



When white people report racial discrimination: The role of region, religion, and politics

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ABSTRACT

Scholarly interest in the correlates and consequences of perceived discrimination has grown exponentially in recent years, yet, despite increased legal and media attention to claims of “anti-white bias,” empirical studies predicting reports of racial discrimination by white Americans remain limited. Using data from the 2006 Portraits of American Life Study, we find that evangelical Protestantism increases the odds that whites will report experiencing racial discrimination, even after controlling for racial context and an array of social and psychological characteristics. However, this effect is limited to the South. Outside the South, political affiliation trumps religion, yielding distinct regional profiles of discrimination reporters. These findings suggest that institutions may function as regional “carriers” for whites inclined to report racial discrimination.

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1. Introduction

Although the election (and re-election) of Barack Obama has led many to question the extent to which anti-black bias persists in a “post-racial America,” his presidency has also coincided with a wave of new claims of anti-white bias. The Supreme Court has increasingly been called upon to adjudicate “reverse discrimination” lawsuits in hiring and university admissions (e.g., *Ricci v. DiStefano*, *Fisher v. University of Texas*), and similar claims filed with the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission have been “growing like kudzu” in recent years (Evans, 2004). New scholarly research has revealed that whites now believe anti-white bias to be more prevalent than anti-black bias (Norton and Sommers, 2011), suggesting that the renewed prominence of anti-white bias claims in the courts represents the tip of the proverbial iceberg. Media outlets, such as CNN and the *New York Times*, have also given recent attention to such claims, further elevating their visibility in popular political and social discourse (Blake, 2011; *New York Times*, 2011).

The resurgence of concern about anti-white bias coincides with increased academic interest in how perceptions of racial discrimination affect personal well-being and civic life. This research shows that Americans who report having experienced racial discrimination are more likely to experience negative mental and physical health outcomes, including hypertension, stress, depression, and anger (Kessler et al., 1999; Paradies, 2006; Pascoe and Richman, 2009; Williams et al., 2008); more negative relationships with intimate partners, children, and physicians (Murry et al., 2001; Penner et al., 2009); and higher levels of work-life conflict (Minnotte, 2012). The experience of discrimination has also been shown to affect political outcomes and policy preferences. Studies of minority populations in the United States have linked the experience of discrimination with reduced political participation and trust in government (Schildkraut, 2005), increased identification with the Democratic Party (Barreto and Pedraza, 2009), and greater support for affirmative action (Kravitz and Klineberg, 2000). More

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broadly, a recent national survey revealed that the experience of discrimination can shape cultural understandings about diversity and membership in the American polity (Edgell and Tranby, 2010).

This growing body of research suggests that whites' claims of racial discrimination have social implications above and beyond their impact on affirmative action and workplace policies. Yet we know very little about whites who report experiencing racial discrimination. While a few qualitative studies have examined the beliefs of white "reverse discrimination" reporters (Camara and Orbe, 2011; Lynch, 1989; Pincus, 2000, 2003), most quantitative studies of the effects of racial discrimination do not include whites in their samples. The focus on non-white experiences of discrimination is understandable given the sociological emphasis on racial discrimination as a property of social institutions and power relations (Pager and Shepherd, 2008), rather than individual acts by prejudiced people, but it leaves us with little representative, empirical data on how whites' perceptions of discrimination may be socially patterned.

Thus, in this article, we seek to answer the basic question: Who, among self-identified white Americans, reports having experienced racial discrimination? Our results reveal predictable differences by region, religion, and partisan affiliation, but unexpected interactions among these factors. We find that evangelical Protestants are significantly more likely than other whites to report racial discrimination, net of religious, political, social-psychological and demographic controls – though the effect of evangelicalism is limited to the South. Outside the South, political affiliation trumps religious affiliation, yielding distinct regional profiles of racial discrimination reporters. These findings underscore the importance of linking the literature on perceived discrimination to the literature on the role of religion and politics in shaping racial attitudes among whites. Further, we suggest that future research should focus on how institutional contexts, such as churches and political parties, affect the likelihood that white Americans perceive that they have been the victims of racial discrimination.

2. The social patterning of perceived discrimination

2.1. Racial discrimination: perception and reality

The experience of racial discrimination is not straightforward, but is instead a subjective, interpretive process (Major and Kaiser, 2008). Because the motives behind potentially discriminatory behaviors are often unclear, in some cases a discriminatory act may occur without being recognized as such, while in others individuals may interpret as discriminatory a behavior that was not, objectively speaking, discriminatory (Phinney et al., 1998; Quillian, 2006). Individuals may also under-report discrimination out of a desire to protect their sense of justice or personal agency, while they may over-report as the result of a bruised ego or because they have become vigilant to discrimination in response to previous discriminatory encounters (Major and Kaiser, 2008). Thus, it is important to bear in mind that an individual's perception of having experienced discrimination may or may not accurately reflect the real incidence of discrimination. Reflecting this distinction, and following Stainback and Irvin (2012: 657), we define perceived racial discrimination as "the subjective assessment that one has been treated unfairly on the basis of his/her race or ethnicity." Nevertheless, whether over-, under-, or accurately estimated, a growing literature demonstrates that perceived discrimination has real effects on a variety of social outcomes (e.g., Barreto and Pedraza, 2009; Paradies, 2006).

2.2. Established correlates of racial discrimination among racial minorities

A number of social and demographic indicators have been shown to covary with perceived discrimination. Unsurprisingly, given the persistence of racial discrimination in American society (Quillian, 2006), racial minorities are more likely to report discrimination than whites (Coleman et al., 2008; Kessler et al., 1999; Hirsh and Lyons, 2010; Paradies, 2006; Stainback and Irvin, 2012). Yet within racial minority populations, perceived discrimination varies by social location. On balance, men are more likely to report experiencing racial discrimination than women (Hausmann et al., 2008; Hersch, 2011; Paradies, 2006). This may be because men are more likely to be targets of discrimination (Williams and Mohammed, 2009), or it may be because women are more likely to discount discriminatory encounters (Kessler et al., 1999). Socioeconomic status appears to be positively related to discrimination reporting among minority populations (Borrell et al., 2007; Hersch, 2011; Paradies, 2006). Increased educational attainment may result in increased rights awareness, more knowledge about social inequalities, and greater exposure to situations where racial discrimination may occur, leading to heightened perceptions of discrimination (Banerjee, 2008; Hirsh and Lyons, 2010; Kessler et al., 1999). Finally, age has also been shown to affect the likelihood of reporting discrimination, though findings have been inconsistent (Paradies, 2006).

Research on minority populations further finds that a variety of psychological factors are related to perceptions of racial discrimination in the United States. A growing body of evidence suggests that negative psychological states predispose individuals to perceive discrimination at higher rates. For example, studies show that depression and anxiety predict perceptions of discrimination (Cassidy et al., 2005; Phinney et al., 1998). In a nationwide survey of seniors, perceived discrimination was positively associated with lifetime traumas (such as death of a child, natural disasters, abuse, and combat service), stressful life events (like unemployment and burglaries), and chronic stressors (such as health and family problems) (Luo et al., 2012). In contrast, studies have shown that individuals who have a sense of control or mastery over events are less likely to perceive discrimination (Cassidy et al., 2005; Ruggiero and Taylor, 1995; Phinney et al., 1998). Traumatic experiences, social anxiety,

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