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Luke S. Tripp

St. Cloud State University, lstripp@stcloudstate.edu

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WHAT IS THE INTERRACIAL BLACK AND WHITE TRAJECTORY IN AMERICA?

Dr. Luke Tripp

King's vision of racial equality.

Martin Luther King envisioned a beloved integrated community of interracial harmony based on racial equality and mutual respect, a society in which race would be irrelevant, and one in which we all would share the resources of the nation based on humanitarian values. Are we moving toward that goal? How can we best measure progress toward it? I will argue that King's vision of racial equality remains elusive and provide factual evidence that shows that the racial inequality gap, which has persisted over the last fifty years, has widened in key domains of social life. First, we will examine the racial gap in terms of its concrete, material aspect, and then analyze it in terms of its social psychological dimensions.

Concrete Measures of Racial Inequality: Socioeconomic Gaps

What are the racial gaps in the vital aspects of material and social life in America today?

The major factors that shape the social well being of groups are wealth, income, political power, educational resources, and opportunities for upward social mobility. We shall now consider the Black/White Racial Gaps: income, poverty, wealth, homeownership, high school completion, life expectancy, incarceration and political participation.

The Income Gap

A Pew Center Research Report (2013) shows that the socioeconomic gap between Blacks and Whites in the last 50 years has persisted and barely narrowed. Between 1967 and 2011 the Black-White income gap widened, from about \$19,000 in the late 1960s to roughly \$27,000 in 2011. Moreover, the Black unemployment rate also has consistently been about double that of Whites since the 1950s. Blacks' lower family income has negative implications for their children. Poor Black children have decreased access to public goods such as educational opportunities and school quality. It also limits their opportunities for upward social and economic mobility and reinforces the reproduction of inequality over time and across generations. The isolation of low-income Black people in the central cities have resulted a number of related problems, including chronic unemployment, increased crime, and failing schools.

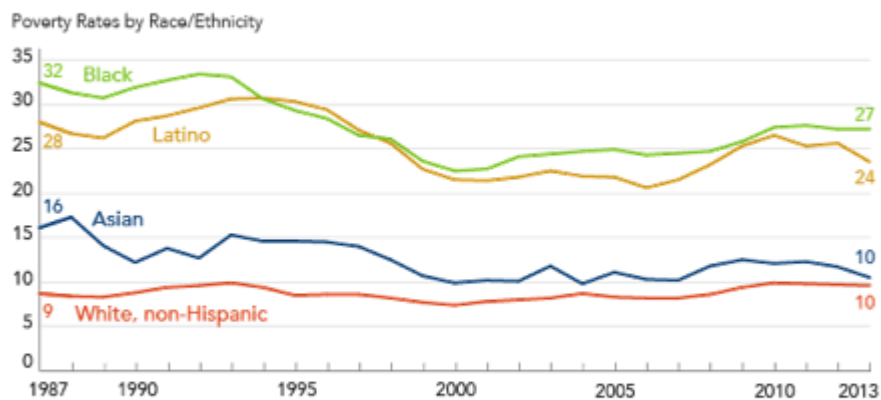
The Poverty Gap

In 2013, there was a 17 percentage-point gap between the poverty rate of Blacks (27 percent) and Whites (10 percent). This represents a 6 percentage point decrease in the

poverty gap since 1987, when the poverty rate for Blacks was much higher, at 32 percent. While the poverty rate for Whites increased slightly during this 25-year period, from 9 percent to 10 percent, the poverty rates for Blacks declined from 32 percent to 27 percent (see Figure 6). Concentrated poverty can be equated with racialized space at the urban core because these isolated low-income populations are also disproportionately populations of color.

FIGURE 6

There Is a Persistent Racial/Ethnic Gap in U.S. Poverty Rates.



Note: Data for American Indians are not shown because of sampling error, but the poverty rate for American Indians/Alaska Natives was estimated to be 27 percent in 2013.

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey. Starting in 2000, racial categories reflect those who selected only one race.

Implications of the Wealth Gap

The research report revealed that a race gap in household wealth has increased from \$75,224 in 1984 to \$84,960 in 2011. In 2012, seventy-three percent of White households owned their own homes, compared with 44 percent of Black households according to the Census Bureau’s Annual Social and Economic Supplement. In 2012, Black homeownership levels were 60 percent of White levels. The size of the White-Black homeownership gap has fluctuated since 1976, when the Black rate was 64 percent of the White rate. The Black homeownership rate in 2012 is no different from what it was in 1976, but the White rate has risen somewhat, contributing to a modest growth of the Black-White gap in homeownership rates.

A house is a transformative asset that can be passed on to the next generation. Intergenerational wealth transfers provide material advantages over those who inherit no wealth. Residence plays a central role in one’s life chances. A large body of research suggests that the neighborhood context one lives in can directly affect that person’s social, economic, or physical outcomes.

It is easier to exploit and discriminate against Blacks in the housing markets than in the labor market. Factors that contribute to the racial gap in homeownership are the following:

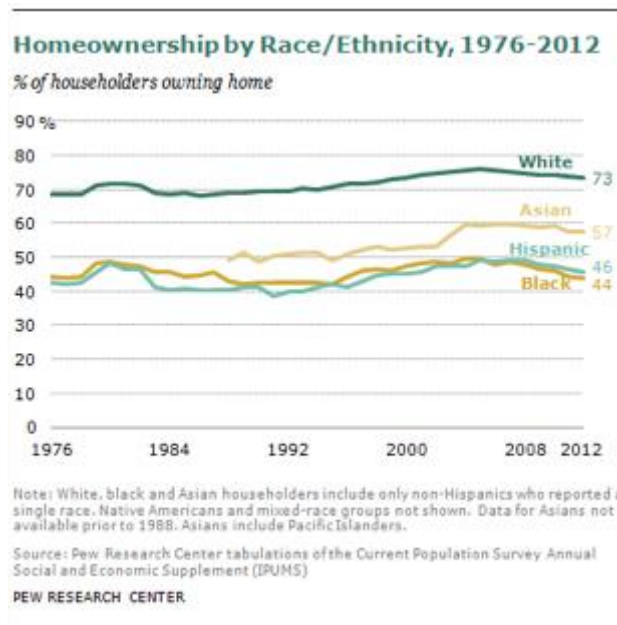
Black disadvantage

- Historically, Blacks were denied a basic form of wealth accumulation and investment through home ownership.
- Financial institutions receive more money in deposits from Black neighborhoods than they invest in them in the sum of home mortgage loans.
- Blacks face more constricted markets for employment, housing, and education than poor Whites.
- Despite the Fair Housing Act of 1968, segregation is perpetuated today through an interlocking set of individual actions, institutional practices, and governmental policies. In some urban areas the degree of Black segregation is so intense and occurs in so many dimensions simultaneously that it amounts to "hyper segregation."

White advantage

- Whites have access to broader housing choices than Blacks and they pay less for similar housing in the same neighborhood.
- Suburbs helped turn Euro-Americans into "Whites". White unity rested on Residential Segregation.
- Federal Housing Agency (FHA) officials collaborated with blockbusters in financing the flight of low-income Whites out of inner-city neighborhoods.
- The federal government provided the highways that helped pave the way out for the fleeing White middle class, and insured the cheap (FHA) mortgages that helped buy many suburban homes. At the same time, this financing was not initially available to many central city residents and people of color because of official and informal policies of redlining, racial steering, and refusing loans to residents that remained in the city
- Whites harbor strong anti-Black sentiments and are unwilling to live with more than a small percentage of Blacks in their neighborhoods. They have the ability to keep Blacks out.
- White privilege is conflated with the societal norm. The denial of White advantage at the expense of Black disadvantage protects White privilege from even being acknowledged. White privilege becomes invisible when it is disguised as the norm. For example, most Whites believe that anyone who can afford a desired house can buy it. But the racially biased mechanisms in the housing market make it much more difficult for Black buyers.

They usually have to pay a higher negotiated price, higher interest rates, higher down payment, and meet more stringent criteria to secure a loan.



Education

In the United States residential space is largely racialized. Although public school enrollment is increasingly diverse, racial segregation in public education has also been increasing since 1986. The racial composition of a public school is largely determined by the racial make up of the residents in a school district. Furthermore, most Blacks attend schools where the majority of students are poor. In their studies, Massey and Denton (1989) analyzed how racial residential segregation is consciously imposed on Blacks to deliberately isolate them from valuable socioeconomic resources.

Gary Orefield and Chungmei Lee (2007) reported that for almost two decades, American schools have been gradually resegregating. They noted that the Supreme Court struck down two voluntary desegregation plans with a majority of the Justices holding that individual students may not be assigned or denied a school assignment on the basis of race in voluntary plans even if the intent is to achieve integrated schools—and despite the fact that the locally designed plans actually fostered integration. The Court's basic conclusion, that it was unconstitutional to take race into account in order to end segregation, represented a dramatic reversal of the rulings of the civil rights era which held that race must be taken into account to the extent necessary to end racial separation.

The racial gap continues at the college level. In 2011 White adults 25 and older are significantly more likely than Blacks to have completed at least a bachelor's degree (34 percent vs. 21 percent, a 13 percentage point difference). Fifty years ago, the completion gap between Whites and Blacks was about 6 percentage points (10 percent vs. 4 percent).

Family Formation:

The Pew Report found growing disparities in key measures of family formation. Marriage rates among Whites and Blacks have declined in the past 50 years, and the Black-White difference has nearly doubled. Today about 55 percent of Whites and 31 percent of Blacks ages 18 and older are married. In 1960, 74 percent of Whites and roughly six-in-ten Blacks (61 percent) were married. The share of births to unmarried women has risen sharply for both groups; in 2011, more than seven-in-ten births to Black women were to unmarried mothers, compared with about three-in-ten births to White women (72 percent vs. 29 percent).

Mass incarceration of Black Men

Black men were more than six times as likely as White men in 2010 to be incarcerated in federal and state prisons, and local jails, the last year complete data are available. That is an increase from 1960, when Black men were five times as likely as Whites to be incarcerated.

There is a strong relationship between family formation and the very high incarceration rates of Black men and Black women. The criminal justice system operates as an anti-Black control mechanism which has a devastating effect on the structure of the Black family. The mass incarceration of Black men has marginalized them in the job market and denied them many of their civil rights.

Political Participation

In the 1960s Blacks in the South were fighting for voting rights. Since then their participation rates have been rising. Blacks nearly caught up with Whites in 2008 and surpassed them in 2012, when 67 percent of eligible Blacks cast ballots, compared with 64 percent of eligible Whites. However, the efficacy of voting for policies and candidates who promise to improve the lives of Black people is open to question. Policies and candidates operate within the current political system, which is designed to reward the wealthy at the expense of the lower social classes. Even if a candidate wishes to use her/his office to change how the system operates, it is highly unlikely that she/he will be able to do it. The reasons are many.

- The system is run by a wealthy political elite who have a vested interest in it. They are not going to let the lower socioeconomic classes dismantle it.
- The political structure was designed to ensure that the wealthy class will write policy.
- The legislative process, which appears democratic, is dominated by the corporate elite which sets the agenda to protect its privilege covers its incestuous collusion with corrupt politicians.
- The political system has enough legitimacy to defend itself against radical attacks.
- The political system has many ways to marginalize dissident political critics.

Summary of socioeconomic data

These socioeconomic data reveal that Blacks are subject to a process of cumulative disadvantages in their social trajectories and they experience blocked social mobility. They also show that Blacks' material well being is much lower than and less secure than that of Whites'. The economic factors of wealth and income are prime determinants of social well being. There is abundant empirical evidence that the social environment is trending towards deepening inequality (income, wealth, educational opportunity, incarceration, housing loans, and residential space, and political influence) and the structural forms of racial inequality are deeply embedded in the social order and reflected in all its political, economic, and social domains. Race is a fundamental organizing principle of inequality and it continues to be a salient predictor of social well being. Enduring forms of racism are sustained by attitudes, policies, practices.

Psychological Measures of Racial Inequality: Gaps

Do Blacks and Whites share the same lens to view social reality? To what extent do their ideologies coincide? Pew Center Research Report found these racial gaps in perceptions of bias treatment against Blacks.

- There is a large gap between Blacks' and Whites' perception in dealing with the police. Seventy percent of Blacks as compared with 37 percent of Whites believe that Blacks in their community are treated less fairly than Whites in dealing with the police.
- There is a large gap between Blacks' and Whites' perception in the courts. Sixty-eight percent of Blacks as compared with 27 percent of Whites believe that Blacks in their community are treated less fairly than Whites in the courts. Blacks' negative view of the criminal justice system explains the rise of the the Black Lives Matter movement

against the anti-Black practices of police officers and the mass incarceration of Black people.

- There is a large gap between Blacks' and Whites' perception equality of public schools. Fifty-one percent of Blacks as compared with 15 percent of Whites believe that Blacks in their community are treated less fairly than Whites in public schools.
- There is a large gap between Blacks' perception of fairness at the workplace. Fifty-four percent of Blacks as compared with 16 percent of Whites believe that Blacks in their community are treated less fairly than Whites at the workplace.
- There is a large gap between Blacks' perception of fairness in getting health care. Forty-seven percent of Blacks as compared with 14 percent of Whites believe that Blacks in their community are treated less fairly than Whites in getting healthcare.
- There is a large gap between Blacks' and Whites' beliefs about progress toward racial equality. When asked how much progress toward Martin Luther King's dream of racial equality do you think the U.S. has made over the last 50 years? Forty-eight percent of Whites responded "A lot" as compared with 32 percent of Blacks.
- How much more needs to be done in order to achieve racial equality? Forty-four percent of Whites responded "A lot" as compared with 79 percent of Blacks.

Both Blacks and Whites believe that the situation for Blacks have gotten worse in the last several years. Today, only about one-in-four African Americans (26 percent) say the situation of Black people in this country is better now than it was five years ago, down sharply from the 39 percent who said the same in a 2009 Pew Research Center survey. Among Whites, the share that sees improvement in situation of Blacks also fell, from 49 percent to 35percent, in the last four years.

Furthermore, only 22 percent of Blacks who have attended at least some college say the situation of Black people in this country is better today than it was five years ago. Among those with a high school education or less, roughly one-third say things are better. This rather small gap (7 percent) of pessimism between the Black social classes suggest that the socioeconomic trends have tended affect Blacks in different social classes in the same way.

Trend toward better interracial social interactions

Both Blacks and whites tend to agree that social interactions at the individual level are positive or neutral. This may be partly the effect of the hegemony of the ideology of colorblindness: the main stream idea that we ought to behave as though we do not have racial identities. In addition, media commercials, television shows, videos, and movies often portray Blacks and whites interacting as friends and coworkers. These images foster the idea that race relations are fairly good. Furthermore, studies show a long trend of increasing interracial dating and marriage between Blacks and whites. Thus these empirical facts under gird the perception and feeling that individual level social relations are improving. Consequently, the overall picture of race relations is complex, with contradictory elements. Whites are taught not to see embedded forms of racial oppression in the culture. They tend to discount racial barriers to opportunity by pointing to the existence of a Black Middle class and by downplaying White hostility towards Blacks by emphasizing the rising number of interracial marriages and friendships.

Silences and denials of white privilege are political tools used to keep us thinking about racial equality as a problem of Black disadvantage or mistreatment rather than as a problem of white advantage at the expense of Black oppression. Discussion of the latter is made taboo because it challenges the myth of a supposed meritocratic system, based on fairness. Thus discourse about white privilege is suppressed or avoided.

Summary of social psychological data

These data show that Blacks' perceptions of the state of race relations is more negative than those of Whites. There is a large gap between between Blacks' and whites' perceptions of the fairness of treatment of Blacks in important spheres of social life. This perceptual difference probably reflects the persistent gaps between the material well being of the races. The perceptual difference is largely at the structural level: schools, the criminal justice system, employment, and healthcare. These social domains are of most concern to Blacks because they are directly related to their objective material circumstances. They help explain why Blacks have strong negative attitudes toward the social system and how it works, while whites tend to hold much less critical views of the status quo.

Whites are far less aware of and sensitive to the harsh realities of ordinary Black life. Because of residential segregation whites tend to have few informal personal interactions with Blacks as neighbors. Their residential exclusiveness and ideology of meritocracy as well as their belief that the system is basically fair blinds them to the reality of White supremacy. Whites' belief in the fairness of the system implies that they think that the existing socio-economic and political

arrangements are legitimate and that Black peoples' lower standard of living must be caused by Blacks' deficits in ability, efforts, and culture, but not by racism. It seems safe to deduce that Whites tend to view the system more favorably than Blacks because they benefit more from it.

Conclusion

American society is not moving toward Martin Luther King's vision of racial equality. Real sustainable racial progress requires the closing of the economic and political power gap between Blacks and Whites. Unfortunately, the long term trend indicate that the economic racial gap is increasing and that poor Blacks who comprise 28 percent on the Black community are becoming more marginalized and isolated. Sustainable racial progress has less to do with how well individual Blacks and Whites get along with each other; rather it has more to do with closing the material gaps that are related to Blacks' concrete opportunities for social, economic, and political power.

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