The General Social Survey

GSS

Implementing the PERLA Skin Tone Scale in the GSS

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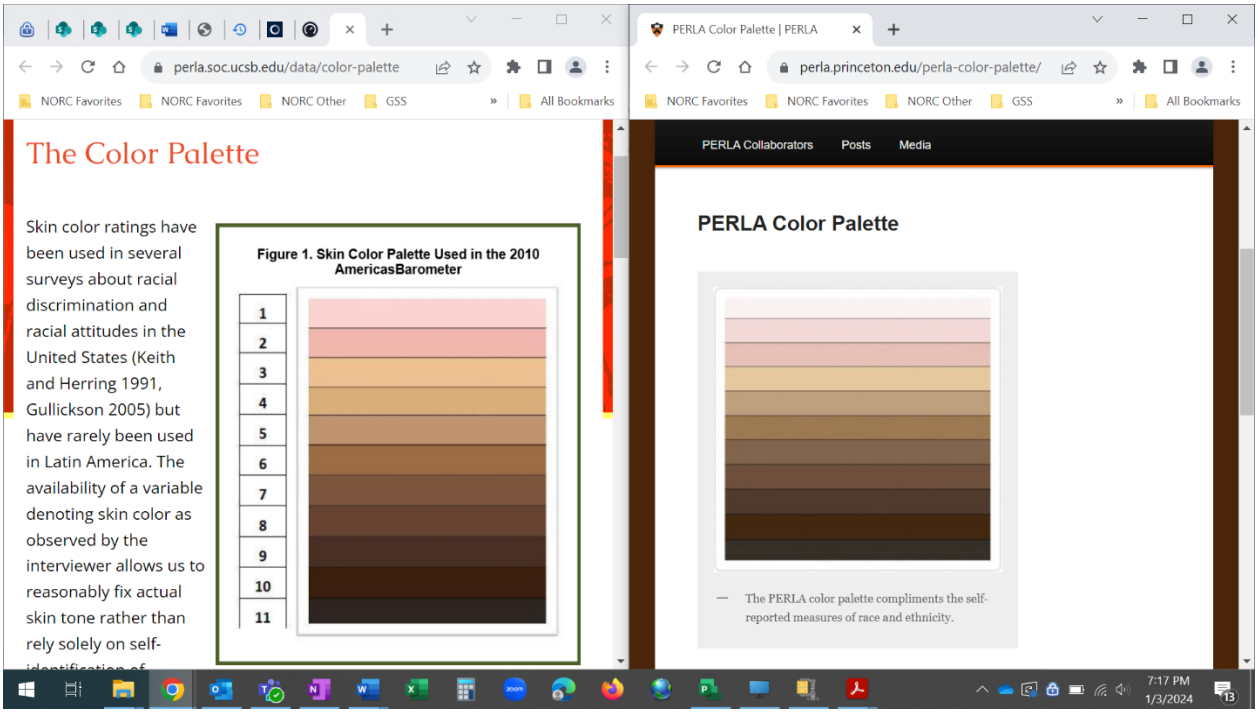
The General Social Survey (GSS) has measured skin tone using the Massey-Martin (2003) scale since 2012 (variable mnemonic: RATETONE). In late 2023, the GSS Scientific Advisory Board recommended replacing the existing Massey-Martin skin tone scale with the Project on Ethnicity and Race in Latin America (PERLA) skin tone scale (Telles, 2014). Compared to the Massey-Martin scale, the PERLA scale is a better scale as it better disaggregates lighter skin tones, particularly among White people, Latinos, multiracial people, and lighter-skinned Black and Asian persons (Telles, 2014; Gordon et al., 2022). It has been standardly used by the AmericasBarometer survey since 2012 (Cernat et al., 2019) and has been examined in other research (e.g., Foy & Ray, 2019; Gordon et al., 2022; Khan et al., 2023).

As NORC worked to implement the PERLA scale in pretesting, the NORC team discovered that two versions of the PERLA scale existed that differed in the lighter color skin tones. The official version is reported in Telles (2014) and by the University of California, Santa Barbara (UCSB) PERLA website. However, a second version of the PERLA scale (originally provided to the NORC team by the Board as the PERLA scale) was reported by a (now defunct) Princeton University PERLA website. The two PERLA scales were nearly identical (see Exhibit 1). Ten of the eleven skin tones are identical, but some skin tones sat at slightly different positions within the scale: the official colors for 1-3 match the unofficial colors 2-4 while the official colors 5-11 match the unofficial colors 5-11. Each scale has one unique skin tone: the unofficial scale contains a much lighter tone in position 1 (hex code #FFF6F7) while the official scale contains a more nuanced tan tone in position 4 (hex code #D7AE7E).

Given two different PERLA websites had two different versions of the scale, the NORC team reached out to Dr. Edward Telles, the champion behind the PERLA scale. In our communications with Dr. Telles, he confirmed the specifics of the official version but he could not confirm that the version on the Princeton website was an earlier or draft version of the final scale and thus was a potential error.

Exhibit *1: The official PERLA scale via USCB (left) and the unofficial scale via Princeton (right)*

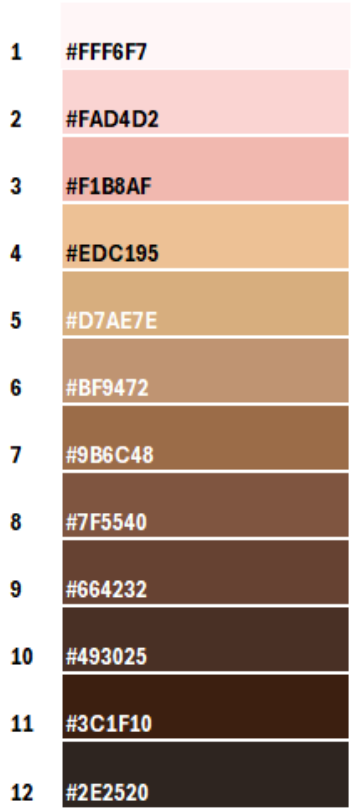


Note. Screenshot captured on January 3, 2024. As of January 2026, the Princeton website no longer exists.

While the NORC team could have defaulted to the official version of the PERLA scale, the GSS Board's concern over the homogeneity in the lightest skin tones in the Massey-Martin scale (a third to a half of all GSS respondents are categorized in the lightest category) was a concern with the official PERLA scale as it likely would have continued this trend of lighter skin homogeneity. The unofficial scale originally proffered by the Board included an additional lighter tone and thus showed promise in breaking this trend.

Upon further discussion between NORC and the Board, it was decided that further reducing the homogeneity in the lighter skin tones was useful for studying the general U.S. population. Therefore, NORC chose to combine the official 11-point PERLA scale with the lightest skin tone from the unofficial scale (#FFF6F7) creating a 12-point skin tone scale (i.e., PERLA+1; see Exhibit 2). This scale preserves the official PERLA scale while allowing for increased disaggregation of lighter skin tones. Researchers can easily combine response 1 and response 2 from PERLA+1 to reproduce the expected data from the official PERLA scale. In consultation with Dr. Telles, he was generally supportive of the GSS expanding the scale.

Exhibit *2:PERLA+1 scale implemented in GSS 2024 (with corresponding hex codes)*



Historically, respondent skin tone measures have only been observed and measured by field interviewers in the GSS. With the transition to a multimode design in 2022, skin tone measures were collected from less than half of the final sample (47 percent, 1,680 out of 3,544) because nearly half of the sample completed via web survey. The introduction of the PERLA+1 scale in 2024 would not change this. Therefore, the Board proposed that with the broader transition to web that a respondent could self-report their skin tone as they may ultimately be a better judge of their skin tone compared to an interviewer. To safely test this change in administration, the Board agreed to field the PERLA+1 scale on the web-based 2024 GSS Next follow-on survey to supplement interviewer observations in the baseline interview. This provided skin tone data from both an interviewer (variable mnemonic: PERLA) and the respondent for a subset of respondents (variable mnemonic: PERLA_SELF). The question wording for PERLA_SELF was "Using the skin tone palette below, please select the option that most matches your skin

tone." This provided skin tone data from an increased number of respondents, as well as provided both interviewer-observed and self-reported values for a subset of respondents to compare.

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