

Interracial Unease in an Urban Setting: The Influence of Neighborhood Social Context*

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

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BACKGROUND

Extant research indicates that social circumstances shape opportunities for education, employment, and health (Arum, 2000; Barr *et al.*, 2001; Wilson, 1996). So too does the social environment shape opportunities for social interaction, and, by precept, the social relationships we form (Pattillo, 1998). Studies of relationship formation between African Americans and Whites have focused on such phenomena as friendship ties (Kao & Joyner, 2004), dating (Clark-Ibanez & Felmlee, 2004), and marriage and family formation (Goldstein, 1999; Joyner & Kao, 2005). Investigators of the antecedent conditions that lead to such interactions have focused primarily on the individual-level factors that influence such exchanges. While the opportunity structure of any one individual is clearly a salient determinant of interracial interaction, neighborhood context also may be relevant for individual perceptions and subjective feelings regarding those of another race. We hypothesize that neighborhood-level structural and social process factors have an independent effect on social perceptions of interracial unease. We examine these perceptions separately for African Americans and Whites and ask whether subjective assessments of interracial unease are influenced by the context in which they are embedded.

Context, in our conceptualization, means where people live. Residential location may be important for: 1) individual interactions and their associated influences, and 2) the normative orientation of the community that independently contributes to perceptions of interracial connectedness. First, neighborhoods are typically key areas of contact; their influence on social networks, and social and economic trajectories, is well-documented (Powers & Ellison, 1995; Sigelman *et al.*, 1996; Wilson, 1987). Research on the contact hypothesis, that interracial interaction facilitates positive racial attitudes, points to the importance of such factors as interethnic friendship (Aberson *et al.*, 2004) in the expression of implicit prejudice. Research in psychology has attempted to tap implicit prejudice or bias directly—this body of work indicates that stereotyping and statistical discrimination are enacted when time limitations preclude filtering behavior (Correll *et al.*, 2002).

Connections between implicit bias and the production of stigma lead to the second point: community context independently affects perceptions of unease. Sampson & Raudenbush, (2004) link research on implicit bias with that centered on racial stigma (Loury, 2002; 2005) in characterizing what they describe as “neighborhood racial stigma.” This emergent property relies on the notion that the social structure of public spaces reinforces stereotypes. Although their focus is on perceptions of disorder, their emphasis on the coupling of neighborhood-based social assessments is instructive. We build off this perspective to focus on the context in which perceptions of unease take shape. We now turn to the theoretical foundation that underlies this approach.

THEORETICAL APPROACH

We bring contemporary elaborations in social disorganization theory to bear on neighborhood context and its role in perceptions of interracial unease. We employ theories of social organization and collective efficacy (Shaw & McKay, 1969; Sampson, Raudenbush, & Earls, 1997), with attention to

work on implicit bias (Correll *et al.*, 2002) and stigmatization (Loury, 2005), to explore interracial unease and to isolate the role of neighborhood social context.

Social organization and collective efficacy theories enable us to put forth aspects of community context that could influence perceptions of unease. Residential stability, poverty, and affluence, as structural characteristics of the neighborhood, may set the stage for neighborhood social processes to take root. The extent to which a neighborhood is integrated is important as well, given what we know about the role of resident segregation in community life (Charles, 2003). The social processes of collective efficacy and social networks/exchange, in turn, may have independent effects on the likelihood of reporting unease. Collective efficacy, for instance, captures the level of trust and attachment characterizing community residents and their capacity for mutually beneficial action. Network interaction and exchange processes capture the breadth of potentially protective social support within a community. Our aim in utilizing these frameworks is to introduce a conceptualization of perceived unease that is congruent with previous work but adds a neighborhood-level dimension.

METHODS

To address our hypotheses we need data sources that provide individual-level outcomes nested in neighborhoods, along with measures that capture individual- and neighborhood-level phenomena. To that end, we combine three data sources from the 1990s: 1) the Metropolitan Chicago Information Center Metro Survey (MCIC-MS); 2) the Decennial Census; and 3) the Project on Human Development in Chicago Neighborhoods Community Survey (PHDCN-CS).

MCIC-MS. The MCIC-MS is a serial cross-section of adults ages 18 and older who reside in the six county metropolitan Chicago area (on average, 3,000 respondents per wave). To create the individual-level component of our final analytic data set we employed data from the 1996 wave of the MCIC-MS ($n = 854$). **Measures** The outcome measure and individual-level covariates come from the MCIC-MS. The outcome is a dichotomous measure of unease derived from the question “*Generally speaking, would you say that white people tend to feel pretty comfortable dealing with black people, or tend to feel uneasy dealing with Blacks?*” The same question is asked of African American respondents, with the reference group reversed. The individual-level covariates include *gender, age, education, income, marital status, self-rated health, and frequency of encounters with those of the opposing race group*.

Decennial Census. Census data allow us to construct measures of neighborhood socioeconomic structure and composition. **Measures** Three of the five neighborhood-level measures come from these data. The first is *affluence*, or the percentage of residents in a neighborhood with incomes \$50,000 or over. The second is a *residential stability* factor score that includes the percentage living in the same house since 1985 and the percentage of owner occupied dwellings. The third is the *percent Black* in the neighborhood (Taylor, 1998).

PHDCN-CS. The sampling design of the PHDCN-CS relied on 1990 U.S. Census data for Chicago to identify 343 neighborhood clusters (“NCs”)—groups of 2-3 census tracts that contain approximately 8,000 people. Major geographic boundaries (e.g., railroad tracks, parks, freeways), knowledge of Chicago’s local neighborhoods, and cluster analyses of Census data guided the construction of NCs so that they are relatively homogeneous with respect to racial/ethnic mix, socioeconomic status, housing density, and family structure. **Measures** Two measures of neighborhood social context come from these data. *Collective efficacy* was operationalized through combining measures of social cohesion and informal social control. Social cohesion was constructed from a cluster of conceptually related items from the PHDCN-CS measuring the respondent’s level of

agreement (on a five-point scale) with the following statements: 1) People around here are willing to help their neighbors; 2) This is a close-knit neighborhood; 3) People in this neighborhood can be trusted; and 4) People in this neighborhood generally don't get along with each other. Health-related informal social control was tapped through items measuring the respondent's level of agreement with the following: 1) If I were sick I could count on my neighbors to shop for groceries for me; and 2) You can count on adults in this neighborhood to watch out that children are safe and don't get in trouble. An additional informal social control item asked respondents how likely it is that people in their neighborhood would intervene if a fight broke out in front of their house. The informal social control items tap expectations for beneficial health-related action as well as neighborhood supervision of potentially hazardous conditions or violent situations. The seven items were combined to form a single scale of health-related collective efficacy (hereafter "collective efficacy"). The *Social Interaction/Exchange* scale measures the frequency of interaction and network-mediated exchange among neighbors. In contrast to the generalized assessments of trust, solidarity, and shared expectations for informal social control included in the measure of collective efficacy, the network interaction/exchange scale is designed to capture *actual ties* between neighborhood residents, consistent with Portes's (1998) conceptualization. Respondents were asked how often do you and people in this neighborhood: (1) Have parties or other get-togethers where other people in the neighborhood are invited; (2) Visit in each others homes or on the street; (3) Ask each other advice about personal things such as child rearing or job openings; and (4) Do favors for each other?

Analysis

The clustering of respondents within Chicago's neighborhoods renders standard OLS techniques inappropriate due to the likely underestimation of standard errors. Our analysis strategy employs Hierarchical Modeling (HM) techniques to investigate the likelihood of reporting unease across neighborhoods. This approach has several advantages. First, the technique adjusts standard errors for the effects of clustering within neighborhoods. Second, HM provides a method for estimating the percentage of the total variance in any given outcome that can be attributed to neighborhood-level factors. In order to correct independent neighborhood-level measures of collective efficacy and network interaction/exchange for missing data and measurement error, we use empirical Bayes residuals from a three-level item-response model of the component items of these scales (Raudenbush & Bryk, 2002).

We begin with means and standard deviations that describe our study population, the individual-level component of our analysis (Table 1). The main feature of our analysis is a series of six nested hierarchical logit models (Table 2) that combine individual and neighborhood-level covariates. A "feel uneasy" response to the interracial unease question forms the outcome. We begin with individual-level factors, then sequentially introduce residential stability, affluence, percent Black, social interaction/exchange and collective efficacy. We illustrate our model as follows:

$$\log(\phi_{ij}/1-\phi_{ij}) = \beta_{0j} + \beta_{1j}(Age)_{ij} + \beta_{2j}(Married)_{ij} + \beta_{3j}(Female)_{ij} + \beta_{4j}(Income)_{ij} + \dots + \beta_{9j}(Female*RaceFreq)_{ij}$$

$$\beta_{0j} = \gamma_{00} + \gamma_{01}(Rstability)_j + \gamma_{02}(Affluence)_j + \gamma_{03}(\%Black)_j + \gamma_{04}(SocEx)_j + \gamma_{05}(HealthCollEff)_j + u_{0j}$$

Finally, we show a graphical representation of the predicted probabilities of perceived unease by race at selected levels of the percent Black present in the community (Figure 1).

RESULTS

Table 1 examines differences between Blacks and Whites for our outcome and individual-level covariates. Of note, Whites and Blacks are significantly different in perceptions of unease; 53% of Whites report that they believe White people feel uneasy dealing with Blacks as compared to only 44% of Blacks who report that Black people feel uneasy dealing with Whites.

Table 2 shows the estimated models, separately by race, which sequentially introduce individual- and neighborhood- level covariates (to facilitate discussion, selected coefficients will be discussed in terms of odds ratios). Covariate effects for Blacks and Whites look similar in Model 1; older and healthy individuals are less likely to report unease while individuals who have less contact with the opposite race and are college graduates are more likely to perceive unease. Blacks and Whites continue to share comparable effects on both individual- and neighborhood-level covariates in Model 2. Controlling for residential stability and affluence at the neighborhood-level does not change these results, except age, which is no longer significant. In Model 3, Black and White coefficients diverge when the racial distribution of the community is introduced. White individuals who “sometimes” have contact with Blacks are 1.32 more likely to perceive unease than White individuals who “frequently” have contact with Blacks. This result is different for White men and women. When both men and women have frequent contact with Blacks, their perceptions of uneasiness do not differ. Yet, White women who “sometimes” have contact with Blacks are 0.76 times as likely to perceive unease as White men or women who “frequently” have contact with Blacks. For Blacks, less contact with Whites, and being a college graduate, increases the likelihood of perceptions of unease in Model 3, while good or excellent health status decreases the likelihood.

With respect to our major focus—the effects of neighborhood characteristics—we find that more affluent neighborhoods translate into fewer reports of unease ($p < 0.10$) while higher levels of residential stability contribute to perceptions of unease in Whites. In Model 3, we introduce covariates for racial composition (percent Black and percent Black squared) with interesting results. For Blacks, the neighborhood percent Black squared coefficient is significant, suggesting a curvilinear relationship between perceptions of unease and the percent Black in the neighborhood. Thus, Blacks report *less* unease in *integrated* neighborhoods (i.e., neighborhoods that are neither White nor Black dominated). In contrast, Whites’ perceptions of unease show no significant relationship with racial composition.

Models 4 through 6 introduce the neighborhood social characteristics, social interaction/exchange and collective efficacy, to the estimation of individuals’ perceptions of uneasiness. Social interaction/exchange does not affect either Blacks or Whites perceptions of unease in Model 4. Collective efficacy does not have a significant effect for Blacks in Model 5; conversely, collective efficacy increases the likelihood of reporting unease for Whites. Thus, Whites are 1.34 times more likely to perceive unease in neighborhoods with higher levels of collective efficacy. In addition, Whites with higher levels of individual income report greater unease when controlling for collective efficacy. In Model 6, the effect of collective efficacy for Whites becomes stronger when also controlling for social interaction/exchange (which no longer has an effect). The positive effect of individual-level income on perceptions of unease remains the same for Whites.

Both social interaction/exchange and collective efficacy have an effect on Blacks perceptions of unease (Model 6). Like Whites, collective efficacy exerts a positive influence on perceptions of unease, or rather Blacks in neighborhoods with higher collective efficacy (one standard deviation

increase) are 1.41 times more likely to report unease. On the contrary, Blacks in neighborhoods with higher social interaction and exchange are 0.72 as likely to report unease. In addition, Blacks who are older are less likely to report unease.

Figure 1 demonstrates the curvilinear relationship between percent Black and percent Black squared and the predicted probability of perceptions of unease. The low, medium and high cut points for percent Black in neighborhoods are based on the 25th, 50th, and 75th cut points for percent Black. Unlike Blacks, Whites do not exhibit a curvilinear relationship with the percent Black in a neighborhood. Rather, Whites predicted probability of perceptions of unease remains relatively the same across all levels of Black representation in the neighborhood. In low percent Black neighborhoods, Blacks have a 48% probability of reporting unease while Whites have a 52% probability. In neighborhoods that are relatively integrated, Blacks are less likely to report unease than Whites at 40% versus 65%. In high percent Black neighborhoods, Blacks are 48% likely to report unease around the opposing race, while Whites are 60%. Thus, Blacks perceive unease when they live in neighborhoods that are either dominated by Whites or dominated by Blacks. Yet, in heterogeneous, integrated communities, or those neighborhoods that are not distinctly dominated by Whites or Blacks, Blacks perceive more comfort than unease.

DISCUSSION

We identify an important role for neighborhood social context in examinations of interracial unease. Affluence and residential stability exerted significant effects for Whites only, with affluence tempering reports of unease for Blacks. Stability, on the other hand, increases perceptions of unease, suggesting that communities with continuity of (most likely white) residents, do not foster openness toward interaction with African Americans. Our findings suggest that the extent to which reports of general comfort vary by the racial composition of the community merits further investigation. In contrast to the findings of Sigelman et al. (1996), propinquity does not appear to alter significantly the perceptions of unease among Whites. Model-based predictions, however, suggest that Whites perceive greater unease in neighborhoods that are relatively integrated. African Americans, in contrast, exhibit a significant curvilinear pattern, with those residing in relatively integrated neighborhoods reporting the *lowest* levels of perceived unease. Finally, collective efficacy exerts an unexpected positive effect on unease for both Blacks and Whites, suggesting that cohesive normative orientations and a willingness to act on behalf of neighbors may also be associated with increasing intolerance (a long-recognized potential downside of strong community).

Understanding the preconditions for network formation is essential for further development of social capital theory, and for a greater appreciation of the factors that either enhance or inhibit interaction between African Americans and Whites. Additional analyses will explore alternative specifications of neighborhood racial composition and issues related to selection. We also will investigate the health composition of the neighborhood and the extent to which this contributes to perceptions of race and race relations. Finally, we will explore alternative measures of neighborhood racial composition and additional approaches to assessing segregation (Echenique & Fryer, 2005).

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Table 1: Summary Statistics by Race

	Whites	Blacks		
Variables	Mean/SD	Mean/SD	T-Test	
Outcome				
Perceptions of Uneasiness	0.53 (0.50)	0.44 (0.50)	2.64	**
Control Variables				
Age	26.88 (15.82)	27.76 (16.45)	-0.80	
Female	0.59 (0.49)	0.69 (0.46)	-2.82	**
Married	0.45 (0.50)	0.30 (0.46)	4.56	**
Income				
Less than 10,000	0.03 (0.18)	0.16 (0.36)	-6.43	**
> 10,000	0.03 (0.18)	0.10 (0.30)	-4.09	**
> 15,000 to 20,000	0.06 (0.24)	0.12 (0.32)	-3.14	**
> 20,000 to 25,000	0.06 (0.24)	0.12 (0.33)	-3.24	**
> 25,000 to 30,000	0.08 (0.28)	0.12 (0.32)	-1.73	+
> 30,000 to 40,000	0.17 (0.38)	0.14 (0.35)	1.12	
> 40,000 to 50,000	0.18 (0.38)	0.12 (0.33)	2.32	*
> 50,000 to 70,000	0.17 (0.37)	0.07 (0.25)	4.63	**
> 70,000 to 90,000	0.09 (0.29)	0.03 (0.16)	4.15	**
> 90,000	0.12 (0.33)	0.03 (0.16)	5.41	**
Education				
No High School Diploma	0.07 (0.26)	0.24 (0.43)	-6.85	**
High School Graduate	0.16 (0.37)	0.20 (0.40)	-1.32	
Some College	0.25 (0.44)	0.41 (0.49)	-4.91	**
College Graduate & Beyond	0.51 (0.50)	0.16 (0.37)	11.74	**
Health	0.72 (0.79)	1.01 (0.83)	-5.23	**
Freq of Encounter w/ Opposing Race	0.88 (0.98)	0.95 (1.09)	-1.00	

N = 854

Table 2: Hierarchical Logit Models of Interracial Unease Perceptions

WHITES	1	2	3	4	5	6
<i>Individual Characteristics</i>						
Age	-0.013 *	-0.012	-0.008	-0.008	-0.008	-0.007
Married	-0.059	-0.074	-0.265	-0.272	-0.302	-0.285
Female	-0.388	-0.440	-0.079	-0.078	-0.089	-0.098
Freq. of Contact with Opposing Race ^a	0.543 **	0.518 *	0.282 +	0.284 +	0.289 +	0.284 +
Health ^b	-0.238 +	-0.255 +	-0.094	-0.087	-0.065	-0.087
Income	0.042	0.049	0.091	0.092	0.099 +	0.101 +
Education ^c No High School Diploma	-0.318	-0.338	-0.482	-0.495	-0.549	-0.518
Some College	0.060	0.088	0.283	0.281	0.300	0.329
College Graduate/Graduate Work	0.712 +	0.813 +	0.445	0.444	0.481	0.515
Female * Freq. of Contact w/ Opposing Race	-0.291	-0.272	-0.355 +	-0.361 +	-0.394 +	-0.386 +
<i>Neighborhood Characteristics</i>						
Residential Stability	-	0.148	0.205 +	0.196 +	0.116	0.110
Affluence	-	-1.699	-2.739 **	-2.826 **	-3.825 **	-4.004 **
Percent Black	-	-	0.411	0.383	0.387	0.518
Percent Black Squared	-	-	-1.507	-1.418	-1.671	-2.201
Social Interaction & Exchange	-	-	-	0.043	-	-0.225
Health Related Collective Efficacy	-	-	-	-	0.295 *	0.464 **
INTERCEPT	-0.260 *	-0.280 **	0.286 *	0.283 *	0.286 *	0.299 **
BLACKS	1	2	3	4	5	6
<i>Individual Characteristics</i>						
Age	-0.013 +	-0.012	-0.012	-0.012	-0.013	-0.014 +
Married	-0.059	-0.074	-0.089	-0.091	-0.076	-0.065
Female	-0.388	-0.440	-0.457	-0.452	-0.459	-0.455
Freq. of Contact with Opposing Race ^a	0.543 **	0.518 *	0.518 *	0.524 *	0.517 *	0.527 *
Health ^b	-0.238 +	-0.255 +	-0.247 +	-0.249 +	-0.248 +	-0.252 +
Income	0.042	0.049	0.044	0.050	0.037	0.039
Education ^c No High School Diploma	-0.318	-0.338	-0.405	-0.411	-0.388	-0.379
Some College	0.060	0.088	0.051	0.060	0.042	0.051
College Graduate/Graduate Work	0.712 +	0.813 +	0.777 +	0.790 +	0.821 *	0.896 *
Female * Freq. of Contact w/ Opposing Race	-0.291	-0.272	-0.281	-0.269	-0.276	-0.245
<i>Neighborhood Characteristics</i>						
Residential Stability	-	0.148	0.094	0.053	0.112	0.054
Affluence	-	-1.699	-1.069	-0.902	-1.959	-2.622
Percent Black	-	-	-1.216	-1.132	-1.238	-1.093
Percent Black Squared	-	-	3.867 +	3.634 +	3.833 +	3.335 +
Social Interaction & Exchange	-	-	-	-0.176	-	-0.334 *
Health Related Collective Efficacy	-	-	-	-	0.161	0.340 *
INTERCEPT	-0.260 *	-0.280 **	-0.246 *	-0.251 *	-0.235 *	-0.234 *

+ p < 0.10; * p < 0.05; ** p < 0.01

^a Coded 0 – Frequently, 1 – Sometimes, 2 – Hardly Ever, 3 – Never^b Coded 0 – Excellent, 1 – Good, 2 – Fair, 3 – Poor^c Reference category is High School Diploma

Figure 1: Predicted Probability of Feeling Uneasy by Race and the 25th and 75th Percentiles of Percent Black in Neighborhoods

