EXPOSURE TO ALL BLACK CONTEXTS AND PSYCHOLOGICAL WELL-BEING: THE BENEFITS OF RACIAL CONCENTRATION

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Introduction

Black and White adults and children live, learn, play, and pray in physically separate worlds. Explanations for the racial, spatial divide include among other things: the "birds of a feather flock together" premise, White anxiety, the economic remnants of slavery, Black nationalism, poverty, and illegal real estate practices. Whatever explanation one endorses, it is nonetheless evident that Black/White social distance characterizes a large part of the contemporary race problem in the United States (Committee on the Status of Blacks 1989; Farley, Schuman, Bianchi, Colassanto, and Hatchett 1978; Farley, Steeh, Krysan, Jackson, and Reeves 1994; Hacker 1992; Jacoby 1998; Massey and Denton 1993; Massey, Condran, and Denton 1987; Myrdal 1944; Wachtel 1999). In sum, most Blacks and Whites have become accustomed to, and comfortable in, racially homogeneous contexts.

This paper examines, in a basic way, the nature and distribution of Black racial isolation and concentration. This paper also addresses whether being in all Black contexts is linked to the psychological well-being of Black adults. Despite the vast body of literature that addresses the deleterious educational and economic consequences of racial segregation in school, neighborhood, and workplace contexts for Blacks, relatively few studies have examined whether racial concentration in those and other contexts adversely impacts psychological well-being.

"De Jure" and "De Facto" Racial Segregation

Although de jure racial segregation in public and private spaces and accommodations was ruled unconstitutional nearly 50 years ago, de facto separation is a social fact (Jacoby 1998). Whether in primary or secondary educational settings, neighborhoods, places of employment, and even houses of worship, the chances of finding proportional racial representation are slim. The chances of finding proportional racial representation as well as amicable interracial relations are closer to none.

The collapse of Jim Crow (de jure) segregation is most notably linked to the 1954 Linda Brown et al. v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas Supreme Court ruling. Thirty-two social scientists testified on behalf of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) that the self-esteem and chances for edu-

cational success of Black children were damaged by their physical separation from White children. Justices ruled in the Brown v. Board of Education case that "separate" Black and White schools were inherently "unequal," and that biracial schooling contexts were an important way to foster racial tolerance. The logic was if Black children in segregated schools could not get a quality education equivalent to that given to White children, bringing the children together under one roof would insure parity. Bringing children together would also supposedly reduce Whites' racial antipathy.

There were two additional anti-discrimination actions that portended the collapse of Jim Crow racial segregation: Executive Order 9981 and the Civil Rights Act of 1964. In 1948, President Truman issued Executive Order 9981 ending racial segregation in the armed forces. This order prohibited the practice of creating all Black, all White, or all Japanese units. The Civil Rights Act of 1964, among other things such as establishing the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC), made illegal consideration of race in public accommodations such as hotels, motels, restaurants, gasoline stations, and amusement parks. Racial segregation in publicly owned facilities such as parks and swimming pools, as well as federally supported institutions such as hospitals and colleges was also ruled illegal.

Despite these and other judicial and legislative actions, in the contemporary United States, Black and White segregation persists. And amicable race relations remain a dream deferred.

The Promises and Polemics of Racial Integration

Integration, as a practical and moral goal, is sought because of persisting race differences in quality of life (e.g., wealth, employment, health) (Committee on the Status of Blacks 1989; Hacker 1992; Fleming 1984; Marable 1983; Oliver and Shapiro 1995; Polednak 1997), as well as continuing racial intolerance. In addition, spatial assimilation is desired because racial concentration exposes Blacks to pathogens. For example, alcohol is marketed to isolated Black communities (Hacker, Collins, and Jacobson 1987) and fatal risks at work occur disproportionately in segmented "Black jobs" (Loomis and Richardson 1998; Robinson 1984). And the experience of poverty among Blacks is exacerbated by residential racial concentration (Massey and Denton 1993; Massey et al. 1987; Polednak 1997).

Level of integration is an excellent barometer of a racial group's economic and social improvement (Bloom 1971; Dovidio and Gaertner 1986; Gordon 1964; Jones 1997; Myrdal 1944; Park 1947; Simpson and Yinger 1953). The history of the United States in regard to White immigrants has validated this proposition. Integration into American society has been an especially arduous struggle for Blacks, who have faced barri-

ers to full inclusion, that groups without a "racial uniform" (Park 1947) have not. Some have argued that racial integration, despite its obvious economic and educational benefit to the Black community and to the moral health of the United States, has had latent consequences that have hurt the Black community (Carmichael and Hamilton 1967). The supposed hurt is based upon the fact that forced segregation created circumstances in which Blacks depended upon other Blacks–re-enforcing political and economic strength under the rubric of racial consciousness. Examples of ethnic enclaves in Hispanic and Asian communities suggest that economic and political viability may indeed be correlated with racial separation and consciousness (see Marable 1983, p. 146 for discussion of "The Golden Era" of Black businesses).

The polemic around issues of assimilation and integration is not new to the Black community (Carmichael and Hamilton 1967; Jacoby 1998). There are many differing opinions about whether assimilation–spatial, political, and cultural–into mainstream [White] society is the silver bullet that can eliminate racial inequality. The concept of "policing blackness" and "racial authenticity" belie beliefs in the Black community about whether desegregation can ever really occur, and whether integration is an ideal goal. Most scholars agree, however, that Black economic and educational disadvantage is (re-)produced in part by racial concentration and segregation. This fact has precluded study of the link between racial separation and psychological well-being.

Previous Empirical Evidence

There are few studies that examine the relation between racial concentration, particularly being in all Black contexts, and psychological well-being. One study of Black elites in White workplaces by Jackson, Thoits, and Taylor (1995) investigated the relationship between "token" status and mental health. Numerical isolation by race (token status) was associated with increased levels of stress (e.g., loss of Black identity, multiple demands of being Black, having to show greater competence) and increased levels of depressive and anxiety symptoms among Black elites. One implication of this research is that increasing interracial interactions may expose upper-class Blacks to individual acts of racial discrimination perpetrated by Whites.

In a seminal study of race and schooling, Fleming (1984) investigated differences between Black students attending predominantly Black colleges and universities and those attending predominantly White colleges and universities. She found that, al-though White colleges and universities had higher levels of material resources, Black students in that context reported lower levels of emotional well-being than Black students at predominantly Black institutions.

There is an emerging body of research that focuses on the link between residential

racial segregation and physical health status (e.g., Polednak 1997; Collins and Williams 1999; Jackson, Anderson, Johnson, and Sorlie 2000; Massey et al. 1987). Collins and Williams, for example, using mortality and Census data for 107 major United States cities, found that residential racial segregation predicted high mortality rates among Blacks. Economic deprivation explained a modest part of the association between neighborhood racial segregation and mortality.

This brief paper investigates whether exposure to all Black contexts influences Blacks' psychological well-being. Given the continuing vestiges of racial stratification and Blacks' low placement in the racial hierarchy, racial separation–whether involuntary or voluntary–is a social fact. Before we equivocally denounce racially homogeneous contexts as regressive, we should examine the nature of racial concentration, and its consequences beyond Black material (i.e., economic and educational) disadvantage.

Methods

Sample

I used cross-sectional data from the 1979-80 National Survey of Black Americans (NSBA) to address these issues. The NSBA was the first national household probability sample of self-identified Blacks living in the continental United States. During the fall of 1979 and spring of 1980, 2,107 adults ranging in age from 17 to 101 were interviewed in their homes by Black professional interviewers. The NSBA asked a range of questions related to family background, group identity, social support, and physical and mental health status. The response rate was 67% (See Jackson, 1991 for detailed description of NSBA and sampling procedures). Although the data are twenty years old, the NSBA is still the only publicly available data that includes multiple race-related measures of racial context, and that statistically represents the Black community.

Psychological Well-Being

Life satisfaction and self-esteem measured psychological well-being. Self-esteem, defined as feelings of utility and self-worth, was measured by six items: 1. I feel I can't do anything right, 2. I feel that my life is not very useful, 3. I feel I do not have much to be proud of, 4. I am a useful person to have around, 5. I feel that I'm a person of worth, and 6. As a person I do a good job these days. The response scale was almost always true (1), often true (2), not often true (3), and never true (4). Items that measured less positive aspects of self-esteem were reverse coded and the weighted sum of the six items was computed. The weighted sum could potentially range from 1 to 4. Cronbach's alpha coefficient for the items in the self-esteem scale was .66.

Life satisfaction was a single item indicator. Respondents were told: "Please think about your life as a whole. How satisfied are you with it-are you completely satisfied, very satisfied, somewhat satisfied, not very satisfied or not at all satisfied?" High life satisfaction was coded into high numeric values.

All Black Contexts

Exposure to all Black contexts were captured by eight measures. The questions were worded: "When you think about the places where you have lived, gone to school or worked–were mostly Blacks or mostly Whites there? (1) How about the grammar or elementary school you went to?; (2) the junior high school you went to?; (3) the high school you went to?; (4) the college you went to?; (5) the neighborhood(s) where you grew up?; (6) your present neighborhood?; (7) the church or place of worship you usually go?; (8) your present work place, if employed?." The response scale was all Blacks (1), mostly Blacks (2), about half Blacks (3), mostly Whites (4), almost all Whites (5), and does not apply (8). These eight variables were recoded so that respondents who reported being in all Black contexts received a score of 1, whereas those who reported being in more racially heterogeneous contexts received a score of 0.

Analytic Strategies

The nature and distribution of all Black contexts and their psychological consequences were investigated using independent sample T-tests and one-way Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) models with Tamhane post-hoc tests. These techniques were chosen because the dependent variables (self-esteem and life satisfaction) were treated as interval scales whereas the independent variables (Black contexts) were a combination of dichotomous and polytomous measures. Independent sample T-tests and ANOVAs were used to explore differences in respondents' psychological well-being across all Black contexts.

Results

The Nature and Distribution of All Black Contexts

The first question addressed by this paper regards exposure to all Black contexts. Figure 1 shows the proportion of respondents that reported being in all Black contexts. For example, nearly 71 percent of Blacks went to elementary schools with only other Blacks. About 57 percent attended all Black junior high schools. One in two respondents went to all Black high schools. One in four respondents went to all Black colleges. Just over 57 percent of respondents grew up in all Black neighborhoods, whereas 42 percent currently live in all Black neighborhoods. Most Blacks

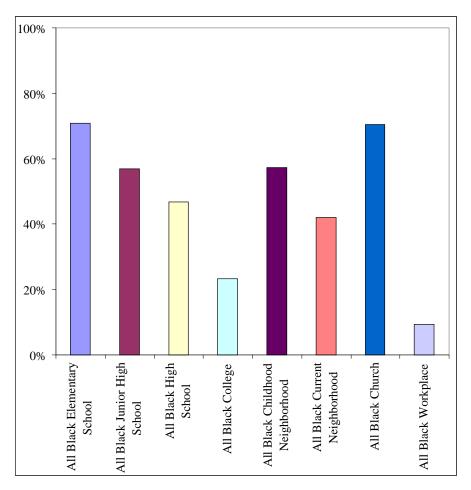
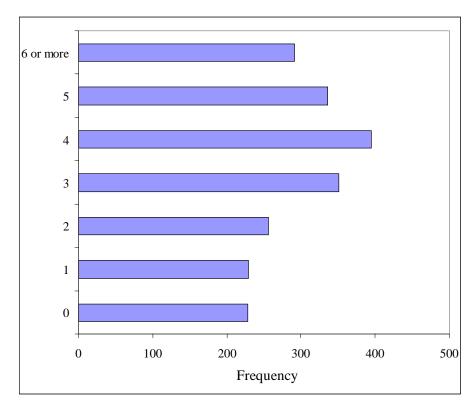


Figure 1. Exposure to All Black Contexts (1980 NSBA; n=2,107)

(71 percent) attend racially homogeneous churches. And 9 percent of Black respondents work in places that are all Black. Although "all Black" was a relatively high threshold, the contextual experiences of many respondents could be characterized that way.

Figure 2 shows the sum of exposure to all Black contexts. The distribution of racially homogeneous contexts was variable. For instance, 228 respondents reported being in no all Black contexts, 229 reported being in only one all Black context. And 336

Figure 2. Sum of Exposure to All Black Contexts (1980 NSBA; n=2,107)

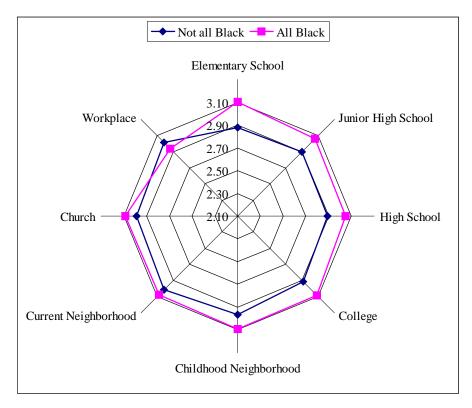


respondents reported being in five all Black contexts, while 291 respondents were in six or more all Black contexts. This disperse distribution indicates that, although most Blacks could identify more than a couple contexts in which they were surrounded by all Blacks, there were at least a couple contexts where interracial interaction of some degree was present.

The Relationship between Exposure to All Black Contexts and Psychological Well-Being

The next question addressed was whether homogeneous racial contexts relate to the emotional quality of Black people's lives. In Figure 3, the relationships between exposure to all Black contexts and life satisfaction were plotted on a graph.

Figure 3. Levels of Life Satisfaction by All Black Contexts (1980 NSBA; n=2,107)



Respondents who attended all Black elementary schools reported significantly higher life satisfaction than those attending more integrated schools (T-statistic = -5.644; $p \le .001$). Blacks who attended all Black junior high schools (T-statistic = -4.357; $p \le .001$), all Black high schools (T-statistic = -3.357; $p \le .001$), or all Black colleges (T-statistic = -2.357; $p \le .05$) reported significantly higher levels of life satisfaction than their counterparts. Living in an all Black neighborhood as a child was linked to higher levels of life satisfaction (T-statistic = -3.470; $p \le .001$) when compared to growing up in more racially heterogeneous contexts. There were no significant differences in level of life satisfaction between Blacks who currently live in all Black neighborhoods and those who live in other community contexts. Life satisfaction was positively, significantly associated with belonging to an all Black church or place of worship (T-statistic = -2.464; $p \le .05$). Interestingly, there were no statistically significant differences in life satisfaction between those who worked in all Black

places and those who worked in more racially heterogeneous contexts.

Figure 4 shows the relationships between exposure to all Black contexts and level of self-esteem. Blacks who attended all Black elementary schools (T-statistic = -2.139; $p \le .05$), junior high schools (T-statistic = -2.940; $p \le .01$), or high schools (T-statistic = -3.337; $p \le .001$) reported significantly higher levels of self-esteem when compared to those who attended more integrated schools. Contrary to the findings for life satisfaction, attending an all Black college was not significantly related to self-esteem level, and neither was growing up in an all Black neighborhood. Blacks who lived in all Black neighborhoods reported significantly lower levels of self-esteem than those residing in desegregated communities (T-statistic = 2.918; $p \le .01$). Belonging to an all Black church or place of worship, or employment in an all Black work place, was independent of levels of self-esteem.

Figure 4. Levels of Self-Esteem by All Black Contexts (1980 NSBA; n=2,107)

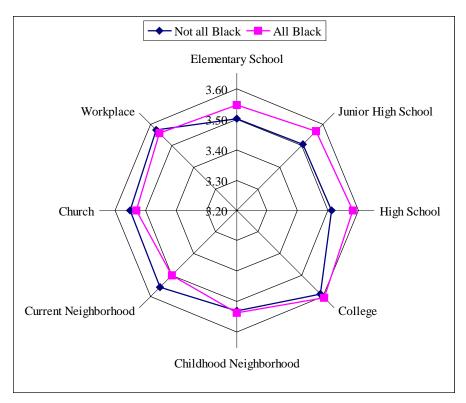


Figure 5. Levels of Life Satisfaction and Self-Esteem by Exposure to All Black Contexts (1980 NSBA; n=2,107)

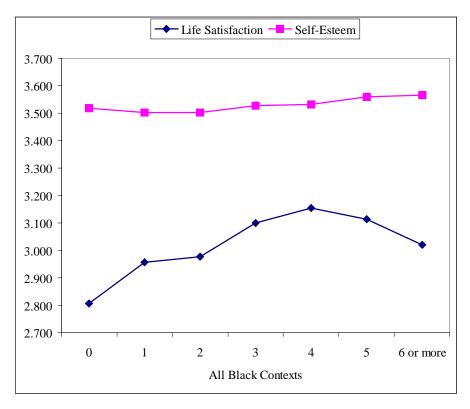


Figure 5 presents the relationship between the sum of exposure to all Black contexts and psychological well-being. As shown, levels of life satisfaction were linearly related to increasing exposure to all Black contexts, showing a slight decline from 4 to 6 or more contexts. There were significant differences in life satisfaction across increasing numbers of all Black contexts (F-statistic = 5.786; p \leq .001). In contrast, level of self-esteem was relatively flat across increasing numbers of all Black contexts across increasing numbers of all Black contexts. This may be linked to the significant and opposite effects of all Black schooling contexts versus all Black current neighborhood.

Discussion

I was interested in examining the nature and distribution of Black racial concentra-

tion and separation, and whether exposure to all Black contexts was correlated with self-reported psychological well-being. Most Black respondents reported being in a number of contexts where they were surrounded solely by Blacks. Approximately 11% of respondents reported never being in any all Black contexts. Results indicate that exposure to all Black contexts was linked to high levels of life satisfaction and self-esteem. Interestingly, significantly lower levels of self-esteem were reported among Blacks currently living in all Black neighborhoods. Given the structural relationship between Black racial concentration and select social dislocations (e.g., poverty, police brutality, unemployment, proximity to toxic waste, high alcohol outlet density), it was sociologically significant to find robust associations between being in all Black contexts and high levels of psychological well-being. I argue that relationships found are conservative effect size estimates because of the correlation between racial concentration and social dislocations. If, for example, Black schools or neighborhoods had material resources (e.g., textbooks, computers, location, city services, quality of housing) comparable to White schools or neighborhoods, larger psychological benefits might have been found.

This study was an important first step in uncovering the nature of, and consequences linked to, multiple context racial segregation. Several points must be made about my results, and in addition, research questions to be explored in future studies need to be elaborated. First, segregated contexts such as church and maybe even college are more controlled, in that, respondents can choose where to go to church or where to go to college. Other contexts such as elementary school or high school are often out of the scope of personal control, subject to parental decision or neighborhood location.

A second point to be made is that racial separation and segregation are a two way street: Whites are responsible for persisting social distance between themselves and Blacks (Wachtel 1999). Furthermore, future studies should investigate whether Whites' psychological well-being is effected by their isolation from Blacks. It would be intriguing to investigate whether being in all White contexts is related to better psychological functioning among Whites. If support were found for such a hypothesis, seminal paradigms about assimilation and segregation would need to be revised (e.g., contact hypothesis, race relations cycle, moral dilemma of racism) (Bloom 1971; Dovidio and Gaertner 1986; Gordon 1964; Jones 1997; Myrdal 1944; Park 1947; Simpson and Yinger 1953). One study of 843 teachers from one of the nation's largest public school systems sheds light on this issue (Mueller, Finley, Iverson, and Price 1999). Mueller et al. (1999) investigated whether Black and White teachers working in schools where their own race was numerically dominant were more satisfied with, and committed to, their jobs than teachers in other contexts. They found that White teachers' satisfaction and commitment was inversely related to increasing proportions of Black teachers and students; there was no relationship between satisfaction and commitment, and racial composition among Black teachers. The authors suggest

that Whites experience "racial mismatch" as threatening because they are not "used to being" in the minority group (defined numerically and by power).

Third, breaking down spatial barriers does not mean that ideological barriers are likely to crumble as well. Blacks and Whites rarely see eye to eye on issues of importance, and when in close contact, interracial tension may be heightened. For example, increasing racial diversity on predominantly White college campuses has been linked to increasing numbers of race-related hate crimes (Levin and McDevitt 1993).

Fourth, contours of the race problem are dynamic. Since legal abolition of racial separation more than a generation ago, the complexity of the race problem and its concomitant symptoms has grown exponentially. For instance, Hispanics are fast becoming the largest non-White group; the average socio-economic status of Blacks has improved; 13 percent of Black men cannot vote because they have been convicted of a felony; affirmative action is under attack; a "multi-racial" movement is in full effect; and hate group membership has been increasing. And there is a generation of Blacks whose only exposure to Jim Crow segregation is through books and movies. In other words, social change embedded in historical time period has determined, and will determine, the stability and viability of continued racial concentration, especially for Blacks.

Fifth, assessment of exposure to all Black contexts was retrospective in some cases (e.g., grammar school, high school, childhood neighborhood, and maybe college). The impact of these experiences was lagged given that psychological well-being was measured in 1979-80, years after respondents may have graduated or moved into their current neighborhood. In other cases, exposure to all Black contexts such as current neighborhood and workplace are temporally concurrent with present psychological functioning.

Conclusion

Blacks face innumerable race-related challenges to achieving and maintaining high levels of psychological well-being-the most insidious of which is "racism" (Carter 1993; Clark, Anderson, Clark, and Williams 1999; Delgado 1982; Harrell 2000; Jackson, Brown, Williams, Torres, Sellers, and Brown 1996; Klonoff, Landrine, and Ullman 1999). I suspect that being in all Black contexts provides opportunities for Blacks to develop and hone tools that protect them from psychological harm. Being in all Black contexts may reduce the likelihood that Blacks are subjected to individual acts of racial discrimination perpetrated by Whites. Despite the documented deficits that result from racial concentration, because race matters, interacting with other Blacks in certain contexts may be an important protective factor.

Can we afford to continue living in separate worlds, as our world becomes increasingly smaller and we become more interdependent? The answer depends upon whether one is Black or White, because integration and spatial assimilation are different constructs across groups. For many Blacks, these constructs imply giving up a sense of heritage and history, as well as conforming to White standards. The answer also depends upon whether Blacks will ever be recognized as full citizens in the United States. Black and Whites will never live, learn, play, or pray together if the beliefs (i.e., racial ideology) that support racial difference and inferiority are not challenged. It will profit Blacks and Whites little to be physically proximate and yet ideologically estranged, or physically proximate but at opposite ends of a quality of life continuum.

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