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“Why Didn’t I Speak Up?” A Mexican American Woman’s Narrative of Colorism

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Keywords

Colorism, Discrimination, Mexican American, Oppression, Phenotyping, Anti-Indigeneity



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Abstract

The present study used a single-case study approach to examine how colorism manifested in the narrative of a Mexican-origin woman living in a mixed-status, transnational family residing in a community situated along the U.S.-Mexico border. Few studies have examined phenotype stratification solely within a community where Mexican Americans are the majority ethnic-racial group. A case was constructed using demographic, interview, and video data for one participant supplemented by population-level statistics. Findings suggest phenotype stratification in Mexican American communities operates outside the Black-White racial paradigm and

transcends skin tone. Three themes were found, including looking Mexican, racialized language, and seen but not named. Colorism may be difficult for Mexican Americans to articulate given its persistent elusiveness and has the potential to interfere with Mexican-origin parents' ethnic-racial socialization goals. Mental health professionals and researchers can benefit from understanding how phenotypical differences within the Mexican-origin community interact with other indicators of social stratification (e.g., class, nativity/citizenship, language, accent) to create conditions that reward Whiteness under ostensibly race-neutral criteria.

“Why Didn’t I Speak Up?” A Mexican American Woman’s Narrative of Colorism

Discrimination based on phenotype is a persistent form of oppression experienced by Mexican Americans with detrimental effects on their physical and mental health (Codina & Montalvo, 1994; Lopez et al., 2018) and negative education and class outcomes (Arce et al., 1987; Relethford et al., 1983; Uzogara, 2019). Sometimes referred to as colorism (Hunter, 2002; Landor & Barr, 2018) or phenotyping (Codina & Montalvo, 1994), phenotype discrimination refers to the inequitable distribution of privilege based on the ranking of bodies along a somatic continuum rooted in White European ideals of skin tone, faces, and bodies (Garza, 2014). Phenotyping is both a between-group and within-group phenomenon, often transmitted intergenerationally as racism becomes internalized for people of Mexican origin (Garza, 2014; Gastelum et al., 2021). Colorism has been predominantly researched in African American communities (Gastelum et al., 2021; Monroe & Hall, 2018; Montalvo, 2009) despite the emergence of scholarship documenting phenotype penalties for Chicanos/as and Mexican Americans nearly four decades ago (Relethford et al., 1983; Arce et al., 1987). Although colorism has been described in Latino/a/x communities of various ethnicities (see Campos-Vazquez et al., 2019; Chavez-Dueñas et al., 2014; Lopez et al., 2018; Garza, 2014; Hordge-Freeman et al., 2020), an emphasis on skin color alone and a tendency to subsume Mexican Americans under the pan-ethnic Hispanic/Latinx labels belies the diversity of White-Indigenous-African admixture (i.e., *mestizo*) between and within ethnic subgroups. Centuries of double colonization (Gómez, 2018) and detribalization of Mexicans with predominantly Indigenous ancestry have led to the erasure of Indigeneity as a racialized subjectivity among *mestizo* Mexican Americans (Gastelum et al., 2021; Pérez-Torres, 2006; Author, 2021). Furthermore, White-Black binary thinking about race dominates racial discourse in research (Burton et al., 2010; Garza, 2014) and prevents healing from intergenerational trauma sustained from internalized and within-group racism.

Research in Latin America (Dixon & Telles, 2017; Lewis, 2000; Telles et al., 2015; Telles & Paschel, 2014; Zizumbo Colombo, 2020) and in the United States (Arce et al., 1987; Chavez-Dueñas et al., 2014; Garcia et al., 2015; Garza, 2014; Hordge-Freeman & Veras, 2020; Montalvo & Codina, 2001) suggests colorism exists across diverse regional and ethnic contexts. Few studies, however, have examined phenotype stratification solely within a Mexican-origin community where Mexican Americans are the majority ethnic-racial group. This gap is notable, considering that people of Mexican descent currently make up the largest sub-group of Latinxs

(Krogstad & Noe-Bustamante, 2021), of which 20 million reported “more than one race” in the 2020 U.S. Census, an increase of over 500% since 2010 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2021). Phenotype discrimination experienced by Mexican Americans who identify as *mestizo/a* or mixed race and whose identities straddle symbolic and material borders (e.g., race, gender, nationality, language, citizenship) may be imperceptible to researchers who have a limited understanding of the racialization processes that include perceptions of Indigeneity (Arce et al., 1987), thereby exacerbating the existing literature gap.

The present study examines how phenotyping emerged in the interview narrative of a *mestiza* Mexican American woman living in a mixed-status, transnational household. We use Critical Race Theory (CRT; Crenshaw et al., 1995; Delgado & Stefancic, 2000) as a framework from which to interpret how structural conditions produce and sustain White supremacy via overt and covert phenotype oppression in a community that is predominantly Mexican American. CRT allows us to consider how neoliberal “race neutral” policies and practices promote the assumed superiority and naturalization of Whiteness. CRT provides a framework for problematizing how phenotyping is weaponized within the Mexican American community to re-stratify a historically marginalized population, a phenomenon that benefits Whiteness. Moreover, CRT allows us to unsettle the myth of race neutrality by centering the racialized Mexican body as a source of racial trauma that is difficult to name within a hegemonic White-Black racial discourse.

Background

Four decades of colorism scholarship on Mexican Americans has revealed the persistence of a skin tone penalty (Hunter, 2007) on employment, education, income, and psychosocial outcomes. While these patterns are similar to the colorism disadvantage for African Americans, the research diverges in important ways. These differences are rooted in two distinct colonization histories (Velez, 2019); thus, we begin with a brief historical perspective on phenotype stratification in the United States and Mexico. We then review the literature on the effects of phenotype discrimination on Mexican Americans, organized chronologically to emphasize the progressive erasure of Indigeneity as a salient dimension of Mexican phenotype. We illustrate how this erasure was a consequence of methodological choices bound by the limits of White-Black U.S. racial discourse that positions Blackness “as the opposite of whiteness” (Monroe & Hall, 2018, p. 2038).

Historical Overview of Phenotype Stratification

Stratification based on embodied features is a gendered process that apportions privilege between and within racial-ethnic minority groups by ranking individuals according to skin tone, faces, and bodies (Hunter, 2007; Garza, 2014; Landor & Barr 2018). Phenotype stratification differs from racial prejudice mainly by classifying members within the same racial group according to dominant ideas about somatic ideals (Hochschild & Weaver, 2007). Colorism research has been conducted most often within African American communities (Monroe & Hall, 2018; Rosenblum et al., 2016), primarily because the legacy of African slavery (Hunter, 2007; Keyes et al., 2020; Landor & McNeil Smith, 2019) and failed colorblind policies (Bonilla-Silva, 2009; Perez & Salter, 2019) have created conditions that systemically disadvantage dark-skinned

African Americans in U.S. social, economic, and political institutions. While slavery systems across the British, Spanish, French, and Portuguese colonies in the Americas also shaped skin tone stratification for Indigenous and Mexican *mestizos*, colonial logics of race developed differently in the United States than in Mexico (Telles et al., 2015; Reséndez, 2016). Relatively low levels of Indigenous-Anglo miscegenation in the British colonies made visible admixture between White slaveowners and enslaved Blacks a focal point of an emerging racial caste system (Jordan, 2014). Based on the tenuous one-drop rule, any amount of African blood was considered sufficient to contaminate the assumed intellectual, moral, and physical superiority of Whiteness (Gómez, 2018). As a result, mixed race children of Black and White parents were classified as Black, increasing the population of enslaved persons (Chaney & Perkins, 2018) and maintaining the myth of Whiteness-as-purity (Jordan, 2014) while increasing the human capital (wealth) of White slaveowners. A Black vs. White binary continues to dominate U.S. racial discourse (Gastelum et al., 2021), obscuring how colorism operates *within* the Black community, conferring economic, social, educational, and health advantages to light skinned African Americans compared to darker skinned counterparts (Chaney & Perkins, 2018; Hunter, 2007; Keyes et al., 2020; Landor & McNeil Smith, 2019; Uzogara et al., 2014).

Ideologies of racial categories developed differently in Mexico (Vinson, 2017), resulting in a framework that situated Indigeneity in opposition to (Spanish) Whiteness, erasing Blackness altogether. Although anti-Indigenous violence was key to Spanish colonization (Reséndez, 2016), White-Indigenous miscegenation was deemed necessary for colonial expansion and intergenerational claims to land (Vinson, 2017). A never-before-seen racial admixture, the Indigenous-White *mestizo*, was created, followed by new admixtures between *mestizos*, Indigenous, Whites, and Africans who were brought to Mexico in the 1520s to labor in newly discovered gold mines (Reséndez, 2016). A complicated racial caste system was developed to limit privileges afforded to Whiteness incurred because of White-Indigenous-African miscegenation and to protect White supremacy by ranking mixed-race persons as categorically inferior to “pure” Spanish Whites (Vinson, 2017). After independence, Mexico propagated a collective *mestizaje* ideology, with the goal of promoting a cohesive race neutral national identity. Framed as the new “cosmic race” (Vasconcelos, 1997), this identity reflected the intractability of racial hybridity among Mexicans. Collective *mestizaje* was inherently racist, however, as it signaled perceived improvement upon the racial stock of “inferior” Indians and Africans via a gradual biological whitening (Gómez, 2018). *Mestizaje* ideology led to a distinctly Mexican racialization process based on an Indigenous-White continuum of phenotype ideals (Delgado, 2020). By erasing Blackness and proclaiming racial colorblindness, Mexico declared racism extinct, despite continued significant privilege afforded White bodies with European features on multiple indicators of physical, psychological, and social well-being (Flores & Telles, 2012; Telles et al., 2015; Zizumbo Colombo, 2020).

Racialization of Mexican Americans

In contrast to *mestizaje* ideologies in Mexico, Mexican-origin people in the United States negotiate their racial identity within a White-Black paradigm that ignores Indigeneity (Gastelum et al., 2021) and subsumes Mexicanness under the pan-ethnic terms Hispanic/Latino (Mora, 2014). Mexican-origin *mestizos* who are not phenotypically Black are forced to select “White” as

their race within the complex U.S. federal racial classification system that reduces Mexicanness to an ethnicity. While Mexicans frequently reject White as an accurate designator of their mixed-race identity (Parker et al., 2015), perceptions by others continue to erase their Indigenous ancestry (Gastelum, 2021). This discrepancy is conceptually linked to the documented mismatch between American Indians' racial self-identification and what others perceive them to "be," an incongruence associated with diminished mental health among Native Americans (Campbell & Troyer, 2007). Indigenous and *mestizo* phenotypes are highly variable in Mexico (Delgado, 2020), further complicating the inclusion of physical characteristics beyond skin tone in colorism research on Mexican Americans. While Indigenous appearance was included as a phenotype measure in early studies of Chicanos (e.g., Arce et al., 1987; Codina & Montalvo, 1994), current phenotype measures rarely consider features beyond skin color, a methodological shortcoming with implications for understanding complex historical processes of internalized racism operating within Mexican American groups.

Early Studies of Phenotype Stratification

The earliest studies on phenotype discrimination among Mexican Americans used measures that accounted for the influence of Indigeneity on physical appearance. Relethford and peers (1983) used data from the San Antonio Heart Study to examine the relationship between skin color and economic stratification among Mexican Americans. Using spectrophotometry to measure skin reflectance as an indicator of Native American ancestry, the study found a negative association between Indigenous admixture and socioeconomic status (SES). Arce et al. (1987) found similar outcomes by analyzing data from the 1979 National Chicano Survey (NCS). Rather than relying on skin conductance instruments, interviewers measured *observed* phenotype, a composite variable that combined two dimensions of Chicano/Mexican appearance, skin color and physical features. Both dimensions were rated on a 5-point scale, from *very light* to *very dark* for skin color and an ostensibly subjective range from *European looking* to *Indian looking* for physical features, whereby the word Indian refers to the Spanish word for *Indio*, denoting a person of Indigenous, Mesoamerican racial heritage. Participants with a combined dark/Indian observed phenotype experienced the greatest degree of social inequality, as measured by education levels, SES, occupational prestige, and perceived discrimination compared to Mexican Americans with lighter skin tone and more European features. In a later study by Codina and Montalvo (1994) on the same sample of Mexican Americans, darker skin and Indigenous features predicted higher levels of depression in U.S.-born Chicano men but not in U.S.-born Chicana women. However, darker/Indian phenotype significantly predicted better mental health in Mexican-born women only, suggesting the colorism's effects on depression are sensitive to gender and nativity.

The NCS dataset was also used in two studies by Telles and Murguia (1990) and Murguia and Telles (1996), supporting the utility of the two-dimensional phenotype scale on Mexican Americans. Telles and Murguia (1990) found significant differences in annual earnings between Mexican American men rated as dark/Indian compared to counterparts in the medium or light/European groups after controlling for other variables. Murguia and Telles (1996) found that Mexican Americans who were rated very dark and having very Indigenous features had three

fewer years of schooling than Mexican Americans who were rated the lightest with very European features. When the sample was reclassified into three phenotype groups (dark, medium, and light), variance in schooling attributed to dark and medium classification was statistically significant, even after controlling for parents' education.

As the body of research examining phenotype discrimination among Mexican Americans grew, fewer studies retained the Indigenous/European dimension in their measure of phenotype. In a study of 102 Mexican American undergraduate students, Vázquez et al. (1997) instructed participants to self-identify on four dimensions of phenotype (skin color, hair color, hair texture, and eye color), however, only skin color ratings were used in the analysis. The authors found a complex relationship between skin tone and acculturation; biculturally acculturated participants with dark and intermediate skin tones had the highest levels of commitment to the Latino community, compared with highly acculturated participants with dark skin. Similarly, Allen, Telles, and Hunter (2000) used only the NCS skin color rating scale to compare differences in skin tone effects on education and income between Mexican Americans and Black Americans. While lighter skin participants had greater earnings than dark skinned participants, the effect was statistically significant only for Black Americans. Perceived discrimination, however, was a significant correlate of earnings for Mexican Americans only. These findings suggest skin color alone may not have captured other physical features salient to the racialization of Mexican Americans, potentially obscuring the relationship between discrimination, phenotype, and earnings.

In 2002, Hunter explained why she used the NCS skin color rating scale but not the physical features scale in her analysis of skin color and social capital on two nationally representative datasets of Mexican American and Black American women. In a clear example of Indigenous/*mestizo* erasure precipitated by methodological decisions, the second dimension of observed phenotype in the Mexican American sample was ignored because there was no equivalent scale for the Black sample. Implications of this omission were not discussed, despite disparate findings between the two groups. For instance, skin color significantly predicted income and spousal status for Black women only, contrary to the study's hypothesis. While Mexican-origin women's skin color significantly predicted education, suggesting an indirect effect on income, the absence of an indicator of Indigenous admixture was not examined as a threat to construct validity. Notably, Hunter's (2002) study appears to be the last to reference the NCS European-Indigenous physical features scale as one of two dimensions used to capture Mexican American phenotype.

Phenotype Examination in Current Scholarship

Toward the end of this century's first decade, colorism scholars began to examine the persistent racialization of the pan-ethnic label *Hispanic* among various Latino ethnic groups, unsettling dominant assumptions about Latino/a/x racial homogeneity. In these studies, phenotype included multiple dimensions of appearance, such as darker skin and features ambiguously described as "less European looking" (Chavez-Dueñas et al., 2014, p.16). Measures included interviewer rated skin tone (Uzogara, 2019), self-identified racial categories that defied U.S. federal racial classification including perceived "street race" (Lopez et al., 2018), as well as

“Other” and “Hispanic” as equivalent alternatives to White (Golash-Boza & Darity, 2008). Darker skin persisted as a correlate to discrimination experiences in a nationally representative sample of Mexican Americans, Puerto Ricans, and Cuban Americans, although these findings did not disaggregate by ethnicity (Golash-Boza & Darity, 2008), despite acknowledging disparate African admixture among the three subsamples. Lopez and peers (2018) found that Latina women who reported their street race as Mexican were 52% less likely to report good physical health than Latina women who reported their street race as White. Uzogara (2019) confirmed an association between skin tone and SES among a sample of 259 Latinos, but did not examine correlations by subgroup, despite finding that Mexican women reported the highest levels of lifetime discrimination compared to non-Mexican Latinas. These findings suggest that interpreting colorism patterns without distinguishing among subgroup may inadvertently erase the influence of phenotypical characteristics beyond skin tone on outcomes.

Elusive *mestizo* racialization has been examined through the lens of decolonization in two recent qualitative studies (Garza, 2014; Gastelum et al., 2021). Using ethnographic narratives of four Mexican-descent women living in the United States, Garza (2014) found evidence of resistance strategies at work within family relationships. Despite sometimes transmitting colorist messages, informants revealed a desire to decolonize self-directed hatred toward their Indigenous/*mestiza* looking bodies. Garza identified the family as a site of phenotype stratification socialization, implicating intimate relationships as the context for decolonial healing. Thus, nurturing oppositional consciousness requires a productive *language of difference* that can facilitate conversations about how family-level colorism is linked to structural inequalities and colonial logics of raced, gendered, and classed bodies. Similarly, Gastelum et al. (2021) examined personal narratives of 83 Latinxs and found evidence of a “reindigenization” consciousness. By embracing their *mestizo*/Indigenous/African phenotype, participants resisted the intergenerational transmission of racial trauma by naming their internalized and externalized phenotype oppression. Both studies underscored the role family plays in the reproduction of racism through everyday socialization messages about the perceived superiority of light-skinned European looking bodies. Notably, the use of qualitative methodologies exposed how participants struggled to find adequate descriptions for their experiences of colorism, a challenge that underscores the harm of embracing insidious race-neutral language and practices.

Methods

The present study uses single-case study methodology to examine the narrative of a Mexican-origin *mestiza* woman living in a predominantly Mexican-origin community along the U.S.-Mexico border. Interview data were taken from a larger qualitative study conducted by the first author about the knowledge making experiences of Mexican-origin mothers ($N = 7$). Data sources for the original study included demographic surveys and semi-structured interviews for all participants. Additionally, videos of unstructured mother-child play were collected for five participants as part of the original data collection (two participants declined the option to participate in video-recorded observations). While the original interviews did not explicitly ask participants to describe experiences of colorism, evidence of phenotyping emerged as a recurring phenomenon in the narrative of one participant. While incidents of within-group discrimination were also present in the narratives of other participants, only one participant provided multiple,

detailed examples of phenotype discrimination in her local context. Thus, we constructed a case with the unit of analysis defined as the issue of phenotype-based discrimination as described by a single participant. Exploratory case studies (Yin, 2009) are appropriate for conducting in-depth analyses of understudied phenomena, where time and place are particularly relevant to the issue being studied (Flyvberg, 2006; Hesse-Biber, 2017; Yin, 2009). All procedures for the original study received IRB approval by the University of [MASKED].

Recruitment and Participant

Purposive and snowball sampling were used to recruit participants for the original study. The first author conducted recruitment activities in a pediatric clinic in a South Texas community that is predominantly Mexican American. To be eligible for the original study, participants had to identify as Latina or Hispanic, be at least 18 years old, and be the primary caregiver of at least one child between six months and 4 years. All participants in the larger study received a \$50 honorarium for completing the demographic survey and interview. Participants who took part in an optional video-recorded mother-child play observation received an additional \$50.

The participant selected for the case, identified by her pseudonym Neyeli, was a 34-year-old Mexican-origin *mestiza* woman born in a South Texas. Neyeli was reared in both the United States and Mexico and spent the years from ages 7- to 14- years old living in the northern Mexican state of Tamaulipas. Both her parents were born in Mexico, and at the time of the interview Neyeli was married to a Mexican-born man who was undocumented and pursuing a legal path to U.S. citizenship. Together, they were rearing three U.S.-born children, ages 10-, 6-, and 2 years old. Neyeli's father resided in Mexico, while her mother traveled back and forth between Neyeli's U.S. household during the week and Neyeli's father home in Mexico on weekends. Therefore, Neyeli's family was both transnational and mixed status. Neyeli completed high school and 2.5 years of college and was a full-time caregiver for her three children. Her husband obtained a college degree from a local university but could not pursue professional employment due to his undocumented status. She reported a monthly household income of \$1500.

Case Construction and Data Sources

The case was constructed using demographic, interview, and video data from the original study supplemented by population-level statistics from the U.S. Census Bureau and The Office of Labor Statistics as indicators of racial, linguistic, and economic conditions of Neyeli's local context. Various data sources were included to facilitate cross-verification of patterns during the analysis phase, including video images from the participant's mother-child play activity to collect observed ratings of the participant's skin tone using the PERLA Color Palette (Telles et al., 2015). Integrating qualitative and quantitative sources increases the likelihood of constructing a holistic corpus of data from which to examine the topic (Baxter & Jack, 2008). Using multiple types of data is consistent with rigorous case study methodology (Baxter & Jack, 2008; Yin, 2009) and allows researchers to build thick descriptions of the phenomenon of interest (Hesse-Biber, 2017). This design allows researchers to engage more deeply with

contextual characteristics theorized as conceptually linked to the participant's experiences, including salient geopolitical conditions of her majority-minority community (Flyvbjerg, 2006).

The main source of narrative data was the participant's semi-structured interview from 2019 conducted in the participant's home. The interview was facilitated in Spanish by the first author who identifies as Chicana and is bilingual and bicultural. Questions were designed to ask participants to describe experiences of knowledge making and invalidation during a time of anti-immigrant, anti-Latino/a border policies affecting the racial climate at the U.S.-Mexico border. In the present case study, we focused on the participant's narrative descriptions of phenotype discrimination. The interview lasted 85 minutes and was audio recorded and transcribed by the first author. During case construction, the first author translated the Spanish transcription into English. The third author, who is also Mexican American and identifies as Spanish-English bilingual and bicultural verified the accuracy of the English translation.

Data Analysis

We used a multi-phase deductive-inductive analytic approach to analyze our case data. During phase one, the first and second authors read the entire transcript for familiarity with the data, followed by independent deductive coding of the interview, looking for evidence of phenotype stratification. Interrater agreement (IRA) on initial deductive coding was achieved at 84%. Coding discrepancies were discussed, revealing differences in the perceived influence of the geographic conditions on the participant's descriptions. This facilitated the transition to the second phase where inductive coding helped identify patterns and conceptual relationships between codes and categories. To increase the trustworthiness of emerging themes, we triangulated patterns with data from the mother-child play video, skin color ratings, and population-level statistics, in line with recommended practices to increase credibility in case study research (Baxter & Jack, 2008).

Results

The purpose of this case study was to examine how phenotyping manifested in the narrative of a Mexican-origin woman living in a mixed-status, transnational family residing in a predominantly Mexican American community situated along the southern U.S. border. Combined deductive-inductive qualitative analyses revealed the following three themes: (a) *looking Mexican*, (b) *racialized language*, and (c) *seen but not named*. Given the paucity of research on phenotype discrimination within Mexican-origin communities, we chose to follow the guidance from Goldberg and Allen (2015) by integrating references to prior literature in the reporting of results as an appropriate strategy to contextualize themes more effectively. All narrative quotes have been translated from their original Spanish.

Looking Mexican

The first theme, *looking Mexican*, refers to the ways in which physical features form Neyeli's racialization of *mestizo/a*/ Mexican-origin people in her community. While she never specified a constellation of traits that defined Mexican appearance, Neyeli used variations of the

term “looking Mexican” several times when describing how phenotyping was used to devalue colleagues at her former place of employment. She said, “It would drive me crazy. I would say, just because you’re different from the one who speaks pure English and perhaps looks like someone who’s not Mexican—we’re all Mexican, right?” In this example, Neyeli denoted the absence of a Mexican appearance, an ambiguous amalgam of features congruent with a documented physical aesthetic defined along a White-Indigenous continuum in which darker skin color and the presence of Indigenous facial features signal Chicano/a/x or Mexican phenotype (Arce, 1985; Arce et al., 1987; Montalvo & Codina, 2001). Neyeli’s reference to a racialized Mexican aesthetic that is recognizable in Mexican-origin communities on both sides of the U.S-Mexico border indicates the colliding of two worldviews—vestiges of nationalistic *mestizaje* ideologies (in Mexico) and the persistent Othering of Mexicans by Anglo Whites (in the United States).

In challenging the phenotyping that disadvantaged her more Mexican looking coworkers from opportunities to appear in television commercials, a prospect that would confer social and professional benefits, Neyeli recalled,

So, I would say, and why don’t you choose her? Because she’s dark-skinned or because her eyes are like this or why not...Why don’t you choose him, who’s short and dark? Because he’s ugly. I mean, maybe they wanted the bank to leave a good impression, but I think that is wrong.

The Spanish word Neyeli used as an indicator of dark skin, *moreno*, is associated with visible Indigeneity under Mexico’s colonial logics of racialization (Lewis, 2000). This discursive choice reveals the complexity of group-specific somatic ideals whereby gradients of skin tone denote distance from Whiteness while simultaneously stratifying non-Whiteness. The penalty levied upon Neyeli’s coworkers for possessing a Mexican *looking* combination of physical traits underscores how phenotyping moves beyond skin color discrimination and relies upon preconceived notions about the “distinctiveness of Mexican faces grounded in ideas of *mestizaje*” (Delgado, 2020. p. 357).

While Mexican appearance seemed to disadvantage both male and female coworkers, Neyeli emphasized the economic reward given female colleagues who possessed more European features. In one example, Neyeli described feeling angry when a Mexican-origin female employee who, by Neyeli’s account, “didn’t do her job very well,” received a promotion because she was deemed attractive compared to her “ugly” Mexican looking colleagues. It is important to note that while Neyeli did not describe discrimination aimed at her own phenotype, neither did she report benefitting from this reward system, stating, “Obviously, they’re going to use people who have, how do you say, prettier features for their commercials or to be on the billboard. But I would say, well, I didn’t care, right, because I’m a very nervous person.” Implied in this statement is a justification of employer discrimination as natural within a corporate capitalist culture whereupon racialization is shaped by free markets; however, the subtext subtly alludes to her falling outside the physical ideals of within-group beauty that she has just identified as racist. This perception of herself as falling outside the ideal aesthetic of light skin and European looking features was partially corroborated by our measure of Neyeli’s skin tone using the PERLA skin

palette (Telles et al., 2015) on images from her mother-child play video. Her mean rating of 5 on an 11-point scale indicates medium skin tone, consistent with the mean skin color rating (4.5) of 785 Mexican adults measured by Telles et al. (2015).

A surprising dynamic that emerged within this theme is how Neyeli herself enacted phenotyping as a cognitive strategy to make sense of a memory that called into question her own racialized identity. To cast the intentions of a male U.S. Border Patrol agent as nefarious and discriminatory, Neyeli described the agent's phenotype by using the stereotyping caricature of "Señor," adding that, "you'd never picture him speaking English by the way he looks." Neyeli lamented the agent's questioning of her U.S. citizenship as behavior that intensifies in hyper racialized spaces (e.g., the International Bridge separating the Global South from the Global North) giving historically disenfranchised people undue conditional power by way of a government job in Homeland Security. Further, the *Señor* stereotype is salient because it reflects damaging representations of Mexican-origin men as criminal (Delgado, 2020) and unintelligent (Gonzales Rose, 2020). Framed as such, the agent exemplified within-group stratification as a visibly Mexican-origin person inclined to discriminate against other Mexicans based on their physical signaling of illegality and criminality (Romero, 2008). Neyeli's dual perspective of phenotyping as a form of injustice and as a defense strategy highlights the multiple and complex ways that physical features other than skin color operate intraracially in bound geopolitical contexts.

Racialized Language

The second theme, *racialized language*, refers to the perception that Spanish language fluency has a downward effect on racial stratification. Neyeli referenced three distinct dynamics illustrating the darkening influence of Spanish language on racialization. First, the deep penalties associated with speaking Spanish came into focus when describing a former colleague whose achievements were diminished despite possessing other markers associated with upward mobility within colorism systems: U.S. residency status, high levels of education, and a relatively prestigious occupation as a bank accountant. After declaring, "No one wanted to speak Spanish" at the bank because it resulted in treating employees "like they were inferior," Neyeli described her colleague's marginalized position:

There was a woman, and we became really good friends. But she's from Mexico. I imagine she studied English, she had her residency and everything, but she spoke Spanish, Spanish all the time. So, it was as if people ignored you. Like they go more with the people who have more titles, more professional, those who know more English and such. But I noticed that, and it was a difference that I didn't like.

Neyeli also perceived the penalty associated with speaking Spanish as incongruent with the social capital typically afforded degreed professionals, adding, "But she's an accountant!" This indicates that the currency associated with high levels of education is conditional, based on its interaction with other embodied racial markers such as spoken language. The dynamic interaction between spoken Spanish and education must also be examined in the context of Neyeli's hometown, where only 19% of residents over the age of 25 years have earned a

bachelor's degree or higher (U.S. Census Bureau, 2019) and in a state where the average annual salary for accountants is greater than \$80,000 USD (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2020), far above the median household income of \$47,000 USD (U.S. Census Bureau, 2019) in Neyeli's border community. While class indicators may have a whitening effect for *mestizos* in Latin

America (Telles et al., 2015), the physical act of speaking Spanish indicates a shift in the racial schema attached to Mexican looking bodies that occurs across international borders. That is, though it is considered external to phenotype, spoken language is not independent of the body and contributes to the racialization of Mexican-origin people, potentially attenuating upward mobility effects of class in geopolitical spaces where *sounding alien* belies in-group acceptance.

Neyeli also identified accent as a distinct dynamic of language and a racialized marker in relation to spoken English. Despite acknowledging her community's ethnoracial homogeneity ("we are all Mexicans"), Neyeli distinguished between English that *sounds* White and English that fits the somatic schema associated with "looking Mexican". Again, when describing discrimination faced by her Mexican-born colleague, Neyeli decried the presumed social benefit afforded English that sounds less contaminated by Mexican bodies. She said, "But maybe because your accent is like a Gringo or maybe because you're an officer... they would treat someone who was more professional better." Neyeli subsequently associated someone whose English is "pure" as appearing "not" Mexican. The reference to linguistic purity and an audible Anglo White accent attached to spoken English is intertwined with the accent "penalty" (Davila, Bohara, & Saenz, 1991) leveraged against Mexican Americans. Similar to the penalty for speaking Spanish in a professional environment, Neyeli's examples underscore how Mexican-origin people's ability to produce (embodied) spoken English that is phonetically, grammatically, and semantically congruent with U.S. Anglo speakers functions as an external marker of race. In a community where 89% of residents speak Spanish at home (U.S. Census Bureau, 2019), accent discrimination becomes a form of intraracial phenotyping. This is consistent with research on how accented English attributed to racialized bodies contributes to the subjective evaluation of the speaker as less intelligent, incompetent (Gonzales Rose, 2020), dishonest, and as incapable of upward mobility (Arce et al., 1987).

The third dynamic that emerged within this theme is that of willful linguistic ignorance, whereby Mexican-origin people pretended not to speak or comprehend Spanish. In describing an attractive, non-Mexican looking woman chosen to appear in a bank television commercial, Neyeli situated the woman's linguistic choice as a flexible marker of her racialization, saying, "No, she didn't speak Spanish. Just English. And she *did know* how to speak Spanish. It's just that they would pretend like, oh, no, no, no, I don't understand you," (*italics added*). The woman's denial of her Spanish language knowledge functioned as a cognitive strategy that necessitated an embodied commitment in order to suppress a learned cultural mode. In the context of the geopolitical pressure facing Mexican looking people residing in a highly surveilled international border community (Sanchez et al., 2021), Neyeli's rendering of this cognitive-linguistic strategy illuminates the temporal and contextual intricacies of phenotyping mechanisms that transcend skin color. As part of a whitening process that could result in a reclassification of *mestizo* Mexicans into more highly ranked strata (Telles et al., 2015), Spanish-speaking Mexican-origin people can choose to self-censor or erase a culturally acquired

linguistic way of knowing multiple times throughout the life course. In this highly dynamic context, Spanish-speaking Mexican Americans negotiate power as racialized groups vying for intragroup status in social and professional spaces on a daily basis.

Seen but not Named

The third theme, *seen but not named*, refers to the challenge of making meaning out of phenotyping that Neyeli perceived but did not label. Neyeli alludes to the difficulty of identifying race-based discrimination that appears race neutral. She states, “It wasn’t very obvious, but you noticed it and felt it,” inferring that, because television commercials require attractive subjects, “there’s nothing wrong with that.” The gap between perceiving and naming led to retrospective self-castigating, reflecting the double burden placed on racial-ethnic minorities who experience discrimination yet simultaneously feel responsible for ameliorating racist behavior. Neyeli said,

And now I think, why didn’t I speak up? There used to be a complaint box and they would always tell us. And just now I was thinking, how stupid I was! Why didn’t I say anything? Nobody, nobody complained about that, but I would see it.

Neyeli’s use of the word “stupid” to self-evaluate her past inaction indicates regret for not having actively challenged the discrimination, a harm that was salient but whose implications she struggled to disentangle. Asked if she thought other employees noticed the colorism, Neyeli added, “I think so. We never talked never talked about it...out of fear.” Without the ability to discuss racial oppression with colleagues or with supervisors, Neyeli’s agency to address discrimination was limited. While there was no uncertainty in her appraisal of the discrimination (“I noticed that, and it was a difference that I didn’t like.”), Neyeli struggled to situate the locus of the transgression, using language that reflected a gratefulness discourse common among immigrant women (Lewis, 2005), thereby minimizing her employer’s culpability. She said,

And you hear a lot about discrimination, but maybe one thinks, no, no, I don’t think they’re discriminating. No, no. It’s just that the environment is very, um, how should I explain? It’s an atmosphere where they make you feel good, like family and they always throw Christmas parties and all that. But it’s something that no, no. You could see it and feel it; I don’t know, I don’t know why it was like that.

While Neyeli was confident that what she saw was discriminatory, designating it as such implied turning against her work family and the social and financial care they provided. Neyeli expressed discomfort at making sense of the contradiction inherent in an ostensibly warm environment that also appeared to tolerate colorism.

For Neyeli, the struggle to make sense of seemingly incongruent realities may have obscured inadvertent messaging about phenotype appraisals in her mother-child communication. While Neyeli did not display evidence of racist beliefs informing her parenting, she spoke frequently of embodied *preferences*. For example, she expressed deep anxiety about letting her children walk without wearing shoes, saying, “I would panic if I saw him barefoot.” Neyeli

explained how this reflected a deep-seated fear that her children would fall ill because of walking with exposed feet. She did not associate this message with frequently used anti-Indigenous slurs that have been documented in Mexican-origin communities (Chavez-Dueñas et al., 2014; Garza, 2014). Moreover, when articulating self-described maternal overprotectiveness, she recalled that with her oldest son, “I didn’t even want the sun to touch him. I didn’t want him to sweat; I didn’t want him to get dirty.” Again, our analysis did not reveal any colorist or racist intent behind these messages. Rather, they have emerged as a discursive function operating within a community whose racialization processes reflect latent anti-Indigeneity that is difficult to identify precisely because it is inconsistent with U.S. White-Black racial discourse.

Socialization messages such as “stay out of the sun” or disapproval toward dirty or barefooted Mexican bodies take on cultural significance when examined under the dual framework of historical anti-Indigeneity. In other words, Neyeli’s messages may unintentionally promote Whiteness if left unexamined. Neyeli exhibited nascent critical consciousness when prompted to speak about discrimination experiences revealing she had not yet processed the oppression, saying,

I think what I noticed today and what I am realizing, many of the things I’ve spoken about today are things that I’ve never really talked about. Maybe because no one has ever interviewed me like that, and it’s very helpful...It was beneficial because there are a lot of things that one doesn’t notice and suddenly, I’m able to see them... When we finish, I’m going to be thinking about everything we talked about.

Nayeli demonstrated an emerging oppositional consciousness, acknowledging that given the opportunity to share and discuss her experiences, connections between discrimination at work and internalized oppression can be made visible.

Discussion

Findings from this single-case study suggest phenotype stratification experienced by a Mexican American *mestiza* woman living in a majority Mexican-origin community operates outside the Black-White racial paradigm and transcends skin tone. Racialization markers for Mexican Americans include phenotype schema organized around Indigenous-*mestizo* somatic characteristics and Spanish language expression and accent that denote distance from Whiteness. Together, these dynamics contribute to the elusiveness of phenotyping awareness among Mexican Americans, a phenomenon that our participant keenly felt but struggled to name. As reflected in the participant’s cognitive reframing of her experiences with racial discrimination, indefinability created conditions that impede critical consciousness and preclude racial healing for this population.

The combination of factors shaping racialization processes for a community whose identity as detribalized, deindigenized *mestizos* is unrecognizable within U.S. race categories affects Mexican Americans in underexamined ways. Understanding how these dynamics interact with other forms of stratification and oppression for the largest non-White ethnic group in the United States requires a multidimensional approach to race that extends beyond skin color.

While we cannot generalize our findings from a single-case study, emerging patterns suggest the need to more closely examine latent mechanisms of racialization that appear to be race-neutral on the surface but whose invisibility maintains White supremacy. By applying Critical Race Theory (CRT), we interpret the intractability of phenotype stratification as consistent with historical and contemporary pillars of Whiteness ideologies: Manifest Destiny, the ongoing erasure of Native and Indigenous peoples, and the perceived superiority of nominally colorblind capitalistic values that contribute to growing economic and environmental disparities affecting vulnerable Brown communities along the U.S.-Mexico border.

The CRT tenet of interest convergence is helpful in explaining why Mexican-origin people living in majority minority communities may struggle to make meaning out of racist encounters with other Mexican Americans. Interest convergence refers to the stipulation that change that improves the lives of racial-ethnic minorities must also benefit White people (Delgado & Stefancic, 2000). By justifying the exclusion of people based on physical and linguistic Otherness as race-neutral choices tied to corporate profits, systemic employer racism rewarding Whiteness and White adjacency continues unabated. Nominally colorblind resource decisions are more difficult to challenge on racial grounds because they are based in discourses of individual responsibility and deregulated free markets that rely on Whiteness and default reference for norms and standards. Mexican-origin people whose bodies signal greater distance from Whiteness can be excluded from economic and social mobility opportunities with impunity because the penalties stand in contrast to rewards given other Mexican Americans whose bodies signal proximity to Whiteness. Under the precarity of *sameness* articulated by our participant (“We’re all Mexican, right?”), within-group racism may seem incompatible to Mexican Americans whose mental representations of racism as a White-Black problem in the United States organize their thinking about phenotype oppression. Incompatibility ultimately benefits the status quo, White supremacy.

Our case study revealed that incompatibility may function as an affective and cognitive block for the development of critical consciousness among Mexican-origin people living in communities where they are the racial-ethnic majority group. Having agency to acknowledge one’s oppressed identities and one’s complicity in the oppression of others requires racial difference be foregrounded and centered (at the intersections of gender, ability, sexuality, and other identity constructions) in any examination of racism experiences. While our participant evinced deep awareness of her husband’s subjugated identity as an undocumented Mexican man, Neyeli also admitted that she had never told her husband about the recurring colorism at work. This admission is especially telling, considering the extent to which the participant suggested ethnic identity informs her husband’s parenting and doing of family rituals. In articulating regret at not having challenged the phenotyping she witnessed at work, the participant internalized her grief, blaming herself for staying silent rather than recognizing any culpability on behalf of more powerful bank officers or of the corporate culture itself.

Internalized grief, if left ambiguous and unexamined, can contribute to the development of internalized racism (Garza, 2014). The clearest indicator of this mechanism occurred when the participant recast personal experiences of racialized Othering in the context of the highly militarized International Bridge separating the United States from Mexico. Using language that

racialized a combative U.S. Border Patrol agent as phenotypically distanced from Whiteness, the participant employed phenotype stratification against the agent as a verbal strategy to minimize the harm experienced as a brown woman living a transnational lifestyle where traversing borders and navigating two dominant national ideologies of race is part and parcel of border life. While more research is needed to examine whether these strategies are used by broader groups of Mexican Americans, this finding suggests phenotyping behavior is fluid in its meaning and may be adopted as a defensive practice for a temporary reprieve against within-group oppression.

Finally, our case study suggests that unexamined racial grief has potential to interfere with Mexican-origin parents' ethnic-racial socialization goals. While the participant recognized the cognitive growth resulting from thinking and talking about racial oppression, it is important to note that neither colorism nor broader phenotype stratification was an explicit topic of the original participant interview. Therefore, we cannot infer the participant made conceptual connections between other references to physical appearance and anti-Mexican racism. However, the frequency with which the participant expressed anxiety about the cleanliness of her children's bodies and their exposure to the sun and the bare ground/earth must be considered in the historical context of pervasive anti-Indigenous messages about skin tone, inferiority, and "savagery" documented among Mexicans and Mexican Americans. While we found no evidence that the participant intended to communicate anti-Indigenous colorism in her narrative, her admitted underexamination of the perceived effects of phenotype discrimination on her well-being may incur developmental risks. In the absence of opportunities to reflect upon racialized experiences, she may unintentionally transmit colorism as racially coded mother-child socialization messages. Combined with the temporally dynamic nature of Spanish-language self-censorship employed at will as a marker of White adjacency, unintended phenotype socialization may contribute to acculturative stress and ethnic identity ambivalence (Montalvo, 2009) for Mexican-origin youth reared in mixed-status families.

Limitations

This case study is not without limitations. The use of a single participant's narrative data to illustrate how phenotyping manifested as a within-group phenomenon has reduced generalizability. Also, the use of secondary data to construct the case circumscribed our ability to interpret the participant's narrative since the original interview guide did not ask the participant to address phenotype discrimination directly and explicitly. In addition to including interview questions about phenotyping experiences, interviews with family members whose identities may reveal a different combination of stratification indicators (e.g., undocumented status) might provide opportunities to study the relational processes of phenotyping within families and would enhance the researchers' ability to triangulate descriptions of the phenotype stratification in dyadic, triadic, or group contexts. Finally, the use of a published skin tone rating palette on video data presented challenges to interrater reliability. Although this instrument was used primarily to construct a qualitative description of the participant's phenotype for verification of themes, future studies would benefit from including the participants' own skin color self-rating for a phenomenological indication of their perceived skin tone rank relative to their broader community and perceived discriminatory experiences.

Implications and Conclusion

Findings from this case study have implications for mental health practitioners and family scholars. Counseling professionals working with Mexican-origin youth, adults, or families may benefit from understanding how within-family conflict arises from perceived psychosocial or material disadvantage owed to skin tone, facial features, accent, or language preference that signal a more Mexican appearance in communities where *Mexican-as-alien* is a dominant trope. Phenotype stratification operating within families may be difficult to articulate for Mexican-origin clients, given its persistent elusiveness. As a result, this conflict may be undetectable to non-Latinx White counselors, who predominate in the field of psychology health service (Hamp et al., 2016). Phenotype stratification may also be missed as it manifests in Mexican American parent-child relationships, whereby a darker infant or child whose facial features appear less European may trigger a parent's internal working model if the caregiver also experienced childhood racial trauma (Lewis & Norwood, 2019). Similarly, colorism operating within marital couples who both identify as Mexican-origin may contribute to ruptures in adult attachment behavioral systems that may be difficult to repair if the interventionist is unaware of this type of within-group dynamic and its potential to shape mental representations.

Scholars who research Mexican Americans can also benefit from understanding how phenotypical differences within the Mexican-origin community and between ethnically diverse Latinx groups interact with other indicators of social stratification (e.g., class, nativity/citizenship, language, accent) to create conditions that reward White adjacence under ostensibly race-neutral criteria. For example, pressure to speak English without a Spanish accent or to minimize the use of Spanish in academic or professional environments for Mexican Americans with darker skin or more Indigenous-mestizo features may be seen as integral to enacting 'American dream' achievement ideologies (Hill & Torres, 2010). This dynamic may thwart efforts by educators to create promoting environments (Garcia Coll et al, 1996) and may introduce new psychosocial risks by diminishing the perceived importance of strong ethnic identity. Finally, more research is needed to examine whether these findings are generalizable to Mexican-origin communities in variable contexts, including mixed-race families and in communities where Mexican Americans are not the dominant racial-ethnic group. Researchers can build upon this case to design larger qualitative studies for the purpose of theory building and deconstructing patterns that underlie processes of stratification that reproduce anti-Indigenous, anti-mestizo, and anti-Black sentiment among Mexican Americans. Future research is needed to understand how historical detribalization and deindigenization enacted as part of Mexico's 'colorblind' collective mestizaje ideologies have eroded Mexican Americans' access to ancestral self-knowledge. While a growing body of research has emerged examining how mestizaje ideologies maintain anti-Blackness within Latinx communities (Adames et al., 2016; Chavez Dueñas et al., 2014), future research should problematize the erasure of Indigeneity for Mexican and Latinx mestizo immigrants as it occurs in their country of origin first and again in the United States. Researchers examining the development of critical consciousness and resistance strategies in family, school, and community contexts would also benefit from incorporating measures that are sensitive to anti-Mexican phenotyping rather than relying on predetermined U.S. government racial categories.

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