

## RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Racial phenotypicality bias in educational expectations for both male and female teenagers from different socioeconomic backgrounds

Joke Meeus\*, Javiera Paredes Mayort, Roberto González†, Rupert Brown‡ & Jorge Manzi†

\* Education and Society, KU Leuven, Belgium

† Psychology Department, Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile, Santiago, Chile

‡ Psychology Department, Sussex University, Brighton, England

## Correspondence

Joke Meeus, Research Institute for Work and Society (HIVA), Catholic University of Leuven, Belgium.  
E-mail: meeusjoke@gmail.com

Received: 20 March 2015

Accepted: 9 August 2016

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1002/ejsp.2247>

**Keywords:** racial phenotypicality bias, colorism, educational expectations, socioeconomic background, gender

## Abstract

In three experiments ( $N=56$ ,  $99$ , and  $225$ ), we showed that racial phenotypicality bias characterizes educational expectations for Chilean mestizo students: participants displayed more positive educational expectations for light complexioned than for dark complexioned high school students. In Study 1, with male high school target students, the relation between racial phenotypic appearance and educational expectations was mediated by differences in perceived competence. Study 2 suggests that the gender of the target student did not influence the occurrence of racial phenotypicality bias. Study 3 showed that racial phenotypicality bias occurs in both university students and high school teachers' judgements. Although socioeconomic background of the target student partially explained the effects of racial phenotypic appearance (especially in teachers), the latter exerted an additional and independent influence on educational expectations. These results underline the fact that effects of racial phenotypicality bias should not be overlooked in the educational domain. As mediational analyses suggested, these effects only partly occur because of stereotypical associations between racial phenotypic appearance and socioeconomic background, but also because of stereotypical associations between racial phenotypic appearance and attributed competence.

Among South American Hispanics, it is common to refer to one another in terms of external appearance. Terms like 'flaco' (skinny man), 'vieja' (old woman), 'moreno' (dark man), 'negrita' (black woman), among others, are frequently used in day-to-day life. Although in some cases these terms are used derogatorily, most often they serve humorous and even affectionate purposes. Of special interest, here are the references to the 'whiteness' of someone's skin tone and facial features, which tends to be a marker for the societally idealized Caucasian origin (Waldman, 2004).

The (unconscious) influence of racial phenotypical features in impression formation has been referred to as racial phenotypicality bias (Maddox, 2004). We prefer this terminology among others proposed in the literature (Colorism, pigmentocracy, and features-based bias), because it best describes that the preference for light complexioned individuals over others with a darker complexion is based on an amalgam of racial features, like skin tone, eye color, consistency of the hair, and other facial features. We will show how racial phenotypicality bias plays a role in the impression formation about specific students' educational skills, which are known to have the potential to influence the actual performance of these students (Darley & Fazio, 1980).

Although related, racial phenotypicality bias should be differentiated from bias on the basis of ethnic origin as it reflects differential treatment on the basis of variations in racial phenotypic characteristics within a single ethnic group (Maddox & Gray, 2002). The phenomenon has mostly been studied in African-American groups in the USA (Maddox & Dukes, 2008), revealing that African-Americans with darker phenotypic characteristics tend to have lower income, fewer years of education, and a lower probability of meeting a partner than those with a paler complexion (Hunter, 2007). Although racial phenotypicality bias has been mostly studied in the USA, potentially it can be observed in any context in which different ethnic groups historically became mixed because of migration and intermarriage. The social effects of racial phenotypic features are a relatively new line of research within social psychology, and Maddox and Dukes (2008) have discussed how this knowledge can contribute to existing theories of social perception. In traditional thinking about social impression formation, skin tone and other facial features are mainly seen as a tool for observers to categorize people which, in turn, leads to the activation of social stereotypes on the basis of an all-or-none principle. This reasoning, in which all members