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Racial identity and the quality of life among blacks and whites in the U.S.

K. Jill Kiecolt[*], Michael Hughes

Department of Sociology, 225 Stanger St. MC0137, Virginia Tech, Blacksburg, VA 24061, USA

A B S T R A C T

Social identity theory and research on mental health among racial minority groups suggest that a stronger, more positive racial identity will be related to a higher subjective quality of life. We investigate how ingroup closeness, ingroup evaluation, and ingroup bias are associated with happiness, positive affect about life, and generalized trust for blacks and whites, using partial proportional odds models. Data came from the 1996–2014 General Social Surveys (N = 6553). Ingroup closeness and more favorable ingroup evaluation had mostly positive associations with the quality of life dimensions. Contrary to what social identity theory would predict, ingroup bias was either unrelated or negatively related to them. Racial identity functions somewhat differently for blacks and whites. Ingroup evaluation and ingroup bias were related to greater positive affect about life for blacks but lower positive affect about life for whites.

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1. Introduction

Blacks continue to have a lower subjective quality of life than whites. Blacks score lower than whites on happiness, life satisfaction and trust in people (Coverdill et al., 2011; Hughes and Thomas, 1998; Thomas and Hughes, 1986; Wilkes, 2011). Differences remain when other influences on the quality of life, such as socioeconomic status, are controlled. Recently Coverdill et al. (2011) proposed that racial identity also may contribute to quality of life assessments. They suggested that group consciousness—a sense of ingroup deprivation and recognition of its structural sources—may sensitize minority group members to racial discrimination, lowering their subjective quality of life. Most studies, however, find that a stronger racial identity neither intensifies nor buffers harmful effects of discrimination on mental health (Pascoe and Richman, 2009).

Our study uses social identity theory to examine whether racial identity boosts the subjective quality of life. Most studies of racial identity have related it to racial minorities' self-attitudes and mental health. A stronger or more positive racial identity is related to better self-attitudes and mental health for blacks (Brown et al., 2002; Hughes et al., 2015; Ida and Christie-Mizell, 2012). Work on whites' racial identities, in contrast, has focused on explaining how whites' racial identity affects political attitudes and behavior that legitimate their status as a dominant group and perpetuate racial inequality (Croll, 2007; Hartmann et al., 2009; McDermott and Samson, 2005; Lewis, 2004; McDermott, 2015). Consequently, we know little about whether racial identity benefits the subjective quality of life for blacks and whites (but see Williams et al., 1999; Yap et al., 2011).

* Corresponding author.
  E-mail addresses: kiecolt@vt.edu (K. Jill Kiecolt), mdh@vt.edu (M. Hughes).

Based on theory and research on racial identity, we expect closer racial identification and positive ingroup evaluation to promote the subjective quality of life. More controversially, social identity theory emphasizes ingroup bias—evaluating one's ingroup more favorably than an outgroup—as the lynchpin linking ingroup identification to positive self-feelings (Tajfel and Turner, 1986). However, because of persisting racial inequality, ingroup bias has different meanings for blacks and whites. For whites, ingroup bias reflects cultural racism—ideas and images that convey black inferiority and white superiority (Williams and Mohammed, 2013). For blacks, ingroup bias implies resistance to cultural racism. Consequently, it may affect the two groups' subjective quality of life differently.

We examine how racial identity influences three broad indicators of the subjective quality of life for blacks and whites. Using data from the 1996–2014 General Social Surveys (Smith et al., 2015), we address three research questions: First, is racial identity associated with a higher subjective quality of life among both blacks and whites and if so, does its effect differ by race? Second, which is more beneficial for the quality of life: positive ingroup evaluation or ingroup bias? Third, does racial identification interact with ingroup evaluation and ingroup bias to influence the subjective quality of life? Our study contributes to the literature on the subjective quality of life and to research and theory about racial identity. Our findings both support and challenge social identity theory.

2. Background

2.1. Race and the quality of life

Numerous studies have found that blacks have a lower quality of life than whites on several dimensions. Blacks score lower than whites on overall happiness (Coverdill et al., 2011; Hughes and Thomas, 1998; Yang, 2008). They also tend to be less satisfied with their lives (Barger et al., 2009; Beatty and Tuch, 1997; Hughes and Thomas, 1998; Thomas and Hughes, 1986), although one study found no significant difference (Neighbors et al., 2011). A large body of research has documented lower generalized trust in people among blacks (Coverdill et al., 2011; Hughes and Thomas, 1998; Smith, 2010; Wilkes, 2011).

2.2. Racial identity as a social identity

Racial identity, like other social identities, involves a person's awareness of belonging to a social category or group, together with the value and emotional significance of belonging (Tajfel and Turner, 1986). In addition to self-categorization as a group member, two important dimensions of identity are degree of identification with or feelings of closeness to a group and a more or less positive evaluation of one's group (Ashmore, Deaux, and McLaughlin-Volpe, 2004; Sellers et al., 1998).

Social identity theory proposes that people want to maintain positive social identities that distinguish their group from other groups. Doing so involves not only appraising their ingroup favorably (positive ingroup evaluation), but also more favorably than a relevant outgroup (ingroup bias). Such appraisals—or identity meanings—take the form of cultural stereotypes (White and Burke, 1987), e.g., judgments about how wealthy, intelligent, or hardworking groups are (Bobo and Massagli, 2001).[1] The theory predicts that closer identification with an ingroup will be related to more favorable ingroup evaluation and greater ingroup bias.

In social identity theory, higher-status groups are assumed by social consensus to have positive characteristics. Consequently, members of higher-status groups should have little difficulty evaluating their group favorably and evaluating it more favorably than outgroups. Members of devalued groups such as racial minority groups are assumed to work harder to do so (Stets and Burke, 2000; Tajfel and Turner, 1986), as they must counter prevalent negative cultural stereotypes (Bobo and Massagli, 2001; Williams and Mohammed, 2013).[2] Social identity theory assumes that they largely succeed in doing so.

2.3. Racial identity among blacks and whites

How do blacks and whites compare on ingroup identification, ingroup evaluation, and ingroup bias? Studies of racial identification find that blacks feel closer to their racial group than whites do (Gurin et al., 1980; Williams et al., 2012; Wong and Cho, 2005), and blacks are more likely than whites to feel "very close" to their ingroup (Thornton et al., 2012). Racial identification gives both blacks and whites a sense of inclusion, and in addition it affords blacks a sense of distinctiveness, because they are a numerical minority (Leonardelli et al., 2010). Racial identity also is more important to blacks. About 38.2% of blacks, but only 10.3% of whites, selected their racial identity as one of the three identities that were most important to

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[1] Scholars also have conceptualized and measured racial identity as a multidimensional construct which includes identity centrality or importance, ingroup identification or closeness, ingroup evaluation, and positive ingroup feelings (e.g., Cross, 1991; Phinney, 1991; Sellers et al., 1998; Vandiver et al., 2002).

[2] The strategy in which low-status group members claim positive characteristics for their group and disavow negative ones is termed _social creativity_ (Tajfel and Turner, 1986). Members of lower-status groups tend to use social creativity when group boundaries are impermeable and stable—that is, when they cannot leave their group, and their group's status is unlikely to improve in the short term. These circumstances largely characterize blacks' situation in American society. More rarely, group members may engage in collective action to improve their group's material or legal standing in society. Blacks have used this strategy to improve their position in American society, but progress has been slow and difficult to achieve. Alternatively, group members may pursue individual mobility by disaffiliating from their group and joining a higher-status [racial] group. This strategy is not viable for most blacks.