Class differences in racial attitudes: a divided black America?

by Sean-Shong Hwang, Kevin M. Fitzpatrick and David Helms

An analysis of data from the 1979-1980 National Survey of Black Americans showed significant differences in the way blacks of different social classes view race. Black Americans were found to identify more closely with blacks in Africa than with white Americans. In the area of political activism, those in the middle class were observed to be more active than those in the lower class. Differences in racial attitudes were also observed among blacks living in different regions. These findings reinforce the theory that social divisiveness exists among blacks in the United States.

Polarization in the black community is the result of a combination of governmental efforts, a less discriminative social climate, and urban economic transformation (Wilson 1987). Because of government efforts, such as Affirmative Action programs, black Americans with better qualifications and resources are able to experience unprecedented upward mobility. This, in conjunction with a more tolerant social climate, enabled wealthier blacks to move away from the inner city. On the other hand, the majority of blacks with poor education and job skills remain trapped in inner city ghettos as low-skilled jobs suitable for them move to the suburbs. This emerging black middle class is seen by Wilson (1987) as the beneficiary of Affirmative Action programs; a group which has increasingly distanced itself, both spatially and socially, from the majority of black Americans. Unlike the black middle-class of the past, which remained spatially and socially integrated with the black community because of forced segregation, increasing numbers of the new black middle class are moving to the suburbs and abandoning their underclass compatriots. Thus, class differences between the two groups of blacks have led to a spatial separation which, in turn, has helped to reinforce the social importance of class differences.

The validity of the class division described by Wilson has been questioned. Some scholars disagree with Wilson on ideological grounds by noting the continued racial discrimination in economic and social spheres (e.g., Feagin 1991; Landry 1987; Willie 1979). Others challenge Wilson on empirical grounds. Massey (1990), for example, questions Wilson’s polarization thesis by challenging the assumption that the class division has resulted from the exodus of the black middle class from inner city ghettos to suburbs. He points out that there is mounting evidence which indicates a lack of correlation between status and geographic mobility among blacks. Further, racial segregation between blacks and whites shows little decline and the segregation between poor and rich blacks has only increased slightly.

Although Massey’s work undercuts the key assumptions regarding how the polarization is generated, it does not discredit the claim that a significant class difference exists in the black community. Systematic evaluations of the black polarization thesis by Farley (1984) and associate (Farley and Bianchi 1985) lend qualified support. Using longitudinal data for several indicators of socioeconomic status, Farley (1984:172-192) concludes that the claim of a split black community has some empirical merit but has been oversimplified.

Much attention has been given to objective repercussions of the class division on measures such as joblessness, welfare dependency, and family disorganization (see Wilson [1987] for a review), yet little is known regarding its effects on the social and political orientations of black Americans. If the polarization thesis is to be of general utility, one should expect class differences to surface not only in aspects that can be objectively measured, but also in other more subtle dimensions such as attitudes. Unfortunately, there is little empirical research that focuses on class differences in attitudes within the black community.

Few existing studies focus on black racial attitudes (Ellison 1991; Hughes and Demo 1989; Schuman and Hatchett 1974), even fewer on attitudinal differences within the black community (Herring 1989; Sampson and Milam 1975; Sigelman and Welch 1991). This paucity of research concerning the diversity within the black community is surprising given the controversy surrounding Wilson’s work. In addition, studies examining the racial attitudes of blacks have been plagued with problems of generalizability. A majority of these studies relied on general purpose surveys that typically included only a few hundred blacks (Schuman, Steeh, and Bobo 1985; Sigelman and Welch 1991). Even in cases where blacks were the focus of surveys (e.g. Campbell and Schuman 1968; Sears and McConahay 1973), the samples were
often geographically restricted. Clearly, our understanding of attitudinal diversity within the black community would be enhanced by using more representative samples.

The purpose of this paper is to examine internal diversity in the black community. Specifically, using a nationally representative sample of black Americans, we explore whether significant class differences exist among blacks with regard to racial attitudes and political action. Our study can be seen as a validation of a recent study by Sigelman and Welch (1991) using a more widely used database. We extend their work by testing Wilson’s (1987) class polarization thesis focusing on a different set of outcome variables.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Because Wilson’s work primarily deals with the structural genesis of the division of social classes among blacks, its implications for a wide array of research questions, including attitude diversity within the black community, have not been explored systematically. Instead, there is a “considerable speculation that the growing economic gulf among segments of the black community would lead to increased diversity of opinion” but “little systematic evidence exists to confirm or deny this speculation” (Welch and Combs 1985:91).

The rationale to expect class diversity in opinions within the black community is not much different from the one on which a large amount of sociological work is grounded. According to the conflict perspective, the sharing of a common economic position in society is the very basis of group consciousness. The objective differences between groups in terms of life chances, power, and the ability to control one’s own life are the foundation on which group differences in world view and opinions are based. For many proponents of class-based theory of ethnicity (e.g., Bonacich 1980; Cox 1948), class is the real basis of group membership. Ethnicity is seen by some as a capitalists’ creation designed to justify labor exploitation (Cox 1948) and to sabotage working class unity (Szymanski 1976).

According to this perspective, attitudinal differences between middle- and lower-class blacks can be anticipated because they occupy different social and spatial locations in society. The economic success that middle-class blacks enjoy is likely to shorten their social and physical distances from the dominant group, creating grounds for their realignment with the latter based on class interest (Banton 1987; Hetchter 1986) while increasing their distance from lower-class blacks. Adopting this class realignment perspective of race relationships allows us to anticipate that middle-class blacks will be more supportive of the very system which they have benefited from. Frazier (1957), for example, describes some members of the old black middle class as ashamed of identifying with blacks in general and lower-class blacks in particular, and “through delusions of wealth and power [they have] sought identification with white America which continues to reject [them]” (Frazier 1957:237).

This perspective suggests that the same status differences that separate blacks and whites also separate middle- and lower-class blacks. As the socioeconomic gap among black Americans widens, so should their differences in attitudes and world view. In addition, the shortening of status distance between middle-class blacks and whites translates into social and spatial assimilation of the former. Thus, it is natural to anticipate black middle class adopting a world view similar to whites. These assumptions furnish a coherent and parsimonious theoretical ground for predicting attitudinal differences between blacks with different class backgrounds.

The class realignment thesis predicts blacks who have "made it" within the existing system of stratification will more likely attribute their successes to ability and hard work, and deny the significance of racism and discrimination. It also predicts middle-class blacks to be less ethnocentric in their social orientation because of their presumed closeness to whites (Alport 1954) and a negative correlation between education and prejudice (Quinley and Glock 1979). In addition, the thesis predicts middle-class blacks to be less politically active than their lower-class counterparts (Welch and Foster 1987).

While these hypotheses are theoretically driven, they overlook an important body of research dealing with the formation and explanation of ethnic identity. One influential view utilized to explain Hispanic identity formation is referred to as ethnic competition in the Hispanic assimilation literature (Hwang and Murdock 1991; Portes 1984). It originated from the works of Glazer and Moynihan (1970) and Greeley (1971), and has been systematized more recently by Portes and his associates (Portes 1984; Portes and Bach 1985). Ethnic competitionists see ethnic identity as a dormant political consciousness aroused among minorities as they confront majority prejudice and discrimination. According to Portes (1984), the opportunity to confront such prejudice and discrimination varies by SES. Because minority members of lower SES are more likely to be spatially confined in ethnic enclaves, they are unlikely to experience intense hostilities which exist in the larger society. This perspective argues that ethnic identity is heightened as minorities increase their levels of education, thus enabling them to enter mainstream occupations, and interact more frequently with majority members.
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The ethnic competition arguments are consistent with the relative deprivation perspective utilized by Orum and Orum (1968) to explain higher degrees of political activism and radicalism among blacks with higher SES. The perspective suggests that higher-SES blacks are more likely to use white middle class as their frame of reference, and as a result, be unhappy with their present situation when discovering they are worse off than their white counterparts. The notions of ethnic competition and relative deprivation have been used by Charles Willie in criticizing Wilson's declining significance of race thesis. Unlike Wilson (1978), who sees a declining significance of race, Willie observes "that the significance of race is increasing and that it is increasing especially for middle-class blacks who, because of school desegregation and Affirmative Action and other integration programs, are coming into direct contact with whites for the first time for extended interaction" (Willie 1979:157, italics added). Such direct contact and extended interaction with whites, according to Willie and other exponents of the ethnic competition (e.g., Feagin 1991, 1994; Portes 1984) and relative deprivation (e.g., Orum and Orum 1968) perspectives, is likely to heighten, rather than lower the racial awareness of the black middle class. Lower-class minorities who live and work (if at all) in urban ghettos are shielded from the outside hostility and therefore less conscious of ethnic differences.

Following this line of thinking, one would expect middle-class blacks to show greater, rather than less, animosity toward whites and the system they represent. Thus, an alternative set of competing hypotheses can be obtained by simply reversing the ones derived from the class realignment thesis.

DATA AND MEASUREMENTS

This study uses data from the National Survey of Black Americans (NSBA). The NSBA was conducted during 1979-80 by the Survey Research Center at the University of Michigan (see Jackson and Gurin [1987] for a detailed description of the sample and study design). A multistage probability sampling approach was used to obtain a representative sample of black American households. One person aged 18 or older was randomly selected from each sampled household for interview. The survey had a response rate of 69% with a useful sample of 2,107 respondents. Comparing the NSBA sample statistics with national census data for a set of basic sociodemographic variables, the NSBA sample appears to be reasonably representative of the national black population (Taylor 1986).

Following Wilson (1978: x-xi, 127), we defined black middle class as adult blacks "who are employed in white-collar jobs and in craftsmen and foremen positions." Those not meeting the criteria were placed in the lower-class category. A similar definition of class was used by Frazier (1957) in his famous study of Black Bourgeoisie and by Landry (1987) in a more recent study of The Black New Middle Class. While there is no consensus definition of black middle class in the social science literature, the one we adopted is the most widely used (Feagin and Sikes 1994:27).

In addition, because we are interested in extending Wilson's (1978) economic bifurcation thesis to attitudinal or social psychological domains, it is essential that we use a definition of middle class consistent with Wilson's conceptualization. Despite these advantages, we would be remiss if we did not point out the potential problems with our definition. Although the placement of professional and technical workers, proprietors, managers and officials into the middle class category creates little controversy, the inclusion of other white-collar positions such as clerical and sales workers in the same category may be problematic. Wilson (1978) justified the inclusion of clerical workers by pointing out that the median income of clerical workers exceeds those of blue-collar workers. Although sales workers have a lower median income than blue-collar workers, it is not likely to seriously distort the economic definition of class because only a very small portion of black workers are in the sales category (Wilson 1978: x).

To more carefully examine class differences, we identify four sets of questions that tap different aspects of racial attitudes and political action as our dependent variables. The first set includes four questions that ask respondents to indicate how each of the following have been important in keeping themselves from getting good jobs. These included: 1) "not having enough ability"; 2) "not trying hard enough;" 3) "not having the education or training," and 4) "because you're black." Together, these four questions tap the personal attribution of inequality. We used principal component analyses to extract the best common factor from the four items. The common factor has an eigenvalue of 1.88 and explains 47% of the total variation. The loadings of the individual items suggest that the common factor measures individualistic explanation of inequality (Kluegel 1990).

The second set includes three questions: 1) "do you think most white people want to . . . keep blacks down;" 2) "if black people don't do well in life, is it because they are kept back due to their race;" and 3) "if black people do not get a good education or job, it is because they haven't had the same chance as whites." These questions allow us to discern whether or not middle-class blacks are more inclined to resort to structural explanations of inequality.
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(Kluegel 1990), as ethnic competitionists suggest. A principal component scale based on the three items yields an eigenvalue of 1.45 and explains 48% of the total variation.

The third set examines possible class differences in social orientation toward one's own group using four attitudinal items: 1) “do you feel closer to black people in Africa or white people in America;” 2) ”black women should not date white men;” 3) ”black men should not date white women;” and 4) ”black people should shop in black owned stores whenever possible.” The principal component for the four items has an eigenvalue of 1.96 and explains 49% of the variation. We label the scale in-group cohesiveness.

Finally, class differences in political activism are assessed by asking the respondents if they have participated in the following political activities: 1) voted in last presidential election; 2) voted in state or local election; 3) worked for a political party or campaigned for a political candidate; 4) called or written a public official; and 5) belong to a national black organization. We extracted the principal component from these items with an eigenvalue of 2.09 and explains 42% of the variation.

To examine the class differences net of other factors, several control variables were employed. They include sex, age cohort, region of the country, rural background, and an index that measures the exposure of blacks to whites. With the exception of the exposure index, all the control variables were measured by a single item. Sex is a dummy variable with 1 = male. Age cohort measures whether a respondent was born prior to (40 years or older), during (30 to 39 years old), or after (less than 30 years of age) the decade of the Civil Rights Movement. This coding was informed by Schuman and Scott’s (1989) argument that the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s imprints a collective memory on older blacks who have lived through the changes. Region is a four-category variable indicating one of the four major census regions (Northeast, North Central, South, and West) where respondents reside. Rural background is a dummy variable indicating where a respondent mostly lived when growing up.

The exposure to whites variable was measured by a summated scale consisting of eight items. These items measure the racial composition in eight environmental contexts including different levels of school (i.e., elementary, junior high, senior high, and college), current and previous neighborhoods, churches, and workplace. The scale, with a Cronbach’s alpha of .74 (Mean = 1.56, SD = 0.73), uses the same items Hughes and Demo (1989) applied to their measure of "interracial contact”(1).

[TABULAR DATA FOR TABLE 1 OMITTED]

FINDINGS

Table 1 shows the univariate percentage distributions of individual items used to assess racial attitudes and political activism. The first set of questions ask the respondents to indicate how important ability, hard work, education, and being a black are in keeping them from getting good jobs(2). About 47% of the respondents answer that ability is very or fairly important; few (28%) blame themselves for not trying hard enough; respondents are about equally divided on the issue of the importance of education and training; 43% of black workers also agree that discrimination against blacks is holding them back from obtaining good jobs.

When asked to provide explanations for why they think blacks, as a whole, do not fare as well as whites, a majority of respondents believe that whites either don’t care about blacks or intend to keep blacks down. Although close to 55% of the respondents believe that blacks have been held back by discrimination, others (44%) blame an unwillingness of blacks to work hard. Close to two-thirds of the respondents believe that lack of opportunities are responsible for blacks’ poorer education and jobs; yet 36% of them believe that blacks themselves are to blame.

With regard to their social orientation, black Americans feel closer to blacks in Africa than white people in America. Although intermarriages have gained increasing acceptance among whites and blacks (Schuman, Steeh, and Bobo 1985), more than one- third of the respondents oppose interracial dating. Finally, about two-thirds of respondents think that blacks should patronize black-owned stores whenever possible.

When asked questions concerning political activism, fifty-five percent of blacks said they voted in the last presidential election and 45% voted in state or local elections. However, much lower percentages of respondents participated in other more committed political activities such as campaigning for a political candidate or belonging to a black national political organization.

Table 2 examines class differences with respect to inequality explanations, in-group cohesiveness, and political activism using the four principal component scales discussed in the previous section as dependent variables. We use dummy variable regression analyses to regress each of the scales on class, the primary independent variable, and five control variables (i.e., sex, cohort, region, rural background, and exposure to whites). One-tailed t-tests using the conventional criteria of significance are the basis for testing our class difference
hypotheses. The results of the tests, the \( R^2 \)'s, and effective sample size(3) for the models are also reported.

Turning to the results reported in Table 2, we find significant class differences for three of the four scales. Net of the effects of five control variables, middle-class black respondents are significantly less likely than their lower-class counterparts to resort to personal explanations of inequality. In contrast, lower-class blacks are more likely than their middle-class counterparts to consider individual attributes such as ability, hard work, and lack of education/training as reasons for their not getting more desirable jobs.

Echoing the class difference in the tendency to explain inequality in individualistic terms, black middle class is also more critical of the establishment and more [TABULAR DATA FOR TABLE 2 OMITTED] inclined to use a structural explanation of inequality. These findings clearly support the predictions of the ethnic competition thesis but are inconsistent with the class alignment argument (e.g., Sigelman and Welch 1991:71) that proposes "higher socioeconomic status decrease[s] the sense that one is a victim of racial discrimination."

The largest difference between middle- and lower-class black Americans is in regard to their political activism. Middle-class black Americans are significantly more active politically than their lower-class counterparts. This difference is consistent with the earlier findings that showed a greater inclination among middle-class blacks to explain black-white inequality using structural, rather than individualistic terms.

Despite significant class differences in views about what is responsible for black-white inequality and political activism, we found no significant difference between the two groups in terms of in-group cohesiveness. Clearly, it would have been erroneous to assume that class differences in views regarding what is believed to be responsible for black adversity and how to change it, blacks as a whole are unanimous in their view about their own community.

Our findings thus provide qualified support for Wilson's view of social divisiveness within the black community. While the structural nature of this division appears real(4), the impact of class differences on black social orientation is not apparent in our analysis. Perhaps more importantly, our analysis and that of others (Herring 1989) suggests that blacks, regardless of class standing, join in a united front with their attitudes serving as grim reminders of the racial inequalities created and maintained by the current stratification system.

While we have focused primarily on class differences in world views and social and political orientations within the black community, our findings also revealed internal diversities not related to class but noteworthy nonetheless. The younger blacks, who do not share the collective memory of the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960's with
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the older generations, tend to be more politically apathetic than older blacks. Blacks who grew up in different regions also showed some diversity in their world views. For example, blacks with a southern background are less likely than blacks with a western background to see racial differences in individualistic terms, but more likely than the latter to emphasize the importance of black community cohesiveness. Such patterns reflect continued regional differences in racial discrimination and the extent of reactive solidarity among the discriminated.

Our findings regarding how the world views and social and political orientations of blacks are shaped by their social surroundings are somewhat unexpected. On the one hand, we found that an increased exposure to whites significantly reduced blacks ethnocentric tendency. Assuming that those who are more ethnocentric are more likely to see racial inequality in structural, rather than individualistic terms, we expected that a heightened exposure to whites, which reduced ethnocentrism, would increase the tendency of resorting to an individualistic explanation of inequality. On the contrary, the opposite was true. Clearly, there is no necessary relationship between ethnocentrism and the perception of black-white inequality. As we noted earlier, although economic class has divided the black community in their explanations of social inequality and political participation, the same class difference has not fragmented the black community socially.

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NOTES

1. Our scale differs from that of Hughes and Demo (1989) in the way our missing values were handled. We summed the non-missing values of the eight items and divided the sum by eight (the theoretical maximum). Thus, two individuals with the same intensity (racial composition of the environment), but different extensity (the number of different environments), of interracial exposure will be assigned different scores.

2. These questions on personal explanations regarding what keeps respondents from getting good jobs are relevant only to those who have at least some employment experience. Thus, the effective n for these questions is much smaller than the entire sample.

3. The effective sample sizes are much smaller here than the values reported in Table 1 because we used listwise deletion procedure in the regression analyses.

4. Because the data were collected in 1979-80, the extent to which the conclusions based on these data remain valid today are uncertain. The period of time since the data were collected has witnessed several important events such as the riots in Los Angeles, the murder trial of O.J. Simpson, and the Million Man March. These events are likely to have some effects on the black community and may work to narrow the divisiveness within the black community as is evident in a somewhat dated dataset.

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