

Lighter skin makes for heavier pay packets

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01 February 2007

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Lighter skin leads to heavier pay packets, according to a survey of US immigrants.

Joni Hersch, who researches law and economics at Vanderbilt University in Nashville, Tennessee, analysed a 2003 US government survey of just over 2000 recent immigrants whose skin tones were rated on an 11-point scale during face-to-face interviews.

After taking into account differences in English-language fluency, education and occupation, she found that immigrants with the lightest skin earned an average of 8 to 15 per cent more than those with much darker skin. Each extra point of lightness on the scale was roughly equivalent to one extra year of education in terms of salary increase.

"There are well-known differences in salary based on race and country of origin, but I was surprised that, even after accounting for these, skin colour still had an independent effect," says Hersch. The findings could support the growing number of lawsuits brought on the grounds of colour, rather than racial, discrimination, she says. At present such cases rarely succeed.

Hersch also checked for correlations between salary and height. "There's a common saying that all US presidents are tall, and immigrants tend to be shorter on average than Americans," she explains. She found that taller immigrants indeed earn more, with 1 per cent more income for every extra inch of height. Hersch will present her research at the American Association for the Advancement of Science conference in San Francisco on 19 February.

From issue 2589 of New Scientist magazine, 01 February 2007, page 6

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Printed on Thu Feb 01 14:33:53 GMT 2007

