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The Significance of Race for Neighborhood Social Cohesion: Perceived Difficulty of Collective Action in Majority Black Neighborhoods

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This article explores William Julius Wilson's contentions about community cultural traits by examining racial differences in middle class neighborhoods' levels of social cohesion. Specifically, we explore the perceived difficulty of these actions—as opposed to general pessimism about their outcomes—as a potential explanation for low levels of instrumental collective action in Black middle class neighborhoods. Our results indicate that, regardless of other neighborhood factors, majority Black neighborhoods have low levels of social cohesion. We also find that this racial disparity is statistically explained by shared perceptions about the amount of effort required to engage in group action in different neighborhoods. These findings emphasize that residence in a majority Black area—and the well-informed perceptions accompanying it—affect the lived experience of neighbors, even when they are middle class.

Key words: race, collective action, social cohesion, collective efficacy

Racial differentials in urban neighborhood environments represent a historically well-studied phenomenon. The sociological literature began to provide a clear statistical picture of Black urbanites' daily environments with the seminal works of Drake and Cayton (1993) and DuBois (1996). These studies invariably included a section on the Black middle class. However,

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with the 1987 publication of Wilson's *The Truly Disadvantaged: The Inner City, the Underclass, and Public Policy*, quantitative sociological literature on the well-being of Black neighborhoods began to focus more exclusively on the circumstances of the Black urban poor. We now know a great deal about racial differentials in neighborhood quality and social cohesion within poor urban environments (Sampson & Sharkey, 2008), and we also know that these factors are associated with racial differences in various health and public safety outcomes (Sampson, Morenoff, & Gannon-Rowley, 2002; Williams & Collins, 2001). Yet, our knowledge of the statistical dynamics of these relationships in nonpoor neighborhoods is more limited.

Understanding these relationships in nonpoor contexts is important because the most common neighborhood environment for contemporary Black Americans is majority Black and majority nonpoor (Pattillo, 2005). This is largely in-line with predictions in Wilson's (1978) earlier and equally influential work, *The Declining Significance of Race: Blacks and Changing American Institutions*. Although some scholars cite the fact that most Blacks live in nonpoor contexts to support contentions that the significance of race is declining in America, most agree that the typical neighborhood environment of Black Americans at this time—majority Black—highlights the significance of race through the perpetuation of class-specific, racial residential segregation in the U.S.

The continued racial residential segregation in the U.S. currently contributes to vastly different neighborhood contexts for middle class Blacks compared to middle class Whites (Massey & Fischer, 2003). Among other outcomes, there is reason to believe that these differential contexts lead to lower levels of cohesion and lower rates of collective action in Black neighborhoods (Lacy, 2007; Pattillo-McCoy, 2000). Although there is myriad literature on the consequences of racial differences in this type of cohesion (Buka, Brennan, Rich-Edwards, Raudenbush, & Earls, 2003; Cagney, Browning, & Wen, 2005; Sampson, Morenoff, & Earls, 1999; Sampson, Morenoff, & Raudenbush, 2005), there is a paucity of quantitative research on the sociocultural explanations for these differentials.

In this paper, we explore differences in residents' perceptions of the amount of effort required to engage in collective

action as an example of Wilson's emphasis on the cultural effects of macrosociological forces. We expect that residents of majority Black, nonpoor neighborhoods will report that engaging in these types of behaviors is more difficult, and distinguish this perception from one common example of "cultural traits": pessimism. Using data from a survey of 603 residents living in a largely middle class urban area, we test the hypothesis that differences in the perceived amount of effort required—not individuals' pessimism or cynicism about outcomes (Sampson & Bartusch, 1998)—explains racial differences in levels of cohesion. We expect the perceptions accompanying residence in a Black middle class neighborhood to be distinct from those in White middle class neighborhoods, and to be potentially informative about the continued significance of race on residents' responses to neighborhood contexts.

Literature Review

Racial Segregation and Neighborhood Quality

Scholars have consistently documented that living in an urban, Black neighborhood is qualitatively different than living in an urban, White neighborhood. Based on the concentration of poverty and single parent families, Wilson, himself, writes that "the 'worst' urban contexts in which Whites reside are considerably better than the average context of Black communities (Sampson & Wilson, 1995, p. 42)." Yet, discussions of single parent families and poverty can conflate race and class issues. Wilson, in his most influential studies, argues that these economic and social characteristics of Black neighborhoods are largely due to macrosociological forces (e.g., deindustrialization of cities) and their subsequent cultural effects. His detractors contend that concentrated disadvantage among urban Black populations is not new; it existed long before the deindustrialization of the Rust Belt (Massey & Denton, 1993). Instead, scholars like Massey and Denton (1993) contend that segregation is the primary source of racial differentials in urban residential contexts and that this segregation remains a problem for Blacks of all social classes.

Subsequent studies have confirmed that residential segregation persists in the U.S. Most notably, recent studies provide

evidence that Blacks continue to be the most racially segregated racial minority group (Iceland & Wilkes, 2006) and—as Wilson predicted—the segregation of poor Blacks from affluent Blacks has increased over past decades (Massey & Fischer, 2003). Some of the persistence of neighborhood segregation is due to the intergenerational continuity of neighborhood environments (Sharkey, 2008) in addition to a threshold effect such that it is nearly impossible for a 40 percent Black neighborhood to decrease their Black residential representation (Sampson, 2009).

The recent documentation of increasing, class-based segregation within the Black community corresponds to Wilson's predictions about the increased significance of class for Black Americans. Yet, the sustained residential segregation between races means that even middle class Black Americans continue to live in inferior neighborhood surroundings when compared to their White counterparts (Sampson et al., 2002). For example, middle class Blacks live in neighborhoods with a lower median household income (Logan, 2002), a higher concentration of abandoned housing, more single parent families, and fewer college graduates (Adelman, 2004) than middle class Whites. Furthermore, middle class Whites live in areas where over a third of their neighbors are also affluent, a characteristic of only a quarter of middle class Blacks' neighbors (Massey & Fischer, 2003). Therefore, it remains unclear whether class matters more than race or vice versa. The whole of the literature suggests that residential segregation is becoming even more complex, with Black middle class neighborhoods segregated from the Black underclass as well as from the White middle class. In this way, it seems that race is distinct from (even if not more important than) class.

Beyond Neighborhood Quality: Neighborhood Cultural Traits and Group Behavior

Extant literature provides a good understanding of the racial differentials in the physical and socioeconomic conditions of middle class neighborhoods, but we have an incomplete statistical understanding of social and political behavior within these areas. Most existing information on the topic comes from qualitative literature. For example, Haynes (2001)

and Patillo-McCoy (2000) document the effects of physical proximity to low-income communities on political cohesion and action in Black middle-class neighborhoods. Other scholars provide evidence that class-based disputes impede Black nonpoor neighborhoods from wielding control over political and social resources, despite their racial, numerical majority (Ginwright, 2002; Johnson, 2002; Lacy, 2007).

To our knowledge, these qualitative findings have not permeated into the quantitative literature on differences in positive, group-based action in nonpoor neighborhoods. Applying the concept of collective efficacy (Sampson, Raudenbush, & Earls, 1997)—a dominant topic in research on impoverished areas (Browning & Cagney, 2002; Browning, Leventhal, & Brooks-Gunn, 2005; Cohen, Finch, Bower, & Sastry, 2006; Leventhal & Brooks-Gunn, 2000; Morenoff, 2003; Wikström & Sampson, 2003)—to dynamics in middle class neighborhoods might help to address this current limitation in the literature.

The notion of collective efficacy centers on the belief in a group's ability to accomplish goals (Bandura, 2000), and incorporates ideas about the group's propensity to collectively act toward achieving those goals (Sampson et al., 1997). As a concept, it extends beyond the aggregate effect of individual self-efficacy, as it allows members of a community to have expectations and understandings of their group's (or neighborhood's) actions that are distinct from expectations for their own, individual behavior (Bandura, 1997). The concept also extends beyond social ties, focusing on mutual trust and cohesion among neighborhood residents in order to act for the well-being of the common good (Browning & Cagney, 2002).

Perhaps due to many social scientists' fear of advancing ideas associated with "cultural" explanations of racial differentials (Patterson, 1995; Wilson, 1991b), collective efficacy has not been acknowledged as a group-level example of a cultural trait and behavior (Wilson, 1991a). These fears may be warranted, given that the majority of Americans—Black and White—believe that "Blacks who have not gotten ahead in life are mainly responsible for their own situation" (Kohut, 2010). Yet, in his most recent work, Wilson (2009b) reminds us that, although cultural explanations are probably not as important as structural explanations, both dimensions need to be taken

into account when studying urban inequality.

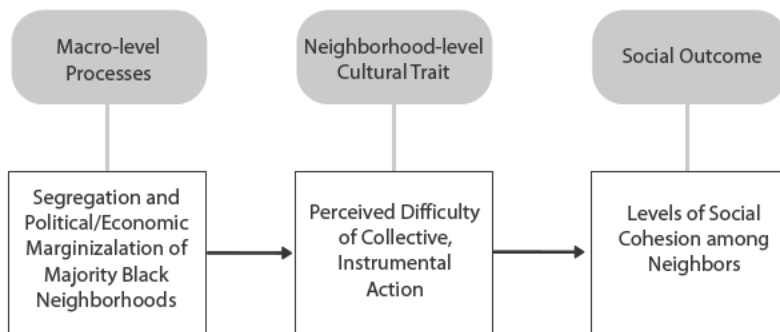
Collective efficacy as a cultural explanation need not be seen as completely devoid of a structural component. If we accept that culture represents “the way that individuals in particular groups, communities or societies develop an understanding of how the world works and make decisions based on that understanding” (Wilson, 2009a, p .1), then perceptions of obstacles to collective behavior represent a specific example of culture. Furthermore, these perceptions about difficulty or obstacles are likely to reflect both Wilson’s (1987) and Sampson, Raudenbush and Earls’ (1997) focus on macrosociological factors better than the stereotypical cultural trait concepts of hopelessness and/or pessimism.

Partially reflecting the dual structural and cultural nature of the concept, scholars often parcel collective efficacy into two components: expressive connections and instrumental actions (Sampson et al., 1997). Expressive collective efficacy represents the social cohesion and trust among neighbors that we have previously discussed. Instrumental collective efficacy is best described as members of a neighborhood coming together to deal with social problems and to improve the conditions of their neighborhood—e.g., taking action to get a stoplight built in the neighborhood (Swaroop & Morenoff, 2006). Similar to Wilson’s contentions about macrosociological effects on underclass cultural traits, Sampson, Raudenbush, and Earls (1997) posit that instrumental collective efficacy originates within the structural and political contexts, often distinguishing neighborhoods through social characteristics. Distinct from expressive collective efficacy, instrumental collective efficacy is especially susceptible to structural barriers because it is typically channeled through formal institutions—police departments, public works, school systems—in addition to the structural contexts that affect expressive collective efficacy. Therefore, it is important to recognize that being “socially situated” determines different types of instrumental, group-level behavior (Bandura, 2000).

Race plays a central role in being socially situated in neighborhoods. Due to structural barriers, and regardless of their median income, urban Black neighborhoods are often distanced from government decision making processes (Coaffee &

Healey, 2003; Mesch & Schwirian, 1996; Portney & Berry, 1997) and, therefore, institutional services (Carr & Kolluri, 2001; Gee, 2008; Holzer, 1991; Orfield & Lee, 2005; Zenk et al., 2005). In turn, instrumental behaviors may be more difficult and require more effort for these neighborhoods' residents than for those living in other neighborhoods. Even if these barriers are not "real," the perception of difficulty itself can impede instrumental actions that would otherwise lead to social cohesion in these neighborhoods (Thomas, 1928). Figure 1 graphically depicts this conceptual framework of the connection between racial composition and levels of collective efficacy. It illustrates our contention that, regardless of whether obstacles are empirically unobservable or unquantifiable, when people living in predominantly Black neighborhoods believe that collective behavior is more difficult in their neighborhoods; this perception itself would impede collective action.

Figure 1: Conceptual framework explaining racial differences in middle class neighborhoods' levels of collective efficacy (Wilson's equivalent concepts are included in gray)



The Current Study

Existing literature on urban neighborhoods indicates that people who believe that their neighbors are willing to intercede when a problem arises benefit in many ways from this high level of collective efficacy (Sampson, Raudenbush, & Earls, 1997). Indicators of neighborhood quality (e.g. concentrated poverty, percent homeownership, etc.) are at the base of

collective efficacy theory, and therefore many previous studies have contended that poverty is associated with greater differences in levels of collective efficacy than is race (Browning & Cagney, 2002). To evaluate this contention, we investigate differences in levels of expressive collective efficacy (i.e., social cohesion) within a sample of largely middle class, urban neighborhoods, based on racial composition of the neighborhood as well as several different indicators of neighborhood quality. We expect to find a significant difference in levels of social cohesion between predominantly Black neighborhoods and other neighborhoods, even when other socioeconomic indicators are taken into account. Furthermore, we hypothesize that these racial differences between neighborhoods can be explained by a perception (or recognition) in majority Black neighborhoods that instrumental action toward collective benefit requires a great deal of effort. We also statistically distinguish this perception from overall levels of pessimism in Black neighborhoods.

Method

Data

The data used to test the hypotheses of this study come from information collected for a larger, separate study during October and November of 2009. The larger project was concerned with public safety and collective efficacy in a mid-sized, Midwestern city. This project focused on life stage specific collective efficacy, so the data set represents a sample of block groups that were stratified by both the percentage of residents age 65 and older and the racial concentration (Black/White) of residents. The fact that the sample was stratified by race ensures the racial diversity of block groups needed to assess our research questions.

In total, 603 residents (a 65% response rate) from 92 census block groups participated in our study. Each block group is represented by two to nine respondents. The Survey Research Center at Indiana University–Purdue University, Indianapolis used random digit dialing to contact residents and solicit participation. Those agreeing to participate spent between 10 and 15 minutes answering 50 questions. They were compensated with a \$5.00 gift card for their time. Individual's responses

were combined with 2000 census information on census block groups to constitute our final database.

Measures

Social cohesion: For our dependent variable, we replicated the portion of the Project on Human Development in Chicago Neighborhoods' (PHDCN) measure of collective efficacy that pertains to community cohesion and trust, which has been validated and replicated in a variety of other studies (Sampson, Raudenbush, & Earls, 1997). Participants used a 5-point Likert scale to respond to five statements: "people around here are willing to help their neighbors," "this is a close-knit block," "people on this block can be trusted," "people on this block help each other when they can," and "people on this block generally don't get along with each other." Responses to the last statement were reverse-coded.

We used these answers to construct a neighborhood-level measure of collective efficacy in accordance with Raudenbush and Sampson's (1999) procedure for constructing neighborhood-level scales from individual-level responses. Thus, we treated responses as embedded within individuals who are embedded within neighborhoods. The final measure represents empirical Bayes residuals (Raudenbush & Bryk, 2002) that are adjusted for measurement error at each of the three embedded levels. The neighborhood-level scale reliability is 0.80.

Neighborhood socioeconomic characteristics: Racial composition—more specifically, whether a neighborhood is majority Black—is the neighborhood characteristic of primary concern. Thus, we created an indicator coded as 1 to indicate that a block group has 51 percent or more Black residents and 0 to indicate all other racial compositions. We also control for other socioeconomic neighborhood characteristics: median income, percent homeowners, percent of households with a senior resident, and percent of households with children. Each of these was dichotomized such that 1 indicates that the block group falls into the lower quartile of our sample and 0 includes all other block groups. These binary variables were created: (1) to be comparable to the indicator of majority Black neighborhood; and (2) because there is no standard cutoff point for "lower income" neighborhoods within nonpoor areas.

Difficulty of instrumental collective action and pessimism: The level of perceived effort associated with instrumental behavior was determined by one statement posed to participants: “getting neighbors together to deal with a problem is a lot of work.” Levels of pessimism were determined by responses to: “If something can go wrong for me, it will.” Respondents answered each of these questions using a five-point Likert scale. Using the method described for our measure of collective efficacy, we calculated empirical Bayes residuals based on a two-level model for each of these statements.

The two measures—perceived effort and pessimism—were created using `gllamm` commands in Stata 11 (Rabe-Hesketh & Skrondal, 2008). After we obtained the Bayes residuals, we recoded them into binary variables so they are comparable to our indicators of neighborhood quality. Our final measures are of high perceived effort (i.e. block groups at or above the 75th percentile are coded as 1) and high pessimism (again, block groups at or above the 75th percentile are coded as 1).

Procedures

First, we performed analyses to address concerns about multicollinearity between the indicators of neighborhood quality. According to established standards (Lewis-Beck, 1980), there is no cause for concern in our dataset. Correlations between the indicators of neighborhood quality range from $-.03$ (between low income and low concentration of elderly) to $.74$ (between low income and majority Black). The largest Pseudo R^2 (regressing low income on all others) is $.55$, and therefore does not approach 1.0. The correlation between average perceived difficulty of instrumental action and average overall pessimism is $.10$, so there is no colinearity between these indicators, either.

Next, we performed four stepwise OLS regressions. The models proceed from including only majority Black as an independent measure to ultimately including all controls. The intent is to establish a baseline association between majority Black neighborhoods and levels of social cohesion, and then determine if the association is “explained” by: (a) neighborhood characteristics; (b) perceived effort; and (c) levels of pessimism.

Results

Descriptive Results

Table 1 displays descriptive statistics pertaining to the neighborhood environment of Black and White respondents accordingly. Our respondents largely reside in racially segregated neighborhoods, where 65 percent of Black respondents live in a predominately Black census block group, and 73 percent of White respondents live in a predominantly White census block group. [It should be remembered, however, that our sample was stratified by race of block group.] In agreement with existing research, our Black respondents are exposed to different neighborhood environments than White respondents. Their block groups have a significantly lower median household income, lower concentration of homeowners, and higher concentration of households with children.

Table 1. Respondents' Neighborhood Characteristics, Separated by Black and White Respondents (n = 603)

| | All Respondents | Black Respondents | White Respondents |
|---------------------------------------|-----------------|-------------------|-------------------|
| Majority Black neighborhood | 40.93% | 65.10%* | 22.81% |
| Majority White neighborhood | 54.91% | 30.71%* | 73.06% |
| Neighborhood median household income | \$48,029 | \$36,170* | \$56,923 |
| Mean concentration age 60 and older | 18.42% | 17.17% | 19.36% |
| Mean concentration households w/ kids | 31.32% | 36.04%* | 27.78% |
| Mean homeownership | 63.87% | 55.12%* | 70.44% |

*ANOVA indicates that $p < .05$

Table 2 indicates that our sample area represents a diverse, largely middle class area, despite its racial

segregation. According to census information, the median household income for blocks in our sample is nearly \$50,000 and 65 percent of residents own their homes. The average neighborhood in our sample is 39 percent Black, with percent Black ranging from .01 percent to 99 percent. Many families have children (30%) while nearly a third of neighborhood residents in the typical block group are classified as seniors. As the table indicates, all of these measures show significant variation.

Table 2: Description of Block Groups in the Sample (n = 92)

| | Mean | Range |
|-------------------------|----------|-------------------|
| Percent Black | 39.33 | 0.1 - 99 |
| Percent homes w/elderly | 28.74 | 1 - 52 |
| Percent families w/kids | 30.48 | 11 - 61 |
| Percent homeowner | 65.30 | 5 - 98 |
| Median income | \$49,655 | \$9,595-\$140,450 |

Analytic Results

The analytic results (presented in Table 3) prove to be very interesting. Model I indicates that levels of social cohesion are significantly lower in majority Black block groups. This one neighborhood characteristic explains 7 percent of the variation in levels of social cohesion (R-squared = .07). Even when we add socioeconomic indicators such as low concentration of elderly, low concentration of children, low home ownership, and low income in Model II, the association between majority Black and collective efficacy remains significant. Perhaps more importantly, the R-squared value remains the same (.07), providing no further explanation of variance.

Model III introduces the indicator of perceived difficulty of instrumental action, and once this is taken into consideration, the association between social cohesion and majority Black neighborhoods is no longer significant. Neighborhoods reporting high perceived difficulty of instrumental action have much lower levels of cohesion than other neighborhoods. The size of the effect (-.213) is similar to the initial size of the effect of

living in a majority Black neighborhood (-.212). Furthermore, introducing perceptions about the difficulty of collective action nearly doubles the explanatory ability of the model (R-squared = .13). To distinguish this effect from the influence of pessimism, we introduced the pessimism variable in Model IV. High neighborhood levels of pessimism are not significantly related to levels of cohesion, and its introduction does not affect the relationship between perceived difficulty and social cohesion.

Table 3: Regressions of Social Cohesion (measured as empirical Bayes residuals) on Indicators of Neighborhood Quality and Neighborhood Attitudes (n = 92)

| | Model I | Model II | Model III | Model IV |
|---------------------------|------------|-------------|--------------|-------------|
| Majority Black | -.212** | -.258* | -.173 | -.172 |
| Low concentration elderly | | -.086 | -.080 | -.082 |
| Low concentration kids | | -.050 | -.078 | -.080 |
| Low homeownership | | .145 | .189 | .191 |
| Low income | | .024 | -.010 | -.008 |
| High perceived difficulty | | | -.213* | -.227* |
| High pessimism | | | | -.013 |
| Constant | 2.21*** | 2.26*** | 2.29*** | 2.30*** |
| R-squared | .07 | .08 | .13 | .13 |

*p < .05, **p < .01, ***p < .001

Discussion

Our results indicate that majority Black middle class neighborhoods have lower levels of social cohesion than other socio-economically similar neighborhoods. In our analyses, race and perceived difficulty of instrumental efforts were the only variables that were significantly related to cohesion. The racial disparity was largely explained by the perceived effort required to engage in group instrumental action. Furthermore, the analyses indicate that perceived effort is distinct from general pessimism about the results of such action.

According to our analyses, scholars can add social cohesion to the list of documented differences in the quality of Black and White middle class neighborhoods. Our descriptive analyses are consistent with existing literature (Adelman, 2004; Logan, 2002): Black respondents, despite living in a middle class area, live in neighborhoods with lower median incomes and lower rates of homeownership. Our analytic results expand on these pre-existing studies and indicate that the majority Black neighborhoods also have lower levels of social cohesion.

In our sample, this statistical difference is explained by residents' perceptions about the amount of effort required to change undesirable aspects of the neighborhood. To be clear, our models indicate that these perceptions are distinct from residents' feelings about whether or not general change is possible (i.e., pessimism). The lower levels of social cohesion in majority Black neighborhoods are not associated with levels of pessimism. Furthermore, in our sample the connection between perceived effort required to affect change and social cohesion among neighbors is not due to general pessimism in the neighborhood.

The distinction between perceived difficulty and pessimism is theoretically significant. Wilson (2004) reminds us that stereotypes regarding Black communities are not necessarily blatant in their delivery; instead they are hidden in the structure of our society and in the institutions that support society. This institutional racism is especially important, given that instrumental action requires a connection to social networks as well as social institutions (Swaroop & Morenoff, 2006). Recognition of these barriers in institutional structures may be thought of as a cultural trait, representing pragmatism or realism about collective action rather than pessimism about outcomes.

It may be helpful to consider a common example of collective efficacy—obtaining a stoplight—to illustrate this process. You may imagine that a group that expects to expend 40 hours of work toward getting a stoplight will be less inclined to do so than a group that expects to expend 20 hours. The additional, expected 20 hours might be due to recognition of: slower responses from government agencies, the time required to form personal relationships that the other group already has, make-up hours at work or school due to limited numbers of

community members available during government hours of business, etc. When these types of difficulties are perceived, it may make action less likely, but this does not mean that the actors believe change is impossible.

In this way, our results add to the extant literature, but all of these findings must be understood and interpreted within certain limitations. Our data rely upon information from a diverse, middle class urban area, but they only represent the experience of individuals in one area of one Midwestern city. The results are, therefore, not generalizable nationally. Given that our results were limited to a specific geographic area, it seems well worth the effort to conduct a comparative study.

The characteristics of the city also limited our ability to explore different racial/ethnic residential concentrations. We can only comment on racial segregation in the Black context, and not in the context of any other racial/ethnic group. We recognize there are cultural differences among populations, and future studies will need to explore cultural characteristics that are important to understanding group level interactions and organizing between neighbors.

Despite these limitations, our findings provide valuable, if preliminary, information about the dynamic, group-level cultural traits of middle class Black neighborhoods. Previous studies have established the importance of perceptions about neighborhoods with high concentrations of Blacks. For example, neighborhood racial composition has been shown to affect the identification or definition of neighborhood disorder: even when objective levels are similar, people tend to perceive more disorder in majority Black neighborhoods (Sampson & Raudenbush, 2004; Swaroop & Morenoff, 2006). Our perception-based inquiry came to a similar conclusion, but suggests that perceptions emanating from within the neighborhood may also be important.

People in our sample who live in majority Black, middle class neighborhoods perceive unique difficulties associated with group action, and this race-specific perception has consequences for social cohesion. Our results reinforce the possibility that perceptions associated with racial concentration are a significant factor in determining neighborhood outcomes, even when comparisons are limited to middle class contexts.

Although the previous research on perceptions of areas with high concentrations of Black residents have concentrated on stereotypes emerging from outside of the neighborhood (Sampson & Raudenbush, 2004), our data suggest that racial concentration may also influence residents' perceptions about their own neighborhood. Racial concentration is not simply a substitute for communities' socioeconomic characteristics. Although neighborhood racial composition is related to economic characteristics, it goes beyond these and also has cultural influence. Racial composition influences people's interpretations of social contexts and seems to shape group behavior and ultimately guides neighborhood residents' experiences.

Conclusions

In future studies, scholars should turn their focus towards both the perception of barriers and the existence of structural barriers to uncover whether or not these perceptions of difficulty are in fact realities. We believe that perceptions of difficulty stem from the social distance between Black communities—even middle class Black communities—and government agencies. Frank Wilson (2004, p. 194) writes that, "problems of race and class, that involve power conflicts and structural inequalities, are generally minimized and made invisible." The qualitative literature has begun to make these issues visible (Lacy, 2007; Pattillo-McCoy, 2000). In future quantitative studies on the neighborhood environment and social cohesion, scholars should make these conflicts more readily evident by identifying the specific difficulties that account for higher perceived effort of action in Black neighborhoods. Essentially there is a new era of maintaining social distance from Black communities and scholars cannot be afraid to approach the cultural traits that may result from this distance. Resistance or hesitance from researchers when approaching such a topic seems understandable, especially when the context of one's work is up to reader interpretation, but studies on cultural traits in Black communities are important to inform intuitional and policy changes.

This new research should also carefully consider the proper analytic treatment and formulation of community-level cultural traits. For example, it is important to distinguish between

pessimism and perceived difficulty as neighborhood-level cultural traits, especially when the analysis concerns neighborhood levels of cohesion (or expressive aspects of collective efficacy). Bandura's (1997) definition of collective efficacy focuses on the group's ability to affect change and work towards a common goal. The group is at the core, not the individual. In contrast to perceptions about group action, pessimism is typically treated as an individual trait (or an aggregate of individual traits)—pointing to hopelessness and loss of motivation to take action—rather than a group-level cultural trait. In contrast to the typical emphasis on pessimism or fatalism when scholars implement the “cultural trait” aspect of Wilson's work, our framework emphasizes the recognition of social and structural barriers. Future studies will need to explore what these perceived social and structural barriers are (which may be more important than determining whether communities' perceptions reflect reality).

Since William Julius Wilson published the *Declining Significance of Race: Blacks and Changing American Institutions*, scholars have been challenging, critiquing, and building upon this research. It has been a powerful force in the field of sociology, guiding the way in which we study and understand Black neighborhoods and the daily environment of poor, Black urbanites. We find, as other scholars have, that race continues to be significant even within nonpoor contexts, but we do not see the continued significance of race as eclipsing the significance of class. In our study, race is a better measure of social cohesion than indicators of class. Specifically, when concerning perceptions about actions that require overcoming institutional and structural barriers, our findings suggest that race continues to be a factor in groups' inclination towards behaviors intended to bring about social change and equality.

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