

“Smiling brown” in the face of colorism: Examining testimonios among the Latinx community

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Background

- The foundation of this project stems from a collection of *testimonios* that describe skin color saliency and color consciousness in the Mexican, Central American, and Andean communities.
- Skin color saliency and color consciousness in U.S. society are often unexamined in research, despite race continuing to be a significant issue.
- Skin color saliency and color consciousness are linked with self-esteem (Thompson & Keith, 2001); however, few research studies have effectively integrated Chicana and Latinx racial and identity aspects.
- Utilizing **counter-stories**, we argue that *testimonios* can be a source for healing despite pervasive negative experiences based on race and phenotype. This provides a voice to the stories that are often unheard (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002).

Methods

- The second author of this project collected retrospective personal *testimonios* (n=83) that discussed the first time that authors recognized their skin color saliency and became conscious of the differences involving skin color. They were de-identified and provided to the first author.
- The *testimonios* were gathered from authors associated with Mexican American Studies or those associated with social or human rights movements.

Analysis

- The first and third author of this project analyzed the *testimonios* to identify common themes. Common themes were discussed among the authors. The most reoccurring themes were analyzed across the *testimonios*.

Results

Theme 1: Internalized Oppression

Authors describe feelings of self-hate toward phenotypes that do not align with Eurocentric phenotypes.

- *“Growing up in the U.S. watching TV shows, movies, or all other media-outlets, where all the kids and characters did not look like me, made me feel that I was different and not beautiful enough, because I was not light skinned, blue eyed, and blonde.”*

Theme 2: Light Skin Equals Beauty & Status

Preference for European phenotypes and associating “whiteness as property.”

- *“...I also hoped to grow up and have enough money to pay for the expensive operation and dye that would make my skin white and my hair blonde. I, however, wanted green eyes instead of blue.”*

Theme 3: Colorism Within Families

Behaviors of family members reproducing White supremacist views (Garcia-Lopez, 2014).

- *“Growing up being labeled dirty Indian [‘India fea’] by her own mother, my grandmother became conscious that because she looked Indian, she believed she wasn’t pretty or clean.”*

Theme 4: Pride in Being Brown

Authors describe feelings of pride and self-love for their skin color.

- *“I have so many feelings about the meaning of my skin; the color of my body the outside matching the inside. The first feeling I have is pride. I am proud of my brown skin and my brown eyes.”*

Conclusions

- Results indicated that dark skin color is not favorable. This aligns with previous findings (Lakoff & Scherr; Hunter, 2002; & Rodriguez, 2014).
- Consistent with previous research, authors of the *testimonios* indicated saliency of skin color at a young age (Aboud & Amato, 2001). While children may not fully understand racial and phenotype differences, they are able to recognize physical differences amongst themselves and others.
- In spite of their young age, children are able to recognize that dark skin is not valued in society. As they become older, they realize that there are advantages to having light skin and disadvantages having dark skin. They recognize that life experiences will be different based on phenotype.
- Pride for skin color is accrued within families. Additionally, few authors discussed their experiences in ethnic studies courses as a source of developing pride for their features.

Implications

- **Counter-stories** challenge the hegemonic structure and sheds light on issues relating to light skin preferences.
- At times, it can be a challenge to continue smiling while brown due to the pervasive negative experiences, yet, there is a continued need for a decolonial framework that complicates the valuing of light skin and non-brown eyes.

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