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# ETHNICITY AND SOCIOECONOMIC STATUS AS DETERMINANTS OF SOCIAL PARTICIPATION: A TEST OF THE INTERACTION HYPOTHESIS<sup>1</sup>

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**T**HE BURGEONING RESEARCH IN RECENT YEARS ON PARTICIPATION IN voluntary associations has led to a generally consistent, cumulative literature. From these studies we now know a great deal about who affiliates with what kind of organizations and why. As with most areas of inquiry, however, certain issues remain unresolved. With respect to minority participation, an important and unanswered question has been: Do black Americans have a higher or lower rate of social participation than their white counterparts? Although seemingly a simple question to answer, contradictory findings have led to considerable, and sometimes heated, debate which has lasted for many years. Using a national probability sample, this note will answer the question and in so doing will show why this question has posed such a problem for researchers.

Most of the early community studies reported blacks as having a higher social participation rate than whites (cf. Lundberg *et al.*, 1934; Mayo, 1950; Babchuk and Thompson, 1962). Explanations for this finding have generally been of two sorts. It has been suggested that members of minority groups belong to voluntary associations to meet various psychological and social needs for association which cannot be satisfied through participation in the larger society (cf. Myrdal, 1944; Kardiner, 1959; Babchuk and Thompson, 1962; Orum, 1966). The second explanation, not mutually exclusive of the first, suggests that an oppressed people respond to discrimination by recognizing their common plight and organizing to change their situation (cf. Myrdal, 1944; Lane, 1959; Olsen, 1900; Verba and Nie, 1972). The former has been referred to as compensatory and the latter as ethnic community theory.

At least one early community study (Drake and Cayton, 1945) reported that lower-status blacks rarely participate in voluntary associa-

<sup>1</sup> The findings presented in this note are part of a larger study supported by a National Science Foundation Grant (GS-36754X). Clyde Z. Nunn is the principal investigator for the larger study and the co-investigators are Harry J. Crockett, Jr. and J. Allen Williams, Jr. The data were collected by Response Analysis of Princeton, New Jersey.

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tions. However, it was a widely accepted paper by Wright and Hyman (1958), based upon national samples, which gave currency to the proposition that whites have a higher social participation rate than blacks. Interpretations, often referred to as isolation theory, include the ideas that blacks participate less because they lack necessary organizational skills, are unaware of the potential benefits of belonging to associations, fear reprisal for becoming socially or politically active, are assisted by welfare programs thus reducing the need for voluntary organizations, and are barred from membership in certain organizations because of their race (cf. Handlin, 1959; Ross and Wheeler, 1967). Babchuk and Thompson (1962) suggested an alternative explanation. They first pointed out that a positive association between socioeconomic status (SES) and affiliation with organizations had been established. Consequently, since blacks were over-represented in the lower social strata and since Wright and Hyman failed to control for SES, this could have biased the comparison. Babchuk and Thompson (1962:647) then went on to suggest that "Negroes are more likely to be affiliated with formal voluntary associations than whites, *especially at the lower-class level*" (emphasis added). In other words, they suggested an interaction between socioeconomic status and ethnicity on social participation.

Recently, a number of studies in American cities have found that blacks have a higher rate of social participation than whites *after* controlling for SES (cf. Orum, 1966; Olsen, 1970; Williams *et al.*, 1973; Antunes and Gaitz, 1975; London, 1975). This would seem to provide rather convincing evidence of the generalizability of the finding, but the only recent study using national samples, Hyman and Wright's (1971) replication of their earlier research, once again, with one exception, shows whites having a higher social participation rate than blacks.<sup>2</sup> The one exception, 1962 data representing the most recent among their samples, shows no significant difference between whites and blacks. The failure of this study to control for SES could account for its disparate findings. An alternative explanation would be that the community studies are not representative of the national pattern. The latter thesis was given apparent support when Clemente and Sauer (1975) controlled for SES and found no difference between black and white participation rates in their Milwaukee study. These investigators specifically raised this possibility by questioning the generalizability of the finding reported by Williams *et al.*, (1973), and, by extension, the other community studies cited above.

In response to Clemente and Sauer, Williams *et al.* (1975) restated and elaborated on the interaction hypothesis. They suggested that compensatory and ethnic community theories do not apply to higher-status members of minority groups. These persons are not characteristic of an oppressed minority and hence have less need to compensate for lack of

<sup>2</sup> It should be mentioned, however, that another national study (Verba and Nie, 1972) found that blacks tend to be more politically active than whites, after controlling for socioeconomic status.

association restricted or denied them in the larger society or to participate in instrumental organizations designed to overcome problems of discrimination. Thus, from this perspective parity in affiliation rates would be expected between higher-status members of minority and majority groups alike. Lower-status members of minority groups, however, should participate more than their SES counterparts in the majority. In the United States, lower-status whites (with the exception of minority-group persons classified as white, e.g., Mexican Americans) cannot blame ethnic discrimination for their situation and they do not have an ethnic community to turn to for compensation.

The data used for the present study allow us to test for an interaction between ethnicity and SES in relation to social participation at the national level.

#### SAMPLING, RESEARCH DESIGN, ANALYTIC METHOD

After pretesting the interview schedule, trained interviewers obtained information from a probability sample of persons age eighteen and older residing in the coterminous United States. From the occupied and eligible households drawn for the sample, 3,546 successful interviews were completed, yielding a response rate of 70 percent. The refusal rate is 17 percent with the other non-completions stemming primarily from designated respondents not being home after four visits. The data were collected in 1973.

For the present study racial or ethnic groups other than black or Anglo, e.g., Asian, Mexican, and native Americans, were deleted. Incomplete information on some of the variables to be used in the analysis resulted in the elimination of additional cases (about 4 percent from each group) leaving 3,084 Anglos and 319 blacks.

Respondents were shown a card listing different types of voluntary associations and were asked, "Which of these types of organizations, if any, do you belong to?" Recall was aided by providing the respondent with examples of different types of associations. For example, group names such as Lions, Masons, Eastern Star, and Rotary were mentioned in relation to fraternal/service organizations. Predominantly black organizations were mentioned among the examples. Specifically mentioned general categories are: church-related, job-related, recreational, fraternal/service, and civic/political associations. In addition, respondents were asked if they belonged to any other organizations not previously cited. Church membership is not counted as a voluntary association.

To reduce the possibility of spurious associations between ethnicity and social participation certain variables believed to affect affiliation independently were introduced as controls. These are gender, age, and whether the respondent is a household head. Education is used as a measure of socioeconomic status. Occupational prestige, the other most

commonly used index of SES, was not used because its inclusion would have forced the elimination of a number of cases, e.g., the retired, unemployed, those never gainfully employed.

Multiple classification analysis (cf. Andrews *et al.*, 1973; Miller and Erickson, 1974) was used to examine ethnic differences in social participation within educational categories while controlling for the other variables in the analysis.

#### FINDINGS

The interaction hypothesis is that lower-status blacks will have a higher social participation rate than lower-status Anglos, but there will be no appreciable black-Anglo difference among higher-status persons.

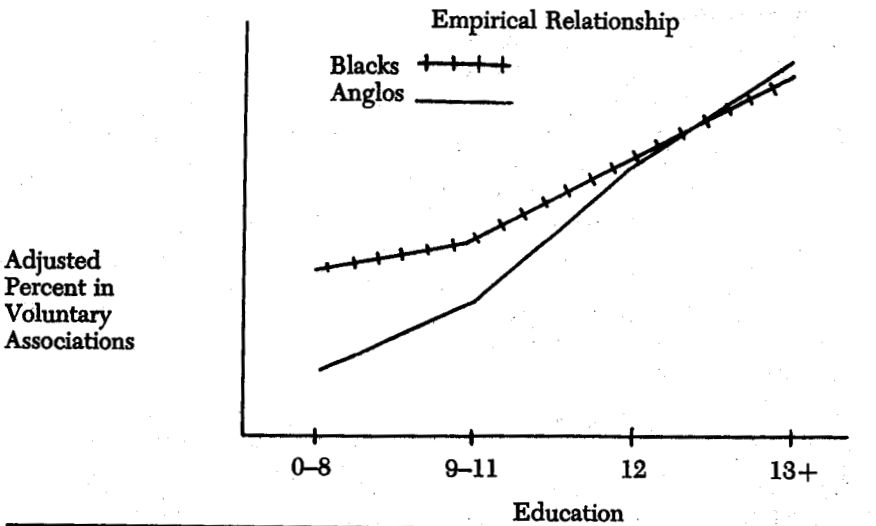
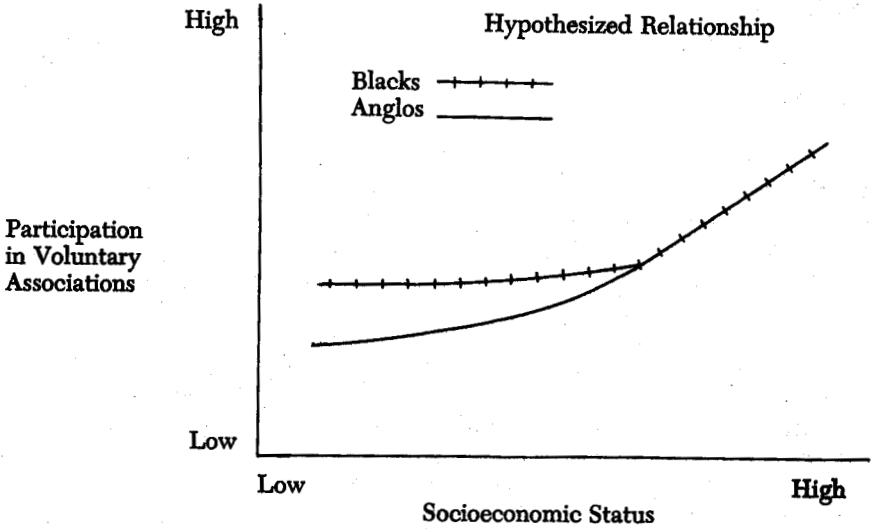
The first part of Figure 1 shows the hypothesized model of the relationship between ethnicity and SES in reference to social participation as proposed by Williams *et al.* (1975). The second part, using what is perhaps the least ambiguous measure of participation—whether the respondent belongs to one or more organizations—shows the empirical relationship found in the present study. Not only is the interaction between ethnicity and education statistically significant, but it can be seen that the empirical finding closely matches the hypothesized model derived from compensatory and ethnic community theories.<sup>3</sup>

Table 1 shows the specific findings both for the simple measure of belonging to one or more associations and for the mean number of different types of organizations the respondent belongs to. For both measures of the dependent variable, blacks have a higher rate of participation than Anglos among persons with none to eight and nine to eleven years of education. Among high school graduates and those finishing one or more years of college, there is almost no difference in participation between the two populations.

The findings presented in this research note provide strong support for the interaction hypothesis. On the basis of a single survey, we do not know whether the interaction between ethnicity and socioeconomic status on social participation is recent or of long standing. However, on the basis of the many community studies, spanning several decades, it seems likely that this relationship has existed for some time. At any rate, the results of this study support compensatory and ethnic community theories as currently articulated and suggest that they are generalizable to the national level.

<sup>3</sup> The hypothesized difference in social participation by ethnicity among persons with low socioeconomic status was tested by creating a dummy variable contrasting blacks and Anglos with less than 12 years of education. After controlling for the additive effects of education, ethnicity, age, sex, and whether the respondent is a household head in a regression analysis, the difference between blacks and Anglos with lower educational attainment is statistically significant ( $P < .05$ ). No significant interactions were found among the other variables in the analysis.

FIGURE 1  
Hypothesized and Empirical Relationships Between Social Participation and Socioeconomic Status for Black Versus Anglo Americans<sup>a</sup>



<sup>a</sup> The hypothesized model is taken from Williams *et al.*, (1975:120)

TABLE 1  
 Ethnicity by Social Participation within Educational Categories  
 after Covariance Adjustment<sup>a</sup>

Education	Anglo American Social Participation			Black American Social Participation		
	Number	Adjusted Percent <sup>b</sup>	Adjusted Mean <sup>c</sup>	Number	Adjusted Percent <sup>b</sup>	Adjusted Mean <sup>c</sup>
College (13 or more years)	1072	77.6	1.58	66	76.2	1.51
High School Graduates (12 years)	992	63.7	1.02	85	65.2	.99
Some High School (9-11 years)	530	46.9	.69	76	54.5	.71
Grade School (0-8 years)	490	38.2	.49	92	50.9	.58

<sup>a</sup> Percents and means are adjusted by controlling for age, gender, and whether respondent is a household head.

<sup>b</sup> Percents belonging to one or more voluntary associations.

<sup>c</sup> Mean number of different types of voluntary associations respondents belong to.

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