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Finding and Explaining Discrepancies in Beliefs and Actions: Understanding Implicit Racism in Christianity

Abstract

Homogeneity in Christian congregations provides a unique opportunity to indirectly examine prejudice and color-blind racism. Although Christianity holds progressive beliefs regarding social injustice, persistent beliefs about individual free will offers a potential contradiction in how a practitioner approaches the idea of racial equality. In this study, the authors examine how religious affiliation might shape one's perceptions of Black persons by examining colorblind racism. Using 2016 General Social Survey data and difference of means and Pearson correlation analysis, the researchers find a significant correlation in survey respondents identifying as being Christian and believing Black persons have a lack of will power. Findings also indicate a correlation in respondents identifying as being a Christian and believing economic differences between Black persons and White persons are not the result of discrimination. This study provides a useful opportunity to apply theoretical concepts to real-world examples.

Keywords

Religiosity, Color-blind racism, Stratification, General Social Survey

**Finding and Explaining Discrepancies in Beliefs and Actions: Understanding Implicit
Racism in Christianity**

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Abstract: Homogeneity in Christian congregations provides a unique opportunity to indirectly examine prejudice and color-blind racism. Although Christianity holds progressive beliefs regarding social injustice, persistent beliefs about individual free will offer a potential contradiction in how a practitioner approaches the idea of racial equality. In this study, the authors examine how religious affiliation might shape one's perceptions of Black persons by examining colorblind racism. Using 2016 General Social Survey data and difference of means and Pearson correlation analysis, the researchers find a significant correlation in survey respondents identifying as being Christian and believing Black persons have a lack of willpower. Findings also indicate a correlation in respondents identifying as being a Christian and believing economic differences between Black persons and White persons are not the result of discrimination. This study provides a useful opportunity to apply theoretical concepts to real-world examples.

Introduction

Christian church congregations are often racially homogenous and segregated (Hawley 2017; Wright, Wallace, Wisnesky, Donnelly, Missari, and Zoula 2015; Blanchard 2007) even while holding formal or informal positions promoting acceptance of all races (Bae 2016; Brown 2009; Edgell and Tranby 2007). Recent research finds that self-identified Christians hold progressive views on justice, equality, and tolerance, yet also often place emphasis on the individual's decision-making as setting their place in life (Bae 2016). Moreover, principles of free will and individualism in maintaining the relationship between the individual and God can overshadow practitioners' understanding and acknowledgment of social inequalities and structural injustice (Wright et al 2015). This contradiction between beliefs in equality and free will creates an excellent opportunity to examine how religious affiliation shapes perceptions of racial inequality from a theoretical perspective. For example, individual performances of faith can also be seen from a dramaturgical perspective, making them symbolic rather than genuine (Goffman 1956). Theories like color-blind racism (Bonilla-Silva 2010) and crosscutting social circles (Blau and Schwartz 2017) also insight on group dynamics and intergroup relations shape church membership. This study examines religious affiliation and perceptions of racial inequality while answering three questions: how does religious affiliation impact an adherent's perceptions of black or African American persons, can prejudices among adherents be explained through implicit bias, and what is the source of differences between actions and beliefs in the faith? This study utilizes General Social Survey data from 2016 and theoretical perspectives to better understand each of these big questions. This study finds that whites respondents in the General Social Survey who identify as Christian are unlikely to report overtly

racist views on issues of differences in racial intelligence and socio-economic experiences, a correlation exists in being Christian and believing black or African American persons have a lack of will power as well as believing economic differences between black or African American persons and white persons are not the result of discrimination. These patterns indicate intriguing patterns of evidence of colorblind racism deserving of ongoing research.

Literature Review

Although Christian affiliation rates among non-Hispanic white, black and African American and Hispanic adults are similar, Christian church congregations continue to be overwhelmingly composed of a single race majority (Hawley 2017; Wright et al 2015; Zoula 2015; Blanchard 2007; Bae 2016; Emerson and Kim 2003.) In fact, as of 2014, about 74 percent of non-Hispanic whites, 77 percent of Hispanic, and 78 percent of black and African American adults in the United States identified as Christian (Hawley 2017). Despite the similarities in affiliation rates, social researchers continue to find that Sunday morning church services are the single most racially segregated part of the United States' social life (Blanchard 2007). In 1998, using the National Congregations Study, an estimated 90 percent of American church congregations were made up of at least 90 percent one racial group while a similar study in 2007 found that 86 percent of congregations pull at least 80 percent of their members from a single racial group (Emerson and Kim 2003; Wright et al. 2015). Although racial segregation is highly prevalent in American congregations, many of the denominations have either formal or informal positions and programs that claim to welcome, accept, and love people of all racial groups (Wright et al. 2015; Bae 2016; Brown 2009; Edgell and Tranby 2007; Emerson, Smith, and Sikkink 1999).

Many of the Christian denominations in the United States have formal positions of acceptance and welcoming others and starting around the 1980s, evangelical churches began a number of activities to reconcile with minority communities (Wright et al. 2015). In recent times, most mainline Protestant denominations have made public statements supporting racial equality and inclusion along with almost all Christian traditions having an emphasis on spreading their beliefs to people outside of the church, yet we have seen little progress with integration (Wright et al. 2015). Even in more qualitative studies, most mainline Christians report holding liberal views on the commitment to justice and equality while valuing things such as love and tolerance (Bae 2016). Major religions report high levels of valuing the common kinship of humankind and the abstract principles of “racial equality, equal opportunity, and fair treatment” (Brown 2009; Edgell and Tranby 2007). The understanding of the Christian denomination’s support for egalitarianism creates a discrepancy between the commonly stated beliefs and the practices of discrimination (Bae 2016). The segregation of congregations and the prejudice practices seen in Christian denominations is likely the result of the implicit bias that stems from the common Christian ideals of free-will individualism and responsibility for personal actions (Wright et al. 2015; Blanchard 2007; Bae 2016; Brown 2009; Edgell and Tranby 2007; Emerson et al. 1999; Hall et al. 2010). Evangelicals place heavy importance on free will and individualism in which people are responsible for their actions and relationship with God, often resulting in the overlooking of structural injustice (Wright et al. 2015). Protestants often dismiss structural inequality when explaining discrepancies between whites and minorities, and instead use individual ideas such as personal motivation (Blanchard 2007). A study of white Protestant Christians found that their explanation for socioeconomic inequality does not

view social structures as contributing and instead places importance on individual problems such as lack of motivation, familial problems, and avoiding responsibilities (Bae 2016). This free-will individualism is built on the idea that individuals exist separate from structures and institutions because free will is granted by God and racial disparities are the result of people not being fully responsible (Brown 2009). Although individualism is a common American value, the type of individualism and the intensity in which the value is held by white conservative Protestants is distinct from the average American (Emerson et al. 1999). The gap between ideology and practice hints that the prejudices held by American Christian churches aren't overt/direct and are instead an implicit bias that is ingrained in the ideas of free will and individualism (Bae 2016). Applying a theory of intergroup relations, we can see how race relations within the church, even when exclusively implicit, affect race relations in the greater social sphere and have real consequences for minorities. One study regarding religious prejudice and segregation is one in which researchers sent out over 3,000 emails acting as if they were new to the area looking for a church to attend using randomly generated names that were common with different racial and ethnic associations. The study found that churches were most likely to respond to white-sounding names, somewhat less likely to respond to black and African American or Hispanic sounding names, and much less likely to respond to Asian-sounding names (Wright et al. 2015). The researchers interpreted their results as an example of the principle of homophily. This principle is the idea that people typically associate with those who they perceive as similar, in this case using race as the common factor. While homophily is certainly something at play, one can gain a deeper understanding by viewing what is going on using the theory of Crosscutting Social Circles (Blau and Schwartz 2017). The longstanding racial

segregation in the church initially alienates people from each other which further develops into creating exclusive groups that exist outside of the church setting. One can find what looks like a revolving door effect where social forces shape church composition followed by the church composition affecting the social forces and structures. The implicit racism that is fostered by the beliefs of individualism can be viewed through the frame of abstract liberalism. Abstract liberalism is a type of color-blind racism in which individuals seemingly overlook inequality and racism by taking abstract ideas such as individual choice and the belief in equal opportunity to blame solely the individual for their circumstances (Bonilla-Silva 2010).

Methods Report

Big Questions

In this study, I will evaluate three major questions regarding Christian religious affiliation and views on racial inequality. First, how does one's Christian religious affiliation affect their direct views of black and African American people? Second, are the prejudices and discriminatory practices of Christian churches the result of implicit bias? Third, what is the source of the disparity between proclaimed Christian ideals and the actual discriminatory practices of Christian churches? To answer these questions, I used data from the 2016 General Social Survey which surveyed respondent's religious preferences, along with their views on race and the source of racial inequality that religious preferences may affect. I used the variables from this dataset to test hypotheses that attempt to better understand the big questions.

Hypotheses

Using theoretical material, I have derived three hypotheses to help answer my big questions. First, I look at the relationship between Christian religious affiliation and directly reported views of black and African-American people. Erving Goffman's (1956) theory of Dramaturgy can help us answer the question. Goffman's Dramaturgy is a micro theory that argues that human interactions can be viewed as theatrical performance. Individuals, who are the actors, are on the front stage when in public and an audience is present. The backstage is where actors go to prepare for their performance and are more their true selves. Thus, when actors are on the front stage they perform dramaturgical actions, or in other words, do things that they believe will improve the audience's perception of them. It is important to remember that most American Christian churches report valuing things such as equality, inclusion, and justice. It is likely that since the Church and the public generally disdain racism, Christians will report valuing racial equality (while on the front stage). Using this understanding of social action, I hypothesize that individuals of Christian affiliation report generally positive views of black and African American people. My hypothesis is stated as:

H1: Christians are likely to report similar views of black and African American people as nonChristians.

Ha: There is no relationship between identifying as Christian and views of black and African American people.

Next, I look at the relationship between the discriminatory practices of Christian churches and implicit bias. We know that American Christian churches report valuing equality however, we also know that these churches often partake in discriminatory practices (Wright et al. 2015). We can use Bonilla-Silva's theory

of Color-Blind Racism (2010), specifically the frame of Abstract Liberalism, to help us understand the relationship between discriminatory church practices and implicit bias. Abstract liberalism is when an individual uses liberal ideas (equal opportunity, freedom, individualism, etc) to explain racial inequality. This frame tends to explain racial disparities as a matter of individual choice instead of structural factors. Building off the idea of color-blind racism, and since Christian churches report high levels of valuing equality, it is likely that the discriminatory practices/attitudes of churches stem from the member's explanations of inequality. I hypothesize that the bias of Christian affiliated individuals comes from an abstract liberalist view and is implicit.

H2: Christian respondents are more likely than non-Christians to explain racial inequality through individual choice.

Ha: There is no relationship between Christian religious affiliation and explanations of racial inequality.

Data

The data for this study comes from the General Social Survey (GSS). The GSS is a secondary data source that has tracked trends in American society since 1972. The survey is funded by the National Opinion Research Council (NORC) out of the University of Chicago and seeks to explain constants and trends in attitudes, behaviors, and attributes. This study uses 2016 GSS data and includes 2,849 cases.

Variables

For this study, I chose variables from the 2016 General Social Survey that focused on the respondent's religious preference, views on black and African

American people, and their explanations of racial inequality. First, to understand the respondent's religious views, the GSS asked: "What is your religious preference? Is it protestant, Catholic, Jewish, some other religion, or no religion?" The GSS operationalized the variable as the respondent's religious preference and includes answers such as Protestant, Catholic, Jewish, Buddhism, Hinduism, Moslem/Islam.

The second variable helps us understand the strength of the respondent's religious preference. The GSS asked the question: "Would you call yourself a strong (PREFERENCE NAMED IN RELIG) or not a very strong (PREFERENCE NAMED IN RELIG)?" The GSS conceptualized strength of affiliation by defining strength as strong or not strong. They operationalized the variable by allowing respondents to respond with "strong, not very strong, or somewhat strong."

The third variable I addressed provides insight into the respondent's views on black and African American people. The GSS asked the question: "Do people in these groups tend to be unintelligent or tend to be intelligent? 3. Blacks?" The GSS conceptualized intelligence as a characteristic of people in different groups in society that can be rated. They operationalized the variable by using a scale of 1-7 where 1 was "Unintelligent" and 7 was "Intelligent".

The fourth variable used once again attempts to provide insight into the respondent's views on black and African American people. The GSS asked the question: Do blacks/African-Americans tend to be lazy or hardworking? The GSS conceptualized work ethic in the same way they did intelligence, as a characteristic of groups of people that can be rated. They operationalized the variable using a scale of 1-7 where 1 was "Hardworking" and 7 was "Lazy". I recorded the variable in my analysis so that 1 is "Lazy" and 7 is "Hardworking".

The fifth variable seeks to answer the question of the respondent's explanations of racial inequality. The GSS asked the following question: "On the average (Negroes/Blacks/African-Americans) have worse jobs, income, and housing than white people. Do you think these differences are... A. Mainly due to discrimination?" The GSS conceptualized the variable as any type of discrimination (workplace, residential, etc) that could account for socioeconomic differences between white and black people. They operationalized the variable by using a yes, no, or don't know response and coding as 1=yes, 2=no, and 8=don't know. I recoded the variable in my analysis as a dichotomous dummy so that 0=no and 1=yes.

The sixth variable also seeks to answer the question of the respondent's explanations of racial inequality. The GSS asked the following question: "On the average (Negroes/Blacks/African-Americans) have worse jobs, income, and housing than white people. Do you think these differences are... D. Because most (Negroes/Blacks/African-Americans) just don't have the motivation or willpower to pull themselves up out of poverty?" The GSS conceptualized the variable by defining will as motivation or will-power that would increase one's economic position. The GSS operationalized the variable by using a yes, no, or don't know the response and coding 1=yes, 2=no, and 8-don't know. I recoded the variable in my analysis as a dichotomous dummy so that 0=no and 1=yes.

Statistical Approach

For my first hypothesis, I will use a T-test to compare the mean scores between different groups. In my analysis, the independent variable of Christian affiliation is coded as a dichotomous dummy where 0=non-Christian and 1=Christian. The dependent variables here will consist of two continuous

variables that seek to gauge respondent's feelings towards black and African American individuals. One dependent variable asks respondents to rank the intelligence of Black and African Americans on a scale of 1-7 and the other asks respondents to rank work ethic on the same scale. Both t-tests will compare the mean scores from both Christians and nonChristians to see if there is a difference in amounts of overtly racist feelings between the two groups.

My second hypothesis will be analyzed using a Pearson Correlation. This statistical test can be used to check if there is an association between two dichotomous variables and to what strength that association exists on a scale of -1 to 1. In this approach, I will test to see if there is a correlation between my dichotomous independent variable of Christian affiliation and my dichotomous dependent variables of explanations for racial inequality. One of the dependent variables asks respondents if they think racial socioeconomic differences are the result of discrimination and the other asks if they think it is a result of the lack of motivation from black people and African Americans. The Pearson Correlation will demonstrate the strength of the association between Christian affiliation and explanations for inequality.

Analysis Section

Table one provides a summary of all variables used in this study. Overall, around 72% of respondents identified as some form of Christian (Protestant, Catholic, Christian, or OrthodoxChristian). Respondents were asked to rank the intelligence of various groups on a scale of 1-7. Seven would indicate that everyone in the group is intelligent, 1 would indicate that everyone in the group was unintelligent, and 4 would suggest that they are not towards either end. The average response for intelligence was 4.32. A similar question was asked

regarding work ethic and respondents had an average score of 3.95. When asked why black and African American individuals have worse jobs, incomes, and housing than white people on average, around 44% of respondents said that discrimination played a role and 43% of respondents said that it was because black and African American individuals don't have enough motivation or will power.

Table two shows the t-test results from comparing Christian and non-Christians' results on ranking the intelligence of black and African Americans. The two different groups had an almost identical mean score and there is no significant difference ($p=.930$). These findings support the initial hypothesis that Christian respondents are likely to report similar views of black and African American people as non-Christian respondents.

Table three shows the t-test results from comparing Christian and non-Christians' results on ranking the work ethic of black and African American people. Once again, the two groups had very similar mean scores with Christian respondents ranking the work ethic of black and African American people about 3.9 and non-Christian respondents ranking the work ethic of black and African American people about 4.1 ($p=.001$). These findings also support the first hypothesis that Christian respondents are likely to report similar views of black and African American people as non-Christian respondents.

Table four shows the results of the Pearson Correlation between being Christian and explaining socioeconomic differences between black or African American people and white people as a result of black or African American people lacking motivation/will-power. A positive correlation exists between being Christian and explaining socioeconomic differences as a result of black and African American people lacking motivation ($p=.001$). The strength of association

is small, but a statistically significant correlation exists. These findings support the second hypothesis that Christians are more likely than non-Christians to explain racial inequality as a result of individual choice.

Table five shows the results of the Pearson Correlation between being Christian and explaining socioeconomic differences between black and African American peoples and whites as a result of discrimination faced by black people. A negative correlation exists between being Christian and explaining inequality as a result of discrimination ($p=.000$). These findings support the hypothesis that Christians are more likely than non-Christians to explain racial inequality as a result of individual choice.

Overall, both of the hypotheses proposed have statistical support. Christians and non-Christians report similar views on black and African American people and demonstrate similar levels of overt racism. However, disparity arises when looking at explanations of inequality. Christians are more likely to explain inequality as a result of individual choice rather than a result of discrimination and structural factors. The hypothesis that Christians are more likely to show signs of colorblind racism due to the liberal ideas of individualism and free will promoted in the Church is supported. While Christians are not likely to report overtly racist views, they do seem to have a colorblind, specifically the abstract-liberal, view of the world.

Table One: Descriptive Statistics

Variable	Mean	Standard Deviation	Min	Max	Obs
Christian or not, dichotomous dummy	.7210	.44860	0	1	2849

Blacks Unintelligent or Intelligent 1- 7	4.32	1.062	1	7	1845
Blacks Lazy or Hard Working 1-7	3.9504	1.16913	1	7	1853
Socioeconomic differences due to discrimination, dichotomous dummy	.4374	.49620	0	1	1813
Socioeconomic differences due to lack of motivation, dichotomous dummy	.4316	.49544	0	1	1821

Table Two: Unintelligent – Intelligent t-test Results Comparing (Equal variances not assumed) on

Group	n	Mean	SD	t	df	p
Non-Christian	505	4.32	.947	-.088	1047.642	.930
Christian	1340	4.33	1.103	-	-	-

***p=.001 **p=.01 *p=.05

Table Three: Lazy-Hardworking t-test Results Comparing (Equal variances not assumed) on

Group	n	Mean	SD	t	df	p
Non-Christian	507	4.0927	1.11107	3.322	966.753	.001***
Christian	1346	3.8967	1.18624	-	-	-

***p=.001 **p=.01 *p=.05

Table Four: Pearson Correlation

		Non-Christian or Christian DD	Differences due to lack of motivation DD
Non-Christian or Christian DD	Pearson Correlation	1	.162***

	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	2867	1821
Differences due to lack of motivation DD	Pearson Correlation	.162***	
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	1821	1821

***p=.001 **p=.01 *p=.05

Table Five: Pearson Correlation

		Non-Christian or Christian DD	Differences due to discrimination DD
Non-Christian or Christian DD	Pearson Correlation	1	-.097***
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	2867	1813
Differences due to discrimination DD	Pearson Correlation	-.097***	
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	1813	1813

***p=.001 **p=.01 *p=.05

Discussion and Conclusions

In summary, the analysis of variables indicates that individuals who identify as Christian and individuals who identify as something other than Christian have similar views regarding the intelligence and work ethic of black and African American people. T-tests show that Christians and non-Christians rank intelligence and work ethic of black and African American individuals on a 1-7 scale roughly the same. A Pearson Correlation shows that a positive

correlation exists between individuals who identify as Christian and explaining socioeconomic differences between white and black or African American people as a result of black people lacking motivation/will-power. A second Pearson Correlation shows that a negative correlation exists between individuals who identify as Christian and explaining inequality between white and black people as a result of discrimination.

The statistical findings in this paper can be viewed alongside the theory that Max Weber proposed in his book *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1905). In the book, Weber argues that the work ethic promoted by Protestant churches fostered the development of modern capitalism and lays out a theory that states that individuals who are immersed in religious devotion are often likely to reject worldly affairs. The Protestant work ethic often embraced ideas such as individual hard work, progress, and viewed work in itself as a good thing. Weber argues that these types of beliefs from the religious world allowed the economic system of capitalism to gain headway. In the same way that religious beliefs can lay the foundation for economic values, the findings in this paper suggest that religious beliefs can also lay the foundation for social values. Christian, especially Protestant, beliefs value ideas such as free will, individualism, and personal responsibility, and these beliefs are often translated into the economic and social world. Religion often lays the foundation for individuals' belief systems. When someone is devout to a religion that stresses personal responsibility, it is easy to see why they could view inequality as a result of personal motivation and decision making and not structural forces. This thought process aligns with Weber's theory that religious devotion can often take priority over someone's acceptance of worldly affairs.

Three main discussion points can be concluded from this analysis. First, it seems likely that the levels of overtly racist views from Christians and non-Christians are similar. Christians and non-Christians ranked the intelligence and work ethic of black and African American people almost the same. If Christians were more overtly racist, it is likely their views of intelligence and the work ethic of black and African American people would score lower. It is important to note that these statistical findings do not conclusively prove that Christians aren't more or less directly racist because for one, there are hundreds of measures of racism and it is nearly impossible to account for them all in one test. The Hawthorne Effect could also be in play. The Hawthorne Effect occurs when test subjects, or in this case survey respondents, alter their responses because they know they are being observed. It is no question that being overtly racist is socially shunned, so it is possible that people reported a lower level of racist beliefs than they held.

Second, the analysis in this paper shows that Christians are more likely than nonChristians to explain racial inequality through differences in motivation and willpower and less likely to explain racial inequality as a result of racial discrimination. This is likely the result of the values and ideas commonly supported in Christian churches such as individualism, personal responsibility, and free will. In most Christian faiths, it is up to the individual to determine their relationship with God and it is up to them whether they go to heaven or hell. In the Christian faith, everyone is born with equal opportunity to form a relationship with God and is left with personal responsibility in their decisions. When extending this same logic to the socio-economic world, one would likely view an individual's economic standing as a result of their own decision-making. Christians are more likely to believe that people are born with equal economic

opportunity and ignore the structural and systemic factors that go into racial inequality. This finding is in line with the Abstract Liberalism frame of Colorblind Racism presented by BonillaSilva.

Finally, these findings are significant for multiple reasons. It is hard to address racial and socioeconomic inequality when people don't agree on the source of the problem. If someone thinks that racial inequality is just the result of personal decision-making, they are unlikely to support policies that look to fight systemic racism. America is a majority Christian nation which means that a significant portion of society likely views racial inequality as a result of individual decision-making. It seems that in order to fight racial and socioeconomic inequality in America, we must find a way to bring the discussion of systemic and structural racism into mainstream society. There are many approaches to take in solving this problem. Public education could incorporate more discussion of structural inequality into their curriculum or maybe the solution takes the shape of community education campaigns. Regardless of the solution, it will be hard to move forward in fighting racial injustice without first agreeing on the root of the problem.

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