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# Black people don't exercise in my neighborhood: Perceived racial composition and leisure-time physical activity among middle class blacks and whites



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## ABSTRACT

Using a sample of middle class blacks and whites living in urban and suburban areas, this article focuses on how perceptions of the racial composition of neighborhoods influence leisure-time physical activity. Using an ordinal representation of an underlying continuous indication of the perceived percentage of blacks and whites within an egocentric neighborhood, the results show that black men are significantly less likely to be physically active in neighborhoods perceived as predominately white. Alternatively, they are more likely to be physically active in neighborhoods perceived as racially diverse and predominately black. Conversely, for black women, white women, and white men, physical activity increases as the perception of one's neighborhood becomes increasingly white. Black women are significantly less likely to engage in physical activity in neighborhoods perceived as predominately black and urban. Drawing upon the intersectionality framework, I discuss how perceptions of criminalization and safety lead to different levels of leisure-time physical activity for middle class black women and men relative to their white middle class counterparts.

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Physical activity is linked to reducing obesity, morbidity, mortality, chronic diseases, and depression ([National Center for Health Statistics, 2010](#); [Stensvold et al., 2011](#); [Katzmarzyk and Lear, 2011](#); [Lee et al., 2012](#)). Despite these benefits, most Americans do not engage in the recommended amount of physical activity ([U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2008b](#); [Mendes, 2009](#); [National Center for Health Statistics, 2010](#)). As is the case with other health-related behavior, there are racial differences in physical activity. Approximately half of blacks and one-third of whites over 18 are physically inactive ([National Center for Health Statistics, 2010](#)). Research shows that, in general, the higher one's social class, the more likely he or she is to be physically active ([Tudor-Locke and Bassett, Jr. 2004](#)). However, among blacks, social class does not explain the high prevalence of physical inactivity ([Bennett et al., 2007](#); [Coogan et al., 2011](#)).

So, why are middle class blacks less physically active than their white middle class counterparts? This focus on the middle class, and the black middle class in particular, is important for two reasons. First, it permits holding social class constant to compare individuals with similar occupations, levels of education, and income. Second, the black middle class is viewed as an example of racial progress. In this case, the high level of obesity and physical inactivity among middle class blacks stalls this progress because a higher social class status does not seem to provide the same health benefits to blacks as it does to whites (see [Thomas and Thomas, 2015](#)).

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While neighborhood resources (Williams and Collins, 2001; Schulz et al., 2002; Bennett et al., 2006; Gordon-Larsen et al., 2006) are shown to be an important factor in increasing or decreasing physical activity, Oka et al. (2011) found that the physical activity and food environments of local areas do not sufficiently explain the obesity rates of local residents. In other words, there are other factors (in addition to neighborhood resources) contributing to these differences. I argue that one key factor that may contribute to this problem is how individuals perceive the racial composition of their neighborhoods. These perceptions manifest in schemas related to criminalization and safety. These schemas may, in turn, decrease leisure-time physical activity for black men in certain neighborhoods and black women in others.

Utilizing the intersectionality framework and drawing upon a sample of middle class blacks and whites living in urban and suburban neighborhoods, I examine how perceptions of neighborhood racial composition influence racial and gender differences in leisure-time physical activity. I do not assume racial or gender homogeneity and instead explicitly compare the experiences of black women, black men, white women, and white men. Below, I first discuss the theoretical and methodological utility of the intersectionality framework for this analysis. Then, I use existing literature on neighborhood segregation and discrimination to interrogate how the racial composition of neighborhoods may lead to different levels of leisure-time physical activity for middle class blacks and whites. I do not purport to provide an exhaustive review of the literature. Rather, the background section focuses on research that speaks to the role of perceptions and racial composition in decision-making processes and behavior.

## 1. Background

### 1.1. Utility of intersectionality for health disparities

The intersectionality framework can be a useful theoretical and methodological tool for broadening the breadth of research on health disparities and intersectional identities (Cummings and Jackson, 2008; Wilkins, 2012; Bauer, 2014; Brown et al., 2016). The purpose of the intersectionality framework is to provide a lens to construct a space for the multiplicity of social identities that provide context-specific scripts for marginalized groups (Few et al., 2003; McCall, 2005).

The multiplicity of social identities captured in the cross-classification of race and gender social status indicators “focuses on the complexity of relationships among multiple social groups within and across analytical categories” (McCall, 2005, p. 1786). Taking a similar approach to prior health disparities research (Cummings and Jackson, 2008), the analysis in this paper compares the level of leisure-time physical activity of four race-gender groups—black women, black men, white women, and white men rather than simply controlling for race or gender in a statistical model. In this case, interaction variables or separate models (one for each race-gender group) can be used to examine intergroup and intragroup differences. The context-specific scripts are the perceptions that individuals form about the racial composition of their neighborhoods. These perceptions stem from the social interactions individuals have with others in and around their neighborhoods. These social interactions are often influenced by the race and gender identities of the individuals in the interaction.

This intersectional perspective is what McCall (2005) calls the “intercategorical complexity” (or categorical) approach. Choo and Ferree (2010, p. 134) call this approach the “process-centered model of intersectionality.”<sup>1</sup> As I do here, this sort of analysis is able to explicitly compare the outcomes of black women, black men, white women, and white men. This analysis can also examine the effects of specific covariates for each group. This approach “begins with the observation that there are relationships of inequality among already constituted social groups, as imperfect and ever changing as they are, and takes those relationships as the center of analysis ... The subject is multigroup, and the method is systematically comparative” (McCall, 2005, p. 1784–1786). For example, in their examination of self-rated health from 1974 to 2004, Cummings and Jackson (2008) find that black women with a college degree reported lower levels of self-rated health than black men, white women, and white men with a high school degree. In this regard, intersectionality becomes vital theoretically, methodologically, and empirically for illuminating the shortcomings of social class.

Accordingly, the approach used in this paper is in some ways similar to previous research examining the relationship between the racial composition of neighborhoods and the race and social class of local residents (Alba and Logan, 1993; Logan et al., 1996). I extend this work by focusing on how the intersection of race, gender, and social class identities as well as perceptions of neighborhood racial composition and neighborhood resources influences physical activity. Moreover, I compare how the perceived racial composition of neighborhoods impacts leisure-time physical activity across four race-gender groups.

<sup>1</sup> Admittedly, McCall (2005) takes a fairly pessimistic view that quantitative intersectionality research employing the categorical approach can get published in “top peer-reviewed journals” (p. 1787). In fact she states, “Indeed, there is much hostility toward such complexity; most journals are devoted to additive linear models and incremental improvements in already well-developed bodies of research” (McCall, 2005:1787). However, there are some examples to draw upon to push this agenda forward, including McCall’s (2001) own work that employs the categorical approach. Another example is Noy and Ray’s (2012) quantitative examination of graduate students’ perceptions of their advisors that provides a blueprint of the categorical approach. Using a data set of roughly 4000 doctoral students in 11 disciplines at 27 universities, Noy and Ray (2012) utilize the intersectionality framework to test whether women of color report less advisor support than White women, men of color, and White men. Thus, this analysis is specifically comparing the experiences of four different groups in different disciplines. These scholars found that women of color (across all disciplines) report less instrumental support (compared to White women and White men) and less respect for their ideas (compared to White women, White men, and men of color). Representing the categorical approach to intersectionality, I employ the same type of analysis in this article for examining racial and gender differences in physical activity.

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