



The impact of local black residents' socioeconomic status on white residents' racial views



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ABSTRACT

This paper extends the study of contextual influences on racial attitudes by asking how the SES of the local black community shapes the racial attitudes of local whites. Using responses to the 1998–2002 General Social Surveys merged with year 2000 census data, we compare the influences of black educational and economic composition on white residents' attitudes. Finally, the independence of these effects from the impact of white contextual SES is assessed. Across three dimensions of racial attitudes, white residents' views are more positive in localities where the black population contains more college graduates. However, such localities tend also to have highly educated white populations, as well as higher incomes among blacks and whites, and the multiple influences are inseparable. In contrast, many racial attitude measures show an independent effect of black economic composition, white residents reporting more negative views where the local African American community is poorer.

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1. Introduction

1.1. Background: Environmental influences on racial attitudes

During recent decades, efforts to understand the racial attitudes of white Americans as an outgrowth of personal characteristics and experiences have been complemented by an active quest to identify environmental influences on racial attitudes.

The roles of historical events, national culture, and regional norms in shaping racial attitudes have long been recognized (Pettigrew, 1958; Schuman et al., 1997). Influences of changed legal requirements and prescribed behaviors on white Americans' racial views, sometimes dubbed “fait accompli effects,” have been documented (Allport, 1954; Pettigrew, 1971). Along with such macro-level environmental effects, the impact of the more immediate social environment is now receiving research attention, facilitated by the development of statistical tools for analyzing multi-level data.

1.1.1. Race composition

The earliest and most numerous multi-level studies focused on the race composition of localities, specifically on the proportion of the residents who are African American. In line with the claim by Pettigrew (1959) that prejudice among white Southerners related directly to local black population share, Giles and Evans (1985, 1986) documented positive relationships between white prejudice and county-level black population concentration. Fossett and Kiecolt (1989) provided supporting information, as did Quillian (1996) from his comparison of U.S. regions. Using 1990 survey data in conjunction with census

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information on metropolitan areas and non-metro counties, Taylor (1998) confirmed that many dimensions of white racial attitudes are more negative in communities where blacks are numerous.¹ In short, accumulated evidence on the impact of black numbers is congruent with threat/competition perspectives (Blumer, 1958; Blalock, 1967; LeVine and Campbell, 1972; Giles and Evans, 1986), not with assumptions that black presence in the community brings the sort of inter-group contact that improves attitudes (Allport, 1954),² although persuasive demonstrations that economic or political threat mediates the impact of black numbers have yet to be produced (see Taylor, 1998).

1.1.2. Educational and economic composition of the white community

A more recent and thus less extensive line of contextual research has focused not on population proportions, but on the influence that aggregate socioeconomic status (SES) in the local white community has on the racial attitudes of white residents.

In a 2000 paper, Oliver and Mendelberg charged that local race composition has received undue emphasis in the racial attitudes literature, being relevant only under certain conditions. The more important contextual predictor, they claimed, is the aggregate socioeconomic status (SES) of whites in the locality, racial attitudes being more negative among whites who live in low-SES communities. Interpreting the SES effect demonstrated in their research with what some scholars would call “scapegoating” theory, Oliver and Mendelberg say: “Low-status settings, defined by low rates of education and employment, expose residents to a daily dose of petty crime, concentrated physical decay, and social disorder. . . This exposure in turn leads to a constellation of negative psychological states. . . In settings characterized by general anxiety and fear, anti-black affect may arise because African Americans are a salient target in a racially divided society” (2000: 576).³

Oliver and Mendelberg’s (2000) interpretation, though not their findings, was challenged in a recent paper by Taylor and Mateyka (2011), who note that Oliver and Mendelberg’s depiction of the white SES findings as a function of economic hardship in the white community is incongruent with their use of educational level as the contextual SES measure. When Taylor and Mateyka pitted the two strands of contextual white SES against each other as predictors of white racial attitudes, education was clearly the stronger influence. Local white economic status has modest effects on white residents’ racial views when examined alone, and has no significant impact net of locality-level white education. However, even after controls for the economic status of the white community, there are noteworthy contextual education effects on many dimensions of racial attitudes: Whites report more progressive racial attitudes in localities where college education is common in the white community.

On first reading, the predominance of contextual education effects may seem like old news, given the well-established role of individual-level education in shaping many racial attitudes (see, for example, Schuman et al., 1997). However, the influence of educational composition in the white community is distinct from the tendency for better educated white individuals to hold more progressive racial attitudes. Contextual education effects exist above and beyond any influence on whites’ attitudes of their own educational achievement: The tendency for whites living in highly educated localities to hold more progressive racial attitudes is seen among well-educated and poorly-educated whites alike. To explain this contextual education effect, Taylor and Mateyka (2011) relied on the interpretation offered in Moore and Ovdia’s (2006) discussion of support for civil liberties. Focusing on high SES residents rather than the bottom of the SES ladder implicated in scapegoating notions, Moore and Ovdia (2006) suggested that where white college graduates are numerically dominant, “institutional and macrosocial means” not dependent on face-to-face interaction promote progressive attitudes.⁴

Much remains to be learned and said about the impact of local white educational composition on racial attitudes, but that topic’s role in the present paper is limited to framing the new research reported here.

1.2. The present study

The present project builds on research about how whites’ racial attitudes are affected by the socioeconomic status of the local white community to ask how the socioeconomic status of the local black community may influence white residents’

¹ Glaser (1994) found a similar relationship of black population proportions with political attitudes, but not with traditional race prejudice – within the South. The dearth of traditional race prejudice effects reported by Glaser may seem to contradict the dominant pattern in other research cited here. However, in fact there is no contradiction with the findings of Taylor (1998), at least, who reported population composition effects on racial attitudes to exist primarily outside the South.

² Dixon (2006) suggests that historical and cultural factors explain the predominance of white Americans’ group threat reactions to the presence of blacks, except when very promising forms of contact take place. In contrast, for racial/ethnic minorities such as Hispanics and Asian Americans, positive outcomes of contact are more easily achieved.

³ Also, Oliver and his collaborators (see Oliver and Mendelberg, 2000; Oliver and Wong, 2003), insisted that the definition of local context is pivotal. These researchers are joined by Ha (2010) in suggesting that the direction of the relationship between minority population size and white attitudes may actually reverse when the definition of locality shifts from larger areas such as metropolitan regions to smaller census units that more nearly approximate neighborhoods.

⁴ Mary Jackman (1994) argues that dominant groups benefit from minimizing the salience of exploitative relationships; earlier Jackman and Muha (1984) had suggested that the self-described progressive racial views of highly educated whites is largely a matter of the sophistication of this group in maintaining the appearance of liberalism. Conceivably, normative pressures supporting “the appearance of liberalism” may contribute to the positive relationship Taylor and Mateyka (2011) report between progressive racial views and contextual white educational level. Disentangling enlightenment effects from concern for appearances among highly educated whites remains a task for future research.

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