

# AMERICAN SOCIOLOGICAL REVIEW



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# Latino Immigrants and the U.S. Racial Order: How and Where Do They Fit In?

Reanne Frank,<sup>a</sup> Ilana Redstone Akresh,<sup>b</sup> and Bo Lu<sup>a</sup>

## Abstract

How do Latino immigrants in the United States understand existing racial categories? And how does the existing U.S. racial order influence this understanding? Using data from the New Immigrant Survey (NIS), our analysis points to changes in how the U.S. racial order might operate in the future. We find that most Latino immigrants recognize the advantages of a White racial designation when asked to self-identify, but wider society is not often accepting of this White expansion. Our findings suggest that relatively darker-skinned Latino immigrants experience skin-color-based discrimination in the realm of annual income. Furthermore, Latinos who are most integrated into the United States are the most likely to opt out of the existing U.S. racial categorization scheme. We predict that a racial boundary is forming around some Latino immigrants: those with darker skin and those who have more experience in the U.S. racial stratification system.

## Keywords

Latinos, immigrants, race/ethnicity, discrimination, racial identification

“The problem of the twentieth-century is the problem of the color-line” (Du Bois 1903:3). A century later, scholars are revisiting Du Bois’s famous proclamation and labeling it this century’s biggest puzzle. There is increased uncertainty regarding the issue of the color line and its meaning for U.S. society (Lee and Bean 2007a, 2007b; Lewis, Krysan, and Harris 2004). Over the past 50 years, the arrival of unprecedented numbers of immigrants from Latin America, in particular from Mexico, has changed the racial/ethnic mix of the United States and challenged the continued relevance of the traditional Black/White model of race relations.

Today’s Latino immigrants, who display a wide range of racial phenotypes, complicate the Black/White portrait of America and raise the question of whether the historic

color line will be changed. According to one prediction, “Mexican-Americans, who have already confounded the Anglo American racial system, will ultimately destroy it, too” (Rodriguez 2007:xvii). Alternatively, some argue that, far from being destroyed, the Black/White divide will remain, but the definition of Whiteness will expand to include new non-Black Latino immigrants (Gans 1999; Lee and Bean 2004, 2007a; Yancey 2003). Others believe the U.S. racial

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<sup>a</sup>The Ohio State University

<sup>b</sup>University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

## Corresponding Author:

Reanne Frank, Department of Sociology, The Ohio State University, 238 Townshend Hall, Columbus, OH 43210

E-mail: [frank.219@osu.edu](mailto:frank.219@osu.edu)

categorization system will change, but instead of an expansion of Whiteness, Latinos will represent a new racial group, separate from Blacks or Whites (Gómez 2007; O'Brien 2008). Still others argue that a more complex racial stratification system will emerge, characterized by a "pigmentocracy," a ranking of groups by skin color (Bonilla-Silva 2004). Which of these predictions will ultimately prevail is an empirical question that the present analysis begins to address.

Previous studies on the continued relevance of the Black/White divide typically focus on children of immigrants, in particular on patterns of intermarriage and the multiracial identification of children from these unions (Qian 2004; Qian and Cobas 2004; Qian and Lichter 2007). An equally important question concerns how immigrants influence the U.S. color line (Itzigsohn, Giorguli-Saucedo, and Vazquez 2005). Upon arrival to the United States, most immigrants encounter a system of racial categorization that differs markedly from those left behind in their countries of origin (Kusow 2006; Rodriguez 2000). By understanding how the foreign-born population simultaneously interprets and is affected by the prevailing U.S. racial stratification system, we begin to see whether and where the U.S. color line will ultimately be redrawn.

This article addresses a two-part question with respect to U.S. racial boundaries and the place of the Latino immigrant population therein. First, how do Latinos see themselves fitting into the U.S. racial order, that is, how do Latino immigrants define themselves when confronted with the U.S. racial classification system and which factors influence their decisions? Second, on the flip side, how are Latino immigrants influenced by racial stratification in the United States? In particular, does the U.S. color-based racial classification system affect Latino immigrants, even though they themselves may not readily identify with an existing racial group?

## BOUNDARY CONSTRUCTION

In investigating the puzzle of the U.S. color line and the place of Latinos therein, we follow the tradition of Barth (1969) and, more recently, Wimmer (2008b), who suggest that racial/ethnic boundaries are not given divisions of human populations to which all members of society ascribe. Rather, racial/ethnic divisions are conceptualized as products of classificatory struggles in which, "individuals and groups struggle over who should be allowed to categorize, which categories are to be used, which meanings they should imply and what consequences they should entail" (Wimmer 2007:11). We examine two dimensions of Latino immigrants' classificatory struggle in the United States to determine where they fit into the existing U.S. racial order. We evaluate Latinos' place in racial terms, as opposed to ethnic, because racial boundaries are understood to be more exclusionary than ethnic boundaries in the United States (Hirschman, Alba, and Farley 2000; Tuan 1998).<sup>1</sup> Sociologists generally refer to racial boundaries as being heavily based on phenotypic differences, whereas ethnic distinctions are perceived as invoking a language of place (i.e., language, descent, and culture) (Golash-Boza and Darity 2008; Landale and Oropesa 2002). Conceptual slippage exists between the two concepts, with historical instances of racial boundaries having become ethnic boundaries over time (Wimmer 2008b). Our analysis finds support for past research arguing that, for Latinos, efforts to consider race as distinct from ethnicity often miss the actual ways that individuals understand boundaries between groups (Brown, Hitlin, and Elder 2006, 2007; Hitlin, Brown, and Elder 2007; Landale and Oropesa 2002).

Questions about how Latinos define themselves and how they are defined by others will help us understand whether the U.S. system of racial stratification might operate differently in the future. In this analysis, we use a boundary centered framework to inform

predictions of how racial construction and practices may be changing in response to the influx of Latin and Central American immigrants. In the language of a boundary centered framework, a social boundary occurs when two different schemas, one categorical and the other behavioral, coincide (Wimmer 2008b). According to Wimmer (2008b), the categorical dimension of a given boundary divides the world into social groups—into “us” and “them.” For the purposes of this article, we evaluate the categorical dimension of a possible racial boundary forming around Latinos using immigrant racial self-identification practices. We begin to account for the multi-actor nature of boundary construction by evaluating self-identification choices within the confines of bureaucratically mandated racial categories. The behavioral dimension of social boundaries involves the everyday action scripts that dictate how individuals interact with those labeled as “us” and “them” (Wimmer 2008b). We address this aspect of racial boundary formation through an exercise that evaluates the effect of skin-color-based discrimination on Latino immigrants’ annual earnings.<sup>2</sup>

### *Categorical Dimension*

In a boundary focused framework, racial/ethnic divisions are understood to be relative and capable of change.<sup>3</sup> In constructing a social boundary around a population group, individuals and groups struggle over who should be allowed to categorize and which categories should be used. Institutional actors, such as the state, are key players in this struggle. Theories of how states create racial boundaries emphasize the use of official categories to legislate exclusion and inclusion. In Brazil, for example, the national government undertook a massive recategorization scheme, switching from a three-category format to represent the Black/White color continuum to a dichotomous

racial scheme in an effort to redress affirmative action policies (Bailey 2008). Although the program’s success in improving the identification of disadvantaged individuals is in dispute, the example illustrates the powerful role that states play in delineating racial boundaries through creation of official categories.

In this article, we examine where Latinos fit in the existing U.S. racial order by first examining racial self-identification, one aspect of a boundary’s categorical dimension. Contemporary federal policy in the United States says that individuals can belong to one or more racial groups. Significantly, Hispanics and Latinos have been set apart as an ethnic group and are instructed to choose the race that best describes them (Tafoya 2005). This forces Latino immigrants to place themselves along a sharply drawn color line that separates Blacks and Whites and has remained relatively inflexible over time (Davis 1991). Compared with other nations, this system has a high degree of social closure; most Americans conceptualize themselves as belonging to mutually exclusive racial categories largely defined by skin color and geographic heritage.<sup>4</sup>

### *Possible Responses*

A boundary centered framework suggests that actors may pursue several options in reaction to existing categorical boundaries dictated by the state (Wimmer 2008a). From the immigrant vantage point, one possible reaction to an existing racial boundary is to reject the available choices and instead promote other nonracial modes of classification and social practice (Kusow 2006; Wimmer 2008a). This process, labeled “boundary contraction,” can be seen in the case of West Indian immigrants who have made concerted efforts to resist the U.S. racialization process by stressing their cultural and national identity (Foner 1987). A study

of Dominican immigrants found that, given a choice of racial categories with which to identify, one-fifth eschewed the customary labels and instead reported their racial classification as *indio/a* (Itzigsohn et al. 2005). By asserting an alternative category not recognized in the United States, members of this group attempt to position themselves in an intermediate racial category between Black and White. Similarly, one Mexican immigrant man's classification of his race as *campesino* reflects an attempt to dissociate from the racial skin-color-based definition assigned by outsiders (Dowling 2004:91). Stepping outside of the Black/White dichotomy may offer a degree of protection, distancing immigrants from the discrimination reserved for racialized minorities in the United States (Landale and Oropesa 2002).<sup>5</sup>

A second option for Latino immigrants is to racially identify in a way that challenges existing racial boundaries. Many researchers interpret the high number of Latino respondents in the 1990 and 2000 Census who marked "some other race" as a blurring of existing racial boundaries (Wimmer 2008b).<sup>6</sup> This has led some authors to argue that while Latinos are undoubtedly aware of the Black/White color line in the United States, they are asserting a distinct Hispanic/Latino racial classification by marking "some other race" (Logan 2003; Michael and Timberlake 2008) and rejecting the federal distinction between race and ethnicity (Hitlin et al. 2007). According to one Mexican-American respondent interviewed on the subject of U.S. Census racial categories: "I think we are big enough to be our own race, especially now that we are growing" (Dowling 2004:101).<sup>7</sup>

Other researchers focus less on the large number of other race Latinos in the U.S. census and instead study the slightly larger number of Latino respondents who select White as their race.<sup>8</sup> Instead of attempting to modify the topography of racial boundaries by expanding existing options, choosing "White" may reflect a process whereby the meanings associated with particular racial boundaries

are modified. Historically, many European immigrant groups, including Irish, Jewish, and Italian immigrants, were originally seen and treated as non-White (Alba 1985; Brodtkin 1999; Ignatiev 1995; Jacobson 1998; Roediger 2005). Over time, they succeeded in expanding the boundary of Whiteness to include their own ethnic origin groups. Whether Whiteness will expand again to incorporate newer Latino immigrant groups remains an unanswered question. An illustrative quote comes from a Mexican-American woman living in Texas who, when asked which race she chose on the U.S. Census form, responded: "White . . . there's no such thing as a brown race. They call Hispanic people brown, right? But we are White. . . . Ignorance is the only thing that would cause anybody to check anything else but White, because that's what we are. . . . There is no such thing as brown . . . we've been here too long. We're just Americans" (Dowling 2004:92). Repositioning into the White racial category may be occurring among contemporary Latino groups in a way similar to ethnic European groups in the past. However, the non-White phenotypic appearance of many Latino immigrants raises some doubts that this process of racial boundary shifting will occur again (Alba 2005). To date, we know little about the social role of phenotypic differences among Latinos and what they could mean for the future of the U.S. color line.

The Latino National Political Survey (1989 to 1990) is one of the few datasets to include information on skin tone and racial self-identification. Past analyses of the data show that, net differences in skin color, more assimilated Latinos are less likely to choose a White racial category (Golash-Boza and Darity 2008; Michael and Timberlake 2008). Respondents who were more fluent in English, had higher incomes, and had spent more time in the United States, were more likely to opt out of existing racial identification choices and choose a separate Latino racial category (Michael and Timberlake 2008). Golash-



Boza and Darity (2008) explain these patterns using a racialized assimilation perspective and argue that whether Latinos will be racialized as such in the United States depends on their phenotype and corresponding experiences with discrimination. Latinos with lighter skin who have not experienced discrimination will be more likely to self-identify as White; those with darker skin who have experienced more discrimination will be more likely to identify as Black or promote a separate Latino racial category.

Past studies on Latinos' racial/ethnic identification patterns focus primarily on the native-born population; we thus know less about the foreign-born population, the individuals who will set the stage for negotiating racial boundaries in future generations (Montalvo and Codina 2001). Only by first understanding how the foreign-born Latino population navigates existing racial self-identification categories will we begin the process of ascertaining whether and where the color line will be ultimately redrawn.

### *Behavioral Dimension*

The debate over who should be allowed to categorize, and which categories should be used in the formation of a social boundary, is important to the extent that categories coincide with "scripts of action" that determine how individual members of particular groups are treated by others. Whether a boundary can be crossed, altered, or redefined depends not only on those attempting to renegotiate the boundary, but also on actors on the other side of the boundary who may reject the newcomers. Too much emphasis on the ideological construction of racial self-identification ignores the corollary to this process: the concrete effects of the prevailing racial classification system on immigrants and their descendents (Feagin 2004). One of the most tenacious forms of racism in the United States is discrimination by skin tone (Hochschild 2005). If some

Latino immigrants are discriminated against on the basis of their skin color, we may expect an increasingly sharp racial boundary to form around them and their descendents.

Most research that empirically evaluates the relationship between racial boundary markers (i.e., racial phenotype) and individual outcomes in the United States focuses on the African American population (Gullickson 2005; Herring 2004; Hersch 2006; Hochschild and Weaver 2007; Keith and Herring 1991; Krieger, Sidney, and Coakley 1998). To date, considerably fewer empirical studies quantify the influence of existing racial boundaries on Latinos.

One approach to quantifying racial discrimination among Latinos is to evaluate differences between self-identified Black Latinos and self-identified White Latinos. Evidence suggests that Latinos who self-identify as Black have poorer outcomes across a range of variables, including higher prevalence of hypertension, worse self-rated health, higher levels of segregation, and lower incomes (Alba, Logan, and Stults 2000; Borrell 2005, 2006; Borrell and Crawford 2006; Denton and Massey 1989). Some scholars take these patterns as evidence that race matters in the lives of Latinos: Latinos who self-classify as Black suffer poorer outcomes due to higher levels of discrimination. This conclusion is limited, however, by several methodological issues. Because these studies have no direct measures of objective racial boundary markers (i.e., skin color), they must rely on self-reported race, which may bias the results; Latinos might identify as Black precisely because they are experiencing poorer outcomes. A lack of direct discrimination measures also threatens the validity of projected causal relationships between self-reported race, discrimination, and any outcome measure.

A second approach to estimating the effects of discrimination among Latinos overcomes one of these methodological issues by including objective markers such as racial phenotype in the analysis (Landale and Oropesa 2005). One of the first studies to do so used data from a 1979 survey of

the Mexican-origin population (the National Chicano Survey) and found that respondents with darker skin had lower levels of education and income (Arce, Murgia, and Frisbie 1987). A follow-up study using the same data attributed nearly all the difference in income between dark- and light-skinned Mexican respondents to discrimination, although a subsequent reanalysis questioned the strength of this conclusion (Bohara and Davila 1992; Telles and Murguía 1990, 1992). Another study examined Latinos' occupational status using data from the 1990 Latino National Political Survey (LNPS) (Espino and Franz 2002) and found that darker-skinned Mexicans and Cubans have significantly lower occupational prestige scores than do their lighter-skinned counterparts. A study of the relationship between skin color and income for Puerto Ricans and Dominicans in the Northeast yielded similar results, with dark-skinned men earning significantly less than light-skinned men (Gómez 2000). Another analysis using the same data as the current study found that among newly legalized immigrants, darker skin color and lower stature are significantly associated with lower wages (Hersch 2008).

These studies suggest that skin color stratification exists within the Latino population (Allen, Telles, and Hunter 2000; Mason 2004), but the veracity of this conclusion has been threatened by methodological concerns. Past analyses of racial phenotype and human capital outcomes often ignore the fact that many control variables used are not exogenous to discrimination (i.e., they are likely influenced by discrimination in the United States), which potentially biases any purported causal relationship between skin color, discrimination, and the outcome variable under study. Furthermore, many of the control variables (e.g., ethnicity, national origin, and self-reported race) are highly correlated with skin color, raising the problem of multicollinearity, increasing the imprecision of any estimate linking skin color and wages. The

possibility that skin-color-based discrimination affects outcomes among Latino immigrants in the United States awaits a more robust statistical test. Doing so might speak directly to the future of the U.S. racial boundary system.

## CONCEPTUAL STATEMENT

Several different scenarios may emerge from the data, each holding a different meaning for the future of the U.S. color line. One scenario is that the current Black/White divide will remain unchanged; immigrants and broader U.S. society will see new arrivals in Black and White racial terms. If this is the case, respondents in our sample should identify with one of the existing racial categories and these choices would be largely determined by a mix of skin color and geographic ancestry. Past research suggests this scenario is increasingly unlikely, given the large number of Latinos who fail to identify with a federally mandated racial category when given the option to do so (Rodríguez 2000).

A second scenario is that the existing U.S. racial boundary system will change in response to the increased presence of Latino immigrants. Our data could reflect this in two ways. First, the White racial category could expand to include Latinos (Yancey 2003). Prior research demonstrates that Latinos recognize the advantages of adopting a White racial designation (Darity, Dietrich, and Hamilton 2005; Dowling 2004; Rodríguez 2000). If this is the case, respondents in our analysis should choose a White racial classification, which would be associated with a mix of sociodemographic and contextual factors whose importance supersedes skin tone.

The success of a strategy of White expansion, however, depends not only on Latino immigrants but also on wider U.S. society. Returning to the behavioral dimension, wider society might not accept an expansion of Whiteness for all Latino immigrants. We may find a scenario in which Latino immigrants self-identify as White (in spite of their

skin tone) but are not afforded the advantages that go with this status. If our analysis yields evidence that Latino immigrants experience a penalty for darker skin tones, the future of White expansion for all Latino immigrants is in doubt. It may be that choosing a White racial category, and the advantages connected to it, are available only to certain Latino immigrants (i.e., those with light skin tone). Alternatively, if we find that Latino immigrants are immune from skin-color-based discrimination, it bodes well for the future success of White expansion.

Instead of an expansion of Whiteness, racial boundaries might change through the creation of a new racial boundary around Latinos. Past research suggests this scenario is more likely for certain groups of Latinos than others (Alba 2005; Golash-Boza and Darity 2008; Michael and Timberlake 2008). Golash-Boza and Darity (2008) coined the term “racialized assimilation” to explain the process whereby time in the United States influences one’s understanding of one’s place in the existing U.S. racial boundary system. Once in the United States, experiences of discrimination may encourage respondents to engage in boundary redefinition by promoting other racial identities (i.e., Latino) and failing to endorse any of the existing U.S. racial categories (Landale and Oropesa 2002). If this process is occurring in our sample, we would expect two sets of findings. First, from a categorical dimension, Latinos who have been in the United States longer, and those with darker skin who are at greatest risk of experiencing skin-color-based discrimination, should be less likely to choose a White racial designation and more likely to opt out of the existing racial categories. Second, from the behavioral dimension, we should see evidence for skin-color-based discrimination among the Latino immigrant population.

## DATA

The data come from the 2003 cohort of the New Immigrant Survey (NIS), which was

originally pilot tested with a 1996 sample cohort of immigrants.<sup>9</sup> The sampling frame for the NIS 2003 was immigrants age 18 and older who were granted legal permanent residency between May and November of 2003.<sup>10</sup> The response rate was 69 percent (Jasso et al. forthcoming). Interviews were conducted in the language of the respondent’s choice as soon as possible after legal permanent residency was granted. The sample includes new arrivals to the United States and individuals who had adjusted their visa status. The NIS data are particularly well suited to answer the questions posed in the current study because they include each respondent’s racial self-classification and an interviewer’s assessment of their skin color. Furthermore, the data contain a sufficient number of Latinos to permit an exclusive focus on this population.

Among the NIS respondents, 2,729 self-identified as Latino. A total of 1,539 observations are available for the first part of the analysis predicting racial identification. Most of the remaining 1,190 cases were lost because of missing information on the skin color chart, primarily due to interviews done over the phone and therefore precluding an interviewer assessment of skin color. The NIS skin color scale (developed by Massey and Martin [2003]) instructs interviewers to rate a respondent’s skin color as closely as possible to the shades shown in an array of 10 progressively darker hands (1 is lightest, 10 is darkest).<sup>11</sup> In the second part of the article, where our dependent variable is annual earnings, we restrict the sample to Latinos who are members of the labor force and have valid skin color information (N = 954).

## RACIAL SELF-IDENTIFICATION

### *Methods and Measurement*

We first focus on Latino immigrants’ responses to federally mandated racial identification choices. Bureaucratic entities are key players in establishing categorical boundaries around population groups (Bailey 2008; Wimmer

2008a). State-sanctioned racial classification schemas form the basis of popular perception and are linked to economic resources and political power through construction of individual and collective identification (Itzigsohn et al. 2005). How do Latino immigrants respond when forced to choose a racial category as dictated by federal policy? What can their answers tell us about the future of the U.S. Black/White racial order?

We constructed a measure of racial self-identification according to federally mandated racial identification categories, which dictate that Latinos must choose a racial category, above and beyond their ethnic affiliation as Latino/Hispanic. We used the following series of questions: "What race do you consider yourself to be? Select one or more of the following: American Indian or Alaska Native? Asian? Black, Negro, or African American? Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander? White?" We trichotomized the answers in response to these questions. The first category consists of all respondents who reported their race as White. The second category combines the responses Native American/Alaska Native, Black, Asian, and Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander. Most respondents in the second category chose Native American (67 percent) or Black (16 percent). We speculate that the two-thirds of the non-White group who identify as Native American may do so because of a shared heritage with Native Americans after generations of their own subjection to colonial rule. Ideally, we would separately categorize the different responses, but sample size precludes a more fine-grained classification scheme for those who did not choose a White racial category. For descriptive purposes, we refer to this category as "non-White." The third category consists of all respondents who refused to answer the racial identification question. This category is partially analogous to the Census choice "some other race," in the sense that, in the absence of a racial category that fits their self-identification, they chose not to answer the question.

Past research shows that Latino self-identification decisions are heavily dependent on the choices provided (Brown et al. 2006, 2007; Campbell and Rogalin 2006; Hitlin et al. 2007). In an analysis of the 1995 Current Population Survey, Campbell and Rogalin (2006) found that when Latino respondents were faced with a single racial origin question, nearly 80 percent identified as White. When offered the choice of Latino (essentially combining the racial and ethnic origin questions), around 78 percent of respondents who previously identified as White chose Latino. This suggests that single racial origin questions that do not include Latino as a racial group may force individuals to artificially place themselves in categories that do not adequately represent their self-conceptions.

We restrict our analysis to federally mandated racial classification choices, that is, a single racial origin question without Latino as an option. Consequently, the analysis likely suffers from misclassification bias; some respondents who chose White as their race, for example, would probably not have done so if other racial options were provided. It is precisely this type of bias, however, that deserves examination. Essentially, the question is not how would Latino immigrants ideally define themselves given all available options, but how do they respond when faced with the limitations of the existing racial categorization system. NIS respondents could refuse to answer the racial classification question. By focusing on these patterns of refusal alongside the federally mandated racial category choices, we evaluate the ways in which Latinos are either accepting, challenging, or expanding federally validated racial boundaries and what this means for the future of the U.S. color line.

To evaluate the role of phenotype in racial self-identification among Latino immigrants, we include a measure of skin color, a factor that has historically played a key role in racial boundary demarcation in the United States. In the NIS, skin color is reported by

the interviewer. Although the interviews were carried out by trained professionals at the National Opinion Research Center at the University of Chicago, it is possible that bias was introduced in their evaluation of respondents (Hersch 2008). While the NIS skin color scale has not been externally validated with the use of a spectrophotometer, which measures reflected light, we justify the use of this measure in the following ways. First, Hill (2002) suggests that skin color evaluations done by interviewers of the same race as the respondent are generally superior to those of different race interviewers. Among our sample, 72 percent completed their interviews in Spanish; while this does not necessarily mean the interviewers were Latino, it does increase the likelihood of a co-ethnic interviewer. Second, Hersch (2008) uses the NIS skin color scale and finds a high degree of concordance between NIS skin color measures for the whole sample and spectrophotometer results reported elsewhere for nine overlapping NIS countries (Jablonski and Chaplin 2000). Third, classical measurement error would result in a downward bias of the effect of skin color on earnings (Hersch 2008).

A number of factors are likely associated with the range of responses available to Latinos in reaction to existing racial boundaries; one of the most salient is the racial/ethnic categorization system in an immigrant's country of origin (Campbell and Rogalin 2006). Past research indicates that Cubans are significantly more likely to choose a White racial category, while Mexicans and Puerto Ricans are more ambivalent about Whiteness (Michael and Timberlake 2008). To account for national-origin differences in identification choices, we subdivide the range of origin countries into five categories: Mexico, Cuba, Dominican Republic, Central America, and South America. The majority of Latino respondents from these five countries and regions gained residency status through family preference categories.<sup>12</sup> Given the low level of variability on this

measure, we do not include a control for class of admission.

Once in the United States, exposure to existing U.S. racial boundaries may affect individual racial self-identification in different ways. Greater exposure to the U.S. racial order may lead some to choose White, the most privileged racial category, and refrain from choosing more stigmatized racial identities, regardless of skin tone. Results from the 2000 Census indicate that Latinos who are citizens and who spend more time in the United States are more likely to identify as White than to not identify with any listed race (Tafoya 2005). Alternatively, increased exposure to the U.S. racial stratification system may result in a lower likelihood of identifying with an existing U.S. racial group. Instead of choosing an ill-fitting or stigmatized racial self-identification, respondents may choose to engage in boundary redefinition by promoting other racial designations (e.g., Latino) and failing to endorse any of the existing U.S. racial categories (Hitlin et al. 2007; Michael and Timberlake 2008). A study of Puerto Rican women found that those living on the U.S. mainland were more likely than island women to racially identify as Latino or Hispanic, whereas island women were more likely than mainland women to identify with federally mandated racial categories such as White or Black (Landale and Oropesa 2002). The authors conclude that Puerto Rican women on the U.S. mainland are more likely to reject conventional U.S. racial classifications. If a similar process is evident in our data, respondents who are more adapted to the United States should be less likely to choose a state-sanctioned racial category.

We operationalize exposure to U.S. racial boundaries in several ways. First, we include a measure for English proficiency, defined as proficient if respondents reported they speak English "well" or "very well" and not proficient if respondents reported they speak English "not well" or "not at all." Second, we include a continuous measure of time in

the United States. We also include a measure of whether there are children in the household. We expect that having children will influence racial self-identification through increased awareness of racial boundaries and the placement of offspring therein. Additionally, the presence of children often entails increased interaction with U.S. institutions, such as schools, as well as with other parents, teachers, and children, which could have the cumulative effect of increasing exposure to U.S. racial boundaries.

Prior research hypothesizes that socioeconomic status may influence racial self-identification to the extent that greater educational attainment and income reflect higher rates of economic assimilation (Tafuya 2005). Higher rates of economic assimilation could increase the probability of identifying as White through a social whitening process linked to increased status attainment (Schwartzman 2007). Alternatively, increased income may be associated with a decreased likelihood of identifying as White, to the degree that higher incomes represent increased economic assimilation and a greater awareness of the limits of existing U.S. racial categories for Latinos. A study using data from the Latino National Political Survey 1989 to 1990 found that increased income was associated with lower odds of identifying as White rather than Latino (Michael and Timberlake 2008). The NIS includes a comprehensive set of questions on socioeconomic status. We constructed three measures including occupational prestige as measured by the International Socioeconomic Index, educational attainment, and earnings (Akresh 2008; Ganzeboom, De Graaf, and Treiman 1992; Ganzeboom and Treiman 1996).

Once in the United States, local social context may also influence individual responses to existing racial boundaries. Past research shows that Dominican immigrants residing in large African American communities are more likely to identify as Black. This pattern is partly attributed to external racialization, a process whereby individuals identified as Black by external observers are more likely

to self-report as Black (Itzigsohn et al. 2005; Logan 2003). Similarly, Latinos residing in communities with higher levels of co-ethnics are more likely to choose a pan-ethnic Latino/Hispanic label when given the option (Campbell and Rogalin 2006; Jiménez 2008). Although we do not have information on the racial/ethnic composition of immigrants' residences, we can include a variable that distinguishes regional context and subdivides the country into Northeast, Midwest, South, West, and Southwest.

In terms of demographic controls, other factors likely associated with individual responses to existing racial boundaries include age, sex, and marital status. Past research shows that older Latino immigrants are more likely to select a White racial category, and younger respondents have higher odds of choosing "some other race" as their racial designation (Rodríguez 2000; Tafuya 2005). With regard to gender differences, an analysis of the 2000 Census suggests that Mexican-origin men are slightly more likely than women to identify as White rather than "some other race" (Dowling 2004).

Past analyses also link marital status with racial self-identification (Tafuya 2005). Data from the 1990 and 2000 Censuses show that in the Mexican-origin population, an individual married to a non-Latino White spouse is more likely to identify as White, while an individual married to a non-Latino non-White spouse is more likely to identify as "some other race" (Dowling 2004). A spouse's influence on racial identification potentially works through an increased awareness of racial boundaries as a result of the socially influenced process of mate selection. Our measure of current marital status distinguishes between individuals who are currently married and all others.

We present five multinomial regression models predicting the log odds of either a White or a non-White racial self-identification as compared to not choosing any racial identification category. We add variable sets sequentially and estimate all models using Stata 9.2.

**Table 1.** Sample Characteristics by Racial Self-Identification

	White (1)	Non-White (2)	No Category (3)	Sig. Diff <sup>a</sup>
Skin Color (Light → Dark)	4.106 (1.705)	4.836 (2.210)	4.814 (1.553)	F = 22.09***
Country/Region of Origin (column proportion)				
Cuba	.067	.038	.014	X <sup>2</sup> = 27.103***
Dominican Republic	.052	.067	.098	
Central America	.298	.362	.360	
South America	.166	.143	.089	
Mexico	.417	.391	.439	
Age	38.867 (13.134)	38.000 (12.453)	37.343 (12.433)	F = 1.360
Female	.548	.516	.495	X <sup>2</sup> = 2.291
Married	.670	.677	.547	X <sup>2</sup> = 12.635***
Anyone in Household under 18	.605	.677	.706	X <sup>2</sup> = 9.616***
Earnings	20179 (18451)	20272 (18040)	19959 (14675)	F = .02
Occ. Prestige (16 to 90)	32.671 (13.212)	32.862 (13.338)	33.057 (14.079)	F = .08
Years of Education	10.198 (4.619)	10.216 (4.450)	9.990 (4.817)	F = .19
Speaks English Well/Very Well	.323	.307	.416	X <sup>2</sup> = 7.588**
Years of U.S. Experience	7.855 (7.366)	6.361 (7.027)	8.202 (7.272)	F = 2.58*
U.S. Region of Residence (column proportion)				
Northeast	.194	.293	.181	X <sup>2</sup> = 23.959***
Midwest	.040	.052	.038	
South	.147	.121	.052	
West	.033	.017	.033	
Southwest	.587	.517	.695	
Percent of Sample (N)	78.82 (1213)	7.54 (116)	13.65 (210)	

<sup>a</sup>Significance tests are from F-tests (ANOVA) and X<sup>2</sup> tests for a significant difference across the three groups. All tests have two degrees of freedom.

## Results

Table 1 presents the percentage distribution of selected variables by self-reported race among the Latino respondents in the sample. The majority of the sample identified as White (79 percent), with a much smaller percentage identifying as non-White (7.5 percent). About 14 percent of the sample did not identify with any of the listed races; this is considerably smaller than the percent in the 2000 Census that chose “some other race” (Tafoya 2005). This difference is likely related to differences in the question construction. “Some other race” is an optional response to the racial classification question on the Census, whereas the NIS

questionnaire has no such option. In the NIS, respondents had to refuse to answer the question if they decided none of the given categories adequately described their racial self-identification. Other studies that evaluate Latino responses to a single racial origin question find similar distributions to the one presented here (Hitlin et al. 2007).

Differences in racial identification by skin color operate in the expected direction. Respondents who self-identify as White have a lower mean on the skin tone scale (lower values indicate lighter skin) than do those who identify as non-White or do not racially identify.

There are considerable national origin differences in who identifies with which racial group. Cubans and South Americans are

disproportionately located in the White racial category. Dominicans are more likely not to choose any racial identification category than to choose either White or non-White. Mexicans have a higher representation in the White than in the non-White category, but they are also highly represented among those who did not racially identify. Immigrants who failed to racially identify are disproportionately located in the Southwest, and those who identified as non-White are most highly represented in the Northeast. There are also differences in racial classification by family structure; unmarried respondents and respondents with children are more highly represented among those who did not racially identify. Among respondents who did not racially identify, a high percentage reported that they speak English well or very well. There are no significant differences in racial designation by educational level, earnings, or occupational prestige score.

### *Multinomial Logistic Regression: Racial Self-Identification*

Table 2 presents the results from the multinomial logistic regression modeling of racial self-identification. For each specification, two columns present estimates of choosing White or non-White, respectively, as compared to not choosing a racial category.

Model 1 shows the relationship between skin color and racial identification. Latino immigrants who identify as White have significantly lighter skin tone than those who do not racially identify. That is, respondents with lighter skin are more likely to see themselves as White than to skip the racial identification question. There are no significant differences in skin color between respondents who identify as non-White and those who do not racially identify.

Model 2 tests for national origin differences in racial classification. Even after accounting for variation in racial phenotype, Cubans and

South Americans are more likely to choose a White racial category, and Dominicans have the highest odds of not choosing a racial category. These results point to the long arm of influence wielded by racial categorization systems prevalent in immigrants' origin countries, which predict racial self-identification in the United States above and beyond individual skin tone.

Model 3 adds demographic controls. Currently married respondents are more likely to identify as White or non-White than to disidentify, although the latter effect is only significant once the socioeconomic controls are added in Model 4. This indicates that the significant difference in marital status lies between those who do not choose a racial designation and those who do, regardless of whether they identify as White or non-White. This finding supports the role the mate selection process may play in racial identity formation. The process of finding a spouse may increase awareness of racial boundaries, such that married respondents are more likely to conceptualize themselves in racial terms. We tested whether nativity of the spouse played a role in determining individual racial self-identification and found no significant relationship.

Model 4 accounts for the role of socioeconomic factors in explaining differences in racial identification. Respondents with higher incomes are more likely to not report a race than to identify as White. This effect runs counter to past evidence that suggests a positive relationship between increased economic attainment and a White racial self-classification (Tafoya 2005). Instead, it suggests that, once the effect of skin color is controlled, individuals who earn more money are less likely to identify as White and more likely to refuse to racially identify.

Model 5 adds a set of measures intended to evaluate whether exposure to the United States alters one's racial self-identification. English proficient respondents are significantly more likely to disidentify than to identify as White or non-White. Time in the



**Table 2.** Multinomial Regression Predicting Racial Self-Identification as White or Non-White Compared to None

	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3		Model 4		Model 5	
	White	Non-White	White	Non-White	White	Non-White	White	Non-White	White	Non-White
Skin Color, 1 to 10, Light → Dark	-.24** (.05)	.01 (.07)	-.21** (.05)	.03 (.07)	-.21** (.05)	.03 (.07)	-.22** (.05)	.03 (.07)	-.22** (.05)	.06 (.07)
Cuba [Mexico]			1.45* (.60)	.84 (.78)	1.53* (.60)	.92 (.79)	1.52* (.61)	.87 (.79)	.88 (.65)	-.23 (.87)
Dominican Republic			-.56* (.28)	-.57 (.47)	-.44 (.29)	-.40 (.48)	-.51 (.29)	-.47 (.49)	-.89* (.41)	-2.20** (.61)
Central America			-.11 (.17)	-.21 (.27)	-.03 (.17)	-.13 (.27)	-.03 (.18)	-.12 (.27)	-.13 (.19)	-.30 (.30)
South America			.55* (.27)	.37 (.39)	.59* (.28)	.43 (.39)	.59* (.28)	.38 (.41)	.21 (.32)	-.75 (.47)
Age					.01 (.01)	.00 (.01)	.01 (.01)	.00 (.01)	.00 (.01)	-.00 (.01)
Married					.41* (.16)	.49 (.25)	.42** (.16)	.50* (.25)	.48** (.17)	.48 (.26)
Female					.20 (.15)	.06 (.23)	.12 (.16)	-.01 (.24)	.14 (.16)	-.01 (.25)
Earnings (logged)							-.15* (.07)	-.12 (.10)	-.13 (.07)	-.06 (.11)
Occ. Prestige							-.00 (.01)	-.00 (.01)	-.00 (.01)	.00 (.01)
Years of Education							.00 (.02)	.01 (.03)	.01 (.02)	.04 (.03)
HH < 18									-.56** (.18)	-.32 (.26)
Years in United States									.01 (.01)	-.03 (.02)
English Proficient									-.47* (.19)	-.60* (.30)
Northeast [Southwest]									.37 (.29)	1.57** (.38)
Midwest									.10 (.41)	.50 (.57)
South									.83* (.37)	1.19** (.50)
West									.00 (.43)	-.40 (.83)
Constant	2.84** (.23)	-.63 (.35)	2.67** (.25)	-.67 (.38)	1.94** (.34)	-1.13* (.53)	3.51** (.80)	-.07 (1.16)	3.86** (.83)	-.33 (1.21)
Observations	1,539		1,539		1,539		1,539		1,539	

Note: Standard errors in parentheses.

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

United States is not significantly correlated with either outcome, although it appears that this variable is highly correlated with English proficiency. If the regression is specified without English proficiency, years in the United States is significantly associated with lower odds of reporting non-White. If we switch reference categories and compare respondents who identify as White with those

who identify as non-White, respondents with more time spent in the United States are more likely to identify as White than as non-White (results not shown). The presence of children in a household is associated with an increased likelihood of not choosing a racial category when compared with choosing a White racial category. These findings suggest that Latinos with more exposure to

the United States—in terms of time spent in the country, language facility, or exposure to schools and other parents—are more likely to eschew federally mandated racial categories.

We find that individuals living in the South are more likely than those in the Southwest to choose a racial designation, either White or non-White. Conversely, individuals residing in the Southwest are more likely than those in the South to opt out of choosing a racial category. Individuals in the Northeast have higher odds of choosing a non-White racial category. These findings confirm that local-level interpretations of the U.S. racial categorization scheme influence Latino immigrants and how they self-identify. Latinos in the Southwest, where a Latino racial identity may be more salient, are more likely than those in the South to opt out of traditional options. An alternative interpretation suggests that in the South, where the Black/White divide has historically been more explicit, Latino immigrants are more likely to identify racially. Residence in the Northeast, where Latinos experience more external racialization as Black, results in a stronger identification with a non-White self-classification than in the Southwest (Itzigsohn et al. 2005; Logan 2003).

These results demonstrate that most Latino immigrants in the NIS sample identify as White. The choice of a White racial category goes beyond racial phenotype. While lighter skin tone is significantly and positively correlated with choosing a White racial category, it is far from deterministic. Cuban origin, settlement in the southern United States, and having a spouse also encourage a White racial category. The decision not to identify as White and to opt out of the existing U.S. racial categorization system appears to be significantly correlated with darker skin tone, Dominican Republic origin, and exposure to the U.S. social context. Looking at measures of economic assimilation (earnings), language assimilation, and whether there are children in

the household, we see a pattern in which respondents who eschew a racial category are characterized by higher levels of exposure to U.S. society. The findings suggest that Latinos with greater exposure to the United States are increasingly challenging the existing racial identification options available to them.

## PROPENSITY SCORE MODELING OF EARNED INCOME

### *Methods and Measurement*

Next, we investigate the other side of immigrants' perceptions of racial categories: whether Latinos are subject to the effects of a racial stratification system based on phenotype. Here, we acknowledge the multi-actor reality of racial boundary formation. Not only do Latino immigrants confront new racial boundaries, but they may also be subject to effects of the existing racial boundaries. We approach this possibility by testing whether Latino immigrants experience skin-color-based discrimination in the case of annual earnings. Several methodological challenges complicate such a test, including the issue of establishing causal inference from a cross-sectional sample of observational data. Prior analyses of the possibility of discrimination within the Latino population have been unable to overcome this issue; instead, they rely on standard regression techniques plagued by problems of confounding, off-support-inference, and overreliance on an ability to correctly specify the functional form of the relationship between various covariates and income. Analyses that look explicitly at skin color and income differentials are also limited by a reliance on arbitrary cut-points delimiting dark or light skin, as well as issues with intra-interviewer variability in skin color assessment.

We offer an alternative approach to addressing these problems, using propensity

score matching with doses methodology (Lu, Hornik, and Rosenbaum 2001; Rosenbaum and Rubin 1983). With propensity score matching, the analysis is based on a balanced covariate distribution rather than assuming a certain functional form of the covariates. A more robust inference regarding the causal effect is possible than would be true with standard regression techniques. We use multivariate matching with doses to conduct a more thorough test of whether racial phenotype is related to earned income through the hypothesized mechanism of skin-color-based discrimination.

In the language of a causal framework, we conceive of our “treatment effect” as skin-color-based discrimination experienced in the United States. This point deserves highlighting because it lies at the crux of the analysis. Prior research contends that in a counterfactual modeling framework, race cannot serve as a treatment because it is an immutable characteristic that cannot be manipulated—you are born either Black or White (Glymour 1986; Holland 1986; Kaufman and Cooper 2001). While there is debate over the merit of this argument, we address this issue by using racial phenotype as a measure of discrimination; this is an external process located outside of the individual and thus amenable to change (Kaufman and Cooper 2001; Klonoff and Landrine 2000; Krieger et al. 1998).

Another important component of the analysis is the understanding that racial stratification in Latin America is not based solely on racial phenotype, but rather on a complex mix of socioeconomic and familial characteristics (Sue 2009; Telles 2002; Warren and Sue 2008). Although discrimination clearly exists in Latin America, immigrants to the United States encounter a system in which phenotype is the primary determinant of discrimination, rather than one of a number. We thus attribute any observed effect of racial phenotype on earned income in the United States to discrimination experienced once here, rather

than being due to racial discrimination experienced in the origin country. The balancing exercise described below includes a large number of pre-migration characteristics to minimize effects of any pre-migration experiences on the post-migration outcome observed in the United States.

### *Analytic Strategy*

Propensity score matching with ordinal dose groups was first introduced by Lu and colleagues (2001) to analyze observational data from a nationwide media campaign. Matching with doses differs from the conventional form of matching with treated subjects and untreated controls because all subjects are exposed to treatment but the doses vary. It is particularly useful in practical scenarios when there are no clearly defined dichotomous treatment and control groups. Instead, participants are exposed to the treatment at numerous levels. The NIS 2003 data record skin color on a 1 to 10 scale, from lightest to darkest. Because interviewers determined the skin color code, a two group comparison with a single fixed cutoff point is not appropriate due to the variability among interviewers. We overcome this issue by recoding the skin color scale into four dose groups of comparable size and focus on the comparison between relatively lighter and darker groups.

Because we have multiple ordinal dose levels, we use an ordinal logit regression model to estimate the propensity score. A propensity score represents the conditional probability of membership in a dose group given a vector of observed covariates. Once estimated, the propensity score is used to compare individuals from groups who are similar in terms of observed characteristics. In our case, relatively lighter- and darker-skinned individuals with the same observed characteristics would have the same propensity score, indicating an adequate match with which to make comparisons. The 18 covariates included in the propensity score model are listed in Table 3 and consist

of all measured characteristics that are potentially predictive of earnings but are not affected by discrimination once in the United States (i.e., characteristics measured prior to U.S. residence). In the ordinal logit model, the distribution of doses,  $Z_i$ , given observed covariates  $\mathbf{x}_i$ , is modeled as the following:

$$\text{logit}[P(Z_i \leq j | \mathbf{x}_i)] = \alpha_j + \beta^T \mathbf{x}_i,$$

for  $j$  distance = 1, 2, 3

where the linear component of covariates,  $\beta^T \mathbf{x}_i$ , is used as the balancing score and does not depend on the dose level.

In matching with doses, any individual can potentially be matched with any other individual as long as they are not in the same dose group. The goal here is to identify pairs that are similar in terms of observed covariates but different in terms of doses. Similar subjects with highly disparate dose exposures are more likely to show significant differences if the treatment has any effect. We use an optimal nonbipartite matching algorithm to create 477 pairs between four dose groups (Lu, Greevy, and Xu 2008). Within each pair, we classify the subject with a higher skin color code into a relatively darker-skin group and the subject with a lower skin color code into a relatively lighter-skin group. The particular distance between two subjects  $x_i$  and  $x_j$  is the following:

$$\Delta(x_i, x_j) = \frac{(\hat{\beta}^T x_i - \hat{\beta}^T x_j)^2}{(Z_i - Z_j)^2}$$

where  $\Delta(x_i, x_j) = \infty$  if  $Z_i = Z_j$

The final sample consists of all respondents who were in the labor market at the time of the survey and have valid information on skin color, the included covariates, and an imputed income variable. We imputed income for 25 percent of the sample using information on an individual's age, sex, country of origin, years of education abroad, years of U.S. education, years of U.S. experience, and English proficiency. The total sample size is 954 respondents.

## Results

Table 3 shows balance on the 18 covariates after matching, providing a check on how well the fitted propensity scores work in terms of creating comparable groups. Means and percentages are presented for the high and low category subjects that correspond to the darker and lighter skin contrasts. Overall, high and low dose groups of Latino immigrants look fairly comparable. Comparing the two columns using a two sample t-test or Pearson's chi-square test, none of the 18 test statistics are larger than one in absolute value, meaning there is more balance on the observed covariates than one would expect in a randomized experiment.<sup>13</sup> After matching, the groups are similar with respect to the covariate distribution but, importantly, the actual levels of skin color are considerably different.

Table 4 presents the results from the post matching analysis. Comparing earned annual income across the matched pairs, we find an average difference of \$2,435.63 between lighter- and darker-skinned individuals. This difference can be interpreted to mean that, after accounting for relevant differences between any two dose groups, Latino immigrants with darker skin earn, on average, \$2,500 less per year than their lighter-skinned counterparts. We also explored the possibility of a dose response relationship, but we did not find evidence that the relationship was associated with dose. Instead, it appears that the relative nature of racial phenotype is important (i.e., relatively darker individuals earn less than relatively lighter-skinned individuals). To the extent that this difference represents an actual difference in earnings by racial phenotype, net of measured pre-migration differences, it suggests that skin color is related to earnings via discrimination against Latino immigrants. This finding suggests that Latino immigrants are not all treated equally upon arrival to the United States; individuals with darker skin are more likely to face discrimination.

The finding that social structure potentially exerts powerful effects on Latino immigrants

**Table 3.** Covariates Balance in 477 Matched Pairs of Low-Dose and High-Dose Latino Immigrants

Covariate	Low Dose	High Dose
Age (Years)	36.4	37.1
Number of Household Members	3.9	4.0
Total Years in the United States	8.8	8.9
Age at First U.S. Trip	27.6	28.0
Sex (0 = Male, 1 = Female)	40.9%	51.9%
Married (0 = No, 1 = Yes)	66.7%	62.1%
Occupational Prestige Score of Last Job Abroad		
No Prior Job Abroad	46.3%	47.2%
1 = Low Prestige	24.7%	27.7%
2 = High Prestige	28.9%	25.2%
Harm Outside U.S. (0 = No, 1 = Yes)	7.1%	8.0%
Sponsor (0 = No, 1 = Yes)	60.4%	55.8%
U.S. Region Green Card Sent To (0 = Non-South, 1 = South)	21.4%	24.5%
Relative Family Income when Respondent was 16 (0 = below average, 1 = average or above average)	57.0%	57.0%
Rural Residence at Age 10 (0 = No, 1 = Yes)	42.1%	44.4%
Worked for Pay Prior to Entering U.S. (0 = No, 1 = Yes)	53.7%	52.8%
Spouse Born in the U.S. (0 = No, 1 = Yes)	12.4%	11.1%
Visa Admission Category		
1 = Immediate Relative	32.1%	31.4%
2 = Family Preference	19.1%	22.0%
3 = Employment	12.2%	7.3%
4 = Diversity/Other	3.6%	2.3%
5 = Refugee	33.1%	36.9%
Region of Origin		
1 = Mexico	34.4%	40.3%
2 = Central/South America	50.9%	47.8%
3 = Other	14.7%	11.9%
Health While Growing Up		
1 = Excellent	56.4%	52.4%
2 = Very Good	24.9%	22.9%
3 = Good	12.2%	18.0%
4 = Fair	5.5%	5.7%
5 = Poor	1.0%	1.0%
Years of Education Abroad		
1 = ≤ 9 years	50.9%	56.6%
2 = 10 to 12 years	26.6%	22.9%
3 = ≥ 13 years	22.4%	20.5%

based on skin color rests on a more robust statistical test than has been undertaken in the past. Use of propensity score matching with doses permits a potentially more valid causal

inference regarding the relationship between skin color and income among Latino immigrants. As is true with all propensity score based analyses, the matching method can

**Table 4.** Post Matching Analysis of Earned Income and Skin Tone among 477 Matched Pairs of Latino Immigrants

Group	Observations	Mean Income
Low Dose	477	\$22,294.29 (20,738.48; 23,850.10)
High Dose	477	\$19,858.66 (18,329.94; 21,387.38)
Lighter Skin–Darker Skin Contrast	954	\$2,435.63 (257.22; 4614.03)

Note: Numbers in parentheses are 95% confidence intervals.

balance observed covariates but has no control over unobserved ones. It is possible that the observed treatment effect could change if additional important pretreatment variables were left out. Moreover, the test is limited by what it cannot show. We attribute the penalty for darker skin to racial discrimination. This is a residual hypothesis that is not directly tested in the model. Thus, the results remain suggestive with regard to the causal role of discrimination.

## DISCUSSION

The U.S. racial landscape continues to change; demographers predict that the Latino population will increase and the non-Hispanic White population will become the minority in the near future. These forecasts have sparked debate over the definition of Whiteness and the U.S. color line. This article focused on one dimension of these debates, addressing the question of where the Latino immigrant population stands in relation to the existing U.S. racial order.

Our findings support the possibility that the U.S. racial boundary system is in the process of changing. According to a boundary centered approach to racial/ethnic divisions, a social boundary is created when two dimensions, one categorical and the other behavioral, coincide. Essentially, a social boundary forms when “ways of seeing the world correspond to ways of acting in the world” (Wimmer 2008b:975). Our analysis finds support for the possibility that a new racial boundary is forming around Latino immigrants. Not

all Latinos, however, will be defined by this new boundary: only those with darker skin or who are more integrated into the United States will be included. Other Latino immigrants (i.e., those with lighter skin) will likely be successful in their attempt to expand the boundary of Whiteness.

The majority of Latino immigrants in our sample recognized the advantages of adopting a White racial designation. For many Latino immigrants, the choice of a White racial category occurred net of skin color. We interpret this as evidence of these respondents attempting to expand the boundary of Whiteness. In doing so, they might modify the meanings associated with the existing U.S. racial boundaries that are based on phenotype. Studies have shown this strategy to be successful in the past: White ethnics, once considered phenotypically ambivalent and probably even belonging to separate races, became White over time (Alba 1985; Brodtkin 1999; Ignatiev 1995; Jacobson 1998; Roediger 2005).

Some of our findings, however, call into question the likelihood that Whiteness will expand again to incorporate all new Latino immigrants. First, and most importantly, we find compelling evidence that Latino immigrants experience skin-color-based discrimination in the workplace. The finding that Latino immigrants, regardless of how many may self-identify as White, are not immune from penalties associated with darker skin in the United States, is a compelling argument against the possibility that all newcomers will simply be accepted as White. Instead, we find that for Latino immigrants, skin color

maintains its role in producing and maintaining stratification (Montalvo and Codina 2001). This finding serves as a reminder that boundary change is a two-sided process (Lee and Bean 2004). Not only must members of racial/ethnic minority groups pursue entry on the basis of racial self-identification, but members of the majority group must be willing to accept their admission.

Additionally, we found that respondents who were Dominican immigrants or who had more exposure to the United States, either by having children with them in the United States, being more fluent in English, or having higher levels of economic assimilation, were more likely to opt out of choosing an existing racial category than to choose a racial category that does not fit well or is stigmatized. We interpret this finding as evidence that some Latino immigrants are attempting to engage in boundary change. Boundary change could represent a process of boundary blurring, that is, failure to choose a racial category as a way of emphasizing nonracial ways of belonging. Alternatively, it could also represent an attempt to emphasize an alternative racial self-classification (i.e., Latino). This interpretation supports the possibility that Latinos with more exposure to the U.S. racial stratification system are more likely to develop an alternative Latino racial identity (Michael and Timberlake 2008). If this latter scenario is the case, it is likely that some Latino groups will increasingly challenge bureaucratically mandated racial categories that, at present, do not allow for a separate Latino racial designation (Hitlin et al. 2007).

In the NIS survey, respondents were circumscribed by the bureaucratically defined identification choices available to them. We argued that these choices are important in and of themselves because bureaucratic categories mandated by the state strongly influence popular perception and are linked to economic resources and political power (Itzigsohn et al. 2005). At the same time, being restricted to these bureaucratic

categories precludes us from making more fine-tuned statements about the type of racial boundary redefinition occurring among individuals who fail to choose a racial self-classification. Results from previous analyses support the possibility that Latinos who fail to choose a federally mandated racial category are likely emphasizing an alternative Latino racial designation. Data from the Latino National Political Survey 1989 to 1990 show that increased time in the United States, higher incomes, and better English language ability are all associated with increased odds of choosing a Latino/Hispanic category rather than a White category (Michael and Timberlake 2008).<sup>14</sup>

Returning to predictions laid out at the beginning of the article, our findings support those who argue that the U.S. racial structure is in the process of changing. While some Latinos will be included within the White racial boundary, our evidence is at odds with past predictions that all or most Latinos will be successful in their bid for Whiteness (Yancey 2003). Although Latinos can choose their racial identification, our findings show that this choice is constrained by the color of their skin and skin-color-based discrimination (Golash-Boza and Darity 2008). In contrast to those who argue that there is more room for discretion in Latino immigrants' selection of racial self-identification, we find limits to this discretion in accordance with skin color (Lee and Bean 2007b). Many Latino immigrants may attempt to be included within the boundary of Whiteness, but we anticipate that only some will be successful. Those with darker skin or more exposure to the United States will likely become circumscribed by a new racial boundary. We conclude that the burden of race is not borne equally by all members of the contemporary Latino immigrant population (Alba 2005, 2009).

Our results agree with those of Bonilla-Silva and Dietrich (2008) to the extent that they argue that simply classifying newcomers as White is not a plausible solution

to the new American demography. While there is evidence that some Latino immigrants' experience is tracking European predecessors, others are becoming racialized minorities complete with skin-color-based discrimination and the formation of an alternative racial boundary. These findings suggest caution against the sanguine view that change in the Black/White divide will result in a fading of racial boundaries for all groups. Instead, they support Hochschild's (2005:71) conclusion that change "is a far cry from predictions that the old shameful racial hierarchies will disappear."

Measuring fluctuating classification systems is, by definition, speculative (Bailey 2008). The evidence presented here suggests that, at present, the burden of race does not fall equally on all members of the contemporary Latino immigrant population. Instead of a uniform racial boundary, a boundary is solidifying around only some Latino immigrants, specifically those with darker skin who have more experience with the U.S. racial stratification system. Light-skinned Latinos and those less integrated into the United States are likely to continue to test the flexibility of the White racial boundary (Alba 2005). Whether this strategy proves successful, and the degree to which boundaries will become stabilized and institutionalized over time, is necessarily left for the future. Foreign-born immigrants inevitably set the stage for determining how U.S. racial boundaries will be redrawn to fit Latinos, but it is the native-born offspring who will ultimately set the future course.

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## Notes

1. Arguments exist on both sides as to whether race and ethnicity are phenomena of a different order

(see Bonilla-Silva 1999; Loveman 1999; Omi and Winant 1994; Wimmer 2008a).

2. Our attempts to account for the multi-actor nature of boundary formation disproportionately rely on immigrants' perspectives when examining the categorical dimension (i.e., racial self-identification) and on wider society's perspective in evaluating the behavioral dimension (i.e., racial discrimination). We cannot directly account, for example, for how other non-Latinos categorize Latino immigrants. Past research on Asian Americans illustrates the importance of outsiders' perceptions on influencing racial self-identity; namely, racial markers remain salient to others even if they no longer are salient for individuals themselves (Min 2002; Tuan 1998).
3. Although less common in the United States, change in racial/ethnic boundaries does occur. An illustrative example comes from Puerto Rico where, in the intercensal period from 1910 to 1920, more than 100,000 Puerto Ricans "became" White. The expansion of Whiteness to include previously non-White Puerto Ricans was likely due to the fact that Puerto Ricans were allowed to become U.S. citizens in 1917. This increased the perceived and actual costs of being seen by Americans as non-White (Loveman and Muniz 2007).
4. We recognize that self-identification is but one component of racial boundary construction (Wimmer 2008b). The second half of the article begins to account for the multi-actor nature of racial boundary construction by evaluating the responses of other actors in the context of skin-color-based income discrimination.
5. For Black ethnics, racial boundary contraction has not been a successful method for avoiding the U.S. racialization process. Most studies of U.S.-born children of Black immigrants show them squarely aligned with African Americans in terms of racial identity (Waters 1999).
6. In the 1990 Census, 43 percent of Hispanics selected "other race"; in 2000, 42 percent chose "some other race" (Rodríguez 2000; Tafoya 2005).
7. "Mexican" was a racial option on the U.S. Census until 1940, when campaigning by Mexican-American civil society succeeded in its removal (Snipp 2003).
8. In the 1990 Census, 52 percent of Latinos chose White; in 2000, 48 percent chose White (Rodríguez 2000; Tafoya 2005).
9. For additional information on the sample, see <http://nis.princeton.edu>.
10. The sampling design dictates that undocumented migrants and others without legal permanent residency status are not eligible for inclusion.
11. The skin color scale is based on a chart available at <http://nis.princeton.edu/downloads/NIS-Skin-Color>



Scale.pdf. Although the chart arrays hands from 1 to 10, interviewers gave less than 3 percent of the sample a skin color code of zero. We interpret this as a skin color lighter than that indicated by 1 and include these cases in the analysis.

12. Family-based preference immigrants reach legal permanent residence through shared kinship with a U.S. citizen.
13. Of course, randomization also balances on unobserved covariates, whereas matching generally does not.
14. A parallel example comes from the case of Vietnamese Americans. In their study of a community in New Orleans, Zhou and Bankston (1998) found that Vietnamese teenagers adopt a racialized identity as part of the process of becoming American. By forming an identity based on social relations with other Vietnamese, these young people embarked on a path toward upward mobility via education.

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**Reanne Frank** is an Assistant Professor of Sociology at The Ohio State University. Her research focuses on the sociology of immigration and race/ethnic inequality. Her past work has examined the role of migration/immigration in shaping demographic and health outcomes in both sending and receiving countries and communities. Other research has critically investigated the intersection of research on genomics and racial/ethnic health disparities.

**Ilna Redstone Akresh** is an Assistant Professor of Sociology at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Her research focuses on various aspects of immigrant incorporation in the United States. Among contemporary groups, she has studied labor market outcomes, such as occupational mobility and earnings growth, as well as health outcomes, such as health selection, obesity, and dietary change.

**Bo Lu** is an Assistant Professor of Biostatistics at The Ohio State University. His research focuses on causal inference in observational studies with propensity score adjustment. He has published several articles on the statistical methods of using propensity score matching for complex study designs, including ordinal dose group, multiple treatment groups, and time-varying treatment assignment. Other areas of research include the impact of union formation on marital disruption and health outcomes.