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Congregational Composition and Explanations for Racial Inequality Among Black Religious Affiliates

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Abstract

Objective—Prior research suggests that congregational characteristics are associated with the racial attitudes of Black churchgoers. This study examines the relationship between congregational diversity and beliefs about the Black/White socioeconomic gap among Black religious adherents.

Method—Drawing upon pooled data from the General Social Survey and the National Congregations Study, we fit binary logistic regression models to estimate the association between congregational size and the explanations of Black/White economic inequality among Black religious adherents.

Results—Findings from our study reveal that congregational diversity is one factor that accounts for intragroup differences in racial attitudes among Black religious affiliates. Relative to Blacks that attend religious services in overwhelmingly Black congregations, Blacks that attend religious services in congregations that are overwhelmingly White and are overwhelmingly comprised of non-Black racial/ethnic minorities are significantly less likely to attribute Black/White socioeconomic gaps to structural factors.

Conclusion—Our study demonstrates that congregational diversity is a source of intragroup variation in racial attitudes among Black religious affiliates, which may attenuate the ability of such congregations to bridge racial divisions.

Keywords

Sociology of Blacks; religion; racial attitudes; contact theory; racial inequality

Though some view the election of the first American President of African descent as a sign of racial progress, racial disparities in income, unemployment, wages, and wealth persist (Hughes and Thomas, 1998; Darity and Meyers, 1998; Massey, 2008; Stewart and Dixon, 2010). The persistence of racial inequalities over the past forty years presents a dilemma for both scholars and activists alike (McDaniel, 1998; Wilson, 1978). Specifically, what factors shape Blacks' explanations for persistent Black/White socioeconomic gaps in the United States? Understanding the factors that shape Blacks' understanding of the Black/White socioeconomic gap has social, political, and policy implications. For instance, prior

scholarship demonstrates strong linkages between racial attitudes and support for racial policies (Fox, 2004; Hunt, 2007), in addition to government spending on social policies among states (Johnson, 2001).

Social scientists have sought to determine the factors that shape Americans' beliefs about race-related issues among Blacks (Bobo et al., 2012; Bobo, 2001; Dawson, 1994). Because many Black Americans view the Black/White socioeconomic gap as a moral issue, a growing body of literature in this area focuses on the role of religion in the formation of racial attitudes among Blacks (Edwards et al., 2013). Prior research has demonstrated statistically significant associations between various aspects of religious life (e.g., religious affiliation [Emerson and Smith 2000], religious service attendance (Brown 2011), and fundamentalist religious beliefs [Davis and Robinson 1996; Edgell and Tranby 2007]) and racial attitudes among Black religious affiliates. However, less is known about the ways that congregational diversity shapes racial attitudes among Black religious affiliates. This oversight in the literature is curious, given high levels of religiosity among Blacks (Chatters et al. 1999; Lincoln and Mamiya 1992; Shelton and Emerson 2012), as the percentage of Black Americans who attending religious services in overwhelmingly Black congregations continues to decrease.

The idea that congregational diversity is associated with variations in racial attitudes among Blacks is congruent with the intergroup contact theory. Gordon Allport's (1954) contact hypothesis argues that isolation from dissimilar racial and/or ethnic groups may breed racial resentment. In this scenario, majority racial groups are deprived of the opportunity to have their beliefs about dissimilar racial/ethnic groups challenged. Though prior research has examined how and why interracial contexts inform the racial attitudes of Whites, less is known about the ways that racial contexts shape the racial attitudes of Black Americans. Yancey (2001) suggests that actual or perceived contact with Whites and other racial/ethnic groups may lead Blacks to adopt the perspectives the majority group. However, scholarship on the role of congregational contexts and the adoption of racial attitudes among Blacks offers mixed support for the intergroup contact thesis. On the one hand, some evidence suggests that Blacks who attended racially diverse congregations reported racial attitudes that were no different when compared to Blacks who attended overwhelmingly Black racial homogenous congregations (Cobb et al. 2015; Emerson and Yancey 2008; Yancey 2001). On the other hand, other evidence suggests that Blacks that attend racially homogenous congregations have racial attitudes that are more anti-structural and less individualist than Blacks that attend racially homogenous congregations (Edwards 2005).

The present study aims to contribute to literature on congregational characteristics and racial attitudes by examining the ways the racial composition of a congregation is associated with racial attitudes. Though this is not the first study to examine how congregational diversity is linked to racial attitudes among Black religious affiliates, there are key differences between the present study and prior examinations on this topic. First, this study draws on a subsample of Black religious affiliates from nationally representative data to how congregational characteristics are associated with variations in racial attitudes. Second, the present study places Blacks that attend religious services in overwhelmingly Black congregations as the reference to examine whether the racial attitudes of this group are significantly different

from Blacks that attend religious services in (1) racially diverse congregations, (2) Blacks that attend religious services in overwhelmingly White congregations, and (3) Blacks that attend religious services in congregations that are overwhelmingly comprised of non-Black racial/ethnic minorities. In line Yancey's (2001) claim that lower proportions of non-Blacks in a congregation will be associated with decreased support for structural and individualist explanations of racial inequality, we argue that the proportion of non-Blacks in a congregation will be associated with decreased support for structural and anti-individualist explanations for racial inequality. Findings from our study offer some support for this idea, as Blacks that attend religious services in predominantly White religious congregations are less likely to support structural explanations for racial inequality than their counterparts in overwhelmingly Black religious congregations.

DATA AND METHODS

Data for these analyses stem from two sources: the General Social Survey (GSS) and the NCS. We use individual-level data from the 1998, 2006, and 2014 GSS, a nationally representative cross-sectional survey of U.S. adults conducted by the National Opinion Research Center (Chaves 2007). Since 1994 the GSS has sampled roughly 3,000 persons in even-numbered years. We use GSS data from 1998, 2008, and 2014 because in these years the survey included special modules on religion and spirituality. These individual-level GSS data are combined with data from the NCS, a survey of a nationally representative sample of religious congregations in the United States. The 1998, 2006, and 2014 GSS included a set of items asking respondents who say they attend religious services at least once or twice a year to report the name and location of their religious congregation (Chaves and Anderson 2008). Because each NCS congregation was nominated by at least one GSS respondent who attends that congregation, the congregation-level data gathered by the NCS can be linked to the individual-level data collected from the GSS respondent who attends that congregation. This linkage, when necessary, enables us to examine the effects of congregational characteristics on individuals. The response rates for the NCS were 80 percent in 1998, 85 percent in 2006, and 83 percent in 2014.

Dependent Variables

The racial attitudes that we consider are explanations for the socioeconomic gap between Blacks and Whites in the United States. Our dependent variables are based on the GSS question: "On average, Blacks have worse jobs, income, and housing than White people do. Do you think these differences are..."

- A. Mainly due to discrimination.
- B. Because most Blacks don't have the chance for education that it takes to rise out of poverty.
- C. Because most Blacks just don't have the motivation or will power to pull themselves out of poverty.

According to Hunt's (2007) distinction between structural and individualist attitudes, structurally-oriented racial attitudes attribute economic gaps between Blacks and Whites to

systemic deficiencies within social structures and institutions. Therefore, respondents who adhere to structural explanations are those who answered affirmatively to option A (mainly due to discrimination) and/or B (lack of educational opportunities). Individualist explanations for racial inequality emphasize personal choices or innate inferiority. Individuals who hold individualist or “person-centered” views of racial inequality were those who responded yes to option C (lack of motivation). The GSS included another individualist response option to explain differences between Blacks and Whites: Because most Blacks have less in-born ability to learn. Given less than 10 percent of Americans that respond yes to this question, In line with previous research on race, religion, and racial attitudes (e.g., Emerson et al. 1999; Emerson and Smith 2000; Hinojosa and Park 2004), we exclude this measure from our analysis.

Independent Variables

Congregational Composition—Following previous research on racial diversity in faith communities (Christerson et al. 2005; DeYoung et al. 2003; Edwards 2008; Emerson 2006; Marti 2005; Yancey 2007), we define overwhelmingly Black congregations as houses of worship in that which the proportion of Blacks in the congregation is 80 percent or more of the congregation. This will serve as the reference group. Overwhelmingly White congregations are houses of worship in which the proportion of Blacks is 80 percent or more of the congregation. Multiracial congregations or racially diverse congregations are places where no one racial group is 80 percent or more of the congregation. Consequently, our analysis is limited to Black adults who identify with a faith community at least marginally. This accounts for approximately two-thirds of American adults (Chaves et al. 1999; Dougherty et al. 2007).

Control Variables

Multivariate models include a host of socio-demographic and ideological controls among Black religious affiliates. *Age* is measured in years and captures all respondents from age 18 to 89. *Education* is measured in years. *Female* is coded “1” if female and “0” if male. Following prior research (Steensland et al. 2000) we divide our respondents into the following religious groups: White Conservative Protestant, Roman Catholic, Historically Black Religious Tradition, and Non-Christians. Black Protestants are the reference group in each of the models. Political views ranges from liberal to conservative. In order to control for region, we created dummy variable for South (1=South, 0=non South). Finally, because we are using data from three points in time across years, we control for survey *year*.

Analytic Procedure

In Table 1, we present descriptive statistics combined for the GSS-NCS sample. We utilize binary logistic regression as part of our analytic strategy to test the influence of congregational composition on explanations for Black/White socioeconomic inequality. Table 2 focuses on the explanations for Black/White inequality (means) across congregational contexts. Finally, Table 3 presents the estimated odds ratios for structural and motivation explanations, again, among Black Religious affiliates. In Table 3, a statistically

significant effect indicates that the odds of responding yes to the particular belief about Black/White inequality either increases or decreases.

RESULTS

Table 1 presents descriptive statistics on the variables in our analyses. Blacks religious affiliates who attend predominately Black congregations comprise 78% of all respondents in our sample. A significant minority (11%) of our sample attended religious services in overwhelmingly White congregations, while 12% of Black religious affiliates in our sample attend multiracial. Nearly three quarters of our respondents (75%) attended religious services in a denomination that is a part of historically Black religious tradition. Seven percent of Blacks that attended religious services in a congregation that was a part of Roman Catholicism, while 13% of Blacks attended religious services in a congregation that was a part of a Evangelical or Conservative Protestant congregation. The mean age of our sample is 45, and on average, respondents had 13 years of education. Our sample is overwhelmingly comprised of women (70%), and individuals who reside in southern states (64%).

Racial and Ethnic Differences in Attributing Black/White Socioeconomic Differences to Racial Attitudes

Table 2 displays the mean comparisons on beliefs about the causes of racial inequality in America across four types of faith communities among Black religious affiliates. Blacks who attend overwhelming Black congregations exhibit stronger support for structural explanations of racial inequality. Though the mean score for support of structural explanations of racial inequality for racial inequality was higher for Blacks that attend religious services in an overwhelmingly Black congregation relative to those that do no), the mean score for support of structural explanations for racial inequality was significantly lower for Blacks that attended religious services in overwhelmingly Black congregations.

Table 3 displays models that estimate the net effects of congregational demographics and covariates on Black's support for structural and individualist understandings of racial inequality. As anticipated, we find some evidence that the racial composition of a congregation accounts for differences in racial attitudes among Black religious affiliates. Specifically, results from Model 1 suggest that, relative to Blacks that attend religious services in overwhelmingly Black congregations, the odds of strong support for structural explanations for racial inequality versus the combined middle and low categories are lower for Blacks that attend religious services in congregations (OR: .20, $p<.001$) and Blacks that attend religious services in congregations that are overwhelmingly comprised of Asians/Indian/Latino Congregations (OR: .10, $p<.05$). Blacks who attend religious services in Roman Catholic, White Evangelical, White liberal or moderate, and non-Christian congregations are no more likely to support attribute the Black/White socioeconomic gap to structural sources than Blacks who attend religious services in congregations that are a part of a historically Black religious Protestant tradition. Older respondents are much more likely to affirm structuralist explanations for racial inequality than younger respondents.

In Model 2, we whether congregational diversity is associated with differences in attributing the Black/White socioeconomic gap to explore the odds that Blacks attribute Black/White

socioeconomic disparities to unequal access to quality education. In contrast, we observe no statistically significant differences between Blacks in majority Black congregations and majority non-Black congregations. Likewise, we observe no statistically significant differences between Black Protestants and Black Non-Protestants. This may be attributed to the survey's sample, as survey year is statistically significant. Finally, we observe statistically significant differences in both age and education of respondent. Older respondents are much more likely to cite individualist or "person-centered" views of racial inequality than younger respondents. These findings correspond directly to the education level of the respondent. More educated respondents are also more likely to also attribute Black/White socioeconomic disparities to individual motivation.

DISCUSSION

Our primary aim in this study was to investigate the association between congregational composition and attributions of Black impoverishment among Black religious affiliates. Though prior research suggests that Blacks that attend religious congregations where Blacks are not the majority may adopt perspectives on racial inequality that are unique from Blacks attendees of overwhelmingly Black congregations, tests of this claim remain limited. Our results reveal some support for this claim. Specifically, Blacks who frequent congregations that are overwhelmingly comprised of Whites or non-White racial/ethnic minorities exhibit *less* support for the structural view of racial inequality than Blacks that attend religious services in congregations that are overwhelmingly Black. There was, however, no association between congregational composition and individualist racial attitudes among Black religious affiliates.

Our results highlight the need for an examination of factors that shape the racial attitudes of Black religious affiliates. One recommendation is to explore the possible mediators of the link between congregational composition and racial attitudes among Black religious affiliates. First, prior on congregational characteristics suggests that congregational size is associated in increasing racial diversity within a congregation, and anti-structural explanations in racial inequality (Cobb et al. 2015). Given that an increasing percentage of African Americans attend religious services in non-Black and larger congregations, congregational size may explain some of the association between congregational composition and support for structural explanations for racial inequality. Second, research on congregational diversity also suggests that Blacks that attend religious services in non-White and/or larger congregations may face greater difficulty in fostering perceptions of social warmth and intimacy. Since social embeddedness and has been shown to shape racial attitudes, some of the association between congregational diversity and racial attitudes may be explained by social embeddedness within a congregation. Marti's ethnographic research on racially diverse congregations suggests that, within these diverse religious contexts, ethnic identities can be transcended (or at least minimized) in order to unite congregants around a shared religious identity. Therefore, it may be helpful to examine how congregational composition may be associated with Blacks' racial identity.

Several limitations of this study should be acknowledged. First, our data are cross-sectional and thus we cannot make claims about causation or consistency of the observed associations

over time. Second, given that Black respondents are not clustered within congregations in our linked data sets, we cannot use more sophisticated statistical procedures, such as multilevel modeling. Third, although we theorize about the importance of context, our measure of context is based on individual reports of the racial diversity within a congregation.

Nevertheless, we propose a continued examination of the ways that congregational context shape racial attitudes among Black religious affiliates. Though we do not wish to argue here that intimate cross-race relationships are absent within congregations that are not overwhelmingly Black, our findings suggest that, despite the potential of congregations that are no overwhelmingly comprised of Blacks, attending religious services in a congregation that is overwhelmingly comprised of Blacks affirms Blacks' support for structural explanations for racial inequality. Future research on the consequences of participating in congregations among Blacks should disentangle the mechanisms by which racially homogenous and diverse faith communities reinforce dominant racial belief systems among Blacks.

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Table 1

Descriptive Statistics, General Social Survey/National Congregations Study (N=400)

	Mean/%	Min	Max
Congregational Characteristics			
Overwhelmingly Black Congregation	76%	0	1
Multiracial Congregation	11%	0	1
Overwhelmingly White Congregation	12%	0	1
Overwhelmingly Asian/Latino/Indian	1%	0	1
Religious Tradition			
Roman Catholic	7%	0	1
White Conservative Protestant	13%	0	1
Black Protestant	73%	0	1
White liberal or moderate	5%	0	1
Non-Christian	2%	0	1
Sociodemographics			
Age	44.5	18	89
Years of Education	13.2	2	20
Female	70%	1	2
South	64%	0	1
Survey Year			
1998	29%	0	1
2006–2007	33%	0	1
2012	38%	0	1
Religious Service Attendance			
Church Attendance	5.62	2	8

Table 2

Mean Comparisons for Explanations of Black/White Inequality Among Black Religious Affiliates Across Congregational Contexts, General Social Survey/National Congregations Study (N=400)

	Structural	Motivation
Overwhelmingly Black Congregation	2.09	0.43
Multiracial Congregation	2.02	0.38
Overwhelmingly White Congregation	1.72 ^a	0.47
Overwhelmingly Asian/Indian/Latino Congregations	1.33	0.50

^a Difference between Blacks that attend overwhelmingly Black and overwhelmingly White congregations is significant at .01 level, two-tailed test.

Table 3

Estimated Odds Ratios for the Explanations of the Black/White Socioeconomic Gap Among Black Religious Affiliates, General Social Survey/National Congregations Study

	Structural Model 1	Motivation Model 2
Congregational Diversity		
Multiracial Church Attendees	0.483 (0.264)	0.514 (0.315)
Attendees of Overwhelmingly White Congregations	0.197 *** (0.121)	0.616 (0.408)
Attendees of Overwhelmingly Asian/Indian/Latino Congregations	0.0964 * (0.124)	0.701 (0.868)
Religious Traditions		
Roman Catholic	2.144 (0.997)	0.654 (0.343)
White Conservative Protestant	1.846 (1.075)	2.201 (1.375)
White Liberal or Moderate	3.070 (2.227)	2.545 (2.031)
Non-Christian	3.270 (2.723)	3.200 (2.839)
Sociodemographic Characteristics		
Age	1.017 ** (0.00662)	0.986 ** (0.00703)
Education	1.033 (0.0380)	0.846 *** (0.0362)
Female	1.102 (0.234)	0.694 (0.162)
South	0.837 (0.168)	1.035 (0.232)
2006	0.575 ** (0.143)	1.696 * (0.473)
2012	0.538 *** (0.128)	2.099 *** (0.557)
Church Attendance	1.052 (0.0565)	1.035 (0.0625)
Constant cut1	1.213 (0.893)	
Constant cut2	5.134 ** (3.805)	
Constant		11.64 *** (9.712)
Observations	400	400

SE in parentheses

p<0.01,

**
p<0.05,

*
p<0.1