Locality Influence on the Racial and Ethnic Perspectives of White Americans

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The increasing complexity of the racial and ethnic landscape in this country adds important dimensions to traditional questions about racial and ethnic attitudes, while also raising intriguing new issues. Using 2000 and 2002 General Social Survey data linked to 1990-2000 Census information about the communities where the GSS respondents reside, this paper assesses the impact of local context on non-Hispanic whites' perspectives vis-a-vis race and ethnicity.

Intergroup attitudes are of interest outside the domain of social psychology. Public opinion can shape public policy, as recent events have shown and research has documented (Burstein, 1985), remedying or perpetuating the disadvantage faced by minority groups in their efforts to join the American mainstream. Expressed public opinion also serves to define the norms that guide the behavior of whites citizens as they interact in ways that facilitate or impede the inclusion of minorities (Pettigrew, 1991). Consensually held stereotypes influence the daily decisions of employers and other gatekeepers to social institutions. And repeated experience with prejudice and discrimination can discourage minorities from actively seeking productive participation in those institutions (Wilson, 1996). Thus, in broadest terms, this inquiry is concerned with the inclusion and mobility of America's racial and ethnic minorities.

Existing research documents the impact of local context, particularly race composition, on the racial attitudes of white Americans (Fossett and Kiecolt, 1989;

Quillian, 1996; Taylor, 1998). However, further examination is warranted on several counts. Most obvious is the need to reassess the effects of locality characteristics on racial attitudes in data gathered at the beginning of the new millennium.

But also, there are new questions to address. For one, as suggested by Oliver and Mendelberg (2000), local context has multiple dimensions, each with the potential for a distinctive effect. This pair of researchers found limited evidence of the race composition effects on which earlier research focused, but concluded that the average socioeconomic level of whites in a locality exerts a noteworthy impact on racial attitudes. This suggestion needs to be pursued with a full array of recently-gathered data.

Perhaps the most pressing need is for research that expands the focus in order to fully acknowledge the increasingly multi-ethnic composition of the U.S. population. In particular, analysts must examine both white Americans' attitudes toward Hispanics and Asian Americans and whites' perspectives on issues of multiculturalism and immigration raised by these swelling "brown" minority groups. Using 1990 survey and census data, Taylor (1998) found no evidence that white Anglos' attitudes toward Hispanics became more negative as the local Hispanic population share grew. However, the expanded Hispanic population share may well be changing the dynamic.

With ethnicity as well as race in the forefront of current inter-group relations, it becomes more and more plausible that non-Hispanic whites' own ethnic identification may play a role in shaping their outlook toward non-white minorities. Many European-origin Americans represent groups that suffered discrimination when they were the recently-arrived immigrants. One might suppose that among whites who retain a sense of ethnic identity, their own group's history would breed identification with the underdog,

leading to relatively positive attitudes toward blacks, Hispanics, and Asian Americans. Alba (1990) posits a different dynamic, suggesting that European-Americans' attachment to their own ethnic roots may be a way in which white ethnic identifiers can distance themselves from Americans of non-European descent.

Using 2000 and 2002 GSS data linked to 1990 and 2000 census statistics for the metropolitan areas and clusters of non-metro counties in which GSS respondents live, this paper examines the influences of selected locality characteristics on racial and ethnic perspectives of non-Hispanic whites. Race/ethnic composition of the locality, 1990-2000 change in race/ethnic composition, and average socio-economic status of white residents will receive special attention. Focal outcomes include key attitudes toward blacks, Hispanics, and Asian Americans; stereotypes held about these groups; and opinions concerning multiculturalism and immigration. Professed importance of their own ethnicity among non-Hispanic white respondents, as well as their attachment to whiteness will receive attention – as they may be influenced by locality characteristics, and as they may, via main effects and interaction with locality characteristics, influence perspectives whites hold vis-a-vis non-white minorities.

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