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Does Religiosity Affect Perceptions of Racism in the New South?

by
Andrea Henderson

Rick Phillips

Jeffry Will

University of North Florida

Background and Hypothesis

The cultural significance of religion in the American South is well understood by social scientists. Historians have referred to the South as a region held in "cultural captivity" to its religious institutions (Eighmy 1988). Sociologist Mark Shibley has argued that one of the major reasons for sustained religious activity in the United States is the persistent vitality of Southern religion, and that religious enthusiasm outside the South is due largely to the diffusion of Southern-style religion to other regions of the country (Shibley 1996).

Southern religion—like all social institutions in the South—is intimately tied to issues of race and ethnicity, particularly the divide that exists between African Americans and Caucasians. In the 1950s and 60s, many White churches in the South used religion and the Bible to justify segregationist policies, and advanced certain theological precepts supporting the notion that Blacks are inferior to Whites (Harvey 1997). By contrast, Black people in the 1950s and 60s used religious organizations

to mobilize for civil rights and oppose racism (Chappell 2003).

However, since the civil rights struggle, the South has changed dramatically. Many sociologists of Southern life assert that the various manifestations of late modernity are changing the traditional character and culture of the South (see Eiesland 2000; Shibley 1996; Thumma 1995; Ammerman 1990). In this paper, we investigate whether the legacy of the historic linkage between religion and perceptions of racism still exist in the minds of contemporary Southerners—both Black and White. Our inquiry is centered on two research questions:

• Question #1: Given the linkage between traditionally White churches and support for segregation in the past, do contemporary White Southerners who describe themselves as religious perceive the persistence of institutional racism differently than White Southerners who are not religious?

We hypothesize that if these differences in perception exist, it is likely that religious White Southerners will be less likely than their non-religious counterparts to acknowledge the persistence of institutional racism. Ample evidence demonstrates that White Southerners are less supportive than other Americans of issues that are associated with ameliorating the lingering effects of institutional racism, such as affirmative action (Skretny 1996). Here we attempt to discern if this phenomenon breaks along religious lines.

• Question #2: Given the historical linkage between Black churches and civil rights activism, do contemporary Black Southerners who describe themselves as religious have different perceptions of institutional racism than Black Southerners who are not religious?

We hypothesize that if these differences in perception exist, it is likely that religious Black Southerners will be more likely to acknowledge the persistence of institutional racism than their non-religious counterparts.

Methodology

To address these questions, we use survey data collected by the Public Opinion Research Lab at the

Florida Center for Public Policy and Research in Jacksonville, Florida. The project originated with a request from the Jacksonville Human Rights Commission. The commission was interested in looking at citizens' perceptions of race relations, and social issues pertaining to race. The study was conducted in several waves, and this paper relies on the 2003 wave of the survey. The data were collected from a random sample of 1000 adult residents of metropolitan Jacksonville. To ensure stable statistics, minorities were over-sampled.

Jacksonville, Florida is an excellent site for the type of questions we are asking, because the city retains its "deep South" character, and the city's politics and culture reflect the ethos of the traditional South to a much greater degree than many other large Southern cities (Crooks, Arsenault and Mormino 2004). Nevertheless, Jacksonville has experienced many of the changes that mark the transition from "old" to "new" South, and hence this city is an appropriate site to examine whether change and transformation in the South is impacting the traditional linkages between religion and race in the region.

The data set contains a number of questions that assess perceptions of institutional racism. The questions fall neatly into two groups: those that examine the respondent's perceptions of the treatment of African Americans by various economic and government institutions, and those that examine the respondent's perceptions of the opportunities for Black people in Jacksonville. Each question asks the respondent to reply whether they think the treatment or opportunities for Black people are "better," "the same," or "worse." The questions are listed below.

Items measuring the treatment of African Americans:

• How are Black people in Jacksonville treated on the job?

• How are Black people in Jacksonville treated in stores or in the mall?

• How are Black people in Jacksonville treated by the police?

Items measuring the opportunities for African Americans:

• How would you characterize the opportunities that Black people in Jacksonville have for getting good jobs?

• How would you characterize the opportunities that Black children have to get a good education?

• How would you characterize the opportunities that Black high school students have to go to college?

• How would you characterize the opportunities that Black people in Jacksonville have to live in any area of the city they want?

We chose to focus our on analysis on institutional racism, because preliminary analyses of the surveys show very little variability on measures of personal prejudice and/or individual propensity to discriminate. It may be that no one in the sample harbors prejudice or is inclined to discriminate, but it is also possible that some respondents were not comfortable candidly revealing these attitudes to the researchers. By looking at institutions and social structures, respondents need not confess to stigmatized attitudes, and hence we feel that focusing on these aspects of racism increases the study's validity. Even so, a large number of respondents refused to answer at least one of the foregoing questions.

Perceptions of Treatment

Our analysis begins with the three survey questions that measure respondents' perceptions of the treatment of Black people in Jacksonville. The table below displays the questions' response categories in the rows. The columns divide respondents by religiousness and race (Table 1).

Table 1
Perceptions of Treatment

How are Black people in Jackson treated on the job?

	White Religious	White Not Religious	Black Religious	Black Not Religious
Better	12.3%	15.0%	0.0%	16.0%
Same	63.7%	67.0%	47.7%	32.0%
Worse	11.3%	9.8%	43.0%	52.0%
Don't Know	12.7%	7.3%	9.3%	0.0%

or Refused				
N	292	193	107	25

How are Black people in Jacksonville treated in stores or in the mall?

	White Religious	White Not Religious	Black Religious	Black Not Religious
Better	4.1%	3.1%	1.9%	8.0%
Same	69.9%	64.8%	43.0%	56.0%
Worse	14.0%	20.2%	48.6%	32.0%
Don't Know or Refused	12.0%	11.9%	6.5%	4.0%
N	292	193	107	25

How are Black people in Jacksonville treated by the police?

	White Religious	White Not Religious	Black Religious	Black Not Religious
Better	2.4%	1.6%	.9%	0.0%
Same	42.5%	39.4%	18.7%	16.0%
Worse	28.1%	36.3%	66.4%	68.0%
Don't Know or Refused	27.1%	22.8%	14.0%	16.0%
N	292	193	107	25

Table 1 reveals modest differences between religious and non-religious respondents within each racial group. Chi-square tests show no significant differences between religious and non-religious Whites on any of the three questions. (These tests cannot be used to compare religious and non-religious Black respondents, because the small number of cases in some of the cells violates the assumptions of chi-square [see McClendon 2004:450-451].)

Nevertheless, while there is little interracial difference on these items, there is a great deal of interracial variation. A large percentage of White respondents feel that African Americans in Jacksonville are treated the same or better than Whites. This differs starkly from the perceptions of Black respondents, who are much more likely to say that they are treated worse. It is interesting to note that a large number of respondents answered "don't know" or refused to respond on these questions. This may suggest that the controversial nature of the questions prompted many respondents to balk at giving answers.

Perceptions of Opportunity

The next set of questions assess respondents' perceptions of the opportunities for Black people in Jacksonville. The questions ask about jobs, education, and residential segregation. These are displayed in Table 2 below:

Table 2
Perceptions of Opportunity

How would you characterize the opportunities that Back people in Jacksonville have for getting good jobs?

	White Religious	White Not Religious	Black Religious	Black Not Religious
Better	20.5%	18.1%	6.5%	4.0%
Same	59.2%	61.7%	33.6%	44.0%
Worse	12.7%	16.1%	52.3%	48.0%
Don't Know or Refused	7.5%	4.1%	7.5%	4.0%
N	292	193	107	25

How would you characterize the opportunities that Black children have to get a good education?

	White Religious	White Not Religious	Black Religious	Black Not Religious
Better	12.3%	11.4%	8.4%	12.0%
Same	67.5%	63.2%	46.7%	52.0%
Worse	14.0%	18.1%	41.1%	24.0%
Don't Know or Refused	6.2%	7.3%	3.7%	12.0%
N	292	193	107	25

How would you characterize the opportunities that Black high school students have to go to college?

	White Religious	White Not Religious	Black Religious	Black Not Religious
Better	20.5%	23.8%	4.7%	12.1%
Same	57.9%	46.6%	34.6%	52.0%
Worse	9.9%	18.1%	52.3%	28.0%
Don't Know or Refused	11.6%	11.4%	8.4%	8.0%
N	292	193	107	25

Chi Square=9.24, p<.01

How would you characterize the opportunities that Black people in Jacksonville have to live in any area of the city they want?

	White Religious	White Not Religious	Black Religious	Black Not Religious
Better	7.9%	7.3%	5.6%	12.0%
Same	71.6%	71.5%	48.6%	60.0%
Worse	14.7%	18.7%	42.1%	28.0%
Don't Know or Refused	5.8%	2.6%	3.7%	0.0%
N	292	193	107	25

Once again, the table shows few interracial differences. However, a chi-square analysis shows a significant difference between non-religious and religious White respondents with respect to their perceptions of college opportunities for Black high school students (X2=9.24 p<.01). In this instance, non-religious Whites are almost twice as likely as religious Whites to think that things are worse for Black students. This is consistent with our first hypothesis. Aside from this item, there are no other statistically significant interracial differences. On the other hand, it is evident from Table 2 that interracial perceptions of opportunities for Blacks are quite pronounced. Black respondents are much more likely than their White counterparts to feel that employment, education and housing opportunities in Jacksonville are worse for African Americans.

Adding it Up

The frequency tables demonstrate that race is far more important than religion in shaping Jacksonville residents' perceptions of institutional racism in their city. But this does not mean that religion is insignificant. To further investigate whether or not religion is significantly related to perceptions of institutional racism, we computed an "Institutional Racism Perception Index." To compute this scale, we re-examined the seven questions listed in the tables above, and coded those respondents who answered that things are "worse" for African Americans on any of these questions as "1," and those who answered that things are the same or better as "0." This yields an index ranging from 0 to 7, with higher numbers demonstrating a stronger acknowledgment of institutional racism, and a

belief that things have gotten worse for Black people in the city. The following table compares the means on this scale for various groups.

Table 3
Means on the "*Institutional Racism Perception Index*"

	Mean	SD	N
All White Respondents	1.57	1.82	399
All Black Respondents	3.91	2.03	169
All Religious Respondents	2.10	2.15	259
All Non-Religious Respondents	2.05	1.94	152
White and Religious	1.30	1.66	172
White and Non-Religious	1.70	1.75	122
Black and Religious	4.04	2.02	70
Black and Non-Religious	3.10	1.83	20

    Comparing the mean scores for various groups on the Institutional Racism Perception Index demonstrates that Black and White respondents have very different ideas about the impact and extent of institutional racism in Jacksonville. White respondents have a mean of 1.57 on the index, while Black respondents have a mean of 3.91. T-tests show that these means are significantly different from one another at the .05 level. However, T-tests also show that the means for all religious and all non-religious people are not significantly different.

    When we isolate the White respondents and compare those who claim to be religious with those who do not, we find that religious White respondents perceive less institutional racism than their non-religious counterparts. This is consistent with the first hypothesis we set forth at the beginning of this paper. Moreover, a T-test shows that these means are significantly different from one another at the .05 level. (Standard deviations are larger than means for all White groups because these distributions are negatively skewed. The median for all White groups on the Institutional Racism Perception Index is 0.)

Examining the Black respondents also reveals significant differences. Black respondents who claim to be religious perceive more institutional racism than their non-religious counterparts. This is opposite of the pattern for Whites, and is consistent with the second hypothesis we set forth at the beginning of this paper. T-tests show that these means are significantly different at the .05 level.

Conclusions

This study is a preliminary examination of the connection between religiousness and perceptions of institutional racism in a Southern city. The findings suggest that the legacy of traditional linkages between White churches and support for segregation in the South may still be found in that fact that religious White people are significantly less likely to acknowledge the persistence of institutional racism than White people who describe themselves as non-religious. Conversely, the legacy of civil rights activism in Southern Black churches may still be observed in the fact that religious Black people in our sample are more likely to believe that the treatment and opportunities for African Americans in Jacksonville are worse now than in previous years. We hope that these preliminary findings will encourage more research on the linkage between religion and perceptions of racism in the contemporary South.

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