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Passing on blackness: Latinos, race, and earnings in the USA

WILLIAM DARITY, JR*, DARRICK HAMILTON# and JASON DIETRICH¶

* *Carolina Population Center at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and Duke University*
\# *Yale University*
¶ *Office of the Comptroller, Washington, DC*

One strategy to address the charge that previous statistical measures overestimate the degree of antiblack discrimination in the US labour market because cultural factors have been omitted, has been to control for culture and vary colour. The procedure is to examine labour market outcomes for all persons self-reporting their ancestry as Hispanic (or Latino) while comparing outcomes among them based upon their self-reported race. The results demonstrate that black Latinos, especially males, suffer substantial discriminatory losses in wages. However, there are two problems: (1) a very small proportion of Latinos self-report themselves as black and (2) controlling for culture by combining all persons with Latino ancestry, regardless of specific national origin, into the gross category of Hispanic is potentially unsatisfactory. In this paper, the Hispanic population is disaggregated by nationality using the 5% Public Use Micro Sample from the 1980 and 1990 censuses to compare outcomes by self-reported race. It is still found that male Latino blacks, regardless of their specific national subgroups, were subjected to significant wage discrimination. The paper also reports on studies that have used the Latino National Political Survey that demonstrates that Hispanics tend to self-identify as black at rates inconsistent with the ascriptive profile of the Latino population. It is explained why this suggests that Latinos who choose to self-report their race as black in the US censuses genuinely are likely to 'look black' by American norms.

> Suddenly I wished I could speak Spanish, or
> anything, and if I had to be black, why couldn't
> I at least have been Puerto Rican?
>
> Francie Coffin in Louise Meriwether's
> Daddy Was A Number Runner (1971, p. 170)

I. INTRODUCTION

Economists' standard statistical procedure for detecting market-based discrimination in the employment process is to use the Blinder-Oaxaca decomposition technique. The Blinder-Oaxaca decomposition technique assumes that an ethnic/racial group may receive an average wage lower than the mean for the entire population due to a combination of two factors: a general group deficiency in productivity-linked attributes that generate higher wages and/or lower returns to those characteristics. The former factor is interpreted as the group's human capital disadvantage. The latter factor is interpreted as evidence of discrimination.

In earlier work Darity *et al*. (1995, 1996, 1997, 2001) applied a version of the Blinder-Oaxaca decomposition with 1980 and 1990 USA census data to estimate the extent of discrimination faced by 49 ethnic/racial groups

partitioned by gender. For each census year, a total of 100 wage equations were estimated, 50 for men and 50 for women. The set of 50 for men included one for all males in the USA population in the given year and one for each of the 49 ethnic/racial groups. A parallel set of 50 was estimated for women.

By substituting the mean characteristics for a specific ethnic group of men or women into the wage equation for *all* men or *all* women in the USA in either census year, an estimate can be derived for the hypothetical wage a member of the group would have received if he/she were treated like the average male/female in the USA population. The difference between this estimated wage and the average wage actually received by all males or by all females in the given year indicates the magnitude of the group's relative advantage or disadvantage in human capital attributes.

Alternatively, by substituting the mean characteristics of all men or all women into the wage equation for the specific ethnic/racial group, an estimate can be derived of the wage the average man or woman would have received if he/she received the labour market treatment faced by members of the specific group. The difference between this hypothetical wage and the mean wage for all men or all women in the USA can be interpreted as a measure of wage discrimination. If the difference is positive it can be interpreted as indicating that the group benefits from preferential treatment or wage 'nepotism.'

In equation form, the wage gap between a group and the general population by gender can be depicted as follows:

$$\text{func}\{w \sup i - w \sup a = B \sup i X \sup i - B \sup a X \sup a + \gamma\} \quad (1)$$

where:

$\text{func}\{w \sup i\}$ = mean wage received by men or women in ethnic group i

$\text{func}\{w \sup a\}$ = mean wage for the entire population of men or women

$\text{func}\{B \sup i, B \sup a\}$ = vectors of the wage regression coefficients where i indicates an ethnic group and a represents the entire population

$\text{func}\{X \sup i, X \sup a\}$ = matrices of productivity-linked variables for the ethnic group i and for the entire population

γ = error term capturing the predictive error the regression equation

Patently if $\text{func}\{B \sup i = B \sup a\}$ the entire wage gap must be due to differences between the characteristics of the group and the mean characteristics of the general population. But if $\text{func}\{X \sup i = X \sup a\}$ the wage gap must be entirely due to differential treatment of the group relative to the treatment of the general population. This can be interpreted as strong evidence of discrimination.

In general $\text{func}\{B \sup i = B \sup a\}$ and $\text{func}\{X \sup i = X \sup a\}$. Therefore, the typical wage gap between members of a specific group and the general population is due to elements both of a human capital gap and differential treatment in the labour market. The Blinder-Oaxaca approach facilitates gauging the relative magnitude of the two factors. Darity *et al.* (1995, 1996) found, for example, that all nonwhite and all Latino males received negative relative returns for their characteristics in 1980. Black American males suffered both a 10% loss in wages due to lower human capital and also a 15% loss due to discrimination.

Confidence in these calculations hinges on the belief that all salient productivity-linked variables have been included as right-hand-side variables in the underlying wage regressions. If a variable that represents an element of human capital for which a group that appears to have been subject to discrimination has less and a group that appears to have benefited from nepotism has more, both the extent of discrimination and nepotism would have been overestimated.

The Darity *et al.* (1995, 1996, 1997, 2001) studies included the following independent variables: fluency in English, years of schooling, work experience and the square of work experience (defined as the difference between current age and last year of schooling), disability status, whether or not born in the USA, assimilation status (i.e. whether the person claimed a second or more ancestral origin and/or whether he or she is married to a person from a different ancestry group), census division residency, metropolitan or nonmetropolitan residency, and industrial sector of occupation. The dependent variable was the log of the average annual hourly wage rate. This is a garden-variety wage equation. It is not immune to the charge of omitted variable bias.

II. THE CULTURE VERSUS COLOUR CONTROVERSY

Thomas Sowell's (1981) perspective leads to precisely such a charge; Sowell contends that the critical omitted variable is culture. According to Sowell, variations in economic performance that correlate with group affiliation are due to intergroup cultural differences that predispose members of one to attain more or better schooling, put forth more effort, be more inclined toward punctuality, or generally, perform better on the job. Sowell specifically dismisses the role of market-based discrimination by arguing that evidence of superior economic performance of West Indian blacks relative to native black Americans must indicate that colour is less important than culture.

Pursuing a strategy followed by Jeremiah Cotton (1993) and Stephen Woodbury (1993), Darity *et al.* (1995, 1996) undertook two exercises to test the Sowell hypothesis.

These exercises, again using data from the 1980 and 1990 censuses (the 5% Public Use Micro Sample), sought, first, to hold colour constant while varying culture and, second, to hold culture constant while varying colour.

In the first exercise all persons in each census year were identified who self-reported themselves racially as black. This subsample was partitioned further by gender and ancestry. Here West Indians consist of blacks who primarily trace their ethnic origins to the English-speaking Caribbean islands and Guyana. Non-West Indian Hispanics are black immigrants from countries to the south of the USA where Spanish is the major language spoken. European blacks may consist of persons who have one black and one white parent who then self-reported their race as black but self-reported their ancestral origins from a European country. 'All Other Blacks', the largest category of respondents, consists primarily of descendants of the slave population in the USA South.

The findings suggest that all black women, apart from non-West Indian Hispanic black females, may have benefited slightly from nepotism relative to all women in the USA. West Indian women appear to have had a mild advantage in human capital relative to all women, but their advantage fell between 1980 and 1990. This slender thread is the strongest evidence the results throw up favourable to Sowell's hypothesis.

The evidence for men refutes Sowell's hypothesis. Although by 1990 black West Indian men were earning wages about 7% higher than all other black men, their labour market circumstances were virtually indistinguishable. Both were losing 10% of their wages due to inferior human capital characteristics and losing 14–15% of their wages due to discrimination. By 1990 there was no premium associated with West Indian ancestry for black men.

The second exercise, on the surface, appears to provide a still more powerful refutation of Sowell's hypothesis. To control for culture, Darity *et al.* (1995, 1996) identified all respondents in the 1980 and 1990 censuses who claimed Latino ancestry: Puerto Rican, Cuban, Mexican, or any other Spanish-speaking ancestry country. They then separated persons who self-reported themselves as black from those who self-reported themselves as white or any other nonblack category.

The results appear compelling that colour trumps culture. Hispanic black women earned modestly higher wages than Hispanic nonblack women in both years and possessed superior productivity-linked characteristics than Hispanic nonblack women, but they incurred a slight discriminatory deficit relative to Hispanic nonblack women.

Hispanic black males also had relatively superior productivity-linked attributes relative to nonblack men, although both groups suffered deficits relative to all American men. But the estimated discriminatory losses were much, much larger for black Hispanic men than nonblack Hispanic men. This would suggest that race is far more important than culture in dictating labour market outcomes.

III. LATINO NATIONALITY AND ECONOMIC OUTCOMES

However, there are two aspects to these findings that are problematic. First, the proportion of all respondents among Latinos who self-describe themselves as black is very small. In both census years for each gender group less than 3% of all respondents self-report themselves to be black. Second, controlling for culture by combining all persons with Latino ancestry, regardless of specific national origin, into the gross category of Hispanic potentially is unsatisfactory. A more convincing exercise would utilize more precise national categories and then disaggregate respondents by racial self-identification.

Table 1 reports results of a Blinder-Oaxaca type of exercise performed with a breakdown of Latino respondents by country of origin. We examine Cubans, Mexicans, and Puerto Ricans separately, and also include an 'Other Spanish' category that covers all remaining ancestral nationalities, the majority consisting of persons from Central and South America.

The first notable aspect of Table 1 is the fact that any data on Hispanics taken collectively in USA censuses is dominated heavily by Mexican ancestry respondents. For both men and women they constitute the majority of all respondents. But among Latinos who self-identify as black the results are weighted most heavily by the responses of persons in the 'Other Spanish' category. Other Spanish constituted more than 40% of all Latinos who self-identified as black in the 1980 census and close to 60% of all Latinos who self-identified as black in the 1990 census.

Who are the 'Other Spanish'? In the 1990 census, independent of racial identification, 22% report ancestry from Spain, 12% from El Salvador, 9% from Colombia, 8% from the Dominican Republic, and 6% from Guatemala. Respondents identifying their ancestry as originating in Venezuela, Peru, Nicaragua, Chile, Ecuador, Panama, Costa Rica, Argentina, Chile, and Honduras all had at least a 1% presence in the Other Spanish category.

Among those persons in the Other Spanish category reporting themselves to be black, the distribution by national origin is quite different: 25% of Dominicans, 37% of Panamanians, and 10% of Hondurans reported themselves to be black. The only other countries of origin where the percentage exceeded 4% were Costa Rica and Venezuela in the 'Other Spanish' category. Countries like Colombia and Peru, despite large African ancestry populations, did not have a percentage of respondents self-classifying themselves as black that exceeded 2%.

Table 1. *Decomposition results for Hispanic ethnic groups, black vs nonblack, females 1980 and 1990 (5% PUMS) civilian population*

	Number of observations in the OLS regressions (1)		Wages as a percentage of USA female average (2)		Percentage gain/loss in wages due to nepotism/ discrimination (3)		Percentage gain/loss in wages due to human capital advantage/ disadvantage (4)	
	1980	1990	1980	1990	1980	1990	1980	1990
Females								
Nonblack Cubans	7133	9225	96.3%	100.6%	14.4%	15.0%	4.7%	2.5%
Black Cubans	223	275	105.0%	103.7%	(–)*	3.0%	2.6%	3.0%
Nonblack Mexicans	44 924	92 738	80.8%	76.0%	−1.0%	−26.9%	−23.0%	−27.0%
Black Mexicans	857	469	77.9%	83.3%	−9.4%	−9.9%	−19.6%	−9.9%
Nonblack Puerto Ricans	8987	14 588	93.0%	95.4%	3.8%	−0.2%	−4.9%	−0.2%
Black Puerto Ricans	309	598	107.3%	96.8%	17.5%	2.0%	1.2%	2.0%
Nonblack other Spanish	21 226	35 738	92.1%	84.4%	1.5%	−9.6%	−4.2%	−9.6%
Black other Spanish	1052	2063	100.2%	84.7%	3.1%	−8.8%	−1.8%	−8.8%

* Nonconvergence of the wage regression for black Cuban women precluded calculation of this measure.

Table 2. *Decomposition results for Hispanic ethnic groups, black vs nonblack, males 1980 and 1990 (5% PUMS) civilian population*

	Number of observations in the OLS regressions (1)		Wages as a percentage of USA male average (2)		Percentage gain/loss in wages due to nepotism/ discrimination (3)		Percentage gain/loss in wages due to human capital advantage/ disadvantage (4)	
	1980	1990	1980	1990	1980	1990	1980	1990
Males								
Nonblack Cubans	8192	10 992	85.9%	88.4%	2.6%	14.1%	−8.3%	−8.2%
Black Cubans	219	353	69.8%	64.7%	−30.7	−25.8%	−14.7%	−21.6%
Nonblack Mexicans	70 424	120 005	71.1%	62.8%	−9.9%	−12.4%	−29.0%	−37.7%
Black Mexicans	846	561	55.8%	52.4%	−26.8%	−29.6%	−28.5%	−35.2%
Nonblack Puerto Ricans	13 876	17 596	68.9%	73.9%	−9.4%	−10.5%	−23.1%	−14.5%
Black Puerto Ricans	471	711	62.2%	62.5%	−21.7%	−21.5%	−24.3%	−20.4%
Nonblack other Spanish	25 705	41 100	82.5%	72.6%	−27.9%	−6.9%	−11.0%	−18.6%
Black other Spanish	1121	2085	64.4%	63.6%	−27.3%	−22.0%	−16.4%	−21.0%

Indeed, this evidence suggests a strong Latino preference for racial self-identification as white, instead of black or even an intermediate category between the dichotomous colour poles. The Latino aversion to self-identification as black is particularly striking. Table 3 presents the proportions of each of the four Latino national groups who reported themselves to be black in the 1980 and 1990 censuses by gender.

With respect to Cubans the low frequency of self-reported blackness is especially stark in the 1990 census. The 1980 census, taken in 1979, would not have reflected the impact of the 1980 Mariel boatlift immigrants, phenotypically darker than the earlier immigrants, on Cuban American demography. The 1990 census, on the other hand, should have included the 1980 immigrants, but the proportion of men and women declaring themselves to be racially black was virtually unchanged.

What does one make of the results in Tables 1 and 2? If Latinos possess a reluctance to self-identify themselves as black regardless of phenotype, we cannot be certain that an exercise that seeks to control for culture and vary colour on this population has indeed controlled for colour. If Latinos who would be socially classified as black by the majority of persons in the USA tend to self-report themselves to be something other than black, then the non-white category may not provide the required quasi-control group.

However, since Latinos are so reluctant to self identify as black, it is reasonable to infer that Latinos who willingly report themselves as black probably strongly possess the phenotypical attributes that would readily lead to their social classification as black in the USA. Therefore, an exercise of this type may *understate* the extent of phenotype-based differences in labour market treatment between

Table 3. *Percentage of Latino national groups self-reporting race as black in the 1980 and 1990 census (5% PUMS)*

	Males		Females	
	1980	1990	1980	1990
Cubans	2.6%	3.1%	3.0%	2.9%
Mexicans	1.2%	0.5%	1.9%	0.1%
Puerto Ricans	3.3%	3.9%	3.3%	3.9%
Other Spanish	4.2%	4.8%	5.0%	5.5%

black and nonblack Latinos that would be detected using social rather than self classification.

Although there is less consistency in the pattern for women across national origin groups in both 1980 and 1990, Latino men who self-reported themselves as black, regardless of national origin, consistently incurred larger discriminatory losses than nonblack Latino men. The only exception is Other Spanish men in 1980. Differences in discriminatory treatment also tended to be much wider than the differences associated with human capital gaps. Thus, especially for males, disaggregating Hispanics by national subgroups leads to similar conclusions that would be reached by examining Hispanics collectively; 'colour' is more important than 'culture' in dictating labour market outcomes in the USA.

IV. A WHITE RAINBOW?

It is customary to assert that the Latin American understanding of race is dramatically different from the understanding in the USA. The conventional wisdom has it that racial classification in Latin America is gradational based upon phenotype, while it is dichotomous and based upon genotype in the USA (Rodriguez and Cordero-Guzman, 1992; Rodriguez, 1992). Gina Sanchez (1997) has made parallel claims for Cape Verdeans. This perspective has led Clara Rodriguez (1989) to declare Puerto Ricans a 'rainbow people', virtually devoid of race prejudice and solely amused and entertained by their phenotypical variations.

In contrast, Roberto Rodriguez-Morazzani (1998) has charged that Puerto Rican society both at home and in its USA incarnations is infused with an intense colour consciousness that correlates strongly with patterns of social stratification. Moreover, Rodriguez-Morazzani (1998, p. 155) suggests that the phenotype-genotype split is not a valid typological division for either Puerto Rico or the USA. In what follows we will provide additional evidence to support Rodriguez-Morazzani's critique of the 'rainbow people' metaphor.

If racial classification were solely a matter of phenotype or ascriptive appearance in Latin America then there should be a close correspondence between an individual's physical appearance and their racial self-classification on a gradational scale. This does not appear to be the case.

Angelo Falcón (1995) reports on a set of results from the 1989–1990 Latino National Political Survey (LNPS) for 561 Puerto Rican respondents drawn from 40 metropolitan areas in the USA. Respondents' skin colour was rated as very dark, dark, medium, light and very light by the interviewers. Respondents were asked in an open-ended fashion to classify themselves by race. LNPS researchers then summarized the respondents' answers in three categories: black, white, and an omnibus intermediate category that included mulatto or a Latino referent for race.

But more compelling is the fact that resistance to self-identification as black remained strong among those who ascriptively would be most likely to be viewed by other Americans as black. Furthermore, not only was there an inclination not to self-identify as black, there was a preference to self-identify as white rather than an intermediate category. Of the very dark respondents, 33% classified themselves as white, 31% of the dark respondents did the same, and 55% of the medium (brown) respondents—the most numerous based upon the interviewers' scale—said they were white. In short, a significant proportion of the darkest skinned Puerto Ricans were inclined to leapfrog the 'other' category altogether and place themselves in the white category. None of the very light or light respondents characterized themselves as black.

Tyrone Forman (1998) utilized the LNPS to replicate the Falcón study as well as present results for Mexican origin and Cuban origin respondents as well. His findings are reported in Table 4. Note that only four out of 1477 (0.3% of the sample) Mexican origin respondents classified themselves as black, yielding a percentage similar to the frequency in the 1990 census. There also is evidence of the stronger Mexican tendency to choose the intermediate category for racial self-classification, although that weakens as skin shade lightens. There still is a remarkably high percentage of darker-skinned persons opting for the white category.

There were a total of 670 Cuban respondents, a mere 18 (2.7%) of whom said they are black. In this case, aside from the very dark Cubans, there is a clear preference for self-identification as white with little attention given to the intermediate category. In none of these cases is there evidence of a neutral outlook about racial categories, nor much evidence of a rainbow of colours. There is evidence of a flight toward whiteness.

Forman's results for Puerto Ricans, based upon a slightly larger sample (571 observations) closely parallel Falcón's findings. One-third of the respondents classified as dark or very dark by the interviewers, identified themselves as white. Half of the respondents with medium (light brown) complexions self-identified as white racially. Only among those respondents the interviewers classified as dark or very dark was there any inclination to self-report

Table 4. *Racial self-identification by skin-colour and rating by interviewers of Mexican and Cuban respondents*

	Puerto Rican respondents skin-colour rating by interviewers				
Racial self-identification	Very light	Light	Medium	Dark	Very dark
White	70.4%	70.6%	55.2%	30.6%	33.4%
Other (Latino referent)	29.6%	28.8%	41.2%	59.0%	29.2%
Black	–	00.6%	03.6%	10.4%	37.4%
Number of cases	(78)	(175)	(218)	(71)	(19)
	Mexican respondents skin-colour rating by interviewers				
Racial self-identification	Very light	Light	Medium	Dark	Very dark
White	71.0%	62.9%	48.4%	37.2%	37.5%
Other (Latino Referent)	29.0%	36.9%	51.6%	62.2%	59.4%
Black	–	0.2%	–	0.6%	0.1%
Number of cases	162	396	599	288	32
	Cuban respondents skin-colour rating by interviewers				
Racial self-identification	Very light	Light	Medium	Dark	Very dark
White	99.4%	97.8%	91.4%	72.7%	9.1%
Other (Latino referent)	0.6%	1.6%	7.1%	12.1%	9.1%
Black	–	0.6%	1.5%	15.2%	81.8%
Number of cases	165	321	140	33	11

Source: Forman (1998)

as black, reinforcing our speculation that Latinos who self-report their race as black in the US census would be unambiguously seen as black by most Americans.

V. CONCLUSIONS

We close with five final observations:

(1) African-Americans are somewhat unique in embracing a black identity. Latin Americans, in contrast, tend to flee identification with blackness. Hence, colour or racial commonality is unlikely to be a pole for intergroup solidarity between them.

(2) Discrimination does not have a uniform impact across all members of broadly construed ethnic/racial groups. As the results reported here suggest the magnitude of discrimination can vary by specific national origin and by phenotype.

(3) The difference between self-classification and social-classification of race is especially important to consider among Latinos. Census data only provides information on self-classification. This is valuable in pointing towards potential anomalies and a Latino preference for whiteness given the distribution of phenotypical attributes in a population that shares significantly in recent African ancestry. Generally, census data needs to be augmented with studies that simultaneously combine interviewee (self-classification) and interviewer (social classification) reports on racial identity to improve research accuracy.

(4) Racial self-identification involves choice, and individual selection need not correspond with the social construction of racial categories. In Latino populations in the USA the individual selection frequently does not match social classification. But, unlike the implications of the 'rainbow people' metaphor, individual racial self-identification among Latinos does not proceed in a fashion that reveals neutrality toward the racial categories. The processes governing the choice, especially the Latino preference for identification with whiteness, is an important subject for further inquiry as the effects of phenotype on economic outcomes. It suggests that future research on race and social outcomes will need to treat race as an endogenous variable, particularly in studies that include Latino populations. This insight will inform our own work when inquiries in this area are extended by using the 2000 census.

(5) These results suggest that popularly reported expectations that the USA will have a nonwhite majority by the mid-21st century should be muted. If most recent immigrant populations prefer the racial status of being classified as white—and if the existing white majority accepts those who are relatively lighter as such, sufficiently flexible boundaries of whiteness could maintain a white majority in the USA indefinitely (Warren and Twine, 1997). Ironically, the same flexibility historically has not been extended to African-Americans, regardless of their skin shade. After all, if everyone could become white then there would be no privilege associated with whiteness. Such privilege is the reason racial boundaries persist.

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