“Some of my best friends are ...”:
Interracial Friendships, Class, and Segregation in America

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Abstract. Ties among dissimilar persons, when they act as social bridges, play a vital role in
diverse societies, expanding identities, opening insular communities of interest, containing inter-
group conflicts, and reducing inequalities. Using a phone survey of 29 communities matched
with census data, this study analyzes correlates of interracial friendships for the four major
racial/ethnic groups in the U.S. using single and multi-level path models. Those who report ties
to other races tend to be “joiners,” in the broad sense: Involvement in nonreligious groups,
socializing with co-workers, and having more friends are robust predictors for all racial groups,
and these are strongly associated with higher income and education. But macro-level opportunity
for contact (metro-level racial make-up) dominates friendship isolation patterns for whites,
whereas associations and other “substructures” are most important for minorities. Hispanic and
Asian patterns parallel those of nonimmigrant blacks in the importance of joining, but sharing
neighborhoods with whites remains an important—and apparently unique—social marker for
blacks.
Introduction

On individual as well as collective levels, inter-group ties—informal personal networks, formal associations, and other connections among socially dissimilar persons or groups—are uniquely important in social life as well as social theory. This is especially true when such ties function as *bridges*, enabling meaningful exchanges across social divides. By connecting social actors with distinct traits, such ties often constitute bridges across roles, status differences, material and symbolic interests, space, norms, and even worldviews. Bridging ties are particularly crucial where they help bind diverse societies, expanding social and civic identities, opening up insular communities of interest, containing ethnic and other inter-group conflicts, and reducing status inequalities, for example by widening access to valuable information and conferring endorsements. As exceptions to the rule of homophily in social relations, ties among birds of different feathers are important in public as well as private life and in multiple dimensions—social, economic, and political.

Unfortunately, given the long-standing importance of the color line in American life, prior research has shown interracial ties to be relatively uncommon in the close friendships of many Americans (Marsden 1988), friendships through which important material exchanges, everyday expressive support, and attitudinal influence operate (Jackson 1977). Friendships between whites and blacks have risen steadily for the past generation (Thernstrom and Thernstrom 1997), for example, but remain rarer, and in many cases more shallow, than one might expect in an increasingly diverse society. Two decades ago, Marsden (1987) found that only 8% of Americans with networks of size two or more reported discussing “important matters” with a person of another race—less than one-seventh the share that population sizes alone would predict if relationship choices were random. Strikingly, only 1% of whites reported
having a black confidant at that level. Racial minorities are more likely to report having white friends (than whites are to report the inverse), including those who are confidants, but also at lower rates than random choice would predict. Popular discussions of race in America often center on interpersonal relations—which relate so closely to the respect, security, and feelings of mutuality we all crave—and not just statistical indices of inequality or codified rights.

Despite the importance of interracial ties, to date, research has provided limited views of the kinds of people who have them and of how opportunities to form them are structured. Using census data matched to a restricted-use version of the Social Capital Community Benchmark Survey (SCCBS), a uniquely detailed survey of 29 local areas (hereafter, “communities”) in the United States that range widely in racial make-up and cover all major regions of the country, this study analyzes the factors associated with a specific type of inter-group tie: Interracial friendships. The study tests hypotheses linked to macrostructural, group assimilation, and group threat theories. My focus is on majority-minority ties, i.e., the analysis considers whites’ friendship ties to members of minority out-groups (black, Hispanic, and Asian) and those groups’ ties to whites, not minority-to-minority ties. More specifically, the study analyzes racial exposure (or isolation) in friendships, in answer to the survey question, “Do you have a personal friend who is [white, black, Hispanic, Asian]?”, not the extent of bridging in each person’s network (how many friends or the content of the friendships). This research complements recent studies of social trust and other measures of social capital in racially diverse settings (Alesina and La Ferrara 2002; Putnam 2000, 2003), as well as a wide array of studies focused on the implications of increased diversity for America’s communities, schools, workplaces, associations, and other institutions.

The contributions of this study are three-fold, reflecting specific limitations of earlier
research. First, drawing primarily on the General Social Survey, most studies of diversity in Americans’ personal relations that were conducted over the past two decades have focused on effects of individual traits—in network parlance, traits of “ego” in ego-centric networks—and the kinship, neighborhood, and other sources of personal ties (see, e.g. Marsden 1987, 1988, 1990) rather than traits of the local context in which most work, play, worship, and other face-to-face elements of everyday life are conducted, in which ethnic subcultures, segregated racial ghettos, and pluralist ties can emerge (Fischer 1982).

Second, studies that have explored effects of local context on inter-group ties and other network traits have thus far been limited to a single city or metro area, for example Detroit (Fischer 1977; Laumann 1973; Verbrugge 1973; Welch et al. 2001), Northern California (Fischer 1982), and Philadelphia (Yancey, Erickson and Leon 1985). This multi-city, multi-region study affords substantial variation across local contexts, allows one to distinguish variation within communities from variation across them (using multi-level models), and allows one to benchmark local indicators against those for a national sample in the same survey.

Third and finally, socio-economic status, life stage, and other individual factors associated with forming and sustaining interracial ties may operate through direct effects or more indirectly, such as by shaping participation in civic, religious, or other associations, habits of work-based socializing, or other aspects of social life, and also by determining what kinds of neighborhoods we live in. Notably, the links among some of these factors differ dramatically across racial groups: More affluent whites are less likely than other whites to live in racially integrated neighborhoods, for example, while racial minorities generally show the opposite pattern in terms of residential integration with whites (Alba and Nee 2003; Clark and Blue 2004). Yet such path effects have not been directly analyzed to date. This study employs one and two-
level path models to do so.

In the next section, I briefly outline scholarly and popular interest in social bridges along with the significance of race bridging, in particular, for changing societies. Following that context are: three bodies of theory from which I develop alternative hypotheses about correlates of interracial ties; data and methods; results; and a discussion of the findings and their implications.

**Why do social bridges matter?**

Social bridges resting on inter-group ties have important consequences for individuals and for society, for social equality as well as for democracy. Among social scientists, sociologists have shown a particularly long interest in inter-group ties, most explicitly in such classics as Laumann’s (1973) study of social differentiation and social distance in the personal networks of city dwellers and Granovetter’s (1973) essay on the value of acquaintanceships and other “weak” ties, which are more likely than strong ties to cross group boundaries. Seminal analyses of economic and social status include Blau’s study of cross-cutting social circles (Blau 1977; Blau and Schwartz 1984), as well as analyses of status attainment that emphasize the benefits of diverse social contacts for network range and function (Granovetter 1974; review in Lin 1999). Further back, Durkheim’s (1893) theorizing about cross-cutting ties in the context of “mechanical solidarity,” and Simmel’s (1923) work on multiple identities, intersections, and “webs” of group affiliation, helped define modern life in complex societies. They also foreshadowed today’s fascination with far-flung networks (including the internet), lifestyle niches, and group boundaries. Over the past generation, sociological analyses evolved from Laumann’s (1973) study of social distance among subgroups of white men, which examined ties that crossed national ancestry and religious lines, to contemporary studies across the fuller spectrum of racial identity and gender lines in America.
More than any other influence, though, it is political scientist Robert Putnam’s work on social capital that has turned a scholarly concern for social bridges into something of a public debate in recent years, encouraged attention to the multiple benefits of such ties (rather than the more specialized foci traditionally applied in subfields of social science), and stirred an activist interest in creating more bridging ties—and, through them, more “bridging social capital” (Putnam 2000; Briggs 1997; Gittell and Vidal 1998; Woolcock 1998). In a comparative analysis of social capital in eight democracies, Putnam and collaborators offer a pointed case for bridging:

In some respects, the growing ethnic heterogeneity of the established democracies, as well as the nativist backlash that has often accompanied this change, is the most striking commonality among [these societies]. It is true … that without the natural restraints imposed by members’ crosscutting alliances and diverse perspectives, tightly knit and homogeneous groups can rather easily combine for sinister ends. In other words, bonding without bridging equals Bosnia. (Putnam and Goss 2002, pp.11-12)

McPherson et al. (2001, p.415), summarizing the consequences of forces that favor bonding over bridging, argue that “homophily limits people’s social worlds in a way that has powerful implications for the information they receive, the attitudes they form, and the interactions they experience.” But networks, schools, workplaces, and formal associations (civic clubs, faith institutions, etc.) that “bond” along one dimension of social identity (socio-economic status, for example) can “bridge” on others (race and gender, say). Such cross-cutting ties derive their special significance from the fact that they bond on the social trait shared by the linked actors while bridging their social differences. Cross-cutting ties are essential to the development of broader identities and communities of interest (Blau and Schwartz 1984; Briggs 2004; Horton 1995; Varshney 2002). These are the social foundations of power sharing, without which the formal machinery of democratic government—competitive elections, rule of law, freedom of
assembly and of the press, and more—tends to falter around the world (Lipset 1994). This is particularly true where the reciprocal influences of out-group exclusion and visible material inequalities create a vicious, conflict-promoting cycle (Blau and Schwartz 1984). The absence of bridging ties undermines the reciprocity and learning crucial to democratic behavior (Putnam 2000), as well as the formation of bridging coalitions essential for significant political change (Gittell and Vidal 1998; Loury 2001; Massey and Denton 1993; Warren, Saegert, and Thompson 2001; Wilson 1999).

Ties that meaningfully bridge social boundaries can also reduce inequality directly, by improving access by lower status out-groups to information, vouching (recommendations and other social endorsements), preparation, mentoring, and other keys to economic access and attainment (Dickens 1999; Lin 1999)—at least when one’s social contacts are willing to help (Smith 2005). In the U.S context, research confirms the particular importance of bridging ties for poor minorities in inner cities (Briggs 1998; Crain and Wells 1994; Dominguez and Watkins 2003; Harrison and Weiss 1998; Johnson, Bienenstock, and Farrell 2000).

As previewed above, the rate of reported interracial friendships has increased sharply in the past generation, at least between whites and blacks (the two groups longest surveyed). From 1975 to 1994, for example, the percentage of whites reporting having a “good friend” who was black—someone with whom the respondent would “get together at least once per month” and “keep in close touch with”—rose from 9% to 73%, while the share of blacks reporting such friendship bridges rose from 21% to 78% (Thernstrom and Thernstrom 1997). All such measures of friendship are imperfect, however, and some respondents appear to be claiming mainly that they are “friendly toward” members of other races (Smith 1999).

**Theoretical Background**

Several strands of social theory provide testable claims about community context and
other sources of variation in interracial friendship: *structural theories* of social association and *homophily* studies, in particular, which respectively emphasize opportunity for contact and preferences for in-group over out-group relations; *group assimilation theory*, which considers how immigrant minority groups might pursue a place in, and be accepted by, the receiving society (often contrasting immigrant Hispanics and Asians with nonimmigrant blacks); and *group threat theory*, which emphasizes the effects of relative group size on inter-group dynamics, including avoidance and conflict.

**Structural theory and homophily**

*Structural theories of association.* Central to social-structural theories of association, including friendship choices, is the notion that both “supply-side” and “demand-side” factors matter, i.e. that choices to associate are based both on opportunities for meaningful social contact and individual preferences (Blau 1977; Marsden 1990), which vary across the life course. A large empirical literature confirms the importance of population make-up, for example, for the structure of interpersonal relations, including interracial marriage, friendships, and crime (Blau and Schwartz 1984; Blum 1985; Marsden 1990; South and Messner 1986). On this, the supply side, most studies have analyzed effects of *macrostructures*, such as group populations in a metropolitan area or nation, not what Blau (1977) termed *substructures*—the family, workplace, school, neighborhood, and voluntary associations in which most daily life is conducted, where each individual’s attention is focused on accessible contacts. Using the General Social Survey (GSS), a nationally representative sample with information on persons with whom respondents had “discussed important matters” in the six months prior to the interview, Marsden (1990) found that individuals were more likely to identify members of other racial groups in these core networks if the networks were less kin-based (had a lower proportion of family members) and more coworker-based. No association was found between interracial ties and proportion neighbor
or group (voluntary association) member.

What, then, is the racial composition of the everyday substructures in which Americans have interpersonal contacts? Most workplaces are somewhat racially mixed (Estlund 2003), certainly more so than most public schools (Clotfelter 2004; Frankenberg, Lee and Orfield 2003), residential neighborhoods (Logan 2003), secular voluntary associations (McPherson et al. 2001), or religious institutions (Jackson 1977; Putnam 2000). But occupational and other structures can promote racial segregation within the workplace. In a study of social relations in California’s Silicon Valley, for example, Fernandez and Nichols (2002) found that Hispanic Americans often worked in the same firms with Asian and European Americans—but usually as janitors and gardeners. In general, substructures that are majority-white provide more opportunities for racial minorities to interact with whites than vice-versa. The opposite is true of substructures, such as central-city public schools and many central-city neighborhoods, that have become majority-minority over the past few decades.

Homophily. Whatever the pool of potential contacts, the observation that bridging or pluralism is the exception, rather than the rule, in social relations is literally age old. The folk wisdom that “birds of a feather flock together”—homophily, in the label employed first by Lazarsfeld and Merton (1954)—has been traced back at least as far as the ancient Greeks in the Western tradition, and the social-psychological attractions of similarity have been confirmed in countless studies. This finding holds most powerfully for race/ethnicity, followed by class status and religion, but also for gender, age, functional role (e.g., in an organization), behavior patterns, and even attitudes, beliefs, and aspirations (review in McPherson et al. 2001). The degree to which social relations are structured along any given dimension, e.g., by religious affiliation, appears to vary significantly across societies. Moreover, while homophily shapes many types of
relationships, it appears to act more powerfully on close or strong ties, including marriage and friendships, than on acquaintanceships or other “weak” ties (Marsden 1988). Granovetter’s (1973) classic essay on “the strength of weak ties” used this to make a widely cited case for the sources and consequences of social bridging. Finally, the limited available evidence on network change over time suggests that bonding ties are not only more likely to form than bridging ties but less likely to fade as well (McPherson et al. 2001).

Using the GSS, Marsden (1987) found that being young, having a larger network, and living in larger cities were also associated with having more racially diverse contacts. In addition, racial minorities were more likely than whites to have ties to members of out-groups. In general, white non-Hispanics (Anglos) have the most racially homogeneous networks of any Americans. African-Americans and Hispanics’ networks show moderate levels of homogeneity, and Asian Americans and smaller ethnic groups tend to report networks dominated by the majority racial group (Marsden 1987; McPherson, Miller, and Smith-Lovin 2001). Higher-SES people tend to have larger networks and be more organizationally active (Putnam 2000), but it is unclear whether these “returns to status” correlate with interracial ties, or link to one another in the same ways, for all racial groups.

*Integrating opportunity structure and preferences (homophily).* The findings outlined above suggest three keys to the formation of the rather exceptional (non-homophilous) ties that are interracial. The first is “baseline” opportunity for contact (baseline homophily), measured by population or pool sizes, and its significance is clearest in the personal networks of majority-group members. One reason the average white American’s social ties are mostly to other whites is that most whites live, work, worship, play, and mobilize politically in majority-white milieus. But opportunity for contact should also vary for minorities according to the size of the pool of
out-group contacts available. Moreover, the specific substructures in which an individual participates also contribute to baseline opportunity, suggesting the first and most basic hypotheses:

*Hypothesis 1, Opportunity for contact (macro structure):* Interracial exposure in friendships will vary directly with the size of the out-group pool available in a local community.

*Hypothesis 2, Opportunity for contact (substructure):* Interracial exposure in friendships will be more strongly associated with the workplace and with participation in secular voluntary associations than with participation in religious institutions. Participation in associations is positively correlated with SES.

The second factor—*in-breeding homophily,* in the shorthand—is most evident in minority-group networks. In-breeding helps explain the deviation of network composition from what group population sizes alone would predict if social ties were chosen at random (McPherson, Miller, and Smith-Lovin 2001; Quillian and Campbell 2003). Even in majority-white milieus, racial minorities tend to report high proportions of co-ethnics in their non-kin networks (Baerveldt et al. 2004; Tatum 1987, 1999). Where relational preferences are concerned, the powerful attraction of co-ethnics reflects a variety of shared traits, such as language (or code or dialect), regional or national origin, tastes and normative disposition, physical appearance (physiognomy and dress), and more (Laumann 1973; Blau and Schwartz 1984). Out-breeding, or the tendency toward ties to out-groups, lacking historical endowments of such powerful social glue, hinges on discovering or creating such traits as shared or potentially shared interests, activities, tastes, and attitudes.

Racial minorities appear especially likely to seek social support from coethnics, a point psychologist Beverly Tatum captures vividly in the title of her book, *Why Are All the Black Kids*
Sitting Together in the Cafeteria? (1999; and see Tatum 1987). Likewise, non-Dutch pupils in Dutch schools report much higher levels of social support in their intraethnic friendships than native Dutch pupils do in theirs, higher too than either group reports in their *inter*-group friendships (Baerveldt et al. 2004). On the other hand, the minority *immigrant* experience can be very isolating. As Menjívar (2000) shows in an ethnographic study of the networks of less skilled Salvadoran immigrants, this isolation may reflect strains of adjustment that belie the notion that immigrants universally enjoy numerous supportive ties to coethnics. In the aggregate, though, minority groups show strong in-breeding, suggesting this hypothesis linking pool sizes to “active choice” of friends:

*Hypothesis 3, In-breeding:* A given racial group’s friendship exposure to out-groups will be more limited, as a function of pool sizes, where the in-group makes up a relatively small share of the local community.

A third and final factor shaping the formation of bridging ties is *others’* preferences, which shape our own opportunities and preferences. While I do not model this directly in the analysis that follows, it is worth underlining that this third factor includes preferences by individual others (potential contacts) but also agency by groups to which they belong. Group agency can include pressure to associate within one’s own group, outward pressure from one’s own group aimed selectively at out-groups deemed desirable (for status advancement, historical similarity, or other reasons), exclusionary pressure by out-groups, or all of the above. Historical cross-group hostility (animus), a strong norm of cultural and religious preservation, perceived economic threat or opportunity (on which more below), political conflicts or polarizing episodes, and other factors may all contribute to this kind of group agency for or against inter-group ties.

The racial segregation of *neighborhoods*, the final substructure of interest, may interact
perniciously with all three factors favoring bonding over bridging, i.e., by limiting opportunity for cross-group contact, increasing in-group salience by adding territorial differences to other cross-group differences, perpetuating negative stereotypes, and more. But increasingly, neighbors tend to be casual contacts rather than socially significant ties (Wellman and Leighton 1979; Wellman 1996), and this is especially true where neighborhoods are heterogeneous (in race, religion, and other dimensions) and relatively transient (Gans 1967; Greenbaum and Greenbaum 1985; Sampson 1988; Sampson et al. 1997). Compounding this, lower travel and communication costs have reduced the effort required to maintain relationships at a distance—and, through on-line community, have expanded the scale and variety of potential relationships, “liberating” community from traditional anchors (Wellman 2001).

The extra-local character of strong ties, in particular, characterizes inner cities as well as suburbs, and of mostly minority as well as predominantly white areas, though some variation has been observed. Among adults, only the ties of the poor, physically isolated, and linguistically isolated tend to be highly localized (Briggs 1998; Fischer 1982). Also, urban blacks have somewhat more localized support ties than do whites (Lee and Campbell 1999; Oliver 1988), and though no direct data on trends are available, the social worlds of poor blacks living in areas of ghetto poverty may have become more socially and geographically insular—“ghetto-bound,” to use an older label (Wellman 1971)—as these areas transformed socially and economically (Fernandez and Harris 1992; Pedder 1991; Smith 2005; Wilson 1987). Etzioni’s (1959) characterization of the contextual extremes remains illuminating half a century later: on one end, geographically-based “totalistic” ethnic community, with primarily localized interactions and heavy dependence on local institutions; and, on the other, geographically dispersed social worlds in which race/ethnicity activates in particular social situations—wired, place-less, portable.
identity, in today’s terms, wherein many neighborhoods are not in fact communities.

Two studies have directly investigated links among neighborhood racial make-up, social ties, and civic participation. First, using a 1975 survey of Philadelphia, Yancey, Ericksen, and Leon (1985) found that four clusters of in-bred friendship networks, in effect distinct worlds of close relations: African-Americans who associated regardless of religion; Puerto Ricans who did the same; Jewish Americans who associated regardless of national origin (Polish, Russian, etc.); and a large cluster of mostly white, non-Hispanic Protestants and Catholics who associated regardless of national origin. While residential dissimilarity (segregation) and friendship dissimilarity among ethnic groups were highly correlated, the authors remind us that this is partly a matter of selection effects (like friends recommend and choose like neighborhoods) and not strictly of residence determining social relations. In general, the researchers found friendship and associational involvement alike to be more localized to the neighborhood for respondents with less education who lived in stable communities. These were largely working-class white ethnics still clinging to Philadelphia’s declining industrial base. Many were long-time homeowners of modest means with few prospects of “trading up” into new neighborhoods. Lower status respondents were also more likely to report prejudice and racially insular friendships.

Second, using a 1992 survey of metropolitan Detroit, Welch et al. (2001) found that living in mixed-race neighborhoods generally predicted more casual interracial contact, more interracial friendships, and less prejudice and stereotyping on the part of both whites and blacks. This was true for both city dwellers and suburbanites. Here again, the authors note that the direction of causality is unclear. Whites who worked in the mostly black city of Detroit, and blacks who worked in its still-mostly-white suburbs, were more likely to report interracial contact at work, including “frequent interracial conversations,” but this did not appear to be
associated with interracial friendships for either racial group.

These findings suggest a tentative fourth hypothesis about the determinants of interracial ties, one incorporating both substructures of opportunity and preferences:

\textit{Hypothesis 4, Segregation in neighborhoods and friendships:} A given racial group’s friendship exposure to out-groups will be positively associated with residential exposure to out-groups at the neighborhood level.

\textit{Group threat theory}

There is some evidence for a nonlinear relationship between population (contact pool) diversity and intergroup relations (review in Goldsmith 2004). These patterns may reflect a psychological sense of threat or intergroup competition for material resources (Blalock 1967; Giles 1978; Moody 2001; and see Allport 1954; Pettigrew 1998) or other tipping-point phenomena (a) where race \textit{becomes} salient when a critical mass of out-group members is reached; and (b) where population diversity is so high that every group is a minority. Blalock’s (1967) work suggested that felt competition for resources and associated group threat are most likely where groups are roughly equal-sized. In a recent study of student-reported interracial friendliness and teacher-reported interracial conflict in schools, Goldsmith (2004) found that conflict \textit{and} friendliness increase with racial heterogeneity (defined as the likelihood that two randomly chosen students will be of different races), then flatten where groups are about 50-50, and then increase. Goldsmith suggests, though her data cannot confirm, that parity in group sizes may lead to avoidance behaviors, a kind of uneasy accommodation among equals, as opposed to the more overt conflict among groups reported in highly heterogeneous schools. Though I do not model attitudinal factors, Hypothesis 2 captures group threat as one potential source of in-breeding (reduced friendship exposure to racial out-groups).
**Group assimilation theory**

A final body of social theory considers alternative experiences for immigrant groups in America, as well as contrasts between immigrant outcomes over time and those of native-born blacks (involuntary immigrants). Based on the experiences of European immigrants in the 19th and 20th centuries, traditional assimilation theory predicts that the social and economic outcomes of Asians and Hispanics will gradually converge, across generations, toward an American mainstream (Alba and Nee 2003), acquiring language skills, human capital, and social capital on the road to economic success and social acceptance. Newer theories suggest a *segmented* assimilation (Portes and Zhou 1993; Portes and Rumbaut 2001), in which immigrant group segregation may persist over generations or immigrants may selectively acculturate—assimilating much more in the marketplace of jobs, for example, than in friendship relations or other culturally organized domains. There is evidence to support each theory, from the comparatively high economic mobility of Asians and the tendency of both Asians and Hispanics to intermarry with whites at high rates to the persistence of labor and housing market discrimination, strong intragroup cultural institutions, and expanding use of languages other than English in all spheres of society (Alba and Nee 2003).

In a study of interracial friendships among adolescents in schools, Quillian and Campbell (2004) compared patterns for first, second, and third generation Asians and Hispanics, as well blacks and whites. The researchers found weak support for traditional assimilation theory: There was some convergence over generations, but immigrant youth’s friendships showed a high degree of in-group homophily. Racial similarity was a much better predictor of friendships, for example, than having parents with similar socio-economic status. While my data do not separately test patterns across immigrant generations, they do include measures of language isolation and foreign birth.
Hypothesis 5, Group assimilation: For Asians and Hispanics, determinants of friendship exposure to whites will not be significantly different from those associated with blacks’ exposure to whites.

Data and Method
Models presented in the next section examine the correlates of racial isolation in the friendships of whites, blacks, Hispanics, and Asians in 29 U.S. communities. My data are from a restricted-use version of the Social Capital Community Benchmark Survey 2000 (SCCBS) and the 1990 and 2000 U.S. Census. The SCCBS collected data on respondents’ personal and household traits, as well as attitudes, social relationships, psychological sense of community, and civic and political participation. The survey included a national survey of adults (N=3,003) that over-sampled for blacks (N=501) and Hispanics (N=502), as well as 41 “community samples” in selected metropolitan regions and states (N=26,200). All results reflect sample weights and standard errors clustered by community. The community samples ranged from 500 to 1,500 respondents each and employed proportionate sampling. This random-digit dial survey, averaging 26 minutes in length, was conducted between July and November 2000. Overall, the SCCBS achieved an adjusted cooperation rate of 42.3% (Saguaro Seminar 2001). Through special agreement with the Roper Center, I obtained a restricted-use dataset that includes 1990 census tract boundaries. These were matched with tract-level census data in the 1990 extract prepared by the Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research (Adams 2000).

Because the large number of local surveys was made possible by actively engaged local philanthropic foundations, these funders, rather than census boundaries, helped determine the final sample geography. Because some of the “communities” in fact comprise entire states or, conversely, only central cities, I selected 29 of the 41 community samples that matched or closely approximated the Metropolitan Statistical Area (MSA or SMSA) boundaries designated...
by the federal government as census geographies; this enables more consistent single and multi-
level modeling. Three city-only samples were part of the SCCBS, and for these I use the central-
city data on population and segregation. The 29 community samples, with N=23,028, are the
focus of this study. As local labor markets, MSAs may be treated as meaningful live-work areas
and thus as catchments for local social relations (Wellman 1996), though this localism is
probably not constant across locales: More populous areas can meet a wider array of social
needs, not just offer a greater diversity of social contacts.

Comparisons to the SCCBS national sample (some shown below) indicate that the
combined 29-community sample is quite representative on the key variables of interest. In
addition, the combined sample provides statistically adequate sample sizes for African-
Americans, Asian Americans, and Hispanics on many variables. The latter two groups include
large proportions of foreign-born non-citizens in the sample (34.8 and 31.3%, respectively) and,
in the case of Hispanics, respondents who preferred to conduct the interview in Spanish (36.1%).
These adequate samples are not available for Hispanic and Asian Americans in each of the 29
communities, however. In addition, while I am able to estimate robust, multivariate two-level
models for white respondents, only one-level models were estimated for the smaller samples of
racial minorities.

All of the models are recursive and use observed variables. I employed Mplus 3.0 for its
power to compute multi-level path models (structural equations), also to enable exploratory
factor analysis and latent variable tests that served as background for the results presented.
Mplus generates a maximum likelihood (probit) estimator, with robust standard errors (Muthén
and Muthén 2004). The two-level models directly estimate between-community vs. within-
community variation, while the one-level models cluster standard errors to reflect the sample
Community contexts. The 29 surveyed communities represent almost one-tenth of the nation’s (331) metro areas. While not nationally representative in the formal sense, these 29 encompass all major census regions (Northeast, Midwest, South, and West), small and large population centers, and diverse demographic make-up and trends. In addition, there is considerable variation across SCCBS communities in racial segregation, a factor which may shape the sorting by substructures (opportunities for interracial contact) within communities. In preliminary analyses, I employed the two leading segregation measures: dissimilarity (D) and exposure (P*) (Massey, White, and Phua 1996), while the reported results are limited to exposure (neighborhood racial make-up).

Friendship measures. Though the SCCBS survey included an extensive battery of questions on associational participation, the survey includes data on traits of respondents’ social ties (alters) only in the case of “personal friends.” These data therefore understate the full range of inter-group ties that respondents may have. Recall that friendships, when compared to more casual ties, tend to include fewer social bridges and are less likely than other ties to lie in the respondent’s immediate neighborhood. When the interviewer asked about friendship ties, the respondent reported first on the number of close friends (specifying “people you feel at ease with, can talk to about private matters, or call on for help”), then the number of people with whom “you can share confidences,” and then traits of “personal friends” (race, sexual preference, religious affiliation, and economic and social status) considered as a set, not tie by tie through the more time-intensive name generator approach used in the General Social Survey and other surveys (Marsden 1987). We know, for example, whether the respondent has any personal friends who are white, black/African American, Hispanic, or Asian American (or who own their
own business) but not how many such friends, nor what the content of those friendships may be.8

Previous researchers have found that “friend” is an ambiguous descriptor unless some relational content is specified (Fischer 1982; Marsden 1987). This leads to considerable variation, as well as some reporting error, when researchers attempt to measure rates of interracial friendship and to compare results over different surveys and different years. In a review of research and methodological experiment using the 1998 General Social Survey, Smith (1999) notes that direct, one-step measures of interracial friendship, such as the measures employed by the SCCBS analyzed here, which did not define “personal friendship” for respondents, are likely to over-state actual interracial contact and closeness, for example because of favorable perception bias (the desire to avoid the perception of racial prejudice by reporting “some” friend of the racial out-group or even to associate having a personal friend with being friendly toward that group). On the other hand, surveys that ask respondents to identify, say, five important friends may undercount important interracial contacts if members of racial out-groups simply do not make that “top five.” Smith’s GSS experiment found that depending on the measure employed, the share of whites reporting fairly close friendship with at least one black person ranged from 6 to 42.1%, while for blacks reporting friendships with whites, the range was 15.2 to 61.9%.

The SCCBS rates should thus be read as a generous estimate of friendships maintained by whites as well as other groups. But since measurement error should be comparable across communities and within large community samples, such error should not bias analyses of structural determinants of friendship isolation significantly. This is the focus of my study, not precise estimates of friendship rates for particular communities, nor of the strength or contents of the friendships that respondents have. There is considerable value in studying racial isolation in
friendships, and as we will see, even on this dichotomous and broad measure, there is substantial variation across racial and other subgroups within communities, as well as between communities. But such isolation should not be treated as a full proxy for network diversity in the surveyed communities. Finally, about 4% of both the national and combined community samples reported that they had no “close” friends, but some of this small group nevertheless reporting having “personal” friends, with some of the traits prompted thereafter. I dropped cases reporting no close friends, since these offered, in effect, no measure of the size of friendship network.

*Covariates.* The SCCBS offers rich data on associational life, political participation, and informal socializing in the subject communities. Four of the most important indicators are: the level of racial/ethnic diversity of the respondent’s self-identified “most important group” (association) and of the members of that group with whom the respondent is “involved”; frequency of socializing with co-workers; a factor score indicating non-religious social participation combining membership with frequency and breadth of involvement in activities (see Table 1 notes); and a similarly constructed index of faith-based participation.

*[TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE]*

Finally, achievements vary along the life course, along with choices about residence, social relationships, and associational involvement. Though network analyses typically consider links among these traits in single-equation multivariate models, the links may be better conceived and analyzed as path relationships. For example, among the predictor variables available in the SCCBS data, ascriptive traits (race, gender, age) and achieved traits (education, income, labor participation, marital status, parenthood) may exert direct and indirect effects on friendship choices, and the pathways may be distinct across racial groups. I use education, income, and at-home internet access as indicators of respondent’s SES (Cronbach’s alpha=.64);
respondent’s occupation and parent’s education are not available. To assert causal direction, however, solving a system of equations would require a host of instrumental variables not available in these cross-sectional survey data, and in the analysis of segregation’s effects, such instrumenting has only been accomplished at the aggregate (metro) level (Cutler and Glaeser 1997; Galster 1987), with a much larger sample of metro areas than the SCCBS affords. Furthermore, path analysis including discrete data presents unique conceptual and statistical challenges, particularly where discrete variables number among the endogenous factors modeled (Winship and Mare 1983), as they do here.

**Results**

*Descriptive Results: Interracial friendship exposure*

I begin by examining friendship exposure by race in the U.S. descriptively, without accounting for traits of individuals or their community contexts. The frequency of interracial friendships varies widely across the 29 communities in the sample and reflects important asymmetries between whites and minorities, as well as some tendency for immigrant minority group members to be generally isolated from friends, including co-ethnics. For direct consistency with the multivariate results to come, Table 2 describes friendship exposure across lines of race as a risk estimate, i.e., in terms of the probability that a respondent of race A reports having a personal friend of race A (co-ethnics), or of race B, C, or D (out groups). The boldface diagonal in Table 2 thus shows within-group or co-ethnic friendships. The two right-most columns count across racial categories, indicating probabilities of reporting a friendship with a member of any out-group and with all out-groups. Table A-1 in the Appendix shows results for the national sample.

Nationally, about three-quarters (74%) of Americans report having at least one personal friend of some other racial-ethnic group, and a somewhat larger share (79%) of the 29-
community sample report the same. More than one-fifth (21%) report having friends of all three out-groups. Consistent with the opportunity-for-contact principle and with General Social Survey data, members of each racial minority group are much more likely to report having a personal friend who is white than whites are to report having a friend of that other race; the degree of this asymmetry is inversely related to the size of the racial minority group. For blacks, for example, this asymmetry is 74% versus 61%, but for Asians, it is much sharper: 74% versus 38%. Results for the national sample are highly comparable (Appendix Table A-1), indicating that the combined 29-community sample, while not formally representative, closely reflects social relations for the national population.

[TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE]

One-quarter (25%) of whites reported no interracial friendships at all, and this measure of racial isolation ranges from a low of 8% in Los Angeles to a high of 55% in Bismarck, North Dakota (data not shown). In addition, Asians and Hispanics report more varied interracial ties. These groups are more likely than either blacks or whites to report having personal friends of every other major racial-ethnic group; almost 40% of Asians in the combined community sample report this, for example. In aggregate, Hispanics and Asians living in the 29 study communities are somewhat more likely to have a personal friend of some other race/ethnicity than of their own group (not so in the national sample: see Appendix). Some 11% of Asians and 16% of Hispanics reported no personal friends who are co-ethnics. As one reviewer noted, this underscores the point that not all interracial friendships (with particular individuals) can function as true bridges to their groups. Moreover, the isolation from coethnics appears to be a function, at least in part, of an overall isolation from friendship ties. Consistent with the General Social Survey and other studies, minorities were more likely than whites to report having no close
Some of my best friends are 23 friends at all (7.7% vs. 2.6%, p<.001, data not shown); the same is true for foreign-born non-citizens when compared to citizens on this question (9.7% vs. 3.7%, p<.001).

Multiple forms of friendship isolation (or exposure) consolidate. Previous research indicates that one of the most significant features of social relations in America, and thus of the contributions of social structure to inequality, is the “consolidation” of race differences with those of status, as measured by education, occupation, income, and more (Blau and Schwartz 1984). I estimated logistic regression equations to examine whether interracial friendship exposure makes it more likely that racial minorities in the sample have friends with comparatively high social status and influence, such as those who own a business, own a vacation home, or are considered community leaders by respondents, holding respondent’s own SES constant. Note that the survey data do not allow us to test for bridging race and status in the same social ties but, more simply, to test whether low-income, less educated minorities, say, who report having a white friend also tend to have a friend with the abovementioned status traits.

Table 3 shows odds ratios for black and Hispanic respondents (Asians were dropped due to the sample size). Net of respondent’s own SES, having an interracial tie is strongly associated with having a friendship tie to someone with these status traits (and to someone of a different religious background, data available). For example, blacks who have white friends are roughly three times more likely than fellow blacks at comparable education and income levels to have a friend who owns a business. For Hispanics, the analogous rate is almost five times more likely.

Finally, as shown in Table 4, minorities are much more likely than whites to report that the membership of their “most important group” is racially mixed or composed mostly of persons of other races (54.4% vs. 30.4%). This figure is highest for Asians (72.8%), followed by Hispanics.
SOME OF MY BEST FRIENDS ARE 24

(56.1%) and blacks (47.4%, comparison p<.001).

[TABLE 4 ABOUT HERE]

The role of community racial composition. How does interracial friendship exposure vary by the racial make-up of a person’s community (metro area)? Consider a random-choice model of friendship selection: A white respondent making, say, three random friendship choices in a local area that is 60% black would have a $1-(1-p)^N=94\%$ probability of choosing at least one black friend among the three, where $p=$ (outgroup proportion in the local population) and $N=$ (number of choices). This hypothetical probability falls to 49% for a locality that is just 20% black, given three picks, or 74%, given six. In this model, the relationship between friendship exposure and community racial make-up is curvilinear, with diminishing “returns to community diversity” as the out-group share of population rises. I assume, for purposes of this descriptive model, that the localism of friendships does not vary significantly across communities, that respondents in Baton Rouge, say, are no more and no less likely to have local friends than respondents in Los Angeles, although the latter have much wider choices. In addition, I take the local catchment area to be metropolitan, but community diversity might affect respondents’ propensity to “shop” outside their jurisdiction for friends. While racial and ethnic diversity is on the rise in most metro areas, using metro-level racial composition even for central-city survey respondents is conservative (metro Detroit was 70% white in 2000, e.g., while the city was just 12% white).

[FIGURES 1 AND 2 ABOUT HERE]

Figure 1 plots rates of friendship with blacks that were reported by white respondents against the percent of local population that is black. Because the sample of communities is small (N=29), this analysis shows the uncontrolled association between the two variables. The plot
employs a locally weighted scatterplot smoother (LOWESS) to directly detect nonlinear patterns in the data (Cleveland 1993). The association is indeed curvilinear: It matches the functional form predicted by the random-choice algorithm outlined above. The odds of a white respondent reporting some friendship exposure (at least one friend) across lines of race rises quickly as minority outgroup share rises from 0 to 10% of the local population. The curve then flattens quickly and remains essentially flat when outgroup share crosses the threshold of about 20%. Above that level, communities also show higher rates of segregation between the two racial groups. The plot includes a concave pattern (dip), where the line is significantly weighted by three highly segregated Midwestern communities below the fitted line, rather than monotonically increasing rates of interracial exposure. The same patterns obtain for white friendships with Hispanics and Asians (plots not shown, available from the author), without the aforementioned concave pattern.

Although these patterns match the functional form of the random-choice model, actual rates of interracial friendship exposure generally fall short of predicted levels except where the minority outgroup share is below 10% (data not shown). Given the challenges of measuring friendship, these simple bivariate results should be treated as exploratory. But they directly suggest why local pool sizes (of racial out-groups) are so much more predictive for white friendships with other races than vice-versa, consistent with hypotheses derived from macrostructural theory (baseline opportunity for contact) and group threat theory as well. This is the probabilistic aspect of the “bridging opportunity structure” for whites in a nation where most metropolitan areas are still majority white (this is directly captured in the “stacking” of data points on the left side of Figure 1). Conversely, Figure 2 plots rates of friendships with whites that were reported by black respondents, who live, for the most part, in majority-white
metro areas. This plot emphasizes a quite different pattern: For blacks, increased white population share does not significantly cut racial isolation (the relationship is largely flat). And overall, the number of outliers is much greater than in Figure 1, both above and below the fitted line: The probabilistic model is generally weaker at explaining variation in rates of black friendship exposure to whites in mostly white metro areas. Results for Asian and Hispanic respondents (not shown) are comparable. These results suggest that isolation from whites (even one friend) that may owe to preferences (in-breeding), to racially segregated substructures of potential contact, or to other factors. Meaningful tests of the corresponding hypotheses (2,3,4,5) await the multivariate models below.

In preliminary analyses of the same survey data, Putnam (2003) has obtained results comparable to those for Figures 1 and 2 above, using a Herfindahl index of diversity rather than race-group-specific measures to measure actual versus predicted interracial friendship rates. Yes, white residents of Los Angeles are far more likely than their counterparts in Maine to have a friend of another race but not nearly as much as the racial composition differences between the two places would predict. What further differences in community context, then, or in the substructures of social participation and neighborhood segregation, might explain this?

**Multivariate models of interracial friendship exposure**

I estimated logistic regression equations for measures of social participation for all racial groups (data not shown), including as independent variables ascriptive traits (gender, age group) and attained traits (marital status, presence of children, SES, employment status), as well as census region, community percent nonwhite (metro-level), suburban residence, and neighborhood make-up (race, homeownership). Prior research has shown these to be associated with a range of social participation measures, such as membership in groups, churchgoing, and socializing (review in Putnam 2000). Selecting statistically significant relationships for the next
stage of the analysis, the single-equation regression models informed the more parsimonious but computationally intensive structural equation (path) models discussed below, in which the dependent variable is odds of interracial exposure in personal friendships, by racial group.

_Friendship exposure for whites._ Figure 3 shows standardized probit coefficients for predictors of exposure by whites to blacks in a two-level model. All of the coefficients are highly significant, and indices indicate a good fit, particularly for a model of this complexity. Straight lines represent direct effects (when any dependent variable B is regressed on predictor A), while curved double arrows indicate residual covariances among dependent variables. This model thus estimates: (a) direct effects of neighborhood make-up (percent black), social participation measures, and SES on bridging; (b) effects of SES that are mediated by those variables; and (c) patterns of association among the mediating variables.

[FIGURE 3 ABOUT HERE]

Beginning at the within-community level of the diagram, several patterns are striking. First, net of other factors, socializing with coworkers, size of friendship network, and organizational participation have the largest and most robust direct associations with friendship exposure (religious participation had little effect and so was dropped from the two-level model to conserve degrees of freedom). Direct effects of SES on friendship exposure are modest once these mediating variables are accounted for. Second, the multiple forms of social participation are strongly correlated. White “joiners” tend to have more friends and to socialize more with coworkers, and all three factors are powerfully associated with friendship exposure across race lines. White joiners are also more likely than non-involved whites to live in racially mixed neighborhoods. Third, SES shows quite different links to social participation versus neighborhood diversity. For whites, higher SES is strongly predictive of social participation,
consistent with prior research, but is inversely related to neighborhood diversity. Higher-SES whites are less likely to share neighborhoods with blacks. Below, the one-level models provide a calculus of paths to reveal the relative magnitudes of direct versus indirect effects.

For the odds that a white person in the U.S. will report having a friend of another race, the single most important predictor is where that white person lives in the country—i.e., the whiteness of their metro area home (consistent with the bivariate plots above). At the between-community level of the diagram, community (metro-area) diversity indeed has a much larger direct association with friendship exposure than any of the within-community factors. As expected, community diversity also exerts a sizeable indirect effect by shaping the diversity of neighborhoods. Together, differences in metro-area and neighborhood-level racial exposure between communities explain 40% of the variation in white friendship exposure to blacks, while within-community factors explain just 9%. For white friendships with Hispanics, these factors explain fully 75% of the between-community variation, while within-community factors explain just 7% (data not shown). Because between-community variation in percent Asian is quite limited in the sample, a two-level model for white/Asian friendship exposure could not be estimated.

**Table 5 about here**

Table 5 presents one-level results for white friendship exposure to all three out-groups, by race of friendship contact (alter), affording a more detailed anatomy of the individual traits associated with exposure. Here, community-level diversity is a control variable, and standard errors are clustered by community. Older whites are more racially insular, net of other factors, and the effect is particularly robust and large for elders (age 65 and over). Whites who have black and Hispanic friends tend to be more residentially integrated with those groups as well, and
joining remains highly significant: With the exception of religious involvement, all of the social participation coefficients are significant as well large. As for SES, the calculus of paths shows direct effects of SES, as well as total indirect and specific indirect effects of mediating variables. For whites’ friendship exposure to blacks (model one), perhaps the most striking finding is in the comparison of direct and total indirect effects of SES. For whites, higher SES has no direct effect on friendship exposure to blacks, net of the mediating variables. The indirect effects via these mediators, however, are large and highly significant.

Though causal effects are not attributed here, it seems improbable that having black friends leads one to join groups, have more friends generally, or choose to socialize with coworkers. It is far more probable that higher-SES whites are more likely than lower-SES whites to report friendships with blacks because SES is so strongly associated with wider social participation, i.e., because higher-SES whites are more likely to be joiners, to have larger friendship networks, and to be employed (and thus able to socialize with coworkers), and perhaps as a matter of preference as well. Similarly, important life course effects are clearly mediated: Large, indirect effects of age (being 65 or older) on friendship exposure are mediated by elders having fewer friends overall, joining less, and socializing far less with coworkers (particularly in the case of those no longer in the labor force, data not shown).

The patterns for white-to-Hispanic (model two) and white-to-Asian friendship exposure (model three) are similar to white/black friendship exposure in the effects of age and social participation. Greater neighborhood-level exposure to Asians has a puzzling and large negative sign, but community (metro) level exposure is larger still and in the expected direction. Asian Americans are the most regionally concentrated minority group in the sample. As outlined in the discussion of scatterplot results above, metro-level percent Asian is the dominant factor in
explaining variation in white friendship exposure to Asians.

It is the composition of SES effects in the latter two models of Table 5 that differ sharply from those for white/black friendship exposure. Direct effects of SES on friendship exposure to Hispanics and Asians are significant and positive, and for friendship exposure to Asian friends, the direct effect of SES is much larger than the sum of all indirect effects measured. These results should be interpreted carefully, since “direct” here means not mediated by any of the mediator variables included. It is quite possible that the range of mechanisms linking white SES to friendships with immigrant minorities are not captured as well by a model emphasizing social participation factors and neighborhood of residence as mediators. In general, specific indirect effects of white SES on friendship exposure are very similar for the three models, in direction, significance, and magnitude. But residential segregation is a striking exception: The pattern for Hispanic alters matches that of blacks—higher SES whites are less residentially integrated with Hispanics, and this is associated with more racially insular friendships for whites (a comparatively small but negative effect)—whereas the opposite is true for exposure to Asians (with whom higher SES whites are more likely to share neighborhoods).

Taken together, the one and two-level models of whites’ interracial ties are highly consistent with Hypotheses 1, 2, and 4. Nonreligious joining, having more friends, and socializing with coworkers all mediate the positive returns to SES and are much larger than effects of religious involvement. In the case of white friendship exposure to blacks, such returns are explained largely by those factors. But these patterns encompass distinct subgroups of whites: Educated, higher income, middle aged married people are the primary joiners (Putnam 2000). On average, they have more friends and are more involved in groups both religious and secular. They are also more likely to live in the South or Midwest. For whites and other racial
groups, those who reported socializing frequently with co-workers are more often young (age 18 to 34), male, and single. Notably, this is also the demographic group most likely to move into mixed-race neighborhoods; young single renters are the nation’s primary white integrators (Ellen 2000). In general, whites who report having a black or Hispanic friend are likely to share neighborhoods with those groups as well. Finally, the long “civic generation” highlighted in Putnam’s (2000) research and the popular media in recent years is, in the case of white Americans, also the most racially insular: Compared to the age 18-34 group, whites over age 65 are significantly less likely to report even one friendship with a person of color, and at least some of this is explained by elders’ lower social participation overall. I leave analyses of nonstructural factors, such as racial attitudes and stereotypes, on the agenda of future research.

_Friendship exposure for blacks, Hispanics, and Asians (to whites)._ Indices (chi-square, CFI, RMSEA, WRMR) indicate a strong fit in all three models in Table 6, in spite of the much smaller sample sizes for minority respondents in the survey. Nonreligious joining has a strong positive association with friendship exposure to whites for all three minority groups in America, as do size of friendship network and socializing with coworkers. These, then, appear to be the most universal correlates of friendship exposure. They are robust and large as predictors of both white/minority and minority/white friendship exposure, and in the case of immigrant minorities, being English proficient and being a citizen are strong predictors of joining in particular (p<.001, data not shown). Likewise, important SES effects on friendship exposure are mediated by joining, in the broad sense of active social involvement. Direct SES effects on friendship exposure are large and positive for the immigrant groups but much more modest for blacks, for whom the effects mediated by substructures represent some 70% of the total SES effect (compared to 33% and 28% for Hispanics and Asians, respectively).
Residential integration appears to be an important marker of friendship exposure to whites only in the case of black respondents, for whom neighborhood integration has a very large direct effect (comparable in order of magnitude to the effects of social participation variables) and also acts as a mediator of the effects of social class on friendship exposure to whites. One possibility for this finding is that higher SES is a poorer predictor of neighborhood integration for blacks; such integration varies more widely for higher-SES blacks in the sample, for example, than for Hispanic and Asian counterparts.

For Hispanics, *citizenship* is a marker of attainment in expected ways: higher SES, joining, socializing, and friendship networks account for almost 40% of the association between citizenship and Hispanic friendship exposure to whites (data not shown, and comparable results obtain when *language use*—asking for a Spanish-language interview—replaces citizenship as the predictor variable). There is no such pattern for Asians, though a sizeable share of Asian respondents (35%), like Hispanic ones (31%), were noncitizens, suggesting that citizenship is not the marker for Asian friendship patterns with whites in the way that it is for Hispanics.

Consistent with the scatterplots, macrostructural opportunity for contact (Hypothesis 1) is much less dominant in explaining minority friendship exposure to whites in the sample—a reflection of the fact that most of the communities are majority white (again, at the *metro* level). This is not to say that the white share of community population is unimportant for racial minorities’ friendship exposure to whites, only that said population variation is limited in the sample, as in the nation as a whole. Friendship exposure is strongly predicted, on the other hand, by participation in substructures, with joining (nonreligious groups) and work-related socializing the main enablers and religious involvement showing no effects on friendship exposure for any group, consistent with Hypothesis 2.
The multivariate models provide a limited test of the in-breeding tendency (Hypothesis 3), suggesting the need for alternative specifications of group sizes. As for Hypothesis 4, net of class and other factors, social segregation, at least as measured by friendship isolation from whites, is associated with neighborhood segregation only for blacks, for whom it is a stunningly robust marker. Finally, Hypothesis 5, which predicted parallel patterns for immigrant and non-immigrant minority groups, was partially supported. As outlined above, social participation factors are robust predictors of interracial friendship exposure for all groups, so immigrant minorities are not only like blacks but also like whites in this respect. Differences among minority groups are largely about group-specific factors, such as language use and citizenship, as well as the neighborhood integration effect for blacks.

**Discussion**

In recent years, even the popular media has shown an interest in the far-reaching social consequences of intergroup relationships—in particular, in the value of interracial and interfaith ones when they function as social bridges. Covering the story of an American-born Jew shot by Palestinian gunmen in Israel in the intifadah, for example, the *Boston Globe* focused not on the slain man’s American-ness but on the fact that his best friend of 34 years was a Palestinian. For the latter’s children, the Jewish American had become a second father, wrote the reporter, and he concluded:

> The death … is more than just another entry on the list of victims in this latest uprising; it represents the loss of a friendship that provided a bridge between peoples whose knowledge of and empathy for each other are declining by the day. (Hardin 2002, p.A7)

The changes re-shaping American society are slowly but surely shifting certain aspects of race relations as well. As many observers have noted, these changes are neither simple nor consistent in direction. New patterns of immigrant assimilation, the persistent segregation of
blacks, and wider economic inequality are shifting, but not eliminating, the color line (Alba and Nee 2003; Lee and Bean 2004). And as Putnam and Goss (2002, p.12) remind us, “A nation could simultaneously see growth in ethnically based social clubs, rainbow coalitions, and government-hating militias.”

In this study, I have focused on whites’ friendship ties to minorities and vice-versa, motivated in part by the powerful ways in which race and status consolidate in American society, deepening inequality and confounding political response. Whites’ friendships with members of other racial groups have increased sharply over the past generation, and the fact that younger whites are more likely to report interracial ties bodes well for the future. People living in more diverse local communities (metropolitan areas) are generally more likely to have friends of other races but less so than a random choice of friends in the local “pool” would predict. For whites, the odds of having an out-group friend increase rapidly as the metro population goes from all white to mostly white (10% other) and then flatten quickly. Across communities, white isolation from friendships with minorities—in a nation where most metro areas are still white by a large majority—is dominated by this macrostructural factor.

In the opposite direction, for racial minorities, access to and participation in substructures, rather than community population make-up, is more important as a predictor of having a white friend. For all racial groups, “joining” in the broad sense—involve ment in nonreligious groups, socializing with coworkers, and having more friends overall—are the substructural factors robustly associated with interracial exposure in friendships, and for some groups, these factors channel much of the advantages of class status. The friendship exposure of Hispanics and Asians resembles that of blacks in the importance of joining but not in neighborhood segregation as a marker for social isolation. Living in whiter neighborhoods
remains a powerful and unique marker for blacks’ social relationships. It is also a controversial one, inside and outside the black community, as discussions of “integration fatigue” and social engineering challenge the integrationist ideal (Charles 2005).

For at least one of the nation’s two largest immigrant groups, Hispanics, non-citizens and those with limited English proficiency are, as one would expect, significantly less likely to have friendships with whites. Net of socio-economic status, the networks of this subgroup tend to be smaller as well as more racially insular, and they are less likely to belong to groups or to socialize frequently with coworkers. Interestingly, there is no such isolation pattern for Asian noncitizens. Immigrant and nonimmigrant racial groups thus face similar macrostructural opportunities—being the minority in most metro areas, still—but certain group-specific challenges and choices as well.

Higher-status minorities of all groups are more likely to report white friends, but this link is much weaker for blacks than for immigrant groups and more likely to be mediated by joining. That is, for blacks, the powerful association between class status and interracial friendship works largely (70%) through greater social participation. Higher-status blacks have more opportunity for such contact but may also differ from lower-status blacks in the conscious choice to cultivate more diverse contacts, i.e., in preferences for social integration. Other researchers have emphasized the power of conscious choices to integrate—or not—with whites, including patterns of partial and “strategic” social assimilation by middle class blacks (Lacy 2004; and see Charles 2005).

The positive paths linking class status to having friends of another race through higher social participation signal double trouble given the widening of economic inequality in America since the late 60s. People with less education and lower income are doubly disadvantaged in the
market for bridging ties and the social capital those ties can channel, with both less opportunity for contact and fewer resources with which to manage active friendships that cross social borders. As for the former, lower-status people are less organizationally active and have smaller friendship networks. If low-skilled, they are also less likely to work and thus to have coworkers with whom to socialize. In addition, lower-status minorities are more likely to live in racially segregated neighborhoods and, if they are employed, to work in racially segregated workplaces. Yet those who do report having white friends are those whose social worlds also include people of comparatively higher status and influence, for example business owners and community leaders. These lower-status minorities who bridge on one important dimension (race) also appear to bridge on others (economic status and community influence).

The findings about joining underline the importance of strengthening civic life in what Arthur Schlesinger (1944) famously termed “a nation of joiners,” where similarly, Alexis de Tocqueville (1840) a century earlier praised the “art of combining,” and where contemporary research has charted marked decline in associational life and other traditional indicators of connectedness or social capital (Paxton 1999; Putnam 2000). This is all the more urgent for a nation rapidly becoming more ethnically diverse in the context of wider inequality. Likewise, effects of work-related socializing highlight the importance of the workplace as a social world for crossing racial and other divides (Estlund 2003). Some workplaces are quite segregated by race/ethnicity or other identity boundaries, and they can certainly be conflict-ridden, but like organized associations, workplaces show multiple features, missing in neighborhoods and other substructures, to encourage relationships across social borders: tangible forms of interdependence and collective identity buttressed by material incentives, shared norms and authority structures for learning and enforcing those norms, space for social learning, and more.
More research is needed on the causal mechanisms that underlie the patterns uncovered in this study, including the conditions under which interracial contact happens in various substructures, as well as important social phenomena, other than friendship networks, that reflect genuine race bridging and that might constitute clear social types. These phenomena include the character of organizational involvement by race, including “ethnic bounding,” in the surveyed communities and regions. While efficient, the participation factors and indexes employed here obscure such patterns. Another key domain for analysis is that of minority-to-minority friendships. Evidence on the latter would, for one thing, help sort out the issue of how distinctive, and how class segmented, the black experience is relative to that of Hispanics and Asians.

Finally, personal networks and social participation are but two dimensions of identity and well-being—and two factors in a community’s capacity for collective action to solve important problems. More work is needed on the relationships among networks, associational involvement, trust, political and social attitudes, and experiences of discrimination in varied community contexts. Using the same survey data, for example, Putnam and his research team have found that social trust and socializing are lower—for all racial/ethnic groups—in racially diverse local communities (Saguaro Seminar 2001). Minorities living in such communities, when compared to counterparts living in more homogeneous settings, even appear to be less likely to trust members of their own ethnic group. On one hand, this is consistent with decades of empirical research and theoretical work on cities as diverse environments (Ross, Mirowsky and Pribesh 2002) and with the general finding, for workgroups and institutions, that diversity strains solidarity, making heterogeneous workgroups less effective, on average, than homogeneous ones (Estlund 2003). People who live in cities are generally less trusting than counterparts living in more socially
homogeneous suburbs and rural towns, and however rational that may be, this trust deficit holds enormous implications for how society functions (or dysfunctions) in the U.S., in other settler states where ethnic diversity is rising, and in other places worldwide, including post-conflict settings that rightly command special attention.

But partly because of wider exposure, city dwellers are also more likely to have diverse social ties and, through those ties, to extend trust to and engage in rich exchanges with particular members of out-groups. In lieu of bridging, diversity makes us less likely to believe in the integrity of all others—“people in general,” when so many are not like us. But diverse environments also make it more possible to create bridges, to connect to particular individuals unlike ourselves, in ways that are important for each of us and for society as a whole. The growing evidence is that for now, we have not marshaled the bridging institutions—voluntary associations, workplaces, schools, and more—equal to that urgent project of connection. If twentieth century social science, and sociology most of all, grappled with the implications of a massive population shift from countryside to city in rapidly industrializing societies, then a crucial puzzle for twenty-first century social research centers on the trade-offs entailed—the good, the bad, and the unexpected—as cities become more and more ethnically diverse.

[APPENDIX TABLE A-1 ABOUT HERE]

References


1 Both race and ethnicity have been employed in the social network literature (see, e.g., Fischer 1982; Marsden 1987), but race is more commonly employed in reference to residential segregation in the U.S. (see, e.g., Lewis Mumford Center 2001; Massey 2001). In such usage, race denotes the five principal
classifications that combine, however imperfectly, racial and ethnic identification: white non-Hispanic (Anglo); black non-Hispanic; ethnic Hispanic (of any race); Asian American/Pacific Islander; and Native American/American Indian.

6 The survey was conducted by TNS Intersearch for Harvard University’s Saguaro Seminar on Civic Engagement in America, led by Robert Putnam. Data are available on-line through the Roper Center for Public Opinion Research Archive, University of Connecticut.

8 On a more technical note, the SCCBS network data are ego-centric; we do not know whether and how respondents’ friends are tied to each other or whether their friendship choices are reciprocated. While the first point is unimportant for a direct assessment of interracial exposure in the respondent’s own first-order ties, earlier research indicates that homophilous ties are not only more common in respondents’ networks but more likely to know each other (McPherson et al. 2001). This is another confirmation of the more dispersed quality of non-homophilous ties, a quality that tends to make them social bridges (Granovetter 1973). The reciprocation point emphasizes advantages of studying friendships dyads, rather than individuals, as the unit of analysis (Baerveldt et al 2004; Quillian and Campbell 2003).

10 The instrument is at www.ropercenter.uconn.edu/dataacq/scc_bench.html (World Wide Web page accessed January 14, 2004). Traditional associations as well as internet groups are included.

15 Each respondent in the survey reports either having or not having a personal friend of racial out-group X, but the mean of all such predicted probabilities for each community is a continuous variable that may be compared to the actual rates as a simple difference. While the data and prior research (Smith 1999) indicate clearly that respondents interpreted the items for “close friend” and “personal friend” differently, the number of close friends represents our closest approximation of the size of a respondent’s overall friendship network (N). Because close friends are fewer in number, the approximation is a conservative one.