

REGIONAL DIFFERENCE IN WHITE ATTITUDES TO DESEGREGATION

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INTRODUCTION

Until recently, social scientists in the United States have made few attempts to distinguish between regional-cultural and socio-demographic explanations of South and non-South differences in attitudes to desegregation. Violent responses to school desegregation in large cities outside the South and evidence of *white flight* in cities outside the South have raised doubts about explanations of segregationist attitudes which emphasize the Southern cultural base (Armour, 1978; Coleman, 1975). This research goes beyond the usual "Southern culture" explanation by assessing the effect of certain socio-economic characteristics of white persons and demographic factors in their county-of-residence on attitudes to desegregation. We want to determine the effect of cultural explanations of regional differences. Cultural explanations of regional attitude differences become less convincing if those attitudes can be shown to relate to socio-economic and demographic factors. We also need to determine whether these are different, comparing the South to other regions.

COUNTY CHARACTER & RACE ATTITUDES

While no past research has examined the effect of county characteristics on the race attitudes of individuals, some investigators have identified some city characteristics as determinants of such attitudes. A study of the utility of the city-of-residence as an independent variable for explaining attitudes of individuals for cities in the northeast and north-central areas of the United States with a large black population indicated that the city of residence was about half as strong a determinant of racial attitudes as were the individual attributes of age, sex, education, occupation, and family income (Schuman & Gruenberg, 1970). The correlation between city-of-residence and the individual attributes shows that these factors are not reflections of each other. Knowing the respondent's city gives access to knowledge not

given by knowing the personal characteristics. Factors which were important included degree of segregation, median white education, and for some attitudes, the percent of the population that is black.

Generally, as median education increases, favorable attitudes toward integration also increase. There is an indirect effect of the percent black in the schools on the parents' willingness to allow their children to be bused. Apparently, it is not the percent black, as such, but the dispersion of the minority which affects racial attitudes (Giles et al, 1974, Roof, 1972).

THE THREAT-COMPETITION HYPOTHESIS

Several explanations are used to account for the importance of percent black on racial attitudes. One of the more frequent is the threat of competition. The threat hypothesis is based on the social psychological argument that ". . . as the black population becomes large relative to the white population, the latter group increasingly views the black population as a threat to their employment and income. This presumably leads whites to limit competition through discriminatory behavior." (Marshall & Jiobu, 1975 450). This hypothesis implies that attitudes to integration act as an intervening link between percent black and actual integration. If so, then it might be expected that some of the same factors which lead to discrimination would also affect people's attitudes toward desegregation.

A study analyzing the actual extent of integration found an inverse relation between percent black and the levels of integration in schools (Cochran & Uhlman, 1973). Kitano asserts that as the size of a minority increases, discrimination also increases (1974, 83). Variation in levels of city intergration can be partly accounted for by the percent black in the population. In 1960, socio-economic differences between white and black populations were highly associated with city integration, and this effect was still apparent, though reduced, in 1970 (Roof et al, 1976; Van-

fossen, 1968). Factors which influence racial attitudes to desegregation are complex, and often interrelated. Most research acknowledges regional differences in these attitudes.

METHODOLOGY

Here we will examine the effect of characteristics of individuals, such as education, income, occupational status, and characteristics of counties where they live, such as percent black, median black family income, and median levels of black education on attitudes toward desegregation.

The sample comes from the University of Michigan Survey Research Center (SRC) in their 1970 election-year survey of 1398 white respondents, to assess their attitudes toward integration. Those living in counties with less than 400 black persons were excluded from the sample, because census figures are not given for education and income of the minority in such cases. About half of the respondents were randomly selected and asked the attitude question. The final working sample was 400.

The advantages of using the SRC data were 1) it contains a global measure of attitudes to desegregation; 2) this year allows for access to the most complete county-census data available in recent years; 3) 1970 is the year before disturbances over school desegregation occurred in areas outside the South. These disturbances brought the regional-culture explanation into question.

MEASUREMENT

The SRC data's most specific information is on the respondent's county-of-residence. The demographic characteristics of the county came from the 1970 Census while the socio-economic characteristics of the respondent came from the SRC data. The primary variables are 1) degree of desegregation the respondent favors; 2) the region of residence; 3) percent of black population; 4) median black family income; 5) median black male education; 6) respondent income; 7) respondent education; and 8) respondent head-of-household occupational status.

The degree of favor for desegregation was determined from the question: "Are

you in favor of desegregation, strict segregation, or something in between?" The percent black population, and median education came from the United States 1970 Census data (U.S. Census Bureau, 1973, Tables 16, 125).

Median black family income was recorded in \$1000s, at the midpoint dollar value for the category (U.S. Census, 1973, Table 128). The maximum of income level recognized was \$33,000. Education was coded as actual years' schooling completed by the respondent. The measure of the head-of-household's occupational status was measured by the Duncan Socio-Economic Index.

RESULTS

That the South is less favorable toward desegregation is shown in Table 1. If socio-economic status and demographic variables are to account for any of this attitudinal difference between the South and other regions, it must first be demonstrated that the regions differ on the status and demographic variables. Table 1 also shows the t-tests for the differences between regions on all socio-economic and demographic measures. Respondents living in the South have lower income, education, occupational prestige, and live in counties with lower median black education, median black income, and a higher percent black population than their non-South counterparts. Thus, these objective differences could account for some of the regional variation in attitudes to desegregation.

To explore these differences in attitude, a simple regression on attitude to desegregation on the region dummy variable was computed. The region effect was strong and explained 10.6 percent of the variance ($b = -.48$; $p = .001$). If these regional differences in attitude are predominantly a function of status and demographic differences between white Southerners and whites from other regions, then controlling for these variables should reduce or eliminate the region effect. Model 1 in Table 2 shows that when controls are added to the equation, the slope of the region variable is reduced to .30, and the unique variance accounted for by region is reduced to 2.1 percent or only a tenth of the total explained variance

TABLE 1: SOUTH - NONSOUTH DIFFERENCES ON ALL VARIABLES

	Non-South n=252		South n=148		t	p
	Mean	sd	Mean	sd		
Attitude toward desegregation	2.4	.7	1.9	.7	6.9	.001
Income 1000s	12.0	7.6	8.9	6.3	4.3	.001
Education, Years	12.0	3.1	10.7	3.4	3.7	.001
Occupational Prestige	44.8	24.6	37.3	23.2	3.0	.01
Percent Black	7.6	7.6	15.5	12.1	-8.0	.001
Black Education, Years	10.6	1.5	8.3	1.4	15.4	.001
Black Income 1000s	7.6	1.5	5.1	1.4	16.3	.001

Black education & income are median values by county of residence.)

TABLE 2: REGRESSION MODELS OF ATTITUDE TOWARD DESEGREGATION

N = 400

	Model One		Model Two	
	Regression	t	Regression	t
Region	-.299	3.2	-.476	1.0
Income, 1000s	.002	0.4	-.003	0.4
Education, Years	.047	3.6	.061	3.6
Occupation Prestige	.002	0.8	.01	0.4
Percent Black	-.009	2.6	-.003	0.6
Black Median Education	.076	2.7	.078	2.2
Black Median Income	-.052	1.9	-.079	2.2
<u>Interaction</u>				
Region x Occupation Prestige			.001	0.1
Region x Education			-.030	1.1
Region x Percent Black			-.007	1.0
Region x Black Education			-.001	0.0
Region x Respondent Income			.017	1.4
Region x Black Income			.066	1.1
Constant	1.367		1.417	
R squared	.209		.221	

($R^2 = .21$). Region has some direct effect on attitude to desegregation, but it is much smaller than is usually assumed by those who use explanations emphasizing regional differences. And Model 1 in Table 2 shows that respondents with higher education were more favorable to desegregation.

Several characteristics of the respondent's county-of-residence also affect attitudes to desegregation. These results are consistent with threat or competition interpreta-

tions. First, respondents living in counties with a higher percent of black population tend to oppose desegregation, and this finding coincides with the results found in many earlier studies on actual segregation (Armour, 1978).

The effects of median black income and education in the white respondent's county-of-residence on attitudes to desegregation were significant, but opposite in direction. As median black education in their counties

increases, white people tend to favor desegregation. But as black incomes increase, white people oppose desegregation. One interpretation of these findings is that black people are not perceived as a threat when they achieve higher education, but a threat may be perceived only when education becomes translated into income, and whites may respond by seeking segregation.

A second model was used to explore the effect of socio-economic and demographic variables. Interaction terms are presented in Table 2. It is important to note that none of the interactions of region with any of the main effects were statistically significant. Such factors as individual's occupational prestige, education, and income, as well as the characteristics of the black population of the respondent's county-of-residence affect Southern attitudes toward desegregation in the same way that they influence the attitudes of people from other regions. Consequently, it can be argued that the major reason the South is more segregationist is due to lower education, income, occupational prestige, and lower black income, education, and higher black population density. It is not due to regional cultural factors.

CONCLUSION

Historically, it has been a dominant theme in the United States' social science literature that the subcultural milieu of the South has played a major role in the more segregationist attitudes of its white inhabitants. Opinion polls have often documented these attitudes, but have not investigated their cause (Hyman & Sheatsley, 1964). The region-of-residence does have a significant direct effect on attitudes toward desegregation, independent of the socio-economic and demographic variables considered here. However, any suggestion that these factors are less important in interpreting regional variations than *cultural* differences is not supported here. Ninety percent of the explained variation in attitudes toward desegregation derived from these socio-economic and demographic variables, and the effects did not differ across regions.

White attitudes toward desegregation are a function of their social structural position

and the demographic characteristics of their communities-of-residence. Interpretations of regional variations in racial attitudes which focus on Southern cultural differences, and solutions which assume cultural differences oversimplify a complex problem.

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