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Abstract of
Am I Still Too Black For You?:
Schooling and Secular Change in Skin Tone Effects

By
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Analysts disagree about whether the Civil Rights/ Black Power eras lessened the influence of skin tone on education. The paper finds that, holding family background constant, the educational disadvantages of dark and very dark blacks persisted between younger and older age cohorts. On the other hand, younger medium skin blacks no longer achieved less schooling than their lighter skin counterparts. This paper implies that, without the decline in skin tone effects for medium brown blacks, the racial gap between age cohorts would have remained larger.

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Am I Still Too Black For You?:

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I. Introduction

Analysts have almost always measured racial disparities in schooling, marriage prospects, and income by comparing all blacks to all whites. Such bipolar comparisons may understate the repercussions of race for some blacks and overstate it for others since skin tone (very light to very dark) affects these outcomes. Researchers examining skin tone effects agree about its historical importance but disagree about its current relevance. Some contend that skin tone effects have remained robust over time. Others claim that the Civil Rights/ Black Power eras eliminated any negative consequences of darker skin among blacks.

The paper shows neither conclusion is accurate for all skin tones. It finds that the relationship between skin tone and years of schooling declined over time for all blacks. However, for dark and very dark individuals, reduced correlation between family background characteristics and skin tone accounts for most of the change. Holding family background constant, the educational disadvantages of dark and very dark blacks remain substantial. On the other hand, young medium skin blacks now achieve the same schooling as their lighter skin counterparts. These findings imply that, while blacks as a group increased their years of education relative to whites immediately following the Civil Rights/Black Power eras, gains came primarily from medium skin individuals *ceteris paribus*.

II. Historical Overview

Historical advantages of skin tone originated because slave masters often favored their own mulatto children and because racial supremacy doctrines denigrated darker skin tones. According to Frazier (1957),

The mulatto was conscious of his relationship to the master race and generally felt himself superior to unmixed Negroes. The lighter skin color generally involved certain advantages that confirmed this feeling of superiority. (p. 274).

(See also Myrdal, 1944; Landry, 1987; Bodenhorn, 2002; Bodenhorn, 2005).

The privileged position of mulattoes made social interaction with lighter skin blacks highly prized and tied notions of beauty to skin tone long after slavery ended. For example, lighter skin substantially improved marriage prospects for black women. According to Drake and Cayton (1945), “successful Negro men . . . put a premium on marrying a woman who was not black or very dark brown”. Freeman et al (1966) found that wives of white-collar men were lighter skin tones than their husbands for 48 percent of marriages. In contrast, husbands were lighter skin tones than their wives in only 20 percent of marriages

(see also Udry, Bauman, and Chase, 1971). For at least the first half of the 1900s, restrictive admission based on phenotypically white characteristics was common for many churches, social clubs, preparatory schools, and black colleges and universities. Blue vein, paper bag, door, and comb tests determined whether applicants resembled whites closely enough to join the organization¹. In addition, until the Black Power movement of the 1960s, black women were almost never seen in public without their hair straightened either by chemical agents or by using a hot comb. Even as of the early 1990s, roughly 75 percent of black women straightened their hair using one of these methods. Furthermore, in 1990, sales of skin-bleaching products amounted to about \$44 million (Russell, Wilson, and Hall, 1992 p. 51).

Differences in socioeconomic characteristics by skin tone also lingered long after slavery. Edwards (1959) reported that, in 1910, light brown men more frequently attended college, held white-collar jobs, had higher incomes, and originated from families with highly educated parents than darker men. In 1920, 10 percent of mulatto family heads worked in white collar or skilled blue collar occupations compared to 2 percent of black family heads. Similarly, 78 percent of mulatto family heads were literate compared to 68 percent of black family heads (Hill, 2000). Using data from 1965, Ransford (1970) showed that, among those with exactly 12 years of schooling, lighter skin men were overrepresented in the highest income category. He also found lighter skin men were more frequently employed and in white-collar jobs than darker men.

III. Changes since the Civil Rights/Black Power Eras

A. Potential Sources of Change

Changes in the effects of skin tone after the Civil Rights/Black Power eras could have come from several sources. Some argue that the Civil Rights/Black Power eras reshaped views about skin tone within racial groups. Along with changes in general perceptions about race (Schumann, Steeh, and Bobo; 1985), whites may disparage darker blacks less than in the past. Similarly, Goering (1972) found that fewer black high school students preferred lighter skin blacks in 1970 than in 1950. In addition, darker skin blacks may have higher self-esteem, higher self-efficacy or generally more favorable self-perception (Porter and Washington, 1979). According to Saunders et al (2004) and Grabowski et al (2001), these socio-psychological characteristics affect educational attainment.

The Civil Rights/Black Power eras may also have changed the effects of skin tone because blacks enrolled in more integrated schools where skin tone was less salient (Hill, 2002). Due to changes in government policy, the percentage of Southern black students attending schools with 90-100% minority enrollment fell from 99 percent in 1963 (U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, 1964, Table 2A) to 77 percent in 1968 and 25 percent in 1972 (U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, 1969, Table 1 and Orfield, 1983, Table 2). While the number of slots at historically black colleges and universities remained relatively constant, the fraction of high school graduates ages 14-24 who were enrolled in or who had completed some college increased from 35 percent to 50 percent between 1967 and 1976 (<http://www.census.gov/population/socdemo/school/TableA-5a.xls>).

Even in the absence of direct effects from Civil Rights/Black Power eras, differences in schooling by skin tone may have fallen. Margo (1986) showed that the racial gap in average schooling dropped by over 2 years between cohorts born 1886-1890 and born 1926-1930. If parents of darker skin blacks disproportionately raised their educational levels and if, as indicated earlier, these parents initially had lower socioeconomic status, skin tone differences would have become less correlated with family background over time. Unadjusted skin tone effects would have declined even though the effects net of background remained the same.

B. Empirical Evidence about Change

Evidence from some analysts implies that skin tone effects on socioeconomic status are as potent now as in the past. According to Hughes and Hertel (1990), years of own schooling, years of spouse schooling, occupational prestige, and income were higher for lighter blacks as of 1979-1980. They concluded that role of skin tone on socioeconomic outcomes changed little since the first half of the twentieth century. Keith and Herring (1991) found that skin tone had a significant effect on years of schooling, net of mother's education, father's occupation, gender, region, urbanicity, age, and marital status. They contended that the "effects of skin tone are not only historical curiosities from a legacy of slavery and racism, but present-day mechanisms that influence who gets what in America" (p. 777).

These claims are supported by other large estimated effects of skin tone on recent socioeconomic status. Using data from the 1979-80 National Survey of Black Americans (NSBA) and the 1992 Multi-City Study of Urban Inequality (MCSUI), Hersch (2006) showed that, holding constant age, parents' schooling,

number of siblings, and residential characteristics when growing up, dark or very dark skin blacks averaged as much as one year less schooling than light skin blacks. Medium brown individuals averaged as much as one-half year less schooling. Goldsmith, Hamilton, and Darity (2006) found that medium and dark skin black men earned 10 percent less than whites with the same schooling, age, disability status, job tenure, parents' schooling and job characteristics.

In contrast, other analysts have concluded that skin tone effects declined over time because the Civil Rights/Black Power eras changed perceptions of attractiveness and relative levels of self-esteem. Gullickson (2005) found that, while each additional increment on a 5-point skin tone scale (1=very dark to 5=very light) raised schooling by 0.4 years, the effect declined for cohorts born after 1945 so that the skin tone had no impact for those born about 1953. He argued that "the Civil Rights movement [may have] consciously challenged dominant ideals of beauty within the black population" (p. 159).

Focusing on blacks in Washington, DC in 1965, Urdy, Bauman, and Chase (1971) similarly contended that the Black Power movement changed the meaning of dark skin. They found that skin tone disadvantages declined for men by age (as measured by the number of years married). Among the oldest group, lighter skin men had more years of schooling, married women with higher educational attainment, and were more likely to improve their occupational status relative to their parents. Among the youngest group, these advantages were held by darker rather than lighter men. Urdy et al argued "that racial pride [which] makes the blackest the proudest and the most motivated (p. 732)" accounted for the finding.

Findings of small skin tone effects on recent socio-economic outcomes support these conclusions. Hersch (2006) reported that dark and medium brown NSBA women did not earn significantly less than light skin women. She also showed that the pattern of black male wage disadvantage relative to whites did not increase with darker skin tones for MCSUI sample members.

IV. Data and Empirical Analysis

In order to assess the conclusions drawn above, this paper analyzes how the effects of skin tone on years of schooling have changed over time. The data come from respondents ages 25 to 70 in Wave 1 (1979-1980) of the National Survey of Black Americans (Jackson and Gurin, 1997). The NSBA is the only large, nationally representative cross-section sample of blacks that measures skin tone. The NSBA data was collected through face-to-face interviews made by 239 black interviewers. In addition to gathering

answers to survey questions on socioeconomic, demographic, and attitudinal variables, interviewers were asked to classify respondents by whether they were very dark brown, dark brown, medium brown, light brown, and very light brown.

In this paper, the sample is divided into those ages 25-35 and those ages 36-70². Since the younger cohort became 18 years of age between 1962/63 and 1972/73, their educational choices could have been influenced by the Civil Rights and Black Power Movement changes of the 1960s and early 1970s. The older cohort made most or all of their schooling decisions long before Civil Rights/Black Power periods. They became 18 years of age between 1927/28 and 1961/62.

Means and standard deviations of the variables used in this paper are listed in Table 1³. It shows that between one-third and two-fifths of the sample were classified as dark or very dark, about half as medium, and the remainder as light or very light. Young sample members averaged 12.6 years of schooling and older members 10.2 years.

Columns 1 and 2 of Table 2 present the unadjusted effects of skin tone on years of schooling by age group. The estimated effects declined between the old and the young cohort for all skin tone categories⁴. Very dark and dark individuals averaged 1.4 fewer years than their very light or light counterparts in the older cohort and 0.8 fewer years in the younger cohort. The effects of medium brown skin went from 1.2 to 0.2 years.

The interpretation of these results is not straightforward since, as indicated earlier, the correlation between skin tone and family background may account for the observed differences and not darker skin per se. That is, darker skin individuals may not actually be perceived differently or behave differently than their light skin counterparts. They may merely come from families with fewer economic and other resources.

Columns 3 and 4 of Table 2 control for several background variables. They show that the gap between light skin and medium skin blacks dropped from -0.82 years for the older cohort to -0.08 years for the young group *ceteris paribus*⁵. This change in the gap is statistically significant (at the 5 percent level) and indicates that younger medium skin blacks achieve about the same schooling as their lighter skin counterparts. Since roughly 45 percent of blacks make up the medium skin category, skin tone disadvantaged many fewer members of the younger than the older cohort.

Civil Rights/Black Power eras may explain this between-cohort change for medium skin blacks. Not only was the overall effect of medium skin larger for the older cohort, it was also larger for subsets of the group - that is, -0.758 (0.347) for those ages 36-55 and -1.091 (0.542) for those ages 56-70. Therefore, the change did not slowly evolve over time but instead occurred discontinuously with the younger cohort, the group whose schooling would be most affected by the Civil Rights/Black Power eras⁶. Furthermore, reduction in the effects of family background between cohorts cannot explain most of the declining impact. According to columns (3) and (4), the between-cohort change after controlling for family background ($-0.82 - (-0.08) = -0.74$) is over 70 percent as large as the unadjusted changes ($-1.18 - (-0.16) = -1.02$) in columns (1) and (2).

In contrast to the disappearing effects for medium brown individuals, columns (3) and (4) of Table 2 also show that, holding family background constant, the educational disadvantages of dark/very dark skin for those ages 21-35 (-0.54) remain significant and large relative to those ages 36-70 (-0.91). The previous estimates in columns (1) and (2) overstate the between cohort change because family background characteristics are less correlated with dark/very dark skin for the younger than for the older cohort. Holding constant family background lessens the effect of dark/very dark skin for the older cohort by 0.48 from 1.39 to 0.91. It lowers the effect for the younger cohort by only 0.24 from 0.78 to 0.54. While unobserved family background differences could explain the large effects of dark/very dark individuals, the lingering effect of skin tone suggests that at least some blacks continued to suffer from racial discrimination and/or stigmatized identities (Loury, 2002) after the Civil Rights/Black Power eras⁷.

The other variables in columns (3) and (4) of Table 2 echo previous research. Both higher years of mother's schooling and more lucrative father's occupations significantly raised the number of years of schooling. Greater numbers of siblings and rural or southern residence when growing up lowered education attainment⁸. The secular trend variable equals age-36 if age-36 is positive and zero otherwise. It measures changes in schooling for those educated before the Civil Rights/Black Power eras of the 1960s and early 1970s⁹. Consistent with other work (Donahue and Heckman, 1991 and Smith and Welch, 1989), the negative coefficient shows that individuals born before the mid-1940s averaged fewer years of schooling the higher were their ages.

V. Discussion

This paper draws different conclusions about changes in skin tone effects from previous work. The discrepancies occur, in part, because some analysts base their judgments on unrepresentative samples or do not look across time. In addition, while continuous measures of skin tone (e.g. 1-very dark, 2-dark, 3-medium, 4-light, and 5-very light) are common in previous research (see, for example, Gullickson, 2005; Thompson and Keith, 2001; Keith and Herring, 1991; and Hughes and Hertel, 1990), they would not register the non-linearities shown in Table 2 (see also Hersch, 2006 and Goldsmith, Hamilton, and Darity, 2006).

Table 3 shows the results using a continuous rather than categorical measure of skin tone. The separate 0.274 and 0.312 point estimates for the younger and older cohorts respectively in columns (1) and (2) imply that the gap in schooling between dark/very dark blacks and medium brown blacks would fall by at least 0.04 years between the older and younger cohorts ($((0.274-0.312)*1=-0.038)^{10}$). According to Table 2, the gap between dark/very dark and medium young cohort members equaled -0.467 ($-0.544 - (-0.077) = -0.467$). The gap between dark/very dark and medium older cohort members equaled -0.089 ($-0.913 - (-0.824) = -0.089$). Rather than fall by 0.04 years, the gap dark/very dark and medium dark individuals actually increased by 0.38 years ($-0.467 - (-0.089) = -0.378$) between cohorts.

An alternative way of estimating how skin tone effects have changed over time uses the full sample with a secular trend and the interaction between continuous skin tone measures and the secular trend (see column (3)). As in Table 2, the negative coefficient for the secular trend shows that schooling declines with age for individuals born before the mid-1940s (ages 36 and over). The very small positive and insignificant coefficient for the interaction between the secular trend and skin tone implies that schooling did not decrease more with age as skin color darkens. This interaction coefficient accurately represents the relatively stable effects over time for dark/very dark individuals but understates the secular change for medium skin individuals¹¹.

Changes in the relative importance of skin tone may help clarify related research on the declining racial gap in schooling across age cohorts. The fraction of medium skin blacks equals about 0.45 (see Table 1). The skin color gap between medium and light/very light blacks fell by 0.74 years (see columns (3) and (4) of Table 2). This means that, without the decrease in the difference between medium and

light/very light black, average schooling of blacks would have been 0.3 years lower ($0.74 \times 0.45 = 0.33$). This 0.3 years is more than one-fifth of the 1.35 years decline in the difference in average schooling between blacks and whites ages 26-35 in 1950 (3.17 years) and ages 26-35 in 1980 (1.82 years) (Smith and Welch, 1989, Table 9). Explanations of declining racial differences between cohorts (all blacks compared to all whites) should be consistent with changes in skin tone effects.

IV. Summary

Almost all past work measures racial disadvantages using bipolar comparisons of all blacks and all whites. Analysis of skin tone effects questions the completeness of such research. Some of this work states that large effects continue to persist. Other papers argue that such effects are mainly historical artifacts and that the Civil Rights/Black Power eras eliminated these effects on years of schooling.

This paper shows that the unadjusted effects of skin tone on years of schooling were smaller for the young cohort than the older cohort at all skin tone categories. However, the decline for dark and very dark individuals resulted primarily from the reduced correlation between family background characteristics and skin tone. Holding family background constant, the disadvantages for dark and very dark blacks were remained about 60 percent as large for individuals ages 25-35 as for those ages 36-70. On the other hand, young medium skin individuals, who were educated during or after the Civil Rights/Black Power eras, no longer averaged significantly lower years of schooling than lighter skin blacks. The results indicate that one-third of younger cohort blacks (very dark and dark) endured skin tone disadvantages compared to 85 percent of older generations (very dark, dark, and medium). The results also suggest that, without the decline in skin tone effects for medium brown blacks, the racial gap between age cohorts would have remained larger.

Footnotes

¹ These tests were based respectively on whether wrists veins were visible to a panel of expert judges, whether the skin on the arm of the applicant was darker than the color of a brown paper bag, whether the skin was darker than the light-brown painted door of the church, or whether a fine-toothed comb became snagged as the applicant attempt to comb his or her hair (Russell, Wilson, and Hall, 1992).

² The sample is restricted to those over age 24 since some individuals in their early twenties may not have completed their schooling. Individuals over age 70 were eliminated since differential mortality rates means that they are less likely to accurately represent schooling for their entire birth cohort.

³ The original data set includes 2125 observations. The following were dropped: 2 for missing data on schooling, 59 for missing data on skin tone, 490 because age was lower than 25 for higher than 70, and 78 for being foreign-born. This left 1496 valid observations.

⁴ The missing category is very light and light skin blacks. These two groups are combined since the number of very light individuals is small. Very dark and dark blacks were also combined in Table 2 because of the small number of very dark blacks. The conclusions of the paper do not change if very dark and dark blacks are included as separate groups.

⁵ Gender differences in the effects of medium skin tone are not significant because of large standard errors. Separate coefficients for men and women equal 0.041 (0.473) and -0.221 (0.293) respectively.

⁶ A similar argument is used by Donahue and Heckman (1991) to determine the role of Civil Rights legislation on changes in relative black/white earnings. Identifying the exact way in which the Civil Rights/Black Power eras altered the effects of skin tone is beyond the scope of this study.

⁷ Other research shows that skin tone effects also persist among blacks in areas such as criminal sentencing (Blair, Judd, Chapleau, 2004; Pizzi, Blair, Judd, 2005).

⁸ The coefficients for father's characteristics were larger for the older cohort. Changes in family structure over time may explain this result. Also in this analysis, younger men averaged more schooling than younger women. The size of the gap is relatively large compared to U.S. Department of Education statistics. Median 1980 years of schooling (Digest of Education, 1995, Table 8) was 12.2 for black men

ages 25 and over compared to 12.1 for black women. Non-random selection among male sample members may account for the discrepancy. According to Jackson and Gurin (1997), the sample under-represents young people of both sexes and over-represents those from the South. Weighting the sample to control for non-random response rates does not, however, change the conclusions that, holding family background constant, the skin tone disadvantages decline between cohorts for medium skin but not for dark/very dark blacks.

⁹ The effects of skin tone did not differ by age for the younger cohort.

¹⁰ Dark and medium skin blacks differ by 1 point on the continuous skin tone scale (1-very dark, 2-dark, 3-medium, 4-light, and 5-very light). Gullickson (2005) estimates a similar coefficient (0.341) for years of schooling using a continuous skin tone variable in column 1 of his Table 3.

¹¹ Gullickson (2005) estimated a negative and significant coefficient for a similar interaction term. His results come from not including both the secular trend and the interaction between the secular trend and skin tone in the analysis. Only when both the secular trend and interaction term are included does the interaction term measure whether schooling declines more with age for darker skin respondents than for the sample as a whole. Gullickson's negative coefficient for the interaction term reflects the general decline in schooling for all older respondents.

Table 1. Means and Standard Deviations

	Ages 25-35	Ages 36-70
Years of schooling	12.612 (2.190)	10.164 (3.590)
Very light brown skin	0.017 (0.128)	0.031 (0.172)
Light brown skin	0.162 (0.368)	0.112 (0.317)
Medium brown skin	0.489 (0.500)	0.430 (0.495)
Dark brown skin	0.257 (0.437)	0.338 (0.473)
Very dark brown skin	0.077 (0.266)	0.088 (0.283)
Mother's years of schooling (if known)	9.839 (4.744)	7.833 (4.708)
Don't know mother's schooling	0.170 (0.376)	0.408 (0.492)
Father's years of schooling (if known)	8.342 (5.129)	6.882 (4.287)
Don't know father's schooling	0.346 (0.476)	0.546 (0.498)
Father: professional or clerical	0.094 (0.292)	0.060 (0.238)
Father: craftsman or operative	0.380 (0.486)	0.230 (0.421)
Father: laborer or service worker	0.215 (0.411)	0.200 (0.400)
Mother: professional or clerical	0.103 (0.304)	0.048 (0.213)

Table 1. Means and Standard Deviations (cont.)

	Ages 25-35	Ages 36-70
Mother: craftsman or operative	0.108 (0.309)	0.077 (0.267)
Mother: laborer or service worker	0.240 (0.427)	0.120 (0.324)
Mother: private household worker	0.217 (0.413)	0.279 (0.449)
Grew up in a rural area	0.194 (0.396)	0.342 (0.474)
Grew up in the south	0.172 (0.378)	0.201 (0.401)
Number of siblings (if known)	3.052 (3.665)	3.033 (3.709)
Don't know number of siblings	0.382 (0.486)	0.360 (0.480)
Lived with both parents at age 16	0.637 (0.481)	0.646 (0.478)
Secular trend	0	15.736 (10.056)
N	534	944

Table 2. Estimated Effects of Explanatory Variables on Years of Schooling Using Categorical Skin Tone Variables

	Ages 25-35	Ages 36-70	Ages 25-35	Ages 36-70
Dark or very dark brown skin	-0.780 (0.275)	-1.392 (0.332)	-0.544 (0.262)	-0.913 (0.294)
Medium brown skin	-0.159 (0.258)	-1.182 (0.331)	-0.077 (0.246)	-0.824 (0.292)
Very light or light skin	-	-	-	-
Mother's years of schooling			0.159 (0.036)	0.158 (0.042)
Father's years of schooling			-0.014 (0.033)	0.124 (0.041)
Father: professional or clerical			1.246 (0.365)	1.578 (0.434)
Father: craftsmen or operative			0.394 (0.235)	1.135 (0.258)
Father: laborer or service worker			0.484 (0.262)	0.863 (0.263)
Mother: professional or clerical			0.104 (0.343)	1.024 (0.488)
Mother: craftsmen or operative			-0.031 (0.316)	0.258 (0.387)
Mother: laborer or service worker			-0.148 (0.237)	-0.409 (0.319)
Mother: private household worker			-0.057 (0.244)	0.067 (0.236)

Table 2. Estimated Effects of Explanatory Variables on Years of Schooling Using Categorical Skin Tone Variables (cont.)

	Ages 25-35	Ages 36-70	Ages 25-35	Ages 36-70
Grew up in rural area			0.011 (0.234)	-1.084 (0.217)
Grew up in the south			-0.187 (0.236)	-0.153 (0.242)
Number of siblings			-0.089 (0.033)	-0.159 (0.035)
Lived with both parents at age 16			0.118 (0.197)	0.337 (0.214)
Female	-0.660 (0.193)	0.099 (0.225)	-0.468 (0.184)	0.148 (0.199)
Secular trend		-0.125 (0.011)		-0.088 (0.010)
Constant	13.361 (0.259)	13.173 (0.368)	11.754 (0.535)	11.385 (0.591)
R ²	0.039	0.142	0.190	0.355
N	534	944	534	944

Other variables included in the analysis were dummy variables for don't know mother's schooling, don't know father's schooling, and don't know number of siblings.

Table 3. Estimated Effects of Explanatory Variables on Years of Schooling Using Continuous Skin Tone Variable

	Ages 25-35	Ages 36-70	Ages 25-70
Skin tone	0.274 (0.103)	0.312 (0.107)	0.280 (0.108)
Secular trend		-0.087 (0.010)	-0.099 (0.020)
Secular trend*skin tone			0.002 (0.007)
N	534	944	1478

The other variables used in these analyses are the same as in Table 2.

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