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Projeto sobre Etnicidade e Raça na América Latina

Not Just Color: Whiteness, Nation, and Status in Latin America

Posted on **October 21, 2013** by **Emilce Santana**

In this study we use statistical analysis of nationally representative surveys from the 2010 Americas Barometer to examine how color, nationality, and several individual characteristics are related to white identification in Latin American countries. Unlike the common treatment of racial identification as a fixed and self-evident social status or behavior, we treat it as a flexible social outcome. We find that though white identification is shaped by skin color, it is also shaped by national context, social status, and age.

We discover that white identification is more common among persons of a brown skin color in Argentina, Chile, and Costa Rica than in the rest of Latin America, where such persons would generally identify as non-white. This suggests that the whitening ideologies of these four countries have made whiteness a more attainable goal. We also find that younger Latin Americans are less likely to identify as white compared to their older counterparts, suggesting a changing valorization of whiteness. Furthermore, college-educated persons are less likely to identify as white than their lower-educated counterparts, challenging ideas that “money whitens.” Findings for age and education suggest a recent shift to multiculturalism. In addition, we find that white identification is predicted to change in response to survey interviewer’s color, suggesting that choices about racial identification are relational.

The work of historians has been critical to understanding our findings for the contemporary period, and we hope that sociological work like ours might inform historical work on race and ethnicity.

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