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Racial Insularity at the Core: Contemporary American Racial Attitudes

by
A. Wade Smith



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Survey research scientists have been interested in American racial attitudes ever since the craft has achieved a reasonable degree of precision. White attitudes toward blacks constitute the longest running topic in survey research. However, as a result of dramatic and systematic changes in racial attitudes and because of the changing nature of race relations per se, there may be less agreement now about the structure of American racial values than at any time since World War II.^a This paper will provide a capsule presentation of the major findings of recent research on racial attitudes and a brief summary of the current controversies.

The first thing that becomes apparent to any investigator is that there is no longer any such thing as a classic "liberal" or archetypal "conservative." In the past these labels characterized a coherent set of beliefs, attitudes, and values, and, armed with knowledge of a given person's opinion on one racial issue, one could be reasonably sure of his/her view on another. This is no longer the case. Since World War II the issues in race relations have changed in two ways. There have been changes in the issues themselves (and thus changes in the importance attached to different attitudes) and in the ascriptive characteristics (i.e., background variables) associated with "progressive" or "repressive" outlooks on racial matters.

As a result of changes in laws and advances in basic science, many of the concerns previously of interest to scholars of racial attitudes have been made moot. During the late 1940s and 1950s surveys typically asked whites whether they approved of various types of desegregation^b (e.g. public facilities, public transportation) and called upon respondents to make assessments of the intelligence, trustworthi-

ness, etc., of blacks vis-a-vis whites.¹ After the successes of the Civil Rights Movement, and after federal legislation had removed barriers to racial interaction, whites came to accept the new reality in such overwhelming proportions that survey researchers soon dropped desegregation questions because there were so few intolerant responses. Similarly, questions involving racial comparisons of intelligence or character all but disappeared by the 1960s.² It will be shown below that the issues on the other side of this fundamental transformation of the American social fabric bear little resemblance to these earlier concerns.

The second dramatic change in American racial attitudes is the erosion of regional differences in those attitudes. Despite the anger, horror, and shock generated by the Civil Rights Movement, by the late 1970s considerable lessening of the differences between southern and nonsouthern racial attitudes was the norm.³ Just as Myrdal⁴ had predicted, whites in the South and the North were gradually coming to think alike on racial matters. One of the reasons for this emerging "national outlook" on racial matters was that the Civil Rights Movement expanded beyond the South, encompassing the entire nation. For another, the racial violence of the late 1960s and early 1970s mainly occurred outside of the South. Together, these developments dispelled any misconception northern whites held of race relations as "a southern problem."

Current investigations of racial attitudes show that there is very little "carryover" effect from one's views on one topic to one's views on another. Some scholars have coined the term "symbolic racism" to explain how an individual might hold relatively enlightened and progressive racial attitudes as a matter of principle, yet disapprove of the policy alternatives proposed to bring about racial equality.⁵ Moreover, there is disagreement as to whether "symbolic racists" want merely to avoid what they see as the economic consequence of racial equality, or whether

they reject the concept entirely but shrink from voicing such sentiments in the current racial climate. But neither symbolic racism nor its permutations would predict, as shown below, that whites have a continued resistance to interracial contacts that has no real policy implications.

Table 1

General Racial Attitudes and Experiences of Interracial Contacts, 1963–1986.^a

Survey Year	Percent of Nonblack Respondents ^b			
	Approving of Black Dinner Guests	Entertained Black Dinner Guests	Blacks Live in the Neighborhood	Attend Church with Blacks
1963	50.0	---	---	---
1966	51.6	---	20.5	---
1970	63.0	---	29.0	---
1972	69.8 ^c	---	28.6	---
1973	68.2	19.9	29.9 ^c	---
1974	72.0	22.5	31.2 ^c	---
1975	---	---	32.9	---
1976	70.5	22.8	42.4	---
1977	71.1	23.2	39.4	---
1978	---	---	45.5	34.5
1980	74.3	26.2	42.9	41.9
1982	77.2	27.5	44.4	---
1983	---	---	43.5	35.7
1984	79.8	27.2	47.0	44.9
1985	77.4	27.8	44.1	---
1986	---	---	44.0	36.4

^aAll surveys conducted by the American Institute of Public Opinion (Gallup) or the National Opinion Research Center (NORC). All sampling errors $\leq 5\%$. See text for actual question wordings.

^bOver 96.2% of all nonblack respondents are white.

^cThis is the mean response from two or more surveys that asked this question in this year.

^dThe dashed line indicates that this issue did not appear in any survey during this particular year.

Limits of Racial Contact

While no racial barriers exist that limit access to public facilities and accommodation, public transportation, etc., there is little truly *voluntary* contact between blacks and whites. To test this assertion, all that is needed are white people's responses to survey queries as to the actual amount of voluntary interracial contact they experience.

Because schools and work places are under (often ineffectual) legal compulsions to desegregate, they may bring whites into contact with blacks involuntarily. But there are two spheres of life over which those who do not live in group situations have complete control.^c Table 1 depicts the social distance whites maintain from blacks in two areas: entertaining dinner guests and attending church. Since 1963, although irregularly, both the American Institute of Public Opinion (the Gallup organization) and the National Opinion Research Center (NORC) have

asked four racial social-distance questions:

How strongly would you object if a member of your family wanted to bring a black friend home to dinner? Would you object strongly, mildly, or not at all?

During the last few years, has anyone in your home brought a friend who was black home for dinner?

Are there any blacks living in this neighborhood now?

Do blacks attend the church that you, yourself, attend most often, or not?

Since some of the earlier surveys only asked these questions of whites, the results reported exclude those blacks that were asked a slightly different question in the later years.^d In every survey at least 96.2% of the nonblacks were white. In any year, if more than one survey fielded the question, a weighted average of the results was calculated.

The increase of those in favor of such social contact is from exactly half of the white population in 1963 to more than three-fourths by the mid-1980s. While the overwhelming numbers of whites approve of having blacks in their home, about a fifth still do not. But all the more striking is the relatively small proportion of whites who have actually had black dinner guests. Little more than a quarter of the white population has actually experienced such racial contact. So while many whites give "lip-service" approval to total voluntary, interracial interaction, comparatively few actually engage in such activities.

Moreover, it is not the case that many whites lack contact with blacks to whom they could extend dinner invitations. In addition to the contacts in the schools and work places mentioned above, Table 1 shows that a substantial plurality of whites respond that blacks live in their neighborhoods. In analyses not shown the overwhelming majority of those respondents report that their black neighbors live relatively close to them (i.e., on their block to less than three blocks away). Yet in some surveys less than half who report that they have black neighbors say that they have entertained black dinner guests. As first reported by Hyman and Sheatsley,⁶ the South and the non-South are converging in the social distance at which they hold blacks. By the 1980s there are no significant regional differences on any of the above figures.

Another potential source of social interaction between blacks and whites is the church. In the five recent surveys where the issue appears, more than a third of the white respondents report that blacks attend their church. This is significantly more than the percent who have entertained black dinner guests. To be sure, there have been increases in positive interracial attitudes about social contact and (to a lesser extent) increases in black penetration of white neighborhoods and churches. But the data here sug-

gest that the increases in the social and spacial proximity of blacks and whites have not resulted in increased social interaction. See Table 2.

Table 2

Trends in Attitudes Toward Interracial Marriages, 1963–1985.^a

Survey Year	Percent of Nonblack Respondents ^b Not Favoring Laws Against Interracial Marriages
1963	37.5
1964	53.2
1968	53.5
1970	47.7
1972	60.1
1973	62.1
1974	65.5
1976	71.6
1977	71.7
1980	67.3
1982	67.1
1984	71.0
1985	70.3

^aAll surveys conducted by the American Institute of Public Opinion (Gallup) or the National Opinion Research Center (NORC). All sampling errors $\leq 5\%$. See text for actual question wordings.

^bOver 96.2% of all nonblack respondents are white.

In our society marriage is the relationship having the least social distance and the most intense contact. The choice of a spouse is also unquestionably beyond the scope of regulation. Table 2 reports the percent of nonblack respondents who oppose laws against interracial marriages. While those not opposing such marriages have almost doubled since 1963, still almost a third of all whites would have the state impose racial limits on individuals' decisions as to whom they can marry. Since interracial marriages extract no cost from anyone other than those in wedlock, not even group conflict motives (a broader definition of symbolic racism) can explain such opposition.

. . . there is no longer any such thing as a classic "liberal" or archetypal "conservative."

Contexts of Tolerance and Limits of Racial Attitude Change

In the face of the continuing evolution of racial attitudes on issues not made obsolete by changes in public policy, what is there to account for the apparent irregularities in contemporary racial attitudes? At face value whites seem to adhere to the principles of racial equality and interaction. But whenever the contexts of such interaction are specified, opposition is raised. What is needed is an explanation for the continuing resistance of whites to interracial

contact that also takes into account their increase in tolerance.

Table 3

Attitudes of Nonblacks Toward Varying Degrees of School Desegregation, 1958–1986.^a

Survey Year	Percent in Favor of Attending Schools With		
	A Few Black Students	50% Black Students	> 50% Black Students
1958 ^b	74.2	48.5	31.6
1959	79.6	52.8	29.7
1963	77.8	48.4	26.7
1965 ^c	83.2	57.9	31.7
1966	87.5	57.3	32.4
1969	88.4	61.8	34.6
1970 ^c	91.0	68.4	35.4
1972	94.0	74.7	44.8
1973	91.8	64.4	31.0
1974	95.7	66.9	33.4
1975 ^c	94.1	68.1	36.0
1977	92.8	73.5	35.8
1978 ^c	93.8	69.0	36.3
1980	94.2	71.6	38.4
1982	95.8	79.4	45.5
1983	96.5	74.9	35.1
1985	95.7	77.6	40.2
1986	96.2	76.4	36.3

^aOver 96.2% of all nonblack respondents are white. Includes only those respondents living in a home with school-aged children.

^bAll surveys conducted by the American Institute of Public Opinion (Gallup) or the National Opinion Research Center (NORC). All sampling errors $\leq 5\%$.

^cThese issues appeared in two Gallup surveys in both 1965 and 1970 and in one Gallup and one NORC survey in both 1975 and 1978. The percentages above are the mean results from both surveys in those years.

A look at post-World War II changes in attitudes toward varying degrees of school desegregation shows that between 1958 and 1986 almost all whites came to accept the presence of a few blacks in school with their children.^c See Table 3. But note that if the question is posed in the 50% range, tolerance drops approximately 20%. When the question is asked about schools in which blacks are the majority, as many as half of those tolerant of half-black schools become intolerant. Further, while there have been increases in tolerance of a few blacks and of half-black schools over time, there is relatively little improvement in white attitudes toward majority black schools.

The lessons learned above in the analyses of racial contact will serve well here. In schools with a few blacks the likelihood of any one white child interacting with a black child is extremely low. But, all other things being equal, in half-black schools this likelihood of interracial interaction theoretically increases to 50% and in majority black schools to above 50%. As long as the intensity of the interracial experience is quite low, whites seem willing to participate. But as this intensity increases, the acceptability of the situation decreases. The racial attitudes of

whites, then, are proportional to the amount of interaction structured by the potential interracial context. Remember, the desegregation of public accommodations, transportation, etc., can be accepted because the intensity of contact is low, lower say than the intensity of contact in interracial dining.

This “group position approach,” first postulated by Blumer,⁷ was empirically validated in time-series analyses of attitudes toward interracial housing⁸ and toward school desegregation.⁹ But more than simply linking differences in tolerance to differences in intensity of racial contact, this approach also accounts for changes in attitudes over time (where they occur). While the largest component of racial attitude change involves simultaneous change across all subgroups of whites, a substantial component of the incremental increase in tolerance over time stems from cohort replacement. Further, decreases in intolerance among whites accrue as a result of increased education over time.¹⁰

Findings thus far lead to the conclusion that not much racial attitude change should be expected in the near future. All of the big (and easy) changes have been incorporated into public policy. Partially as a result, there is little interest in white attitudes regarding these moot issues. With the possible exception of school desegregation, those areas of racial contact remaining are beyond the regulation of law as well as free from the influence of economic institutions. In short, the amount of interracial personal contact any white experiences is the result of a series of extremely personal decisions. Given the data presented above, it seems as though most whites will not extend themselves.

. . . an individual might hold relatively enlightened and progressive racial attitudes as a matter of principle, yet disapprove of the policy alternatives proposed to bring about racial equality.

Public Policy Versus Racial Privacy

It appears that just as whites do not seem to be extending themselves toward blacks, they also do not want blacks to intrude into their lives. Both Gallup and NORC have surveyed nonblacks on their attitudes regarding the intrusion of blacks into their world. These were four of the questions:

Which statement comes closest to how you, yourself, feel:

Blacks shouldn't push themselves where they are not wanted. (Agree strongly, agree slightly, disagree slightly, disagree strongly)

White people have a right to keep blacks out

of the neighborhoods if they want to, and blacks should respect that right. (Agree strongly, agree slightly, disagree slightly, disagree strongly)

Suppose there is a community-wide vote on the general housing issue. There are two possible laws to vote on (respondent reads an open and a restricted housing law). Which law would you vote for?

In general, do you favor or oppose busing of black and white school children from one district to another?

Table 4
Public Policy-Oriented Racial Attitudes 1963–1986.^a

Survey Year	Percent of Nonblack Respondents ^b			
	Disagree That Blacks Should Intrude	Disagree w/“Rights” to a Segregated Neighborhood	Would Vote for Open Housing Law	Favor Busing
1963	22.3	44.9	---	---
1966	21.9	---	---	---
1968	20.6	43.2	---	---
1970	15.6	50.6	---	13.5
1971	---	---	---	17.8 ^c
1972	31.9 ^c	59.2 ^c	---	19.5
1973	26.0	---	34.1	---
1974	---	---	---	20.1
1975	24.8	---	34.0	17.2
1976	28.5	59.6	34.6	15.8
1977	26.5	55.9	---	16.3
1978	---	---	36.8	20.2
1980	31.1	64.8	38.9	---
1982	39.3	70.2	---	19.2
1983	---	---	44.4	23.1
1984	39.9	71.7	48.7	---
1985	38.2	72.3	---	22.0
1986	---	---	47.1	29.4

^aAll surveys conducted by the American Institute of Public Opinion (Gallup) or the National Opinion Research Center (NORC). All sampling errors ≤ 5 %. See text for actual question wordings.

^bOver 96.2% of all nonblack respondents are white.

^cThis is the mean response from two or more surveys that asked this question in this year.

^dThe dashed line indicates that this issue did not appear in any survey during this particular year.

According to Table 4, only a little more than a third of all whites would accept the legitimacy of blacks pushing for desegregation in the face of white resistance. In other words, even in the 1980s, a sentiment of racial insularity exists among an overwhelming majority of nonblacks. Note that there has only been a slight erosion in these feelings since the 1960s and 1970s. It seems that while a majority of the white population willingly coexists with blacks in desegregated work, school, and other public settings, in reality they want as little to do with blacks as possible.

This sentiment becomes glaringly apparent when specific public policies regarding interracial contact are at issue. While the overwhelming majority would limit restrictive legislation, more than a quarter of all nonblacks would respect the “right” of whites to bar blacks from their neighborhoods, and these respondents would call for blacks to yield a similar respect. In other words, a substantial plurality of whites see nothing wrong in restrictive covenants and other limitations to free-market real estate activities that are designed specifically to preserve the racial integrity of a community.

Table 4 also shows that less than a majority of whites would vote for an open housing law that “says that a homeowner cannot refuse to sell to someone because of their color.” Presumably the majority would vote for the version wherein “a homeowner can decide for himself whom to sell his house to, even if he prefers not to sell to blacks.” Apparently it matters little to the quarter of the white population who would restrict blacks from living in their neighborhood, or the majority of respondents who oppose the open housing law, that the courts have long ruled housing restrictions to be both illegal and actionable (i.e. the offended parties can litigate to recover damages – including pain and suffering).

. . . a substantial plurality of whites see nothing wrong in restrictive covenants and other limitations to free-market real estate activities. . . .

Given the reluctance of whites to have blacks live among them and their desire to insulate blacks from their lives and to some extent the lives of their children, it is no wonder that only about a quarter of all whites favor interdistrict school busing. See Table 4. Such busing is the ultimate in forced interracial interaction. In this light, white people’s vehement objection to busing is not in the least surprising. That such a large, yellow object can become the focus of such intense racial animosity makes perfect sense when we realize that while whites say they are willing to coexist with blacks in most public circumstances, they are much less willing to be forced (or to have their children forced) to do so.

Summary and Implications

In the minds of many whites, not all that much has changed since Hyman and Sheatsley¹¹ observed, “In most of the North, whites maintain a social distance from Negroes, though allowing them the legal right to use public facilities.” In contemporary America many of the regional differences paramount in earlier studies of racial attitudes have dissipated – if not disappeared. Contemporary white America speaks with one voice, and, in the final

analysis, it wishes to be left alone.

In the immediate future the prospects for reduction in this insularity appear dim. Since World War II most of the changes in white racial attitudes have their origins in dramatic changes in the legal and political status of blacks (e.g., the rights of equal access to public transportation, public facilities, etc.). No further dramatic changes in the legal status of blacks loom on the horizon. Moreover, while there are both normative and structural components to the evolution of racial attitude change, the former contribute more (and more slowly) than the latter.¹² Together, these realities mean that the insularity at the core of American racial attitudes is likely to persist for some time.

NOTES

^aBefore the late 1940s primitive sampling procedures governed most survey data collection. Here the period of “modern” national surveys is taken to begin with the 1948 National Election Study.

^bUntil recently even when interviewed for surveys blacks were seldom allowed to answer questions on race relations¹³ because white researchers presumed they knew black response patterns. Only recently have the attitudes of blacks been systematically explored.¹⁴

^cIn both Gallup and NORC surveys all respondents are drawn from the noninstitutionalized adult population in the continental U.S. Thus, no respondent was in a group living situation at the time of the interview.

^dThe results here are based only on respondents with school-aged children because the earliest (Gallup) surveys did not query all respondents, only parents. Tabulations that include all respondents (not shown) yield statistically similar results.

^eThis question continues to be asked both because it serves as an introduction for the others in the series, and it provides a framework for comparison. Otherwise – based solely on its failure to produce a distribution of responses between the two categories – it would have been discarded with many others from this era.

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