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Religious Perspectives on the Impact of Race on Health and Social Behaviors across the Life Course: An Introduction to a Special Issue

Robert Joseph Taylor

School of Social Work, Program for Research on Black Americans, Institute for Social Research, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor

Religious involvement, affiliations, and movements have had enduring and complex associations with issues of race and social problems in the United States. Principles of religious freedom and personal liberty, originally established in opposition to religious intolerance, have given rise to astounding diversity in institutional and personal religious expression. Ironically, that same religious diversity has also incited a long and unfortunate history of religious intolerance and discrimination against religious minority groups, many of whose adherents are members of racial and cultural minorities in the U.S.

Religion, and specifically, religious institutions have an important and significant history of providing safe and nurturing communities for their members and improving the personal, social, and material circumstances of racial and ethnic minority groups. Strategies and mechanisms range from the individual to organizational efforts and include the inculcation of religious beliefs and values, promotion of behaviors and practices in coping with adversity, and promoting advocacy and direct action for social change. This tradition of community organizing, support, and improvement is evident in African American religious traditions and represented by a variety of civic, educational, political mobilization, and health initiatives. The efforts of innumerable religious communities that serve domestic and global migrants to the U.S. (i.e., immigrant churches), similarly reflects the social mission of addressing the social problems affecting their communities, as well as a mandate to serve as a cultural repository and cultural broker for their members. Finally, religious institutions have been instrumental in shaping multi-faith religious coalitions to actively confront religious prejudice, discrimination and social marginalization and exclusion, as well as to push for change in domestic and global social policies and U.S. military and diplomatic actions.

Religion and religious institutions have thus been viewed in two very dissimilar ways—as social problems themselves (marginalization of religious minorities), as well as a remedy for the social discrimination and prejudice affecting their communities. The articles presented in this volume explore this second perspective on religious communities examining the various ways that they respond to the needs of their members with respect to providing supports, resources and personnel to better their social circumstances. Nonetheless, it should be apparent that the expression and response of religious communities to the circumstances described in these studies arises out of the broader social context and the continued problematic position of race and religion in the U.S.

This article is an introduction to the second special issue on race and religion appearing in *Race and Social Problems*. The first special issue, published in the March 2017, addressed a variety of topics related to religion including the correlates of religious participation (Bowie et al., 2017), religion in relation to migration (Pendergrass, 2017) and immigration policies (Brown & Brown, 2017), religion and the psychological construct of optimism (Mattis et al., 2017), the associations between religion, discrimination and drinking behaviors (Henderson, 2017), religion and depression (Mouzon, 2017) and instrumental social support exchanges (e.g., transportation, financial assistance) among African American church members (Taylor et al., 2017). This second special issue of *Race and Social Problems* also addresses several important topics regarding the role of religion in the lives of Americans. The following section highlights the research studies presented in this special issue.

The past 10 years, has witnessed a noticeable increase in the number of studies that address congregation based informal support networks. This research is significant because it acknowledges the importance and role of both kin and non-kin (such as friends and congregation members) in support networks and thus has filled an important void in the literature. Research in this area has investigated the correlates of receiving support from congregation members (Krause & Batisda, 2011; Taylor et al., 2017) and the complimentary roles of congregation and family members in social support networks (Krause, 2016; Nguyen et al., 2016; Taylor et al., 2016; Taylor et al., 2013). Research in this area also investigates the impact of congregation support networks on a variety of health and mental health outcomes. For instance, research indicates that congregational support is positively associated with a variety of positive mental health outcomes such as life satisfaction (Krause, 2004) and is protective against depressive symptoms (Chatters, Taylor, Woodward, & Nicklett, 2015), serious psychological distress (Chatters et al., 2015), and suicidal ideation (Chatters, Taylor, Lincoln, Nguyen, & Joe, 2011).

Ann Nguyen's article (2017) in this issue makes several unique contributions to this literature. First, her work examines congregation support networks among Muslims which is a much understudied population generally and especially in regards to the health and mental health literature. Second, Nguyen's work contributes to the relatively small but growing body of research on congregation support networks. This current effort builds upon her earlier research on the receipt of mosque based support among young Muslims (Nguyen et al., 2013). Congregational based support may be of greater importance in the lives of Muslims as compared to Christians. This is because many mosques also operate as comprehensive community centers that provide a number of services. Nguyen's article (2017) for this special issue investigates the impact of congregation support on self-esteem. She finds that receiving emotional support from congregants is associated with higher levels of collective self-esteem, that is, respondents who report receiving support from congregants more frequently also report more positive evaluations of Muslims, as a religious group. She also finds that negative interaction (e.g., criticisms, arguments) with congregants is associated with lower levels of personal self-esteem, an association that is consistent with other work on the adverse impact of negative interactions.

Hope and collaborators (Hope et al., 2017) also investigate the impact of congregational support on psychiatric disorders among African American and Black Caribbean adolescents.

They investigate the impact of both emotional support and instrumental support on psychiatric disorders and the impact of discrimination on psychiatric disorders. They find that discrimination is positively associated with psychiatric disorders and emotional support from congregation members is inversely associated with psychiatric disorders. Congregational support, however, does not buffer the impact of discrimination on psychiatric disorders. This analysis is notable in several respects. First, it is one of very few articles that investigate the impact of congregational support on psychiatric disorders. Second, it examines the impact of both emotional support and instrumental support from congregation members. Finally, this work contributes to the extremely small body of research focusing on religiosity among Black adolescents.

Butler-Barnes, Martin and Boyd (2017) also investigate religiosity among African American adolescents. Specifically, they examine the impact of adolescent religiosity and parental religious socialization practices on adolescent psychological well-being. Their findings indicate that adolescents' personal communication with God is positively associated with psychological well-being. Further, African American adolescents who report lower levels of having a relationship with God, and who also report having a parent with low levels of religiosity, have lower levels of psychological well-being. Collectively, this study (Butler-Barnes et al., 2017) and the Hope study (Hope et al., 2017) contribute to the limited research on religiosity among Black adolescents.

Two studies in this special issue address religious influences on help-seeking for mental health and other serious problems (Hays & Lincoln, 2017; Chatters et al., 2017). Hays and Lincoln (2017) examine the impact of religious participation on both formal and informal help-seeking for psychiatric disorders among African Americans. This is an important issue because of the under-utilization of mental health services among all groups and particularly among African Americans. Seeking assistance for psychiatric problems is extremely important because of the potential numerous negative consequences of untreated psychiatric problems, including self-medication through substance abuse, difficulties in marital and romantic relationships, work and employment problems, and suicidal behaviors (Joe et al., 2006; Kessler et al., 1998; Taylor et al., 2012). Using latent class analysis, Hays and Lincoln (2017) find that African Americans with mental disorders seek out a variety of professional and informal sources of help with some individuals accessing more than one source for assistance. One of their important findings is that African American religious values may not necessarily be at odds with seeking help for a psychiatric disorder from professional mental health practitioners. This study is a follow up to other work by Hays on help seeking among African Americans (Hays & Gilreath, 2016).

The article by Chatters et al., (2017) also investigates one aspect of help-seeking for serious health and mental health problems. They explore differences between African Americans and non-Hispanic whites in the use of clergy for counseling. Their goal is to help understand the paradox in this field that African Americans attend religious services more frequently, have more contact with clergy, and receive more general support from clergy, but are less likely to seek help from clergy. They find that non-Hispanic whites are more likely than African Americans to use clergy for serious personal problems. This significant difference, however, is somewhat mediated by the fact that African Americans are more likely to see

clergy in a religious setting (church) and non-Hispanic whites were more likely to see clergy in other settings including hospitals. In addition, because African Americans have more contact with clergy (Krause & Batisda, 2011); and are more likely to see them as a member of their social network, they may be less likely to discuss personal problems such as marital issues. Chatters et al., (2017) results reveal that seeking assistance from clergy is much more nuanced than previously thought. Their paper builds upon previous research on the use of clergy (Chatters et., 2011; Mattis et al., 2007; Neighbors et al., 1998; Taylor et al., 2011; Taylor et al., 2004; Wang et al., 2003).

The article by Weng (2017) is a unique examination of the influence of race and religion in the utilization of social services. Weng conducted semi-structured interviews with 27 social service providers to explore their beliefs regarding the degree to which issues of race and religion impact the delivery of social services. Two of the themes she identified in her study were: 1) the marginalization of smaller racial and religious groups and 2) the role of race and religion in social services. Several of the social service providers in her study noted that greater inclusiveness of agency staff, both in terms of race and religion, would be helpful in providing better services. Her study highlights the importance of understanding social service providers' perceptions and attitudes in working with marginalized racial and religious populations.

Lastly, the article by Cobb, Üsküp and Jefferson (2017) is an interesting examination of attitudes about racial inequality among African Americans. Cobb and colleagues investigate differences in attitudes concerning racial inequality between African Americans who attend religious services in overwhelmingly Black congregations and those attending religious services in overwhelmingly White congregations. They find that African Americans who attend religious services in congregations that are overwhelmingly White are significantly less likely to attribute racial differences in socioeconomic status to a lack of African American educational opportunities. The authors argue that racial composition of congregations is an important factor to consider when investigating African American attitudes about the causes of racial inequality. This article continues the work of Cobb and associates (Cobb et al, 2013) in this area.

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