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1. RACE, SKIN TONE, AND WEALTH INEQUALITY IN AMERICA

INTRODUCTION

The racial wealth gap in America is massive and intransigent (Brown, 2016; Herring & Henderson, 2016; Meschede, Thomas, Mann, Stagg, & Shapiro, 2016). It tends to compound and accumulate over time and from generation to generation (Addo, Houle, & Simon, 2016; Brown, 2016). It offers security and protection to Whites, but puts African Americans at risk (Herring & Henderson, 2016). Racial wealth inequality is built into the structure of American society (Meschede, Hamilton, Muñoz, Jackson, & Darity, 2016).

The processes and mechanisms by which racial wealth inequality operate are difficult to discern, but the effects of such inequality are readily apparent. In particular, racial disparities in wealth provide material goods, opportunities, resources, services, and psychological satisfactions for Whites, and they serve to penalize African Americans by decreasing their quality of life (Herring, Henderson, & Horton, 2014). Unlike most other indicators of well-being, wealth epitomizes a stable gauge of well-being that signals one's capability to take care of both immediate and enduring needs (Keister, 2000).

Despite the growing literature on racial wealth inequality (Addo, Houle, & Simon, 2016; Bowman, 2016; Brown, 2016; Friedline & West, 2016; Kijakazi, 2016; Zaw, Hamilton, & Darity, 2016), the sources of racial wealth disparities remain elusive (Herring & Henderson, 2016). One under-studied explanation of racial differences in wealth is colorism—the discriminatory treatment of individuals falling within the same “racial” group on the basis of skin color (Herring et al., 2004). Colorism—much like the notion of race itself—is historically contingent and based on supremacist assumptions.

In the United States, the ranking of people on the basis of the skin complexion and phenotypes has been linked to financial well-being (Hughes & Hertel, 1990; Telles & Murguia, 1990; Keith & Herring, 1991; Hunter, 2002; Goldsmith, Hamilton, & Darity, 2007; Frank, Akresh, & Lu, 2010). Generally, darker skin tones result in worse outcomes among people of color,

as people who are considered White or light are at the top of the skin color hierarchy (Sherriff, 2001; Telles, 2004; Penha-Lopes, 2004). Similarly, those who are dark or Black are at the bottom of the color hierarchy (Herring, 2003; Edwards, Carter-Tellison, & Herring, 2004; Bonilla-Silva, 2004; Bailey & Telles, 2006; Kiang & Takeuchi, 2009; Telles & Steele, 2012). These patterns have been found to be true for African Americans (Hughes Hertel, 1990; Keith & Herring, 1991), Latinos (Telles & Murguia, 1990; Flores & Telles, 2012), and various Asian groups (Kiang & Takeuchi, 2009). These rankings are also true for such indicators of well-being as income (Hughes & Hertel, 1990; Keith & Herring, 1991), educational attainment (Hughes & Hertel, 1990; Keith & Herring, 1991; Herring, 2003), hourly wages (Hersch, 2006), marital status (Edwards, Carter-Tellison, & Herring, 2004), and occupational status (Hughes & Herring, 2013).

But do skin tone differences lead to differences in wealth? If so, do skin tone differences yield differences in wealth for African Americans, Whites, both, or neither? This chapter contributes to this line of inquiry. Using nationally representative data from the 2014 General Social Survey, this chapter asks whether skin tone is associated with wealth differences between African Americans and Whites. It also seeks to determine whether skin tone differences within these racial groups are linked to intraracial differences in wealth.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Skin Tone and Intraracial Inequality

As mentioned above, “colorism” is the discriminatory treatment of individuals falling within the same “racial” group on the basis of skin color (Herring et al., 2004). It operates both intraracially and interracially. Intraracial colorism occurs when members of a racial group make distinctions based upon skin color between members of their own race. Interracial colorism occurs when members of one racial group make distinctions based upon skin color between members of another racial group.

Skin color has historically played a significant role in determining the life chances of people of color (Hughes & Hertel, 1990; Keith & Herring, 1991). It has also been important to understanding the processes of racialization (Bonilla-Silva, 2004), and it has been linked to inequality dating back to times of slavery. In slavery era America, slave owners who procreated with their Black slaves produced offspring with lighter complexions (Ajani, 2014).