age	0.006** (0.00181)
Female	-0.205*** (0.0412)
Mother's education	0.0107† (0.00625)
Years of education	0.129*** (0.00811)
Employed	0.495*** (0.0420)
Married	0.511*** (0.0385)
Region (south)	-0.058 (0.0576)
Rural	-0.005 (0.0472)
Skin color scale	0.029* (0.0145)
Constant	7.648*** (0.173)
N	2,547
r ²	0.33

Note: Household income is $\log(\text{household income})$. Standard errors in parentheses. All analyses are weighted in order to account for the survey's complex design (e.g., clustering and stratification).

*** $p < .001$ ** $p < .01$ * $p < .05$ † $p < .10$ (two-tailed tests)

NSBA 1979–1980) obtain even after controlling for the respondent’s mother’s educational attainment, these findings suggest that the association between skin color and earnings is not simply a lingering legacy of the past, but rather, due to contemporary social processes of differential treatment according to gradations of skin color. Admittedly, the effect of skin tone after these controls is relatively weak, though it is in the expected direction (i.e., the lighter skinned a respondent is, the higher the household income). The strongest effect on household income is that of educational attainment. Previous research has shown, however, that educational attainment is strongly associated with skin tone among black Americans. This would suggest that skin tone has *both* a relatively weak direct effect and a relatively stronger *indirect* effect on household income through educational attainment (if it is the case that skin tone and educational attainment remain significantly associated). I examine the relationship between skin tone and educational attainment next.

Educational Attainment

Descriptive statistics of education by skin tone reveal that the lightest-skinned black Americans have over a full year of more education than the darkest-skinned black Americans. In table 3, I utilize OLS regression to examine whether skin tone is associated with educational attainment net of respondent’s age, sex, marital status, region, rural residency, and mother’s educational attainment. The results indicate that skin tone is strongly associated with black Americans’

Table 3. Results of OLS Regression, Educational Attainment

	Educational attainment All
Age	0.015** (0.005)
Female	0.124 (0.098)
Mother’s education	0.211*** (0.020)
Married	0.529*** (0.094)
Region (south)	–0.160 (0.149)
Rural	–0.417* (0.152)
Skin color scale	0.098* (0.039)
N	2,576
r ²	0.11

Note: Standard errors in parentheses. All analyses are weighted in order to account for the survey’s complex design (e.g., clustering and stratification).

*** $p < .001$ ** $p < .01$ * $p < .05$ (two-tailed tests)

educational attainment⁸ net of these controls—lighter-skinned blacks have higher educational attainment than darker-skinned blacks. This amounts to a gap of *six months of schooling* between the lightest- and darkest-skinned black Americans, *even after controlling* for the aforementioned factors.⁹ Furthermore, if we restrict the sample to include respondents aged 30 and older, the effects become larger. Among respondents aged 30 and older, bivariate analysis reveals a gap of one and a half years of schooling between the lightest and darkest-skinned black Americans. Multivariate analysis reveals a gap of eight months between the lightest and darkest-skinned black Americans, net of the aforementioned controls. Moreover, in contrast to what was found utilizing the NSBA 1979–1980 (Keith and Herring 1991, 773; Gullickson 2005), I do not find that this association is specific to *women only* or stronger for women compared to men (results not shown).

Unfortunately, the existing literature offers no specific explanatory theory for why there would be a relationship between skin tone and educational attainment. It is plausible (and perhaps likely) that as research demonstrates how black boys are at times treated as “troublemakers” and seen as “adults” when behaving poorly in comparison to boys of other races (Ferguson 2003), it may be the case that *darker-skinned* black boys face even more of this form of discrimination from their teachers (white, black, or otherwise) than all other black boys. This is especially likely given studies that find that both blacks and whites often view darker-skinned black males as threatening, violent, and criminal (Maddox and Gray 2002). Also, there may be some degree of self-selection out of the school system given such stereotyping, and possibly discriminatory treatment against darker-skinned black boys. In the case of black women, one study finds that young black girls often face harsh stereotyping in school settings, and perhaps color bias forms one aspect of this discrimination (Wallace et al. 2011). As one scholar puts it, “Teachers and administrators are prone to make distinctions among African American children about who the ‘smart kids’ are and who the ‘good kids’ are” (Hunter 2005, 49). Such evaluations are likely to include skin color as a factor. Further research is needed to better specify the mechanism(s) causing the association between educational attainment and skin tone among black Americans.

Employment Status

I utilize logistic regression models to analyze the relationship between skin tone and employment status net of a variety of sociodemographic characteristics. The results, reported in table 4, demonstrate that skin tone is not significantly associated with employment status (i.e., being employed or being unemployed/out of the labor force) net of respondents’ age, sex, years of education, marital status, region, and rural residency. Consequently, the relationship between skin tone and employment status appears to be indirect, as educational attainment, which is associated with skin tone, is a strong predictor of employment status among black Americans. As most research finds that darker skin is a disadvantage for labor market outcomes, it is hard to explain why, in this case, skin color is not directly

Table 4. Results of Logistic Regression, Employment Status

	Employed All
Age	-0.039*** (0.00490)
Female	-0.287* (0.117)
Years of education	0.217*** (0.0254)
Married	0.449** (0.134)
Region (south)	0.297** (0.108)
Rural	0.124 (0.124)
Skin color scale	-0.059 (0.0370)
Constant	-0.262 (0.508)
N	3,125

Note: Standard errors in parentheses. All analyses are weighted in order to account for the survey's complex design (e.g., clustering and stratification).

*** $p < .001$ ** $p < .01$ * $p < .05$ (two-tailed tests)

associated with the odds of being employed. One would expect that darker skin may be linked to *lower odds* of being employed. It is important to consider, however, that being able to find any job is not the same as finding a *high-status* job. It may be the case that darker-skinned blacks are able to stay employed at similar rates as other blacks, but the work that darker-skinned blacks often find is of *lower* occupational prestige. I examine this possibility next.

Occupational Status

The results presented in table 5 demonstrate that darker skin is somewhat negatively associated with occupational status among employed black Americans, even after controlling for their education, marital status, region, and rural residency ($p < .10$). Respondents in the darkest-skinned category (i.e., “very dark skin”), however, have significantly higher odds of being in a less prestigious occupation than all other respondents net of the same controls ($p < .001$). Specifically, respondents with “very dark skin” have 73 percent higher odds of having a *less* prestigious occupation than all other respondents (results not shown). Such findings emphasize the persistence of skin tone stratification in the labor market among black Americans for at least the past thirty years (Johnson, Farrell, and Stoloff 1998).

Comparing the association of skin tone with occupational status for black men and women, however, reveals a truly novel finding. While I find that skin

Table 5. Results of Ordered Logistic Regression, Occupational Status

	Occupational status All	Occupational status Men
Age	0.011* (0.00450)	0.0175** (0.00671)
Female	0.872*** (0.0907)	
Years of education	0.445*** (0.0301)	0.401*** (0.0393)
Married	-0.0471 (0.095)	-0.217 (0.162)
Region (south)	-0.274* (0.120)	-0.291† (0.215)
Rural	-0.265* (0.102)	-0.316† (0.213)
Skin color scale	0.0694† (0.0389)	0.112† (0.0595)
Cut 1	2.950*** (0.423)	2.557*** (0.571)
N	1,999	740

Note: Standard errors in parentheses. All analyses are weighted in order to account for the survey's complex design (e.g., clustering and stratification). For skin color scale (men) $p = .06$. *** $p < .001$ ** $p < .01$ * $p < .05$ † $p < .10$ (two-tailed tests)

tone is a significant predictor of occupational status for the sample as a whole, I find no association between skin tone and the occupational status of black women. By contrast, Keith and Herring's (1991) analysis of the NSBA 1979–1980 finds that skin tone affects the occupational status of black women *only*; specifically, lighter-skinned black women enjoyed *higher* occupational status than darker-skinned women (model 2). Instead, I find somewhat significant association between skin tone and the occupational status of black *men*.¹⁰ The effect of skin tone on occupational status is notably weaker in the sample as a whole compared to that of black men. Across a seven-point skin color scale, the darkest-skinned black males have 97 percent higher odds of having a less prestigious occupation than the lightest-skinned black males net of the aforementioned controls. Moreover, there is a strong association between occupational status and “very dark skin” among black men, such that black males in the darkest-skinned category have 62 percent higher odds of being in a less prestigious occupation than all other black respondents even after controlling for their age, education, and other sociodemographic controls¹¹ ($p < .001$). Thus, the findings presented here suggest that there may have been a shift in the relationship between skin tone and occupational status for black Americans.

A compelling explanation for this change is perhaps slight transformations in the US racial order brought about by the civil rights movement. Perhaps, following Gullickson (2005), with heightened “racial integration,” blacks came into more sustained contact with white gatekeepers. The consequence of this

shift may be that skin color matters today for black Americans in the labor market somewhat differently than it would have in the past, where relatively more extreme ethnoracial segregation (and relatively less integration) meant that the labor market outcomes of blacks were more controlled by other blacks than by whites. The consequence of this shift could be that the stereotype-laden fear of darker-skinned black men (i.e., darker-skinned black men as criminal and dangerous) may be more powerful than ever and perhaps even more consequential than the association between dark skin and stereotypes of black women in the early 21st century in terms of labor market outcomes in particular. Recent studies that detail how whites tend to associate dark skin tone with criminality among black American men certainly suggest such a dynamic (see, for example, Blair, Judd, and Chappelle [2004]; Eberhardt et al. [2004]; and Dixon and Maddox [2005]). One experimental study finds, for example, that whites tended to support the death penalty significantly more often for darker-skinned, more “stereotypically black” looking subjects than all other black subjects (Eberhardt et al. 2006). Undoubtedly though, further research should be conducted to uncover the mechanisms by which this result may become more intelligible.

Marital Status

Table 6 presents the results of logistic regression analysis of the association between skin tone and the marital status of black Americans after controlling for

Table 6. Results of Logistic Regression, Marital Status

	Married All
Age	0.017*** (0.00330)
Female	-0.628*** (0.0922)
Years of education	0.096*** (0.0227)
Employed	0.493** (0.138)
Region (south)	0.257* (0.0956)
Rural	0.210 (0.136)
Skin color scale	0.015 (0.034)
Constant	-2.488*** (0.351)
N	3,125

Note: Standard errors in parentheses. All analyses are weighted in order to account for the survey's complex design (e.g., clustering and stratification).

*** $p < .001$ ** $p < .01$ * $p < .05$ (two-tailed tests)

various sociodemographic factors. I find that there is no significant association between skin tone and marital status among black Americans. While this finding may seem surprising given how much is typically discussed about skin tone and relationships among black Americans (see Bond and Cash 1992; Hunter 2005), other studies have failed to find a connection between skin tone and marital status among black Americans as well. Hamilton, Goldsmith, and Darity (2009), for example, also find that skin tone does *not* predict the marital status of black women once sociodemographic characteristics are taken into account (based on their analysis of the Multi-City Study of Urban Inequality 1992–1994). That said, it is not as if there is *no* association between skin tone and marital status among black Americans. Hamilton, Goldsmith, and Darity (2009, 42) find that among black women between the ages of 16 and 29, there does appear to be a “beauty queue” (see Hunter 2005), where darker-skinned black women will be passed over for marriage, *ceteris paribus*, for lighter-skinned black women. Furthermore, there is evidence that, *ceteris paribus*, lighter-skinned black women tend to marry *higher-status* spouses than darker-skinned black women (Hunter 2005). I examine whether this continues among black Americans in the early 21st century in the next set of analyses.

Spouse’s education and spouse’s skin color First, I analyze the relationship between skin tone and spouse’s education. The results presented in table 7 demonstrate that lighter skin tone is positively associated with spouse’s education even after controlling for respondent’s demographic characteristics, occupational status, and even their own education (which is typically the strongest predictor of spouse’s education, regardless of race or color). This result is consistent with the findings from previous studies and the NSBA 1979–1980 (Hunter 2005; Hamilton, Goldsmith, and Darity 2009).

Critically, though, further analyses reveal that the relationship between lighter skin color and spouse’s education obtains only for black women. I find that for each one-point increase in the lightness of respondent’s skin tones, black women’s spouses complete another 0.19 years of schooling. This means that even after controlling for black women’s own educational attainment, occupational status, and whether or not they have a job, the lightest-skinned black woman is likely to marry a man with more than a full year of more education than the darkest-skinned black woman. The magnitude of the result presented in this study is almost exactly the same as an earlier analysis of the National Survey of Black Americans, 1979–1980 (Hunter 2005, 48), even though the analysis presented here utilizes even more control variables and has a slightly larger sample size. I found no statistically significant relationship between skin color and spouse’s education in the sample of black men alone. This highlights, once again, how gender is a key factor to consider when analyzing skin tone inequality within the black population and is clear evidence of how [lighter] skin color, as a form of capital, is exchanged for [higher] status mates (Hunter 2002, 2005). To be clear, in actuality, lighter skin color, linked to notions of beauty, is not only exchanged for *higher-status* mates, but possibly all mates, however when it comes to *higher-status* mates, “beauty” may have an even greater impact (as evinced by the results). It is not that surprising that higher-status

Table 7. Results of OLS Regression, Spouse's Educational Attainment

	Spouse's educational attainment, all	Spouse's educational attainment, women
Age	-0.010* (0.00467)	-0.021* (0.00873)
Female	-0.787*** (0.149)	
Years of education	0.441*** (0.0411)	0.485*** (0.0670)
Occupational status	0.118*** (0.0301)	0.131* (0.0526)
Region (south)	-0.064 (0.123)	-0.185 (0.196)
Rural	-0.164 (0.194)	-0.214 (0.301)
Skin color scale	0.117** (0.039)	0.186** (0.0670)
Constant	6.838*** (0.555)	5.675*** (0.778)
N	1,005	540
r ²	0.33	0.31

Note: Standard errors in parentheses. All analyses are weighted in order to account for the survey's complex design (e.g., clustering and stratification).

*** $p < .001$ ** $p < .01$ * $p < .05$ (two-tailed tests)

mates, who arguably have more “options” on the marital market, would be able to select for “beauty” in a much more selective way than the majority of individuals (i.e., lower- and average-status mates) on the marital market are able to. Consequently, we see a significant association between lighter skin tones and having higher-status spouses, which falls in line with what has been found about skin color and intimate relationships among black Americans for decades (see, for example, Powdermaker [1939]; Drake and Cayton [1993(1945)]).

I also test whether there is a relationship between a respondent's skin color and their perceptions of their spouse's skin color. Bodenhorn (2006), for example, reports the existence of skin-tone-based homogamy within the black population stretching back to the 18th century. Such a form of homogamy has been reported in qualitative literature for many decades, but a direct test of its existence has not yet been tested (to the knowledge of the author). In order to test whether or not skin tone homogamy persists, I use the skin color scale variable, following the logic that, *ceteris paribus*, the skin tones of spouses tend to approximate each other (even after controlling for various socioeconomic factors). Evidence of this occurring is revealed in table 8, where ordered logistic regression¹² results reveal a strong positive association between respondents' skin tone¹³ and their spouse's skin tone. That is, the lighter the skin tone of the respondent, the lighter the skin

Table 8. Results of Ordered Logistic Regression, Spouse's Skin Color

	Spouse's skin color All
Age	-0.003 (0.004)
Female	-0.987*** (0.113)
Years of education	-0.018 (0.019)
Occupational status	-0.002 (0.0242)
Region (south)	0.074 (0.136)
Rural	-0.119 (0.148)
Skin color scale	0.371*** (0.081)
Cut 1	-2.33*** (0.566)
N	1,488

Note: Standard errors in parentheses. All analyses are weighted in order to account for the survey's complex design (e.g., clustering and stratification).

*** $p < .001$ (two-tailed tests)

tone of their spouse. These findings may be interpreted to suggest that the skin tones of respondents and their spouses are either the same or approximate, even though lighter-skinned women tend to marry higher-status mates.¹⁴ This is even after age, sex, educational attainment, employment status, occupational status, region, and rural residence are taken into account. Remarkably, by comparison, the strength of skin-tone-based homogamy within the US black population is nearly three-fourths as strong as educational homogamy within the US population as a whole (Schwartz and Mare 2005; Schwartz 2010).

Discussion

The main goal of this study was to ascertain whether or not skin tone is still a significant factor of stratification within the US black population in the early 21st century. Using the National Survey of American Life (2001–2003), a nationally representative survey conducted decades after the National Survey of Black Americans (1979–1980), I demonstrate that skin tone remains a persistent factor of stratification among black Americans. While I do not find that skin tone is significantly associated with the likelihood of being employed or being married, I do find that skin tone is significantly associated with black Americans' household income, their educational attainment, occupational status, and even the skin tones and educational attainment of their spouses. In contrast to previous

findings, I find that skin tone is associated with the educational attainment of both black women *and* men, not just black women only (see Keith and Herring 1991, 773). Furthermore, I find that skin tone is significantly associated with the occupational status of black men as well as the sample as a whole, but *not* black women. Consequently, this study demonstrates that while skin tone inequality has persisted in the early 21st century, there have been some shifts in the consequences of skin tone along gender lines among black Americans.

Thus, while a voluminous literature emphasizes inequality between blacks and whites (or blacks and non-blacks), there is also considerable inequality among blacks themselves due to differences in skin color. That is, beyond matters of self-esteem and beauty (Bond and Cash 1992), skin tone is a significant factor of *socioeconomic stratification* and social differentiation within the US black population. As the results of this study (and earlier studies) demonstrate, by controlling for parents' education, the findings presented here are most likely the result of bias (both inter- and intraracial) that cannot be completely traced back as ancestrally accumulated disadvantage (Hill 2002)—color inequality is reproduced generation after generation.

It is certainly possible that shifts in the US “racial order” brought on by the rise of the Latino and multiracial populations since the 1980s may be a factor that is sustaining or perhaps exacerbating the significance of color in the United States, and thus for black Americans (Bonilla-Silva 2006). Finding that skin color predicts the educational attainment of both black women and men, instead of just women, as was found decades earlier (Keith and Herring 1991), and that skin color predicts the occupational status of both black women and men, also instead of just women, as was found in earlier work (Keith and Herring 1991), is perhaps evidence of this. It is important to remember, however, that color has *always* been significant among black Americans in the United States, and the results of this study, along with previous work, demonstrate that color has continued to be a significant factor of social and economic inequality among black Americans from at least the 18th century to Jim Crow to the civil rights movement (including the black power movement), until the present day.

Even in an era where overt discrimination has ostensibly waned and explicit racism is frowned upon in public (Bobo et al. 2012), color discrimination has survived. There are at least two compelling reasons why this would be the case. For one, as was mentioned earlier, studies show that while ethnoracial stereotyping can be suppressed, individuals are often unable to suppress *color* discrimination, even when they are told in advance about the problem (Blair, Judd, and Chappleau 2004). In fact, even during the black power movement, young blacks who explicitly professed that “Black Is Beautiful” still expressed negative stereotypes of darker-skinned blacks (Anderson and Cromwell 1977).

Another reason for color discrimination's survival may be the persistent conflation of “race” and “color.” As Jones (2009, 224) explains, “The terms race and color have been used interchangeably throughout US history ... [E]xamples are plentiful, including common phrases like ‘colored people’ and ‘colored folk,’ W.E.B. Du Bois's use of ‘the color line’ and similar references to the ‘color barrier.’ Even Dr. Martin Luther King's exhortation that children be judged not

by the ‘color of their skin but by the content of their character’ can be seen as a call for the elimination of racial discrimination.” Though they are indeed related concepts, they are not synonymous (Jones 2009, 225). While ethn racial discrimination may affect an individual regardless of the person’s color, two individuals belonging to the same ethn racial category may face differential treatment due to their varying skin tones (Jones 2009, 234). Conflating “race” and “color,” then, ends up obscuring the significance of color, and even our legal system often conflates the two. For example, one defendant in a color lawsuit, the IRS, argued that there couldn’t be discrimination because “skin color and race are essentially the same characteristic” (Nance 2005, 465¹⁵). Being careful to treat “race” and “color” as analytically distinct yet related concepts, is important then not only for our scholarship, but also for matters of justice in our legal system.

Skin color inequality highlights the need to look beyond mere census categories when examining inequality in the United States—there are at least two dimensions of [ethn racial] inequality in the United States: that which obtains between blacks and whites as a whole, and that which obtains within the category “black” according to gradations of skin tone. Thus, analyses that rely on census categories to compare blacks to whites obscure a much more complicated reality. That is, *nested within* the rigid black–white, ancestry-based *dichotomy* yielded by the one-drop rule, there is a skin color *continuum* that also shapes the life chances and experiences of black Americans. This dynamic is obscured by the intrusion of folk notions into our scholarship on ethn racial inequality (Wacquant 1997).

Perhaps the relative marginalization of scholarship on the significance of skin color for black Americans, compared to the much more visible research on black–white inequality, in addition to the persistent conflation of “race” and “color,” is the very nature of ethn racial classification in the United States for blacks—the “one-drop rule,” which assigns individuals a “racial status” *regardless* of their phenotype. As Hochschild and Weaver (2007b, 160) astutely point out: “[Racial] classification systems can have a third impact, beyond reinforcing inequality and helping to create the conditions for fighting it; they can also *mask disparities* [emphasis added], which restricts citizens’ capacity to derail them.” In other words, the violence of Jim Crow in the aftermath of slavery and Reconstruction, in conjunction with the political and symbolic labor exerted to impose the rule of hypodescent on “negroes, mulattoes, quadroons, and octo-rooms,” (which was mostly successful by the 1930s), was not only essential in the forging of a sense of *linked fate* and ethn racially inflected political unity among individuals of various degrees of African and European lineage (marked by varying skin tones and hair types), but also had the side effect of *suppressing and repressing* critical vectors of inequality (e.g., skin shade) within this population of “New People” (see Williamson 1980)—black Americans.

It is possible that the current logic of ethn racial classification in the United States for black Americans, since the imposition and virtually unanimous acceptance of the “one-drop rule” by 1930 (by both blacks and non-blacks), has both bolstered political mobilization among those who view themselves as black

(due to ancestry) and hindered political mobilization¹⁶ around skin-tone-based inequality and socioeconomic stratification among black Americans—all despite the fact that such skin-tone-based inequality, as this study and many others demonstrate, is indeed consequential. For Hochschild and Weaver (2007a), this very dynamic is the *Skin Color Paradox*.¹⁷

It still remains relatively unclear, unfortunately, what mechanisms *specifically* may lead to skin tone inequality. Social psychological research, cited above, continues to demonstrate that color bias persists among blacks and non-blacks, but such findings, while important, stop short of illustrating in detail *how color works* in everyday life. Many scholars end their analyses with admitted speculation about white gatekeepers and intraracial preferences for certain skin tones among black Americans, but it is readily apparent that there is a clear need for much more research to be done. Ethnographic research and in-depth interviewing could help shed light on the mechanisms and processes by which skin tone stratification persists in the early 21st century: via intraracial processes (i.e., discrimination among black Americans) and interracial processes (i.e., discrimination between blacks and non-blacks) in a variety of domains (e.g., school, work, in public, marriage, policing, etc.). Certainly, paying more attention to which outcomes are more affected by interracial interactions than intraracial interactions will be important as we seek to uncover the mechanisms that lead to skin tone effects.

It is also critically important to keep in mind that skin tone stratification is not simply a curious phenomenon that exists only among black Americans. Within the US case alone, scholars observe that both lighter-skinned (and more phenotypically European) blacks *and* Latinos, on average, all earn more money, complete more years of schooling, live in better neighborhoods, and marry higher-status people than darker-skinned members of the same ethnoracial population (Murguia and Telles 1996). Thus, as the study of color continues its resurgence, future research that compares and contrasts the significance of skin color among other populations in the United States will add much needed depth to our understanding of these processes. Moreover, internationally comparative work that examines the significance of skin color in the United States, Latin America (especially Brazil), and elsewhere will also be critically important to help deepen our understanding of skin tone stratification and ethnoracial dynamics more generally.

One researcher recently finds, for example, contrary to what would be expected given the comparative literature on ethnoracial inequality in the United States and Brazil, which typically highlights *differences* between these cases, that skin tone is as consequential for life chances among African Americans as it is within the Brazilian population as a whole—and perhaps even more so (Monk 2013). That is, despite the structural opposition between a system of ethnoracial classification based on ancestry and the one-drop rule (US) versus a system of ethnoracial classification based on a phenotypic continuum (mostly in terms of skin color) where ancestry is of little importance, skin color inequality is as consequential in the United States (among African Americans) as it is in Brazil (the widely held “canonical” case of a *pigmentocracy*), and on certain outcomes, even

more consequential in the United States. Novel findings such as these not only challenge and extend our understanding of the US racial order, but also highlight the value of *new modes of comparative analysis* that privilege skin color (i.e., physical appearance) specifically, as opposed to comparative analyses that utilize only *ethnoracial categories*, which may be somewhat incommensurable between different racial orders due to varying bases of ethnoracial classification across cases. At the very least, such international comparisons will help guide scholars toward building richer and more rigorous theories about when, how, and why skin color shapes individuals' life chances in countries all over the world.

Notes

1. An exception is the case of lighter-skinned blacks with attaining higher-status spouses (Gullickson 2005, 173).
2. The aforementioned studies were cited in Weaver (2012).
3. Cited in Weaver (2012, 166).
4. All respondents in this study are self-identified African Americans born in the United States, as was the case in Keith and Herring's (1991) analysis of the NSBA 1979–1980.
5. Interestingly, I find no significant skin tone results for non-native-born blacks of West Indian or Caribbean descent. While a full discussion of this finding is beyond the purview of this study, scholarship suggests that immigrant status (selection bias and verbal accent) differentiates non-native-born blacks of West Indian or Caribbean descent from both native-born blacks and native-born blacks of West Indian or Caribbean descent (Waters 1999).
6. The distribution of occupations in percentages from 1 to 10 is 5.17, 14.94, 12.53, 6.88, 20.52, 8.19, 10.14, 11.28, 7.09, and 3.26 percent.
7. “Half of all unemployment spells end with individuals leaving the labor force; nearly half who withdraw from the labor force continued to want employment, but inability had led them to temporarily stop searching. The authors also find that 34% of the individuals who withdraw from the labor force re-enter the labor force within a month and 44 percent re-enter within two months” (the vast majority re-enter in an unemployed status) (Clark and Summers [1979], cited in Goldsmith, Veum, and Darity [1995], 276). While being “out of the labor force” may mean something different for men as opposed to women, there were only slight differences in the averages of women reporting being “out of the labor force” as opposed to men (only 3.8 percent more women reported being “out of the labor force” compared to men in the sample).
8. Analyses were also run using educational attainment as a categorical variable (see Keith and Herring 1991, 766); this did not alter the results.
9. Results from the analysis of the full sample (i.e., without mother's educational attainment) control are available from the author on request. These results indicate a gap of over a *full year of education* between the lightest- and darkest-skinned respondents net of the controls.
10. Please note that, similar to the analyses conducted by Keith and Herring (1991), I present the results of men and women separately (i.e., this is not an analysis of interaction effects).
11. Results available from author by request.
12. I also ran models using OLS regression; this did not alter the substantive results.

13. For the sake of consistency and sample size attrition, I prefer to report models using self-reported skin tones (respondent and spouse) for this outcome, as many interviewers were unable to assess respondent's spouse's skin tones. As the scale reliability (alpha) of the self-reported and interviewer-rated skin tones is very high (0.80), this should not cause a problem for the interpretation of the results. In order to ensure that this was the case, however, I also ran models using *interviewer-rated* skin tones for the respondent and found that respondent's skin color was still a significant predictor of their spouse's skin color net of the same controls.
14. The association between respondent and spouse's skin tones obtains for both black men and black women, respectively.
15. Cited in [Weaver \(2012\)](#).
16. Hochschild, Jennifer. 2006. "When Do People Not Protest Unfairness? The Case of Skin Color Discrimination." *Social Research: An International Quarterly* 73(2):473–98.
17. Recent work demonstrates that a similar "skin color paradox" operates among Latinos, where skin color shapes life chances but not political attitudes ([Faught and Hunter 2012](#)).

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