In this study we use statistical analysis of nationally representative surveys from the 2010 AmericasBarometer to examine how color, nationality, and several individual characteristics are related to white identification in 17 Latin American countries. Unlike the common treatment of racial identification as a fixed and self-evident determinant of social status or behavior, we treat it as a flexible social outcome. We find that though white identification is largely 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, Uruguay, Chile, and Costa Rica than in the rest of Latin America, where such persons would generally identify as mestizo. This suggests that the whitening ideologies of these four countries have made whiteness a more capacious category. We find that younger Latin Americans are less likely to identify as white compared to their older conationals, suggesting a changing valorization of whiteness. Furthermore, college-educated persons are less likely to identify as white compared to their lower-educated counterparts, challenging ideas that “money whitens.” Findings for age and education may reflect a recent shift to multiculturalism. In addition, we find that white identification is predicted to change in response to the 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, ways that sociological work like ours might inform historical work on race and ethnicity.