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Race & Society 4 (2001) 207–217
RACE & SOCIETY

Reconsidering wealth, status, and power: Critical Demography and the measurement of racism

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Abstract

Sociologists have a long tradition of studying the effects of differentials in indicators of socioeconomic status by race. In fact, since Duncan's classic study on poverty, differences on such indicators have often been considered a measure of the "cost of being black." This paper employs the new paradigm in the study of population, *Critical Demography*, to develop a measure of racism based upon estimates of the differentials in wealth, status and power. Specifically, the study asks three questions: (1) How is racism measured relative to wealth, status and power in the United States? (2) Based upon this measure, how has racism changed over time? and (3) What are the theoretical implications of this measure for the study of race and ethnicity in sociology, demography and the social sciences in general? The findings provide evidence of Mertonian serendipity: once macro-level measures of racism are controlled, blacks actually exceed whites in levels of education, income and housing values. The paper concludes with a discussion of the policy implications of measuring racism from a *Critical Demography* perspective.

Keywords: Critical; Demography; Racism

Racism continues to be a major, if not the most salient, component of the American social structure. Yet despite its historical and contemporary influence on social institutions, population processes and population policy, conventional demographers have tended to avoid racism as a topic of scholarly research. It is maintained that one impediment to the use of the concept as a variable in demographic analyses is the problem of measurement. Accordingly, the purpose of this research note is to employ *Critical Demography* to facilitate the development of measures of racism relative to wealth, status and power in the United States. Specifically, the following questions are addressed: (1) How is racism measured relative to wealth, status and power in

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doi:10.1016/S1090-9524(03)00010-X

the United States? (2) Based upon these measures, how has racism changed over time? and (3) What are the theoretical implications of the measure of racism in the study of sociology, demography and the social sciences in general?

1. Racism and the measurement of racial differentials

Demography is not alone in its avoidance of racism as a topic, let alone variable, of analysis. Mainstream sociology has likewise tended to avoid the issue as evidenced in the publication of articles in the *American Sociological Review*, the *American Journal of Sociology* and *Social Forces*. However, what has emerged in both disciplines is a tradition of the measurement and analysis of racial differentials. The classic work of Duncan (1968) set the standard for this approach. Essentially, the logic behind Duncan's measure of "*the cost of being black*" is: once you have controlled for the array of variables that logically function as plausible alternative explanations, the net effect for the race variable is in essence a measure of racial discrimination.

Despite the obvious problem of not knowing if the next variable to be included might in fact make race statistically insignificant in a multivariate model, this has yet to be the case. Arguments on the declining significance of race not withstanding, there have been no studies to date that have been able to eliminate the *statistical* significance of race in multivariate models—even in the face of a multitude of social and demographic controls. However, what has changed is the *interpretation* of the effect of race in these models. There has been a subtle, but noticeable, attempt to attribute the remaining differential to cultural differences between blacks and whites. Ironically enough, this trend represents a return to the "*blaming the victim*" paradigm that pre-dated Duncan's original work (Ryan, 1972).

Since Duncan (1968), there have been a number of attempts to measure and/or assess racial differentials (Beggs, Villemez, & Arnold, 1997; Bendick, Jackson, & Reinoso, 1999; Daymont & Kaufman, 1979). A disproportionate amount of this work has been done by sociologists and psychologists who focus on the attitudes of whites toward blacks (Chin, 1986; Dyer, Vedlitz, & Worchel, 1989; Gilbert, 1998; Sidanius, 1989). In fact, in some cases, social psychological measures of racism itself have been attempted (Kleinpenning & Hagendoorn, 1993). However, while this type of micro-level approach has some inherent value, it is maintained here that it misses the very nature of the social structure. Not only does racism at the macro-level impact micro-level attitudes on race, but it also functions independently of those individual-level manifestations. In other words, given the structural nature and origin of racism, it can exist despite the relative decline of such at the micro-level. It is for this reason that not only is racial prejudice distinct from racism, the former is neither necessary nor sufficient to infer or indicate the presence of the latter. In practical terms, this means that in contemporary America, racism can continue to be a major force in determining racial inequality although the majority of dominant group members may not themselves be racist. But they don't have to be. The racism embedded into the heart of the social structure is on *auto-pilot*. Therefore, the first task in the effort to make the utilization of racism effective as a variable of analysis is properly operationalizing the concept. It is to this task that this paper now turns.

2. Operationalizing racism

Since the introduction of the term by Ture and Hamilton (1967, 1992), racism has been defined in a myriad of ways. However, it is maintained here that prior definitions have not facilitated the operationalization of the concept so as to be amenable to measurement and analysis. Conversely, the definition Horton introduced in the context of the *Critical Demography* paradigm is deemed the appropriate exception to this general rule: "Racism is a multi-level and multi-dimensional system of dominant group oppression that scapegoats the race and/or ethnicity of one or more subordinate groups" (Horton, 2002, p. 26).

The implications of the use of this operationalization of racism are clear. First, any measure of racism must include models that encapsulate racism's role at both the macro and micro levels—at a minimum.[1] Secondly, because of the complexity and depth of racism in American society, it has many empirical manifestations. Thus, not only is the measure of racism likely to vary by context, within each there are likely to be multiple indicators of the phenomenon. Thirdly, racism is a variable rather than a constant. That means it is subject to change over time. Accordingly, to properly measure racism models must be used that capture the multi-level and multi-dimensional aspects of the concept while simultaneously accommodating the element of change.

2.1. Racism and the emphasis on wealth, status and power

An acknowledgment of the structural basis of racism necessitates a reconsideration of racial differentials in wealth, status and power. These are in fact the valued resources that dominant groups in any society struggle to maintain for themselves and to exclude from others. In the United States, there are clear indicators of each that provide the basis for the measurement of racism.

2.1.1. Racism and wealth

The clearest indicator of the impact of racism on wealth is the distribution of the latter by race. Arguably the best example of this phenomenon is the level of racial inequality in home ownership and housing values. Racism in mortgage lending is well documented. Horton (1992) demonstrates that racial differentials in home ownership persisted even in the face of a broad range of social and demographic variables. Horton and Thomas (1998) find significant race–class interactions in their study of race and housing values. In fact, class actually exacerbated the race effect on housing values. In other words, despite the ongoing argument of class superceding race in its effect on lifestyle, middle class blacks were found to be at a greater disadvantage relative to middle class whites than working class blacks to their white counterparts in terms of housing values (Horton & Thomas, 1998). Hence, it is argued here that it is quite appropriate to use housing values as a proxy for wealth on both historical and empirical grounds.

2.1.2. Racism and status

Education, occupation and income are defensibly the best indicators of racism and its effects on social status in the United States. Since Blau and Duncan's (1967) classic, *The American Occupational Structure*, sociologists have acknowledged the role that racial discrimination

plays in impeding, if not eliminating altogether in some cases, the chances of improvements in socioeconomic status for blacks. And where there have been a broad acknowledgment of an improvement in the likelihood of black achievement in these areas (Wilson, 1980), there has yet to be any evidence that would suggest that blacks have gained parity with whites in education, occupation and income (Horton, Lundy Allen, Herring, & Thomas, 2000). In fact, recent findings from the 2000 census show that the racial differential in income was practically unchanged over the 1990–2000 decade. Again, following the logic introduced by Duncan (1968), in a multivariate framework, the net effect for these variables are proxies for micro-level indicators of racism.

2.1.3. Racism and power

Max Weber defined *power* as the ability to realize one's goals irrespective of the resistance of others. In contemporary America, the most visible manifestation of the power to maintain racial advantage is segregation. In contemporary research, the emphasis has tended to be confined to the area of residential segregation (Emerson, Yancy, & Chai, 2001; Massey & Denton, 1993). However, Lieberson (1980) documented the process by which the dominant group in the United States eliminates subordinate groups from competition in education and income as well. This is a macro-level process and is perpetrated and perpetuated on the basis of race (Lieberson, 1980). Accordingly, it is reasonable to argue that segregation measures across a broad range of social and economic indicators function as proxies for macro-level measures of the use of power to achieve racist goals, that is, macro-level indicators of racism.

2.1.4. Data and methods

The data employed in this study are the 1980 and 1990 Integrated Public Use Micro-data Series (IPUMS) from the U.S. Bureau of the Census and the Minnesota Historical Census Project. The IPUMS data are well suited for this study because they allow for the inclusion of individual household and SMSA level characteristics. Moreover, IPUMS allows for the inclusion of a relatively large sub-sample of minority populations (in this case, blacks). It should be noted that the data are cumulated so as to facilitate the assessment of change over time (Firebaugh, 1997). The *N*s for blacks and whites, respectively are 277,780 and 2,581,676.

2.1.4.1. Combining changing-parameter and hierarchical linear models. A unique feature of this study is the combination of changing-parameter models (Firebaugh, 1997) with hierarchical linear modeling (Byrk & Raudenbush, 1992). To our knowledge, there have been no prior studies to combine these two approaches. However from the standpoint of measuring racism, this combination is quite logical. In the case of hierarchical linear models, the rationale for the application is straightforward. The very definition of racism employed here requires that multi-level analysis be employed in its measurement. The inclusion of the changing-parameter model approach is necessary to assess the extent to which racism has changed over time. The resulting changing-parameter/hierarchical linear "hybrid" model is represented as follows:

$$E(Y_{ij}) = \alpha + \gamma D_{\mathrm{yr}} + X_{ij}\beta + X_{ij}D_{\mathrm{yr}}\delta$$

where D_{yr} is a dummy variable representing census year, X_{ij} represents a vector of multi-level predictors besides census year; $\exists$ and * are vectors for parameters. $X_{ij}D_{\mathrm{yr}}$ represents the

Table 1
Descriptive statistics for whites and blacks on select social and demographic indicators, 1980–1990

	Whites	Blacks
Region	2.83	2.78
Housing values ($)	93866.50	68113.78
Age	48.64	45.98
Sex	1.53	1.56
Marital status	0.69	0.47
Education	6.76	6.09
Income ($)	16559.60	11102.13
Social class position	2.12	2.26
Employment status	1.77	1.79
Region	2.63	2.61
Proportion middle class	0.19	0.17
Proportion in professional occupations	0.14	0.10
Proportion homeowners	0.72	0.55
Proportion college educated	0.39	0.28
Observations	2581676	277780

Table 2
A multi-level analysis of inequality on education between blacks and whites across metropolitan statistical areas, 1980–1990

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Intercept	9.7873***	7.0610***	7.3423***
Black	−0.6991***	−0.6688***	0.5995***
Controls			
1990		0.3709***	0.1144***
Age		−0.02950***	−0.02240***
Female		0.07889***	0.1662***
Employed		0.8054***	0.5566***
Unemployed		0.09649***	0.1864***
West		0.5859***	0.3497***
Northeast		0.3825***	0.2701***
Midwest		0.2636***	0.1596***
Married		0.1780***	0.1449***
Measures of racism			
Middle class segregation			0.2051***
Occupational segregation			0.4765***
Housing segregation			0.3080***
Educational segregation			3.8979
Between MSA variance	0.1336***	0.1027***	0.003695***
Within MSA variance	3.9038***	3.2682***	2.3467***
Subjects	321	321	321
Observations	2860000	2860000	2680000
−2 Log Likelihood	12010744	11502556	9902397

*** $p < 0.001$.

interaction term which in essence measures the change in the predictor variables. For the sake of parsimony and clarity of interpretation, the use of interaction effects will be limited to the race-year interaction. It should be noted that cross-level interactions will be considered in subsequent analyses.

2.1.4.2. Operationalization of variables. There are three dependent variables in this analysis: income, education and housing values. All of the three are measured at the interval level. Income and housing values are logged.

The measures of racism are metropolitan statistical area (MSA) level variables. To create these variables, individual-level data for blacks and whites were aggregated. The index of dissimilarity was used to measure black–white segregation in the areas of housing, educational attainment (college level), and social class position (middle class). In each instance, the index shows the level of movement that would have to occur between two or more groups to achieve complete integration.

The logic in assessing the validity of the macro-level measures of racism is straightforward. Following Duncan's approach (1968), let's assume that controlling for plausible alternative causal factors leaves a race effect that represents racism at the micro-level. That being the case,

Table 3
A multi-level analysis of income inequality between blacks and whites across metropolitan statistical areas, 1980–1990

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Intercept	9.3505***	7.9712***	8.2358***
Black	−0.4161***	−0.3076***	0.1558***
Controls			
1990		0.2934***	0.1750***
Age		0.02455***	0.02197***
Age^2		−0.00014***	−0.00010***
Female		−0.7471***	−0.6811***
Employed		1.0757***	1.0064***
Unemployed		0.3431***	0.3558***
West		0.09447***	0.05274***
Northeast		0.09407***	0.04996***
Midwest		0.03049***	−0.03023***
Married		−0.08940***	−0.1040***
Some college		0.4587***	0.3624***
Measures of racism			
Middle class segregation			0.5190***
Occupational segregation			0.1996***
Housing segregation			0.2806***
Segregation in education			0.5546***
Between MSA variance	0.01983**	0.01132***	0.008422***
Within MSA variance	1.2255***	0.8642***	0.8291***
Subjects	321	321	321
Observations	2550000	2550000	2680000
−2 Log Likelihood	7756419	6865445	7111154

*** $p < 0.001$.

then the inclusion of *macro-level* indicators for racism should have a measurable effect on the *micro-level* race variable. In fact, we argue that this is the clearest evidence that the macro-level measures and the micro-level measure are in fact measuring the same phenomenon.

Race, is a dichotomy with the codes of 1 for black and 0 for whites.[2] Other dichotomies are female, 1990, married, college and homeowner. Trichotomies are class (middle, working, and bottom) and employment status (employed, unemployed, not in the labor force). For both variables the last category listed is the reference category. South is the reference category for the region variable. Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics for the study.

2.1.4.3. Results. Table 2 presents the multi-level analysis of educational inequality. Model one represents the baseline model and consists of the micro-level racism effect and the intercept only. This model shows the expected trend that blacks tend to have lower levels of education that whites. Model two incorporates the standard controls that sociologists and demographers tend to employ in studies of racial inequality. The inclusion of these variables does not eliminate the effect of micro-level racism. In fact, there is only a marginal (and arguably non-significant) change in the magnitude of the micro-racism effect.

However, such is not the case with the inclusion of the macro-level measures of racism. In fact, the findings are so dramatic that they may be appropriately termed, in a Mertonian (Merton, 1968) sense, "serendipitous." The effect for race *reverses* in direction. Equally dramatic is the

Table 4
A multi-level analysis of inequality in housing values between blacks and whites across metropolitan statistical areas, 1980–1990

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Intercept	11.0529***	10.1586***	9.9763***
Black	−0.3902***	−0.2787***	0.03945***
Controls			
1990		0.4900***	0.5427***
Age		0.000963***	0.01556***
Female		0.03661***	0.01129***
Employed		0.04091***	0.07961***
Unemployed		−0.07500***	−0.05213***
West		0.2986***	0.2643***
Northeast		0.4372***	0.4100***
Midwest		−0.03633***	−0.1371***
Married		0.2042***	0.1887***
Measures of racism			
Middle class segregation			0.2900***
Occupational segregation			0.09302***
Segregation in education			0.4892***
Housing segregation			0.1307
Between MSA variance	0.1937***	0.1087***	0.1117***
Within MSA variance	0.5773***	0.4801***	0.4791***
Subjects	321	321	321
Observations	1890000	1890000	1600000
−2 Log Likelihood	4319252	3971021	3361220

*** $p < 0.001$.

magnitude of the switch. The race effect goes from a −0.6688 to a +0.9843. The interpretation provided here is that while blacks in general tend to have lower overall levels of education than whites, in a few MSAs a different pattern emerges. When levels of racial segregation in class, occupation, housing and (most importantly) college education, are insubstantial, blacks actual experience levels of education that exceed that of whites. This is indeed a significant finding because not only does it provide dramatic evidence of the effects of the measures of macro-level racism, but it likewise shows that there are "*pockets of progressiveness*" in the United States relative to educational attainment.

Table 3 presents the income inequality analysis. As before, model one represents the baseline model. It shows the predictable pattern of blacks having lower levels of income than whites. Model two includes the controls. It should be noted that after the introduction of the controls the race effect is reduced to −0.3076 from an original figure of −0.4161 in the baseline model. However, the introduction of the macro-level measures of racism reverses the macro-level racism effect to 0.1558. Taken at face value, this finding essentially means that in a few MSAs where the levels of racial segregation on the indicators in question are relatively low, blacks tend to experience higher levels of income than whites. Once again, this finding heretofore has not been reported in prior research and adds further credence to the argument that these measures are in fact measuring racism as it relates to income.

Table 5
Changing-parameter models for blacks and whites on education, income and housing values, 1980–1990

	Education	Income	Housing values
Intercept	6.0362***	7.7283***	9.9819***
Black	0.6243***	−0.09470***	−0.1117***
Black*1990	0.5664***	0.07164***	0.2120***
Controls			
1990	0.1946***	0.2527***	0.5254***
Age	−0.02311***	0.02347***	0.01570***
Age^2		−0.00011***	
Female	0.1744***	−0.7068***	0.01232***
Employed	0.5303***	0.9791***	0.07954***
Unemployed	0.1453***	0.3557***	−0.05264***
West	0.4413***	0.05739***	0.2653***
Northeast	0.3707***	0.07882***	0.4110***
Midwest	0.3052***	0.03174***	−0.1347***
Married	0.1685***	−0.1169***	0.1894***
Some college		0.5197***	
Measures of racism			
Middle class segregation	0.1896***	0.5539***	0.2851***
Occupational segregation	0.4622***	0.2048***	0.09306***
Housing segregation	0.3973***	0.2767***	0.1383***
Segregation in education	3.9014***	−0.3057***	0.4937***
Between MSA variance	0.05427***	0.007225***	0.1115***
Within MSA variance	2.3447***	0.7999***	0.4786***
Subjects	321	321	321
Observations	2860000	2550000	1600000
−2 Log Likelihood	10552873	6668355	3359270

Table 4 presents a multi-level analysis of inequality in housing values. The baseline model (model one) shows the expected differential of blacks owning homes of lower value than whites. Once controls are introduced (model 2) the effect is reduced but is still substantial (from −0.3902 to −0.2787). However, the introduction of the macro-level measures of racism reverses this effect again. The positive log-odds of 0.0395 indicates that in those MSAs where the macro-level effects of racism are relatively low, blacks tend to have slightly higher levels of housing values. To reiterate, this serendipitous finding is clearly at odds with past studies and present assumptions. Moreover, it underscores the fact that racism is multi-level and multi-dimensional in nature.

Finally, Table 5 presents the results of the multi-level changing-parameter model analyses. The educational inequality model shows that the trend of higher levels of education for blacks than whites in those MSAs with relatively low levels of macro-level racism was evident in 1980. That trend significantly increased by 1990. In short, in those MSAs, blacks further extended their advantage over whites in education over the decade. The income inequality model shows that blacks trailed whites in 1980, but improved modestly over the decade. The housing value model shows that blacks improved relative to whites over the decade on this measure. In short, the evidence shows that on every measure of inequality, blacks experienced significant improvement relative to whites between 1980 and 1990.

3. Conclusion

The purpose of this research note was to employ the *Critical Demography* paradigm to facilitate the development of measures of racism. Horton has defined racism as a multi-level and multi-dimensional system of dominant group oppression that scapegoats the race and/or ethnicity of one or more subordinate groups (Horton, in press). Using this definition, hierarchical linear models and changing-parameter models were used to assess the impact of macro-level measures of racism on micro-level race effects and to measure their respective effects over time. The analyses provided some surprising results. First, once the macro-level measures of racism were incorporated into the standard models of racial inequality, there were dramatic changes in the micro-level race effects relative to education, income and housing values. Education showed the most dramatic change. Blacks went from having significantly lower levels of educational attainment to actually surpassing whites in those MSAs where the levels of racial segregation in class, occupation, education and housing were relatively low. The race effects on income and housing values were similar in direction though of lesser magnitude. In essence, in both cases the effects were reversed from the baseline model: once the macro-level effects for racism were controlled, blacks exceeded whites on income and housing values. These serendipitous results have heretofore yet to be found by prior research and represent a major step forward toward the understanding and re-conceptualization of the meanings of race, racism and racial inequality in contemporary America.

Moreover, the results of the analyses from the changing-parameter models showed that on all three measures of inequality there was improvement for blacks over the decade. In the case of education, it was revealed that the unexpected higher black than white effect in some MSAs actually was present in 1980. Ultimately, these results provide substantial

support to the rationale of the inclusion of measures of racism in multi-level models of racial inequality.

While it is important to note that this study is preliminary, it is nevertheless appropriate to discuss some its implications. There are several. First, MSAs can be identified and ranked based upon these macro-level measures of racism. This would be of benefit to researchers interested in the conditions that facilitate or inhibit the levels of racial inequality in society. From a policy perspective, knowing where the "pockets of progressiveness" are would be helpful in the further enhancement of the conditions that promote racial equality.

Another implication of the application of these measures of racism is to determine if and how the macro-level measures of racism vary across racial and ethnic groups. In other words, it has been long established that blacks are the group that experiences the greatest degree of racial segregation across a number of dimensions. However, if there are MSAs where blacks equal or exceed whites on education or income, then it is logical to argue that there would be similar patterns when Asians and/or Latinos are so compared. Moreover, it would be possible to determine if there are certain MSAs that are more favorable to one minority as opposed to others. Past research would lead us to believe that the relative population size of the minority group in question is an important factor. However prior research also provided no evidence to suggest the findings of this analysis. It is likely that there may be more "serendipity" to be found once we expand beyond the simple black–white model.

In sum, *Critical Demography* facilitates a freedom of thought and scientific inquiry that is alien to its conventional counterpart. Measuring racism is but one example of the potential of this dynamic new paradigm. And while it is premature to state that the measures provided here are definitive, we believe that they represent a major step forward in the study of racial inequality in the fields of sociology and demography. One thing is unequivocal: whatever racism truly is, there is evidence here to support the argument that it is multi-level and multi-dimensional in nature. Moreover, we have demonstrated that it is possible to incorporate racism, race and racial inequality in a single multivariate model. Consequently, we will continue to develop new measures and to introduce more refined and in some instances more complex (i.e., three-level and cross-level interaction) models to capture the dynamics of racism in American society. We welcome other scholars as we continue to expand the boundaries of *Critical Demography* and sociology as well.

Notes

1. It should be noted that racism also functions at the medial level. In fact, one might argue that it is at this level where many, if not most, of the racism that impacts individuals exist. However, for the purpose of exposition, and as well as the developmental nature of the current analysis, only two levels of racism will be considered here. Most certainly, further development of the racism concept will incorporate the medial level in its conceptualization and measurement.
2. It should be noted that Hispanics and Asians are excluded from this analysis. The logic here is based upon lower levels of segregation for these groups (compared to blacks). Future analyses and development of the measure of racism will include these groups.

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