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Perpetuation theory and the racial segregation of young adults



Pat Rubio Goldsmith

Texas A&M University 4351, College Station, TX 77843, USA

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ABSTRACT

Previous research confirms a strong empirical association between the racial composition of young adults' residential areas and the racial compositions of the residential areas and schools of their youth. Perpetuation theory predicts that part of this association is causal. The present study uses data from the National Education Longitudinal Study (NELS) and the U.S. Censuses of 1990 and 2000 to test for this effect with regression models, propensity-score-weighted models with robustness tests, and regression models that look at long-distance movers. The findings suggest that the association declines rapidly as the distance moved increases, but it remains robust even at long distances. It is also stronger for African Americans and more assimilated Latinos than for whites and less assimilated Latinos. These findings suggests that to some extent, young white, African American, and Latino adults are residentially segregated from each other because they grew up that way. Policies that promote integrating youth residentially and/or desegregating schools may contribute to residential integration over time.

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1. Introduction

Metropolitan areas in the United States exhibit high rates of residential segregation. African Americans' segregation from whites has slightly declined between 1970 and 2010, but it is still higher than for any other group. Latinos' segregation from whites increased during this period (Charles, 2003; Logan and Stults, 2011; Tienda and Fuentes, 2014; Rugh and Massey, 2014). High rates of racial residential segregation result in many African Americans and Latinos living high poverty neighborhoods, reducing their life chances in many areas (Massey and Denton, 1993; Sampson et al., 2008; Wodtke et al., 2011). Determining why segregation is so persistent and which policies might combat it effectively may improve the lives of racial and ethnic minorities.

One approach to understanding the causes of residential segregation is to examine the racial compositions of the neighborhoods that people move to, or their residential attainment (Alba and Logan, 1993; Charles, 2003; Crowder et al., 2006; Massey et al., 1994; Quillian, 2001; South and Crowder, 1998; South et al., 2005a, 2005b). This research has relied on two theories: the spatial assimilation model and the place stratification model. Although they can help explain the persistence of segregation, they ignore experiences during youth, which is surprising, because both school desegregation and residential mobility policies attempt to create long-lasting integration by providing youth with experiences in integrated contexts (Wells and Crain, 1994; de Souza Briggs et al., 2010). While the research on these policies is admittedly mixed, the importance of youth experiences in shaping adult outcomes is also consistent with a number of recent studies showing that

E-mail address: pgoldsmith@tamu.edu.

most adults live in residential areas¹ with a racial and income context that closely resembles those of origin in which they grew up (Dawkins, 1994, 2005; Sharkey, 2008, 2013; Goldsmith, 2010). Adults also usually move from and to residential areas with similar racial compositions (Crowder et al., 2006).

This paper assesses whether part of the association between the racial compositions of youth and adult residential areas is an effect, as policies assume, or whether it is spurious, as both the spatial assimilation and place stratification models suggest. To theorize an effect of prior contexts, this study used perpetuation theory, which emerged from the literature on school desegregation (Braddock, 1980; Braddock and Eitle, 2004). I test for an effect of the racial compositions experienced during the teenage years using panel data from the National Education Longitudinal Study (NELS). The analyses employ weighted least squares (WLS) and propensity-score-weighted regression to predict the proportion white in individuals' young-adult neighborhoods, with separate analyses for long-distance movers.

The results show that most young adults live in residential areas with a proportion white very similar to the ones of their origin. The association primarily results from many individuals not moving far, which suggests an attachment to particular places. The association is stronger among African Americans and English-background (EB) Latinos than among whites and Spanish-background (SB) Latinos. The analyses estimate that approximately 20 percent of the total relationship can be attributed to the causal effect predicted by perpetuation theory, which suggests that part of the reason white, African American, and Latino young adults are residentially segregated from each other is that they grew up segregated from each other.

2. Literature review

2.1. Racial and income contexts of youth and adult residential areas

Many adults live in residential areas with racial and income contexts similar to those experienced in youth. Sharkey (2008, 2013), for example, shows with data from the Panel Study of Income Dynamics that the median income experienced in census tracts by people during youth and adulthood correlate .67, suggesting that income contexts are an extremely rigid dimension of social structure. Sharkey argues that the transmission of income contexts from youth to adulthood is partially the result of racial residential segregation, which he explains with two of the theories employed here, the spatial assimilation model and the place stratification model (2008). He also argues that such transmission results from place attachment, the attachments people form for people and places where they live (2013). These attachments create a continuity of contexts by reducing spatial mobility to far away places, and Sharkey (2013) describes the process as an inheritance of place. Given these findings, it is not surprising that Goldsmith (2010) reports a correlation of .74 between proportion white during the teenage years and at age 26 in residential ZIP-Code Areas (ZCTAs). How is the continuity of contexts understood in theories of segregation?

2.2. The spatial assimilation model

The spatial assimilation model views residential attainment as part of a general assimilation or status-attainment process (Alba and Logan, 1993; Massey, 1985; South et al., 2005a, 2005b). The theory contends that people convert their capital endowments into residence in predominantly white residential areas: people with more capital are more likely than people with less capital to move to predominantly white residential areas. Capital is broadly understood in this model to include economic, human, and cultural capital. Economic capital includes income and wealth; human capital consists of useful skills and is often proxied by educational achievement or attainment. Cultural capital refers to levels of immigrants' cultural assimilation and is indicated by such things as English fluency and generation. Suburban residence is also considered an asset associated with mobility into predominantly white residential areas (Alba and Logan, 1993).

Although most research on the spatial assimilation model has not focused on the continuity of racial contexts from youth to adulthood, the theory predicts this continuity in two ways. First, parents and their adult offspring tend to possess similar amounts of capital because it is passed on intergenerationally. Since capital endowments are similar across generations, the racial composition of their residential areas will be as well. Second, people from predominantly white (non-white) contexts tend to accumulate more (less) capital (e.g., see Cutler and Glaeser, 1997), so they also tend to move to predominantly white (non-white) residential areas in adulthood. Consequently, the spatial assimilation model will receive empirical support if people with more capital generally move to residential areas with proportionately more whites, and if the associations between youth- and adult-racial contexts decline when differences in capital (i.e., the confounding variables) are held constant.

The spatial assimilation model may be particularly useful for understanding continuity of contexts among Latinos because high rates of immigration and the formation of Latino residential enclaves has resulted in many Latino youth being raised in Spanish-speaking families and neighborhoods (Iceland and Nelson, 2008). Due to the strong forces of assimilation (especially in schools) these youth are likely to become Americanized and to learn more English than their parents, positioning them for upward mobility into neighborhoods with proportionately more whites than those of their parents (Portes and Hao, 1998; South et al., 2005a, 2005b) and attenuating the intergenerational continuity of racial context.

¹ The terms "residential area" and "neighborhood" are used interchangeably here.

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