

Spatial Differentiation of Black-White Inequality in Poverty in the United States: Racial Threat and the Conditioning Influence of the Legacy of Slavery

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The extent of black-white inequality in poverty in a place varies considerably across the United States. For example, in 2000, some counties reported no differences while others reported black poverty rates that were more than 18 times as high as white poverty rates. The highest levels of inequality were reported in the South (18.81, versus 12.79 in the non-South). Yet, within this region are counties that also report no racial differences in poverty.

A long-standing explanation for the range in local-area racial inequality is racial threat, as represented by black population concentration. A related structural explanation is the legacy of slavery. Previous research has treated these concepts separately, but there is reason to suspect that the two factors work together to influence inequality. That is, the extent to which racial threat shapes inequality might be conditioned by local area slave roots. This study extends theories of black-white inequality by examining the extent to which the relationship between racial concentration and black-white inequality in poverty is modified by the legacy of slavery. By doing so, we shed light on the processes generating spatial differentiation in black-white inequality.

Legacy of Slavery and Racial Threat

Previous research has identified both racial threat and the legacy of slavery as factors contributing to the relative disadvantage of African Americans compared to whites (Adeola, 1999; Beggs, Villemez and Arnold, 1997; O'Connell, 2009). These perspectives identify two distinct processes that have separate means of affecting inequality. Racial threat operates through time-variant responses to a threatening population – as the minority population increases, so too does perceived threat - (Blalock, 1956). In contrast, the legacy of slavery presumably works through permanent social structures that extend from a place's ever-present slavery past (Levernier and White, 1998; Ruef and Fletcher, 2003; Vandiver, Giacomassi and Lofquist, 2006).

To further distinguish between the perspectives, threat is a group-based response to a large or growing racial minority population. When a group is perceived as economically or politically threatening, the more powerful group discriminates against the minority group in order to maintain its dominant position, which ultimately results in inequality. Alternatively, slavery primarily affects racial inequality by influencing the dominant understanding of race and the assumed social hierarchy. Specifically, the American institution of slavery assumed whites were inherently superior to blacks and, therefore, were entitled to social and economic benefits. This social knowledge is transferred over time and affects how whites view their position in contemporary society compared to blacks.

Previous research has examined these factors separately or as competing forces that generate inequality. In the current study, we examine the two processes in relation to one another to empirically assess the extent to which the legacy of slavery conditions the dynamics of the racial threat process. We take this approach to better understand the spatial differentiation in racial inequality as well as spatial differentiation in the processes that generate inequality.

Conceptual Framework

Implicit in extant studies of racial threat is the idea that the propensity for whites to feel threatened by African Americans is constant across space (e.g. Blalock, 1956; Tienda and Ding-Tzann, 1987; see Curtis,

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Voss and Long, 2009 for an exception). As the size of the minority population increases, the perceived threat among the majority population increases, regardless of location within the United States. Such treatment of threat is consistent with the assumption that the United States functions according to one racial ideology. This assumption is not without warrant. In his study of the southern diaspora, historian James Gregory argues that aspects of culture, including racial ideology, in the North and West have been shaped by the migration of black and white southerners. The migration of southerners to other regions in the United States spread southern racial ideology to places within the nation that did not directly experience the formal institution of slavery. Drawing on this perspective, regional differences would be minimized and there would be no moderating effect of legacy on group responses.

However, there is strong reason to believe that the dynamics proposed by the racial threat thesis are not the same across the United States, but are modified by local area conditions that are related to the legacy of slavery. For example, research on racial attitudes demonstrates that a universal racial ideology does not exist within the United States. Significant regional differences in whites' perceptions of African Americans persist after controlling for social and economic factors that might influence racial perceptions (Tuch and Martin, 1997).

Consistent with the racial attitudes literature, research on the legacy of slavery suggests that there is spatial differentiation in whites' views of group position. Specifically, places with a strong connection to slavery, including the southern United States and places within the South that were particularly rooted in slavery, are prone to promote a racial hierarchy that ranks whites in the dominant strata and blacks on the bottom rung. The historical institution of slavery deliberately maintained a racial hierarchy and promoted – and was contingent upon – the belief that African Americans were an inferior race. In places where slavery was historically an integral part of the economy, whites are more sensitive to group position and therefore to potential threats to that hierarchy. Within this perspective, the heightened sensitivity would increase the effect of racial concentration on black-white inequality. That is, racial threat would have a greater impact on black-white inequality in poverty in places with stronger ties to slavery compared to places with weaker or no ties.

Previous research also suggests that racial threat may actually be weaker in places with a slave past as compared to local areas with no direct ties to slavery. William Julius Wilson (1987) discusses how the Great Migration of African Americans from the South to the North elevated racial tension in the North, such that conditions eventually became worse in the North than in the South. His work suggests the historical concentration of African Americans in the South that was rooted in the demands for slave labor attenuates the effect of racial concentration on inequality. The familiarity with the presence of blacks in the South reduces the animosity provoked by a high concentration of African Americans. In contrast, the same concentration of blacks would promote a higher perceived threat among the non-southern white population since there is less familiarity given the absence of a historically large black population. According to this perspective, racial threat would have a smaller effect on black-white inequality in the South compared to the non-South given the extent to which familiarity with a large black population reduces the negative white response to black concentration.

Data & Analytical Approach

We analyze county level Census data from 2000 to investigate the conditioning influence of legacy on the relationship between racial threat and inequality in poverty. Inequality in poverty is measured as the ratio of the black poverty rate relative to the white poverty rate in a county. Following previous work investigating racial threat, we measure racial concentration as the natural log transformation of

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the African American population relative to the total population (Blalock, 1967). We use two dichotomous variables to measure the legacy of slavery: an indicator of a county's location in the census-defined South; and a second variable for southern counties indicating whether a county is located in the plantation belt, as defined in the 1910 United States Census. We account for the potential influence of the structural and compositional characteristics of a place, including local area industry and black educational attainment.

First, we begin with a Gaussian geographically weighted regression (GWR) to assess the extent to which the strength of the relationship between racial inequality and African American concentration varies. This approach addresses whether the response to the size of a racial minority is uniform across the United States. Traditional regression approaches assume that variables have the same relationship for all locations and, thus, report a global regression coefficient. This approach ignores possible spatial differentiation in relationships. Whereas a traditional, global regression model provides spatial averages of each variable's coefficient, by using GWR we can test the assumption of a global relationship by calculating separate regressions for each local area and testing for significant differences across the study region.

Next, we conduct a spatial regime analysis to formally estimate the patterns of spatial differentiation in the relationships generating inequality. We identify two sets of regimes including (1) legacy (counties in the census-defined South) and non-legacy (counties in the non-South), and (2) strong legacy (counties in the southern Plantation Belt) and weak legacy (other southern counties). This approach enables us to systematically assess the extent and nature of spatial differentiation in the inequality-generating processes that produce the wide range of black-white inequality across the United States. In the spatial regime analysis, we fully interact the key independent and control variables with the identified regime, in this case legacy (South, non-South) and strong legacy (plantation, non-plantation). A regime analysis is preferable to two separate models for each regime because it provides a test for the stability of the parameter estimates across the regimes as well as overall model fit; such tests are not directly available when analyzing separate models.

Preliminary Results

Results from the GWR analysis indicate significant spatial variation in the magnitude of the racial concentration coefficient. That is to say, the relationship between the concentration of African Americans and racial inequality in poverty is not constant across space. This suggests the degree to which the black population is viewed as a threat varies across the United States. One implication is that previous studies employing global regressions for the entire United States mask variation in the extent to which racial threat is a factor for racial inequality.

Moreover, preliminary results from the GWR analysis show that African American concentration is significantly related to black-white inequality in poverty in only one cluster of counties, net of other factors associated with inequality. These counties are located in the west south central sub-region (Arkansas, Louisiana, Oklahoma and Texas), parts of the east south central sub-region (Alabama, Kentucky, Mississippi and Tennessee) and parts of several surrounding states (Arizona, Kansas, Missouri, New Mexico North Carolina and Virginia). Further investigation using spatial regime techniques will allow us to directly test for differences in the magnitude of the association conditional on legacy.

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