

Skin tone is found to shape the experiences of Mexican immigrants in Atlanta and Philadelphia

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While racism is often a focus of concern in the U.S., skin tone—separate but related to race—plays a lesser known but important role in discrimination, according to new research.

A new study led by Helen B. Marrow, an associate professor of sociology, found that Mexican immigrants with darker skin tones perceived greater racial [discrimination](#) and more frequent discrimination specifically from U.S.-born whites than did Mexican immigrants with lighter skin tones. Those same people with darker skin tones also reported more [negative responses](#) to that discrimination, such as pulling inward and struggling internally.

The research, published in *Social Psychology Quarterly*, also showed that darker [skin tone](#) is nearly as strong of a predictor of such increased inner struggle as lack of documentation status.

"Skin tone is uniquely related to how Mexican immigrants are understanding their interactions with and treatment by U.S.-born whites, even after controlling for a range of other demographic and immigration-specific factors," Marrow says.

Colorism is distinct from racism in that it describes mistreatment based on skin tone rather than ethnic or racial category. For example, two people may both be of the same ethnicity or race, but one may perceive more frequent discrimination due to a darker skin tone.

Ellis Monk, an associate professor of sociology at Harvard University who was not involved in the research, says the new study is an "important extension" of burgeoning research on skin tone and discrimination.

"Trying to get more understanding around how people deal with discrimination is really important," he says. He adds that "when people feel themselves to be disrespected, it has negative physiological responses for the person that can actually lead them to be physically ill over time."

The study surveyed 500 foreign-born Mexican immigrants living in 10 counties of metropolitan Atlanta and Philadelphia, and asked participants to identify their own skin tone on a scale of one to seven, with one being "very light," seven being "very dark," and four being "medium." While such measurements are subjective, Marrow says that could be an advantage. "It captures something about how people understand themselves," she says.

Next, participants described the discrimination they'd experienced in their city since moving there, including questions about how often, where, and by whom they'd been treated well or poorly. The survey also asked participants to identify their typical responses to poor treatment, which could range from defending themselves to reporting the treatment to ignoring the discrimination altogether.

Struggles inward and outward

Not only were darker-skinned Mexican participants more likely to perceive discrimination from U.S.-born whites relative to lighter-skinned respondents, but skin tone was a stronger predictor of this outcome than participants' self-described ethnic or racial identity. The predictive results were similar in both [metro areas](#), even as respondents in Atlanta reported higher levels of discrimination.

Participants with darker skin tones were also more likely to report responding to discrimination by struggling internally but not outwardly saying anything.

According to Marrow, this response to colorism might raise [health concerns](#), which warrants further study.

Both metro areas included in the study are considered "new immigrant destinations" for Mexicans, or areas of the country that began to see an

influx of Mexican immigration only after the 1980s. Marrow says sociologists don't yet know as much about the role skin tone plays in the lived experiences of Mexicans in these new immigrant gateways, while much more research has been done on skin tone among Chicanos and Mexican Americans living in Texas and the Southwest.

One possible factor contributing to the results, according to Marrow, is that the racialization of Latinos living in new [immigrant](#) destinations has intensified over the past two decades, especially in the U.S. South, where Atlanta is located. This means that Mexican immigrants' place within local racial hierarchies has become more strongly racialized than scholars typically documented before 2000, likely affecting their perceptions of their interactions with the U.S.-born.

Marrow says the research, conducted with colleagues at Indiana University and the University of Massachusetts Amherst, is one of the first to examine immigrants' perceptions of discrimination in new destinations using measures of race/ethnicity and skin tone together in the same study, and to do so with a large, representative sample.

"The big implication of this is that [social scientists](#) should pay more attention to skin tone variation within our studies of race-based discrimination," she says.

More information: Helen B. Marrow et al, Skin Tone and Mexicans' Perceptions of Discrimination in New Immigrant Destinations, *Social Psychology Quarterly* (2022). [DOI: 10.1177/01902725221128387](https://doi.org/10.1177/01902725221128387)

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