



The Shift in Perception of the Disadvantages of Blacks in America

Erol Y. Dincer

Corresponding author; eydincer@gmail.com

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Abstract

This paper is about the shift in perception of the disadvantages of blacks in America and how segregation exacerbates this racial attitude. Both white and black Americans are affected by segregation. There are views suggesting that racism has ended. However, my analysis proves the opposite. Only the way it is expressed has changed. Raw data is utilized from the General Social Survey (GSS) between 1972 and 2006 to verify this change in perception. The analysis confirms that a majority of Americans still do not see discrimination as a reason for the disadvantages of blacks, and that segregation increases this view. This study aims to raise awareness so that civil and political leaders can take relevant steps to achieve racial equity. This paper closes with study limitations and suggestions.

Introduction

In the United States, race has always been held a significant factor in determining a person's social economic status (SES). Racial attitudes affect not only the life of an individual but also the whole community and the labor market. They affect one's income, housing and quality of life (Kluegel, 1990; Bobo and Kluegel, 1993; Schuman and Krysan, 1999).

From the 1960s onward white Americans have believed that the extensiveness of racism has declined. They used to believe that the disadvantages of blacks were stemming from discriminative reasons. Yet, over time, the whites have changed their understanding of the issue. They started to attribute the disadvantages the blacks experienced to the black individuals' lack of motivation (Kluegel, 1990; Bobo and Kluegel, 1993; Schuman and Krysan, 1999).

The shifts in the whites' understanding of the issue in 1960s were mainly attributed to either the legislatives passed in response to the Civil Rights Movement, or the press and media coverage of overt actions of white racism, or the media broadcast of the riots in black ghettos in multiple cities. For example, the 81 percent of whites believed that discrimination was not the reason for the disadvantages the blacks experienced in 1968. This number dropped to 68 percent in 1988 (Schuman and Krysan 1999). Although there is a drop in this trend, research still shows the majority of whites do not accept discrimination as a cause for the disadvantages of blacks.

The rise and struggles of the Civil Rights Movement led to a new type of racism (Schuman and Krysan 1999). In this modern racism, types of anti-black feelings have shifted from an overt racist ideology to a more covert one/manner where contradictions between public notions and governmental policies reside (Bobo and Kluegel 1993; Neville, Awad, Flores, and Bluemel 2013).

Here the contradiction or paradox is that whites publicly disapprove of any overt or traditional racist behavior, while they continue not hiring one due to the color of skin. They thus show their reluctance to support governmental policies that promote racial equality (Kluegel 1990; Bobo and Kluegel 1993).

Modern racism disseminates through the ideology of 'blaming the victim' or 'the denial of its existence all together'. For example, by accepting themselves as 'colored blind' racists passively deny the existence of racism. At the same time, they keep on stating that the disadvantages of blacks are in fact due to a 'lack of motivation. Should the black try harder they succeed'. In this way racists put the blame onto the victim, black Americans (Bobo and Kluegel 1993). These types of ideologies do not help resolve the discrimination and segregation but hinder progress for racial equity in near future.

These white Americans believe that they are not personally racist. They assume that previous barriers imposed by institutions against blacks do no longer exist (Kluegel 1990). The implications of this credence are detrimental to the progress of racial equity. Unless most whites who hold the ruling power and take decisions believe that the disadvantages of blacks are "structurally caused", policies supporting racial equity will continue to be 'majority' opposed (Kluegel 1990). The denial of discrimination as the main cause for the blacks' disadvantages increases the likelihood of future inequity (Neville et al 2013).

Research also suggests that there is a schism within the black community's higher and lower social-economic classes. As blacks of higher SES began to adapt 'white' social norms and break from 'traditional' behaviors, higher class blacks began losing solidarity with the majority lower class black community (McDaniel 1998; Countryman 2006; Fanon 2008; Shelton and Wilson 2009). Blacks of higher SES became more withdrawn from the socio-economic ideologies held by blacks of lower SES. They are generally becoming more conservative. (McDaniel 1998; Shelton and Wilson 2009)

Likewise, higher income earners of both the white and the black are less likely to support policies to redistribute wealth and help the poor. There are differences in beliefs between the black community's higher and lower SES. However, the majority of blacks still see discrimination as a reason for the disadvantages of blacks. They therefore support government policies against racial inequities (McDaniel 1998; Shelton and Wilson 2009).

Residents in the US have historically lived segregated (Farley, Steeh, Krysan, Jackson, and Reeves 1994; Oliver and Mendelberg 2000). Activists during the Civil Rights Movement advocated against legislation supporting racial housing segregation. In spite of the Housing Act of 1968, black neighborhoods today are still racially segregated from the whites. High levels of segregation also exist for upper class blacks, too (Farley et al 1994).

Segregation is motivated by fear more than anything else. Although some suggest that Americans live segregated due to their wish just to be with ‘like individuals’, studies suggest the opposite. When asked why they would not want to live with more than three black families in a 15-house neighborhood, their response was mainly linked to racial stereo types, decrease of property value, or fear of a rise in crime. When blacks where asked why they did not want to live in the same circumstances with whites, they gave reasons linked to fear of hostility from whites (Farley et al 1994).

The majority of white Americans live in highly segregated neighborhoods. Some neighborhoods are segregated by municipal jurisdictions and these are in metropolis areas. Other are segregated from municipal boundaries and those are in the suburban regions. This indicates that ‘social contexts’ really have an impact on the racial attitudes of whites and that individuals’ racial opinions are formed through the information fed by their own social environments (Oliver and Mendelberg 2000).

Is discrimination really a reason for blacks’ social economic disadvantages? Existing research shows that racial and discriminatory attitudes are still central within American social contexts. Furthermore, such attitudes have shifted from a traditional racist ideology to a modern racist behavior. To prevent such behavior, governmental policies that may aid racial equality must be thwarted.

Denial of existence of discriminations, blaming the victim, and turning a blind eye to the fact itself feed racist notions. Therefore, racial segregation continues to flourish in the US and contributes to the perpetuation of certain racial attitudes against black Americans. All these necessitate further research on how and to what extent race and white segregation affect people’s views and behavior regarding in particular to blacks’ disadvantages.

I hypothesize: (1) Race still has an effect on the views of blacks’ disadvantages; (2) Americans who identify themselves as white, compared to black, are more likely to not see discrimination as a cause for blacks’ disadvantages; (3) A more segregated neighborhood, especially a segregated white neighborhood, affects how people blame blacks for blacks’ disadvantages; (4) In higher white segregated neighborhoods, white and black Americans are both more likely to not see discrimination as a cause for blacks’ disadvantages; (5) However, they are less likely to not see discrimination as a cause in lower white segregated neighborhoods.

Data and Measures

To test my hypotheses, I used the cumulative General Social Survey (GSS) from 1972-2006 produced by The National Opinion Research Center (NORC) (Davis, Smith, and Marsden 2007). The GSS used a random sampling method to interview their respondents in person using a question survey format. I focused on the 2004 GSS data which has a total of 2812 valid cases with a 70 percent response rate.

I used RACDIF1 to measure if Americans see discrimination as a cause for the disadvantages of blacks. This variable was evaluated in the GSS by asking if respondents thought that discrimination was the reason for blacks having worse jobs, income and housing than whites. Respondents were then able to

either answer yes or no. RACE was used to examine this study focusing on those respondents who identified with being either white or black. I did not use “Other” due to the heterogeneous racial and ethnic content.

The socio-demographic variable to be controlled for is RACLIVE. This was used to observe the level of white segregation in the respondent’s neighborhood. They were asked if there were any blacks living in their neighborhood and then answered either yes or no. This was chosen as a control variable in order to see if racial neighborhood segregation influences attitudes towards race in America and its importance from previous research (Oliver and Mendelberg 2000; Farley et al 1994).

Some limitations from the data collected could derive from “other” in the variable RACE due to some individual’s beliefs that they are not black even though according to the majority group they may be classified as so. More detailed steps need to be taken in future collections of data to better analyze and record what “other” exactly stands for. At the same time the black respondents were significantly less than their white respondents which could result in outcomes becoming skewed.

Results

Table 1: Frequency Charts

Race	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
White	2234	79.40%	79.40%
Black	337	13.40%	13.40%
Other	201	7.10%	7.10%
Total	2812	100%	100%
Racdif1	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
Yes	303	10.80%	35%
No	563	20%	65%
Total	866	30.80%	100%
Raclive	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
Yes	853	30.30%	66.40%
No	431	15.30%	33.60%
Total	1284	45.70%	100%

Table 1 presents the three variables used in this study. RACE has a total of 2812 respondents with no missing values. Out of them, 79.4% of the respondents are white compared to 13.4% who are black and 7.1% who identify as other. RACDIF1 has a total of 866 respondents with 1946 missing values. From the total, 35% of respondents agreed to discrimination as a reason to the disadvantages of blacks and 65% disagreed. The last variable, RACLIVE has a total of 1284 respondents with 1528 missing values. Out of them, 66.4% lived in low levels of white segregated neighborhoods and 33.6% lived in higher levels.

Table 2: Crosstabulation of Discrimination as a Cause for Blacks' Disadvantages by Race

		White	Other	Black
Discrimination as a Cause for Blacks' Disadvantages	No	70.2%	58.0%	35.0%
	Yes	29.8%	42.0%	65.0%
		100.0% (694)	100.0% (69)	100.0% (103)
GK Tau=0.058, p<0.001				

Source: General Social Survey 2004

According to Table 2, Race seems to affect beliefs on racial inequality. White Americans are more likely to not see discrimination as a cause for blacks’ disadvantages and the opposite is true for black Americans. Specifically, 70.2% of whites do not see discrimination as a cause compared to 35% of blacks, a

35.2 percentage point difference. At the same time, 35.2% more blacks (65%) than whites (29.8%) do see discrimination as a cause for blacks' disadvantages. Although it is a weak relationship with a

GK Tau score of 0.058 it is highly significant allowing it to be generalized to the public on a $p < .001$ level.

Table 3: Crosstabulation of Discrimination as a Cause for Blacks' Disadvantages by Race by Segregation of Race in Neighborhood

		High Segregation of Race in Neighborhood			Low Segregation of Race in Neighborhood		
		Race			Race		
Discrimination as a Cause for Blacks' Disadvantages	No	White 72.0%	Other 40.0%	Black 42.9%	White 69.2%	Other 66.7%	Black 33.3%
	Yes	28.0%	60.0%	57.1%	30.8%	33.3%	66.7%
		100.0% (236)	100.0% (25)	100.0% (21)	100.0% (422)	100.0% (42)	100.0% (81)
		GK Tau=0.058, $p < 0.001$			GK Tau=0.070, $p < 0.001$		

Source: General Social Survey 2004

Table 3 shows that the effect of race on discrimination being seen as a cause for blacks' disadvantages varies after the control of white segregation levels in neighborhoods, which means that the effect of race on discrimination as a cause is confounding with white segregation. Of those living in neighborhoods of high white segregation, 72% of whites do not see discrimination as a cause for blacks' disadvantages compared to 42.9% of blacks, a difference of 29.1 percentage points indicating that whites are more likely to not see discrimination as a cause for black disadvantages. The GK Tau score of 0.058 shows a weak association but can be generalized to the public on a $p < .001$ level. Of those living in neighborhoods of low white segregation, whites (69.2%) are similarly, more likely to not see discrimination as a cause than blacks (33.3%), but with an increased magnitude of 35.9 percentage point difference. The GK Tau score of .070 on these findings show again a weak relationship, but still can be generalized to the public on a $p < .001$ level.

However, when race is controlled for, those living in neighborhoods of high white segregation are also more likely to not see discrimination as a cause. Of those who are white, 72% that live in highly white segregated neighborhoods do not see discrimination as a cause, compared to 69.2% that live in neighborhoods of low segregation, a difference of 2.8 percentage points indicating that those who live in neighborhoods of high white segregation are more likely to not see discrimination as a cause for blacks' disadvantages. At the same time, of those who are black and living in highly white segregated neighborhoods (42.9%) are also more likely to not see discrimination as a cause than those who live in neighborhoods of low segregation (33.3%), but with an increased magnitude of 9.6 percentage point difference.

To sum up, this shows that whites and blacks living in higher levels of white segregation are more likely to not see discrimination as a cause for blacks' disadvantages. Whites living in highly white neighborhoods (72%) are more likely to not see discrimination as a cause and blacks living in a low segregated neighborhood are less likely (33.3%) to not see discrimination as a cause for blacks' disadvantages.

Discussion and Conclusion

The results of my analysis support my hypotheses. The results show that race does matter when assessing the disadvantages of blacks. After the Civil Rights Movement, overt racist behavior started to decrease in America. The decrease in overt racism gave the impression that previous obstacles put forth by institutions were eradicated. However, government policies promoting racial inequities were still being put into action. Whites then, began to shift their perception from discrimination to a 'lack of motivation' when looking at the disadvantages of blacks.

The majority of whites do not see discrimination as a reason for blacks' disadvantages, and when I controlled RACLIVE for levels of white segregation, it slightly enhanced the effect for both whites and blacks. The amount of white segregation of race in one's neighborhood affects how blacks are blamed for their disadvantages. Specifically, white and black Americans both are more likely to not see discrimination as a cause for blacks' disadvantages in highly white segregated neighborhoods but are less likely to not see discrimination as a cause in lower segregated neighborhoods.

Discrimination for racial SES disadvantages in America is denied by a large majority of white individuals. As is stated above, it will be extremely difficult to create policies which support racial equality if these anti-black feeling are not eradicated, and disadvantages for all minorities will continue (Kluegel 1990). At the same time, blacks living in higher levels of white segregation have a higher risk of denying their own racial community's hardships which can create oppositions towards policies of racial equality.

The denial of discrimination feeds modern racism. This type of racism in some ways can be even more deviant than traditional racism. Due to its covert nature, it is able to hide behind the rejection of racial prejudice giving off the illusion to the public and the person themselves that racism is a thing of the past (Kluegel 1990). From this, the blaming of the victim come easily into play allowing the media and other social institutions to throw salt on the black community's wounds without any disregard.

In addition, the black middle class continues to ideologically distant themselves from the majority black community. They are important to the poor black masses, in some cases, having greater political pull and wider social networks, but due to a lack of ideological solidarity their influence is weaken (Shelton and Wilson 2009; McDaniel 1998).

The nature of American racism is institutionalized demanding policies in order to change injustices focused on minorities (Alexander 2012). It is essential to American democracy and human rights for all people that this schism is eradicated from the United States. Due to the nature and history of the black community's plight, other forms of discrimination will be almost impossible to eliminate without an honest and sincere awakening to the denial of these racial prejudices. Until then the citizens of this country will continue to be in an illusion of freedom where one's comfort is at the expense of another's.

Suggestions

My study is not definitive and limited in terms of the scope. So further extensive data and community-based research is needed. Since "other" in the race variable was too vague to measure, it

would be more helpful in future studies to breakdown this category into a less inclusive term. Also, for future research, rewording discrimination to better fit modern racist attitudes projected from anti-black statements may help social scientist better understand current racist trends, which will in return allow researchers to assess anti-black attitudes more accurately.

More community meetings and forums ought to be organized, either separately or collectively, with community members, civic and political authorities, and the press and media, in order to discuss the negative effects of segregation and bring them into the fore, into public space. This may lead civic and political authorities and institutions to pick up the issues and attempt to develop and deploy pertinent measures.

Data Availability

The data that support the findings of this study are available in The General Social Survey at <https://gss.norc.org>

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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Appendices

Variables/ Labels

IV – RACE/ RACE OF RESPONDENT

DV- RACDIF1/ DIFFERENCES DUE TO DISCRIMINATION

CV – RACLIVE/ ANY OPP. RACE IN NEIGHBORHOOD

GSS Questions

IV – What race do you consider yourself?

DV – On the average (Negroes/Blacks/African-Americans) have worse jobs, income, and housing than white people. Do you think these differences are mainly due to discrimination?

CV – Are there any (Negroes/Blacks/African-Americans) living in this neighborhood now?