

Despite efforts, not all Latino immigrants accepted as 'white'

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While some Latino immigrants to the United States may be accepted as "white" by the wider society, a new study finds that many of them face discrimination based on skin color.

In fact, the research showed that relatively darker-skinned Latinos earned less than their lighter-skinned counterparts.

The results suggest that the rapid influx of Latino immigrants will shift the boundaries of race in the United States, but will not end skin-color-based discrimination.

"It is likely we will see change in our racial categories, but there will not be one uniform racial boundary around all Latinos," said Reanne Frank, co-author of the study and assistant professor of sociology at Ohio State University.

"Some Latinos will be successful in the bid to be accepted as 'white' - usually those with lighter skin. But for those with darker skin and those who are more integrated into U.S. society, we believe there will be a new Latino racial boundary forming around them."

Frank conducted the study with Ilana Redstone Akresh, assistant professor of sociology at the University of Illinois, and Bo Lu, an assistant professor of biostatistics at Ohio State. Their results appear in the June 2010 issue of the journal [American Sociological Review](#).

The data for the study came with the 2003 New Immigrant Survey, which interviewed immigrants age 18 and older who were granted legal permanent residency between May and November 2003. This study included data from up to 1,539 self-identified Latinos. Importantly for the results, the survey included information, collected by the interviewers, rating the [skin color](#) of the respondents on a scale of 1 to 10 (from light to dark).

The question of how Latino immigrants view themselves in the country's racial order - and how they will be accepted by wider society -- has growing implications. The U.S. [Census Bureau](#) projects that nearly one in three U.S. residents will be of Hispanic/Latino origin by 2050. The issue is especially timely now as Americans are interviewed for the 2010 Census.

Under the current census form, Hispanics and Latinos have been set apart as an ethnic group and are instructed to choose the race that best fits them. The 2000 Census had six categories, and the 2010 Census has 15 categories, but Latino or Hispanic is not one of the options.

"We are hearing stories from census takers that many Latinos say the race question does not fit them. They are confused by why they can't label their race as Hispanic or Latino," Frank said.

In the 2000 Census, about 50 percent of those who marked Hispanic or Latino as their ethnicity chose "some other race" as their racial category. That has been interpreted by many researchers as them attempting to assert an alternative Latino racial identity, she said.

However, in the New Immigrant Survey used in this study, participants were not given the option of choosing "some other race."

As a result, in the New Immigrant Survey, more than three-quarters of

respondents (79 percent) identified themselves as white, regardless of their skin color.

"This shows that Latino immigrants do recognize the advantages of a white racial identity. Most are attempting to push the boundaries of whiteness to include them, even if their skin color is darker," Frank said.

About 14 percent of the sample refused to identify with any of the listed races, even though this was not an official option in the survey.

The study found that Latinos who were most integrated into U.S. society - those who were proficient in English, spent more time in the country, and those who had children - were more likely than others to not choose a racial category.

"We believe the more-integrated immigrants have faced discrimination in the country, and realize that 'white' is not an identity that is open to them. They may be trying to develop a new alternative Latino racial category," she said.

Along with more-integrated immigrants, darker-skinned Latinos will also have trouble being accepted as "white" and will face discrimination as a result.

Researchers classified the skin color scale into four groups of comparable size and focused on the comparison between relatively lighter and darker skinned groups of respondents. Comparing earned annual income across matched pairs from different groups, findings showed that Latino immigrants with relatively darker skin earned, on average, \$2,500 less per year than their lighter-skinned counterparts.

"[Latinos](#) display a range of physical characteristics - they don't fit neatly into what has historically been a black-white racial order in the United

States," Frank said.

"It appears that some with lighter skin will be able to pass as white, but others with darker skin will not and will continue to face discrimination."

Frank said it is not possible at this time to tell what proportion of Latino immigrants will be accepted as white, and how many will be forced into a new racial category. She emphasized that this study only included immigrants, and that the answers to questions like this may not be answered until their children grow up.

"Immigrants are important because they set the stage for determining how U.S. racial boundaries will be redrawn," she said. "But it is their native-born children who will ultimately set the future course for how the racial lines will end up."

Provided by The Ohio State University

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