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Skin Color and Self-Perceptions of Immigrant and U.S.-Born Latinas

The Moderating Role of Racial Socialization and Ethnic Identity

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Research has increasingly identified race as a salient characteristic that affects one's life experiences and psychological well-being. However, little is known about how skin color affects the emotional health of Latinas. The present study examined how skin color relates to the self-perceptions of immigrant (N = 26) and U.S.-born (N = 55) Latina college women. Results indicate that immigrant Latina participants with darker skin tend to have poorer self-perceptions than their U.S.-born peers, including lower self-esteem, lower feelings of attractiveness, and a desire to change their skin color to be lighter. Both racial socialization and ethnic identity served to buffer Latinas from the negative self-perceptions associated with darker skin. These findings suggest that skin color may be a particularly central risk factor for immigrant Latinas' well-being, and racial socialization and ethnic identity may serve as important protective factors.

Keywords: *skin color; Latino; self-perceptions; racial socialization; ethnic identity*

Skin Color and Well-Being

Skin color is suggested to be the primary feature that people use when considering a person's race and can be considered the most significant of phenotypic features (Brown & Dane, 1998; Vázquez, García-Vázquez, Bauman, & Sierra, 1997). Latinas encompass a rich tapestry of racial phenotypes. Because of their historical roots in African, Native American, and European cultures, Latinas range from having very light skin with European

features to having very dark skin with African or indigenous features (Comas-Díaz, 1994; Uhlmann, Dasgupta, Elgueta, Greenwald, & Swanson, 2002). The value of light skin color has been well-documented, even among Latinos themselves (e.g., Cota-Robles Suarez, 1971; Uhlmann et al., 2002). Because of racial stratification, discrimination, and the value placed on light skin, Latinos with darker skin and more African and indigenous features are more likely to live in segregated communities, earn less money, attain less education, have lower occupational prestige, and marry lower status partners (Arce, Murguía, & Frisbie, 1987; Espino & Franz, 2002; Gómez, 2000; Murguía & Telles, 1996; Relethford, Stern, Gasjukk, & Hazudsa, 1983).

In contrast to work on life opportunity outcomes, little research has examined the link between skin color and psychological well-being among Latinos. Darker skinned Latinos perceive discrimination more often than their lighter skinned counterparts (Arce et al., 1987), and discrimination has been associated with lower self-esteem and increased depressive symptoms among Latinos (Greene, Way, & Pahl, 2006; Romero & Roberts, 2003). Darker skinned Latino children and adolescents report more negative self-perceptions and lower self-esteem than their lighter skinned peers (Maldonado & Cross, 1977; Shelibow, 1973). Research among adults show conflicting findings and suggest that the effect of skin color on well-being may depend in part on gender. Ramos Jaccard, and Guilamo-Ramos (2003) found that Latinos have higher depressive symptoms than both African Americans and European Americans, and Black Latinos, especially women, have the highest levels of depressive symptoms. Thus, dark skin may be a particularly important risk factor for Latina women. However, Codina and Montalvo (1994) found that darker skin was not related to mental health for Mexican American females but was related to better mental health for Mexican-born females. Further research is needed to disentangle how skin color affects the psychological well-being of Latina women.

In addition to gender, immigrant status may affect how skin color affects Latinos' psychological well-being. Skin color is salient in Latin America. In fact, there are racial terms that describe the range of mixed heritages and

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appearances. For example, “Blanco” refers to light-skinned Latinos with European features, whereas “Indio” and “Moreno” refer to darker skinned Latinos with more indigenous or African features, along with many other terms to describe the range of phenotypes (Uhlmann et al., 2002). In addition, racism against dark skin color is severe in Latin America (Wade, 1997) where the media highlights the value of light skin, and many families stress the importance of maintaining one’s social status and class by marrying light-skinned partners (Comas-Díaz, 1994). Skin color is also salient in the United States where a Black–White dichotomy exists (Smart & Smart, 1995) and where race is even less flexible than in Latin America (Landale & Oropesa, 2002). Immigrating to the United States may be particularly stressful because of adapting to this new racial stratification system. Indeed, darker skinned Latinos are less acculturated than their lighter skinned counterparts (Vázquez et al., 1997). Because they come from a society where skin color is important and are entering a new society where a strict Black-White dichotomy exists, Latino immigrants may have to reevaluate their self-identification and their understanding of race and skin color, which may have negative implications for their well-being (Landale & Oropesa, 2002).

The Moderating Role of Racial Socialization and Ethnic Identity

Because people of color live in an environment in which they may face racially hostile encounters (Arce et al., 1987), parents often socialize their children to deal with racial barriers. Racial and ethnic socialization have been viewed as a primary means by which parents foster resiliency in their racial minority children by conveying messages about values, norms, morals, and beliefs to protect them from the harmful effects of living in a discriminatory environment (Constantine & Blackmon, 2002; Demo & Hughes, 1990). Research on racial socialization has primarily focused on African Americans and has found that it relates to better well-being, including higher self-esteem, lower depression, and higher grades (Bowman & Howard, 1985; Constantine & Blackmon, 2002; Fisher & Shaw, 1999; Stevenson, 1995). The limited research with Latinos has almost exclusively examined socialization practices around ethnicity and culture, with an emphasis on messages that promote cultural awareness, pride, and handling of discrimination based on cultural differences (e.g., Hughes & Chen, 1997; Knight, Bernal, Garza, Cota, & Ocampo, 1993; Phinney & Chavira, 1995) rather than messages around racial pride and awareness, and dealing with

racial discrimination. Racial socialization involves parenting messages related to a child's physical appearance, including skin color, hair texture, and facial features and occurs when parents prepare their children to overcome experiences of racism and enhance their children's racial pride. Racial socialization may be particularly important for protecting darker skinned Latino youth from the harmful effects of living in a discriminatory environment by helping them to gain the necessary tools to handle any racial barriers that they may face because of being considered and treated as a racial minority.

In addition to racial socialization, a strong ethnic identity may help Latinos to feel more positive about their ethnicity. Ethnic identity has been related to more successful handling of stress and more positive psychological adjustment (Goodstein & Ponterotto, 1997; Utsey, Chae, Brown, & Kelly, 2002). Individuals who more strongly identify with their ethnic group may be protected from the negative effects associated with discrimination (Shelton et al., 2005). In fact, recent work has shown that ethnic identity may have a buffering effect on the relationship between perceived discrimination and psychological adjustment (Greene et al., 2006). However, it remains unclear whether ethnic identity will similarly buffer the association between skin color and well-being. A strong ethnic identity may help Latinos to focus on the positive aspects of their ethnicity and race and thus feel more proud and confident of their image within American society thereby diminishing the negative outcomes associated with darker skin.

Current Study

The current study examines whether skin color is related to the self-perceptions of immigrant and U.S.-born Latina college women. Self-perceptions, including feelings of satisfaction and self appraisals about one's physical appearance, are important in how one experiences the world (Fegley, Spencer, Goss, Harpalani, & Charles, 2008). Those who do not perceive that they have socially valued traits, such as light skin color, may have lower feelings of satisfaction with the self (Fegley et al., 2008), including lower self-esteem, less satisfaction with one's skin color, lower feelings of attractiveness, and a desire to change one's skin color to be lighter. It is not clear whether skin color similarly affects the well-being of immigrant and nonimmigrant Latinas. However, because light skin may be valued strongly in Latin America and immigrating to the United States where a new racial stratification system exists may be stressful, immigrant Latinas with darker skin may be at a higher risk for more negative self-perceptions

compared with their U.S.-born peers. Finally, because racial socialization promotes competence and more successful handling of stress related to discrimination, and feeling connected to a group can increase one's self-concept, racial socialization and ethnic identity may serve to mitigate any negative experiences associated with darker skin.

Method

Sample

Participants were 81 female Latina undergraduate college students from the five college areas in Western Massachusetts (mean age = 21.09 years, $SD = 3.93$). All participants either identified broadly as Latina or had at least one parent who is Latino. The four largest ethnic groups were from Mexican ($n = 20$), Puerto Rican ($n = 23$), Dominican ($n = 14$), and Cuban ($n = 5$) backgrounds. The remaining students were from other Latino backgrounds ($n = 19$). A total of 55 (68%) participants were born on the U.S. mainland and 26 (32%) were immigrants who had moved to the United States at a mean age of 8.8 years. In all, 71% ($n = 39$) of the U.S.-born participants were second-generation youth—that is, they had at least one parent who immigrated to the United States from Latin America.

For socioeconomic background, participants indicated their mother's and father's highest educational attainment ("elementary/junior high school," "some high school," "graduated from high school," "some college," "graduated from college," "law, medical, or graduate school"). For the most part, participants' parents were highly educated with most receiving college or graduate degrees (father: 45%; mother: 49%) or some college (father: 18%; mother: 16%). The remaining received high school degrees (father: 16%; mother: 22%) or did not finish high school (father: 14%; mother: 11%), and education could not be determined for eight parents. Immigrant and U.S.-born participants did not differ in terms of their parents' level of education. Participants also indicated their parents' occupation, and these responses were coded according to a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (*unskilled level*) to 5 (*professional level*). Similar to the educational levels, parents for the most part had high-level jobs with the majority having semiprofessional to professional jobs (father: 48%; mother: 45%) or semiskilled to skilled jobs (father, 24%; mother, 33%). Immigrant and U.S.-born participants did not differ in terms of their parents' occupational level. Finally, participants indicated their families' socioeconomic status (working poor, working

class, middle class, upper class, etc.). Seventeen percent of participants reported coming from upper-class families, 28% from middle-class families, 35% from working-class families, and 15% from working poor families. Five participants (6%) did not provide information about their family's socioeconomic background. Immigrant and U.S.-born participants did not differ in terms of their families' socioeconomic background.

In terms of family composition, 39 participants (48%) reported that their parents were married, with the remaining 42 participants (52%) coming from families whose parents were divorced, separated, or never married. More than half of participants (52%) spoke primarily English in their home when they were growing up, 36% spoke primarily Spanish, and 12% spoke Spanish and English equally. Whereas the majority of immigrant participants (62%) spoke primarily Spanish in their homes, the majority of U.S.-born participants (58%) spoke primarily English.

Procedure

Participants were recruited through e-mail messages sent to students who identified as Latino on their college applications, messages posted on organizational listservs, fliers posted on campuses, and announcements made in classes and club meetings. Participants met with the investigators individually or in small groups to fill out the paper and pencil self-report questionnaire, which took approximately 1 hour to complete. Participants received course credit for their participation and were entered into a raffle to win one of four \$25 prizes.

Measures

Skin color. Participants reported their self-perceived skin color using a measure created by Brunsmma and Rockquemore (2001). Participants indicated their skin color on a scale from 0 to 12 (0 = *white*, 6 = *light brown*, 12 = *black*). Participants also rated their perception of their mothers' and fathers' skin color using the same scale.

Self-perceptions. *Self-Esteem* was measured using the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Inventory (Rosenberg, 1965), which contains 10 items that tap global self-esteem. Using a 4-point scale (1 = *strongly disagree* to 4 = *strongly agree*), participants indicated whether they agree with 10 statements about how they generally feel toward themselves. For example, "On the whole, I am satisfied with myself" and "I wish I could have more respect for

myself.” The measure showed good internal consistency ($\alpha = .87$). *Skin Color Satisfaction* was measured by asking participants, “How satisfied are you with the shade (lightness to darkness) of your own skin color?” Participants responded by using a 9-point scale (1 = *very dissatisfied*, 5 = *neither*, 9 = *very satisfied*). *Skin Color Change* was measured by asking, “If you could change your skin color, you would make it . . .” Participants responded using a 9-point scale (1 = *much lighter*, 5 = *exactly the same*, 9 = *much darker*). *Feelings of Attractiveness* was measured by asking participants, “How attractive do you feel yourself to be?” Participants responded using a 5-point scale (1 = *not at all attractive* to 5 = *very attractive*).

Racial socialization. An 11-item measure was created for this study by adapting racially based items from other socialization scales (e.g., Helms, 1995; Helms, & Parham, 1996; Hughes & Chen, 1997; Stevenson, Cameron, Herrero-Taylor, & Davis, 2002) and creating new items that are specifically relevant to Latinas’ racial experiences. Using a 5-point scale (1 = *never* to 5 = *always*), participants reported how frequently their parents emphasized specific socialization messages when they were growing up. The measure has three subscales, (a) *Preparation for Bias* (e.g., “How often did your parents teach you how to cope with discrimination based on your skin color or facial features?”), (b) *Racial Pride* (e.g., “How often did your parents tell you that you should feel proud of the color of your skin?”), and (c) *Equality* (e.g., “How often did your parents tell you that all people, regardless of skin color and facial features/hair texture, are equal?”). Each subscale had good internal consistency (α s: Preparation for Bias = .83, Racial Pride = .79, Equality = .86).

Ethnic identity. Participants completed the Multigroup Ethnic Identity Measure (Phinney, 1992). The scale measures participants’ sense of belonging to and attitudes toward their ethnic group. Participants responded to 12 items using a 4-point scale (1 = *strongly disagree* to 4 = *strongly agree*). The measure has two subscales. The *Affirmation* subscale measures adolescents’ ethnic pride, being happy with one’s ethnic group membership, and feelings of attachment and belonging to the group (e.g., “I have a strong sense of belonging to my own ethnic group”). The *Achievement* subscale measures adolescents’ exploration and commitment to one’s ethnic identity, efforts to learn about one’s group, and a clear understanding of the role of ethnicity in one’s life (e.g., “I have a clear sense of my ethnic background and what it means for me). Each subscale had good internal consistency (α s: Affirmation = .71, Achievement = .78).

Table 1
Predictor and Outcome Variable Means and Standard Deviations

	Immigrant (<i>N</i> = 26)		U.S. Born (<i>N</i> = 55)	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Participant's Skin Color	3.81	2.90	3.71	2.85
Ethnic Identity Achievement	3.28	0.86	3.10	0.54
Ethnic Affirmation	3.46	0.43	3.34	0.54
Preparation for Bias	2.45	1.11	2.64	1.05
Equality	3.63	1.49	4.12	1.06
Racial Pride	2.64	1.35	2.77	1.11
Self-Esteem	3.35	0.56	3.35	0.49
Skin Color Satisfaction	6.81	2.64	7.11	2.20
Skin Color Change	5.81	1.23	5.91	1.11
Feelings of Attractiveness	3.85	0.83	3.91	2.85

Note: Immigrant and U.S. born refer to the participants' place of birth. Immigrant and U.S.-born participants did not differ on any of the variables.

Results

Descriptives

Means and standard deviations for all predictor variables and outcomes are shown in Table 1. Overall, participants reported having predominantly light skin ($M = 3.74$, $SD = 2.85$ on a scale from 0 to 12, where 0 = *white* and 12 = *black*). Nearly two thirds of participants (63%) perceived their skin color to be light (between 0 and 4), and one third of participants (37%) identified as having medium or dark skin (between 6 and 8). There were no participants who perceived their skin color to be darker than dark brown (between 10 and 12). Immigrant and U.S.-born participants did not differ in any of the predictor or outcome variables, $t_s(79) = -1.14$ to 1.68, *ns*.

Participants' parents' skin color was associated with their level of education and socioeconomic background, such that mothers with darker skin tended to have lower socioeconomic statuses (mother, $r = -.37$, $p < .001$), and both parents with darker skin attained less education (mother, $r = -.32$, $p < .01$; father, $r = -.22$, $p = .05$).

Skin Color and Self-Perceptions

We examined whether the association between skin color and self-perceptions differed by participants' place of birth by testing the significance

Table 2
Multiple Regression of the Interaction of Skin Color
and Immigrant Status Predicting Self-Perceptions

Regression Step	Self-Perception							
	Skin Color Satisfaction		Skin Color Change		Feelings of Attractiveness		Self-Esteem	
Immigrant Status	-.22 (.26)	<i>-.09</i>	-.01 (.12)	<i>-.01</i>	-.05 (.08)	<i>-.07</i>	-.11 (.06)	<i>.06</i>
Skin Color	.46 (.26)	<i>.20</i>	-.24 (.12)	<i>-.21</i>	-.09 (.08)	<i>.08</i>	-.10 (.06)	<i>-.19</i>
Immigrant Status × Skin Color	-.18 (.26)	<i>-.08</i>	-.26 (.13)	<i>-.23*</i>	-.21 (.08)	<i>-.28**</i>	-.12 (.06)	<i>-.23*</i>

Note: Unstandardized regression coefficients and standard errors (in parentheses) are in the first line for each self-perception, with the standardized beta coefficient immediately to the right in italics. Each column represents one regression analysis with each of the four self-perception outcomes. The rows represent each step of the regression analysis in which the main effects are entered (immigrant status and skin color) followed by the interaction term (immigrant status × skin color).

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

of interaction terms involving skin color and immigrant status (see Table 2). Immigrant participants with darker skin tended to have more negative self-perceptions. Whereas U.S.-born participants with darker skin were more satisfied with their skin color ($b = .20$, $SE = .10$, $p < .05$), did not want to change their skin color ($b = -.02$, $SE = .05$, nonsignificant [ns]), and did not show negative associations with feelings of attractiveness ($b = .02$, $SE = .03$, ns), or self-esteem ($b = -.01$, $SE = .03$, ns), immigrant participants with darker skin did not show an association with skin color satisfaction ($b = .07$, $SE = .19$, ns), wanted to change their skin color to be lighter ($b = -.22$, $SE = .08$, $p < .05$), felt less attractive ($b = -.14$, $SE = .05$, $p < .01$), and had lower self-esteem ($b = -.10$, $SE = .04$, $p < .01$).

Racial Socialization and Ethnic Identity as Moderators

Next, we conducted moderation analyses to examine whether the associations between skin color and self-perceptions were buffered by racial socialization or ethnic identity. Given that the moderators are continuous, we computed interaction terms by centering the moderator variables and multiplying them by the centered version of skin color. The interaction

terms were then entered into multiple regression analyses along with the centered moderators and skin color to predict self-perceptions.

As predicted, racial socialization and ethnic identity both moderated the association between skin color and self-perceptions. For descriptive purposes, the moderators were broken into high and low groups by taking a median split, and separate regressions predicting self-perceptions from skin color were conducted. For racial socialization, Preparation for Bias and Equality each moderated the association between skin color satisfaction and feelings of attractiveness. As shown in Figure 1, darker skinned Latinas who reported lower levels of Preparation for Bias felt less attractive ($b = -.11$, $SE = .04$, $p < .01$) than those who reported higher levels ($b = .03$, $SE = .05$, ns). In addition, Latina participants who reported higher levels of Preparation for Bias and had darker skin were more satisfied with their skin color ($b = .26$, $SE = .13$, $p < .05$) compared with those who reported lower levels ($b = .11$, $SE = .12$, ns). A similar pattern was found for Equality. Latina participants with darker skin who reported higher levels of Equality felt more satisfied with their skin color ($b = .37$, $SE = .12$, $p < .01$) compared with those who reported lower levels of Equality ($b = -.02$, $SE = .13$, ns; see Figure 2). Racial Pride did not moderate the association between skin color and self-perceptions, and none of the racial socialization subscales moderated the association between skin color and self esteem or the desire to change skin color.

Figure 1
Feelings of Attractiveness as a Function of Participants' Skin Color and Their Parents' Racial Socialization Messages Around Preparation for Bias

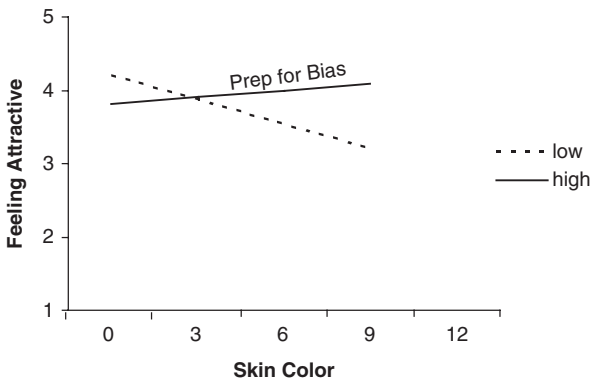
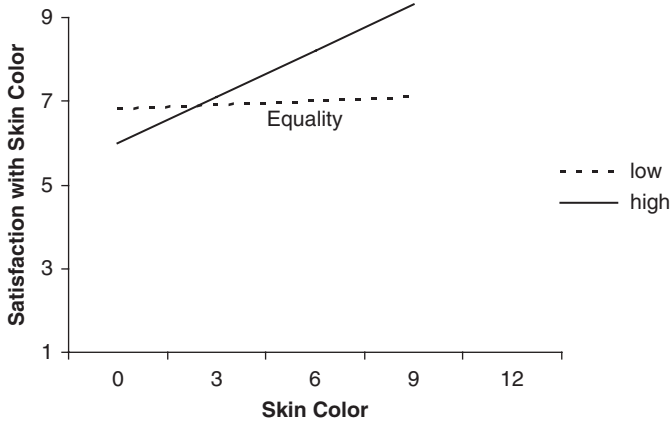


Figure 2
Satisfaction With Skin Color as a Function
of Participants' Skin Color and Their Parents'
Racial Socialization Messages Around Equality



In addition, Ethnic Identity Achievement and Affirmation each moderated the association between skin color and self-perceptions. As shown in Figure 3, those who reported lower levels of Affirmation and had darker skin had lower self-esteem ($b = -.06$, $SE = .03$, $p < .05$), whereas those with higher levels of Affirmation did not show an association with self-esteem ($b = -.01$, $SE = .03$, ns). In addition, as shown in Figure 4, those with higher levels of Achievement and darker skin were more satisfied with their skin color ($b = .41$, $SE = .12$, $p < .01$) compared with those with lower levels ($b = -.07$, $SE = .13$, ns). Ethnic Identity did not moderate the association between skin color and feelings of attractiveness or desire to change skin color.

Discussion

Despite the growing understanding of the importance of race in shaping Latinos' life experiences, little research has examined how skin color affects their self-perceptions. The current study suggests that skin color

Figure 3
Self-Esteem as a Function of Participants' Skin Color and Their Ethnic Identity Affirmation

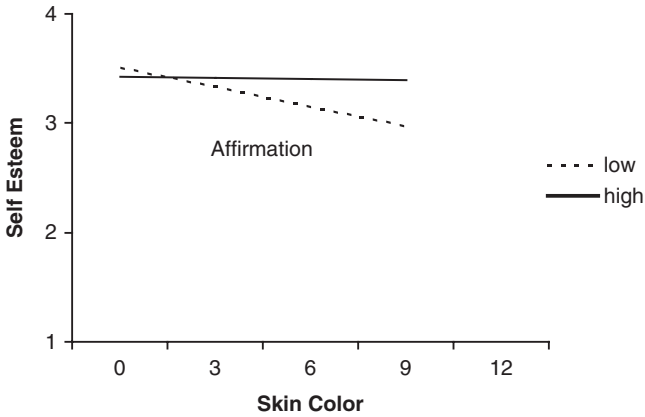
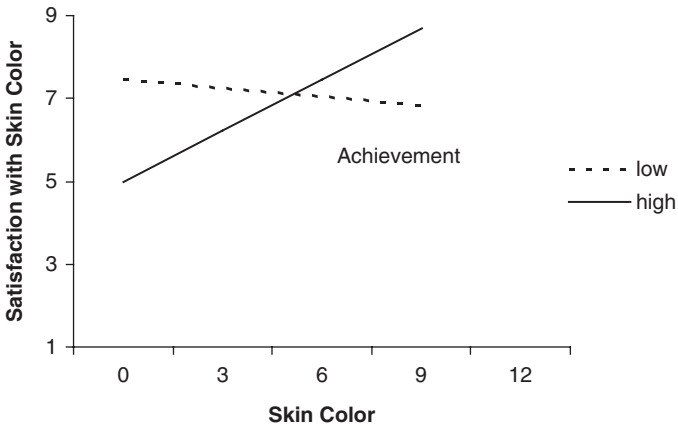


Figure 4
Satisfaction With Skin Color as a Function of Participants' Skin Color and Their Ethnic Identity Achievement



may be a particularly central risk factor for immigrant Latinas' well-being. Immigrant participants with darker skin had poorer self-perceptions, including lower self-esteem, lower feelings of attractiveness, and a desire to change their skin color to be lighter. U.S.-born participants did not show any negative associations between skin color and self-perceptions. As predicted, both racial socialization and ethnic identity served as protective factors for Latinas' self-perceptions.

Skin Color and Self-Perceptions

Darker skin was associated with poorer self-perceptions among immigrant Latina participants. This may be due to racial stratification, which is severe in some Latin American countries where negative stereotypes and the stigmatization of dark skin are prevalent. The media in Latin America portrays high-status Latinos as being light skinned (Comas-Díaz, 1994). Furthermore, many Latin cultures have words and phrases that describe the differing racial phenotypes, such as "Blanco" for light skin and "Moreno," "Negro," or "Indio" for darker skin (Uhlmann et al., 2002). These phrases emphasize the importance of skin color for Latinos as a salient aspect of their identity. The value of skin color and the stigmatization of darker skinned Latinos may be reinforced by Latinos themselves because of internalized racism and the subconscious acceptance and/or incorporation of negative stereotypes from the media, society, and history. Such values placed on skin color may negatively affect Latinos' self-perceptions.

In addition, the transition into American society may further exacerbate the negative association between skin color and well-being among immigrant Latinas. In the United States, a Black-White dichotomy exists, and skin color variations and racial mixtures are less flexible than in Latin America (Smart & Smart, 1995). Although light skin is valued both in Latin America and the United States, the categorization and classification of race, and therefore which racial groups are discriminated against, is different in Latin America and the United States. Indeed, researchers have reported that darker skinned Latinos report lower levels of acculturation compared with their lighter skinned counterparts who are more oriented toward Anglo culture (Vázquez et al., 1997). Thus, Latinas with darker skin may find it more difficult to adapt to and acculturate into American culture. When migrating to the United States, Latinas may reevaluate their self-identification and their understanding of race and skin color, which may have negative implications for their self-perceptions, especially for those with darker skin.

The Moderating Role of Racial Socialization and Ethnic Identity

The results of this study suggest that the association between skin color and self-perceptions depend, in part, on both the messages youth receive from their parents to overcome racial barriers and on how connected participants feel with their ethnic group. We found that participants, who reported more parental socialization, emphasizing equality of all people and preparing them to overcome discrimination, were buffered from the negative associations of dark skin: Those with darker skin and higher levels of racial socialization were more satisfied with their skin color and felt more attractive. Parental socialization prepares children to become competent members of the society to which they belong and promotes their adjustment, social functioning, and competence (Constantine & Blackmon, 2002; Fisher & Shaw, 1999). Racial socialization helps youth to overcome the harmful effects of living in a racially hostile society by preparing them to deal with experiences of discrimination and promoting their racial pride. Because Latinos, especially with dark skin, may be exposed to racism and discrimination, racial socialization may serve to mitigate these negative experiences and enhance Latinos' well-being. The findings in the current study linking racial socialization with better self-perceptions are well-grounded in the African American literature (e.g., Bowman & Howard, 1985; Constantine & Blackmon, 2002; Stevenson, 1995). However, this is the first study to show that parental racial socialization can help buffer darker skinned Latinos from the harmful effects of living in a racially stratified world.

Ethnic identity also buffered the association between skin color and self-perceptions. Those with darker skin who had explored their ethnicity less and felt less attached to their ethnic group had lower self-esteem and were less satisfied with their skin color compared with those who had spent more time exploring their ethnicity and felt more attached to their ethnic group. These results are consistent with the findings and theoretical models proposed by other researchers (Cross, 1991; Greene et al., 2006; Phinney, 1996). In accordance with social identity theory, when one's racial or ethnic group is exposed to racism or discrimination, a common strategy used to maintain one's self-respect is to increase one's connection to a group identity (Brehm, Kassin, & Fein, 1999). Darker skinned Latinos may increase their connection and affiliation with their ethnic group to find the social and psychological support to help them buffer against and overcome experiences of racism and discrimination, and also to affiliate with a group for

whom race is not a salient and negative characteristic. This sense of ethnic identity and security may help to enhance darker skinned Latinas' self-perceptions and general well-being.

Skin Color and Education

In American society, being dark skinned may afford certain disadvantages throughout many social systems, particularly in education. Institutional racism operates through policies and curriculums that exclude people of color, denying them equal access to educational opportunities, and reducing their chances of attaining an equal education (Arce et al., 1987; Espino & Franz, 2002; Fegley et al., 2008). In the current study, we found a larger proportion of light-skinned Latinas, as defined by self-perceived skin color, compared with other published reports (Fegley et al., 2008; U.S. Census Bureau, 2000). Although different measures were used to evaluate skin color, the percentages in the current study may suggest that many darker skinned Latinas did not make it to college, perhaps because of racial barriers. This is consistent with the findings of Murguia and Telles (1996) who found that a significantly higher percentage of light-skinned Latinos enter and complete college compared with their medium- and darker skinned counterparts. We also found that participants' parents who had darker skin had attained less education and had lower socioeconomic statuses than lighter skinned parents. Because this study was conducted in a college sample, we are not able to address how skin color relates to well-being across a broader Latino population. Future researchers should examine how skin color relates to well-being in other geographical areas and social environments. Additionally, future work should follow Latinas as they make the transition from high school to college or the work force to examine whether skin color differentially affects those who enter college versus those who do not.

Conclusion

In conclusion, we find that skin color affects Latinas' self-perceptions, such that immigrants with darker skin tend to have poorer self-perceptions compared with Latinas born in the United States. One way to help protect darker skinned Latinas from poorer self-perceptions is through racial socialization and ethnic identity. Thus, Latinas' social networks, especially their family, may be integral to their well-being. These findings are very important in light of the growing Latino population in the United States. By understanding the challenges faced by immigrant Latinas and the risk

factors that affect their well-being, psychologists and educators may not only be better equipped to help Latinos adapt successfully into and thrive within the current American culture, but may also be better positioned to challenge historical and present notions of race in the United States. The current climate is especially ripe for this change as the number of people claiming multiracial backgrounds is increasing.

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