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

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Abstract. Ties among persons of different backgrounds, when such ties 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 city-regions matched with census data, this study analyzes predictors of interracial friendships for whites, blacks, Asians, and Hispanics, with single and multi-level path models. Results underscore the social significance of the workplace and of civic involvement. 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. These are strongly associated with each other and with higher socio-economic status, highlighting a powerful class dimension to accessing inter-group ties. But macro-level opportunity for contact (metro-level racial make-up) dominates the variation in friendship exposure patterns for whites, whereas associations and other “substructures” are more predictive for minorities. Consistent with assimilation theory, sharing neighborhoods with whites remains a distinctive social marker for blacks and also for Hispanic noncitizens but not for other Hispanics or for Asians.

Introduction

What’s in a friendship? In an increasingly diverse and unequal society, quite a lot. 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 and the social worlds they help define. 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 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 rare in the close friendships of many Americans (Marsden 1988), i.e., relative to what random choice would predict in a diverse society. These are friendships through which important material exchanges, everyday expressive support, and attitudinal influence operate (Jackson 1977). Still, between 1985 and 2004, the share of Americans reporting someone of another race among their confidants rose somewhat, from 9% to 15%, even as those core networks became more family-centered and less grounded in the neighborhood and associational ties that offer more diverse social contacts (McPherson, Smith-
And the rate of other reported interracial friendships has increased sharply over the past generation, at least between whites and blacks—the groups longest surveyed (Thernstrom and Thernstrom 1997). Popular discussions of race in America often center on such interpersonal relations, which relate so closely to the respect, security, and feelings of mutuality we often crave.

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 city-regions 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 interracial exposure in 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]?”

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 and the kinship, neighborhood, and other sources of personal ties rather than traits of the local context. 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. This multi-city, multi-region study affords substantial variation across local contexts and allows one to distinguish variation within communities from variation across them (using multi-level models). 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 socializing, or other aspects of social life, and also by influencing what kinds of neighborhoods we live in. The links among some of these factors differ dramatically across racial groups, yet such path effects have not been directly analyzed before.

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 hypotheses about correlates of interracial ties; data and methods; results; and a discussion of the findings.

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 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 (Erickson 1996; review in Lin 1999). Further back, Durkheim’s (1893) theorizing about cross-cutting ties as buttressing the interdependence among differentiated segments of emerging industrial cities and Simmel’s (1923) conception of social structure as organized by multiple identities, intersections of roles, 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 social 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.

But 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, and stirred an activist interest in creating more bridging ties—and, through them, more “bridging social capital” (Briggs 1997; Gittell and Vidal 1998; Putnam 2000; Woolcock 1998). In a comparative analysis of social capital in eight democracies, Putnam and Goss (2002, pp.11-12) offer a pointed case for bridging: “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.” Bonding without bridging may also undermine collective action where broader perspectives and coalitions are required, as when tightly-knit neighborhoods are under external threat (Granovetter 1973).

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; Warren, Saegert, and Thompson 2001), as well as the reciprocity and learning crucial to democratic behavior (Putnam 2000). These are the social foundations of power sharing, without which the formal machinery of democratic government tends to falter around the world (Lipset 1994).

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; Ferrand, Mounier and Degenne 1999; Lin 1999)—at least when one’s social contacts are willing to help (Smith 2005). Analyzing the powerful connection between social capital and cultural capital as resources for getting ahead, Erickson (1996, p.247) argues, “Social networks are the continuing adult education of culture, and diversified networks are the
liberal arts programs teaching a little of almost everything.” In the U.S context, research confirms the particular importance of bridging network ties for advancement by poor minorities in inner cities (Briggs 1998; Crain and Wells 1994; Dominguez and Watkins 2003; Johnson, Bienenstock, and Farrell 2000).

**Theoretical Background: Determinants of Inter-Group Friendship**

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 groups incorporate into receiving societies; and group threat theory, which emphasizes the effects of relative group size on inter-group dynamics, including avoidance.

**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 and action (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 opportunity-for-contact dimension, 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 attention is focused on accessible contacts.

*Structures, large and small.* Marsden (1990) found that individuals were more likely to identify members of other racial groups in these “core” (confidant) networks if the networks were less kin-based (had a lower proportion of family members) and more coworker-based (though these small core networks give a limited view of the diversity in respondents’ social ties). No association was found between interracial ties and proportion neighbor or group (voluntary association) member. Marsden (1987) found that being young, having a larger network, and living in larger cities were associated with having more racially diverse contacts. 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.

If small-scale settings, not just big local pools, matter, what is the racial composition of the everyday *substructures* in which people in America have interpersonal contacts? Most workplaces are somewhat racially mixed (Estlund 2003; Fernandez and Nichols 2002), more so than most K-12 public schools (Clotfelter 2004; Frankenberg, Lee and Orfield 2003) or residential neighborhoods (Logan 2003). And secular voluntary associations are more diverse, on average, than religious institutions (Jackson 1977; Putnam 2000). But these general patterns vary by region, and occupational and other structures can promote racial segregation *within* workplaces and other substructures.

*Homophily.* 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. In the U.S., this finding holds most powerfully for race/ethnicity, followed by class status and religion (review in McPherson et al. 2001). 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 (Granovetter 1973; Marsden 1988). Furthermore, 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 racial minorities were more likely than whites to have significant 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 intermediate levels of homogeneity, and Asian Americans and smaller ethnic groups tend to report networks dominated by the majority racial group (McPherson, Miller, and Smith-Lovin 2001).

*Integrating opportunity structure and preferences.* The findings outlined above suggest three specific 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, study, worship, play, and mobilize politically in majority-white milieus.

*Hypothesis 1, Opportunity for contact (macro structure):* In general, interracial exposure in friendships will vary positively with the size of the out-group pool available in a local community. The range will be greater for whites than for racial minorities, given relative pool sizes for each.

*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 (the survey does not include data on the make-up of schools attended).

The second key factor (in-breeding homophily) 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. Even in majority-white milieus, racial minorities tend to report high proportions of co-ethnics in their non-kin networks (Tatum 1987, 1999). 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). Racial and ethnic 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 cf. Baerveldt et al. 2004; Menjivar 2000). Likewise, in a study of neighboring in Nashville, Lee and Campbell (1999, p.136) report, “Despite the potential for interracial contact in [racially] mixed areas, over 80% of the ties of black residents are to black neighbors, while over 95% of the ties of whites in mixed areas are to white neighbors.”
A third key factor shaping the formation of bridging ties is others’ preferences, which shape our own opportunities and preferences. Group agency, which I do not model directly, 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. A history of inter-group hostility (animus), a strong norm of cultural and religious preservation, perceived economic threat or opportunity, political conflicts or polarizing episodes, and other factors may all contribute to this kind of collective agency for or against inter-group ties.

The racial segregation of neighborhoods, the final substructure of interest, may interact perversely 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 (Massey and Denton 1993). But thanks to new technologies and other factors, increasingly, neighbors tend to be casual contacts rather than socially significant ties (Wellman and Leighton 1979; Wellman 1996, 2001), and this is especially true where neighborhoods are heterogeneous—in race, religion, and other dimensions—and relatively transient (Greenbaum and Greenbaum 1985; Sampson 1988; Sampson et al. 1997). Among adults, only the ties of the poor, physically isolated, and linguistically isolated tend to be highly localized (Briggs 1998; Fischer 1982; Smith 2005; Wellman 1971; Wilson 1987). Urban blacks have somewhat more localized support ties than do whites (Lee and Campbell 1999; Oliver 1988).

Very few studies have directly investigated links among neighborhood racial make-up, interracial social ties, and participation in local institutions or substructures in the U.S. First, using a 1975 survey of Philadelphia, Yancey, Ericksen, and Leon (1985) found that residential segregation and friendship segregation (each measured in terms of dissimilarity) among ethnic groups were highly correlated. But 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. 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, whether in city or suburb, generally predicted more casual interracial contact, more interracial friendships, and less prejudice and stereotyping on the part of both whites and blacks.

European researchers report mixed findings on the association between residential segregation and inter-group contacts (net of individual traits), depending on how contact and “ethnic concentration” in neighborhoods are specified (Bouma-Doff forthcoming; Drever 2004; Esser 1986). Though minority segregation rates are much lower in Europe than in the U.S., this research generally concludes that residential segregation per se has either a modest effect or no effect on the formation of ties between, say, native Dutch or Germans and immigrant ethnic minorities in their countries. The third hypothesis—a “straw man”—reflect these mixed findings, as well as the conventional wisdom held by advocates of residential integration:

Hypothesis 3, 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, net of other factors.
**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; Goldsmith 2004; Moody 2001; cf. Allport 1954; Pettigrew 1998) or other tipping-point phenomena (a) where race 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, leading to an uneasy accommodation or other responses. Though I do not model attitudinal factors, only structural ones, Hypotheses 1, 2, and 3 may capture group threat as a source of in-breeding, especially if interracial friendship exposure does not rise monotonically with the size of the out-group pool (Hypothesis 1). I return to this in the section on results.

**Group assimilation theory**

Assimilation 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; Lee and Bean 2004), as immigrants and their children acquire language skills, human capital, and social capital on the road to economic success and social acceptance. But newer theories and evidence 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 job market, for example, than in personal friendship or other culturally organized spheres of life.

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 as 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 of the same socio-economic status. While my data do not allow me to test patterns across immigrant generations, the data include many immigrants as well as direct measures of language isolation and foreign citizenship among Asians and Hispanics (the number of immigrant blacks and whites in the sample is trivial), suggesting a final hypothesis:

*Hypothesis 4, Group assimilation*: Asians and Hispanics will not differ significantly from blacks in the determinants of friendship exposure to whites.

**Data and Method**

I model the structural correlates of interracial exposure in the friendships of whites, blacks, Hispanics, and Asians in 29 U.S. cities and metro areas, i.e., the odds of having at least one “personal friend” of another race. The data are from a restricted-use, geocoded version of the Social Capital Community Benchmark Survey 2000 (SCCBS) matched to the 1990 and 2000 censuses. The survey included a national survey of adults (N=3,003) that over-sampled for blacks and Hispanics, as well as 41 “community samples” in selected metropolitan regions and states (N=26,200). The community samples ranged from 500 to 1,500 respondents each and
employed proportionate sampling. This random-digit dial phone survey, averaging 26 minutes in length, was conducted between July and November 2000. Overall, the SCCBS achieved an adjusted cooperation rate of 42.3% for the national sample and 41.6% for the combined community samples (Roper Center 2001); these rates compare favorably with other major phone surveys in recent years, despite the fact that the average SCCBS interview was longer.

Because the large number of local surveys was made possible by actively engaged local philanthropic foundations, these funders helped determine the final sample geography. But since some of their “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, metro areas 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.

The combined community 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 the minority groups in each of the 29 locales, yet excluding community samples with fewer than 25 or fewer than 50 respondents of a given minority group did not affect the models shown, and I do not report community-specific multivariate results (wherein reliability would be an issue given small n’s). In addition, while I am able to estimate robust, multivariate two-level models for white respondents, only one-level path models were estimated for the smaller samples of racial minorities.

All of the models are recursive and use observed, not latent, variables. I employed Mplus 3.0 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 design. All models employ sample weights.

**Locales.** The 29 surveyed city-regions represent almost one-tenth of the nation’s (331) metro areas. While not nationally representative in the formal sense, the 29 encompass all major census regions, small and large population centers, and diverse demographic make-up and trends as well as segregation rates. 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). I tested a variety of specifications for outgroup presence (pool size): number, log number, percent, and percent squared. I present the percent measures, as explained in Results.

**Friendship measures.** Though the SCCBS survey included an extensive battery of questions on associational participation, the survey includes data on traits of respondents’ social

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Some of my best friends are 7
ties (alters) only in the case of “personal friends.” These data therefore understate the full range of inter-group ties that respondents may have. 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 or what the content of those friendships may be.\(^4\)

Researchers have found that “friend” is an ambiguous descriptor unless some relational content is specified (Fischer 1982; Marsden 1987). This leads to considerable variation and some error when researchers attempt to measure rates of interracial friendship and to compare results over different surveys and different years. Smith (1999) notes that 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. Asking about “personal friends” after specifying relational content for “close friends” should mitigate this bias.

Nevertheless, the SCCBS rates should be read as a generous estimate of friendships maintained by whites as well as other groups, and measurement error should not bias analyses of structural determinants of friendship exposure significantly. This is the focus of my study, not precise estimates of friendship rates for particular communities, nor of the strength or contents of respondents’ interracial friendships. 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. I dropped cases reporting no close friends, since these offered 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. Three key indicators are: frequency of socializing with co-workers (“How many times in the past twelve months have you socialized with coworkers outside of work?”); a multi-item 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 (text for all items is available online, cf. Roper Center 2001).

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 socio-economic status (Cronbach’s alpha=.64); respondent’s occupation and parent’s education are not available.
To assert causality, 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 (Winship and Mare 1983). This further warrants against strong causal claims based on the measures of statistical association that follow, though the models are well identified using accepted criteria (Bollen 1989).

Results

Descriptive Results: Interracial friendship exposure

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—even co-ethnics. Table 2 describes friendship exposure across lines of race in terms of the probability that a respondent of race A reports having a personal friend of race A (co-ethnics); of race B, C, or D (out groups); or any out-group or all out-groups. Some 79% of respondents in the 29-community sample report having at least one personal friend of some other racial-ethnic group, and more than one-fifth (21%) report having friends of all three out-groups. Consistent with the opportunity-for-contact principle, relative group sizes matter: 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 (available from the author) are highly comparable.

Yet 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. Hispanics and Asians in these locales are somewhat more likely to have a personal friend of some other race/ethnicity than of their own group: 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 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%, \( p < .001 \)). In a related vein, 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%; \( p < .001 \)). This figure is highest for Asians (72.8%), followed by Hispanics (56.1%) and blacks (47.4%, \( p < .001 \)).
Multiple forms of friendship isolation (or exposure) consolidate. 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. 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 (not Asians, due to sample size limitations). 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 also to someone of a different religious background, data not shown). For example, blacks who have white friends are about 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.

The significance 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 $1-(1-p)^3=94\%$ probability of choosing at least one black friend among the three, where $p=$ (outgroup proportion in the local population) and $N=$ (number of choices). In this model, the relationship between friendship exposure and racial make-up is curvilinear, with diminishing “returns to 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 locales, 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 more choices overall. 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).

Figure 1 plots rates of friendship with blacks that were reported by white respondents against the percent of local population that is black. The plot employs a locally weighted scatterplot smoother (loess) to directly detect nonlinear patterns in the data (Cleveland 1993). The pattern matches the functional form predicted by the random-choice model. 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. The same form obtains for white friendships with Hispanics and Asians (plots not shown).\(^5\) Functional form aside, however, actual rates of interracial friendship exposure generally fall short of predicted levels except where the minority outgroup share is below 10% (not shown).\(^6\) These results directly suggest why local pool sizes (of racial outgroups) are so much more predictive for white friendships with other races than vice-versa, consistent with hypotheses derived from macrostructural theory. This is the probabilistic aspect of ties to other races (for whites) in a nation where most metropolitan areas are still majority white (note 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 reduce racial isolation. The relationship is largely flat, with the lowess plot downweighting the extreme outliers of Lewiston and Yakima, which have only a handful of black respondents reporting. Results for Asian and Hispanic respondents (not shown) are comparable, except that there is much less variance in white share of metro population for those two groups as compared to blacks, leaving only the flat-line portion of the relationship evident in Figure 2. These results suggest isolation from whites (even one friend) that may owe to preferences (in-breeding), racially segregated substructures of potential contact, or other factors.

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 regression equations for measures of social participation for all racial groups, 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.

*Friendship exposure for whites (to racial-ethnic minorities).* 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 multiple indices confirm a good fit. This model estimates: (a) direct effects of neighborhood make-up (percent black), social participation measures, and SES on inter-group friendship exposure; (b) effects of SES that are mediated by those variables; and (c) patterns of association among the mediators.

[FIGURE 3 ABOUT HERE]

First, at the within-community level of the diagram, 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). Hypothesis 2 is strongly supported. 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 greater social participation. But higher-SES whites are, as expected, less likely than lower-SES whites to share neighborhoods with blacks. Below, the one-level models provide a calculus of paths to reveal the relative magnitudes of key 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—more specifically, the whiteness of their metro area home (consistent with the bivariate plots above). The observed differences in metro-area racial exposure between communities explain 60% of the variance in white friendship exposure to blacks, 71% for white friendship exposure to Hispanics, and 39% for white friendship exposure to Asians (data not shown). The within-level factors explain much less variance at that level: 9.3%, 7.6%, and 13.2%, respectively.

[TABLE 4 ABOUT HERE]

Table 4 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, metro-level racial make-up is a covariate, and standard errors are clustered by locale. Older whites are more racially insular, net of other factors, and the effect is particularly robust and large for white seniors (age 65 and over). Whites who have black and Hispanic friends tend to be more residentially integrated with those groups as well, and non-religious joining remains highly significant. As for SES, the calculus of paths shows direct effects of SES, as well as total indirect and specific indirect effects of the mediating variables. For whites, higher SES has no significant, direct association with friendship exposure to blacks. The indirect effects via these mediators, however, are large and highly significant: For whites, class effects are closely associated with joining, in the broad sense. Likewise, important life course effects are clearly mediated by social participation (data not shown): 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). Taken together with the models below, these results for white-to-black friendship exposure reflect the curvilinear functional form described for the simple bivariate plots above (as do results, not shown, wherein tract and metro-level outgroup presence is specified by log number rather than percent; the former fits better only in the white-to-black model, and so percents are shown for consistency and simple interpretation). Net of other factors, there are rapidly diminishing “returns” to increased local diversity.

The patterns for white-to-Hispanic (model two) and white-to-Asian friendship exposure (model three) are very similar to white-black friendship exposure in the effects of age, social participation, and the latter as a mediator of class effects. But Asian-Americans are the most geographically concentrated minority group in the sample. As predicted in the discussion of scatterplot results above, metro-level percent Asian is the dominant factor in explaining variation in white friendship exposure to members of this group.

It is the composition of SES effects in the white-to-Asian model that differs sharply from that in the other two models. The direct association between SES and friendship exposure to Asians is 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 cautiously, since “direct” here means not mediated by any of the mediator variables included in the models. One possibility is that the range of mechanisms linking white SES to
friendships with Asians is not captured as well by a model emphasizing social participation factors and neighborhood of residence as mediators. It is also possible that the observed effect reflects Asians’ higher average class standing than blacks or Hispanics. 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 for blacks—higher SES whites are less residentially integrated with Hispanics, and this is associated with more racially insular friendships for whites (supporting Hypothesis 3). The same is not true for exposure to Asians.

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. But these patterns encompass distinct subgroups of whites: Educated, higher income, middle aged married people are the primary joiners of groups (Putnam 2000). On average, they have more friends and are more involved in groups both religious and secular. For whites and other racial groups, those who reported socializing frequently with coworkers 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.

**TABLE 5 ABOUT HERE**

Friendship exposure for blacks, Hispanics, and Asians (to whites). Two-level models (not shown, available from the author) match the white-to-minority, two-level models I reported above, except that within-level factors—respondent’s class status and social participation—explain much more of the within-level variance in friendship exposure to whites than these factors explain for white friendship exposure to minorities: 14.6% of said variance for black respondents, 32.1% for Hispanics, and 25.3% for Asians. The effect of variance in metro-level outgroup size (white presence) is trivial, consistent with the limited variance evident in Figure 2.

The one-level models allow a concise comparison of patterns for minority-group respondents, including factors of special relevance to the social worlds of immigrant minorities, such as citizenship and language use. Multiple indices indicate a strong fit in the three models in Table 5. Nonreligious joining and socializing with coworkers show strong positive associations with friendship exposure to whites for all three minority groups. These, then, appear to be the most universal correlates of friendship exposure, consistent with Hypothesis 2. These factors 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 interracial friendship exposure are mediated by joining, broadly defined.

Yet direct SES effects on friendship exposure are large and positive for the Asians and Hispanics and 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 a robust 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. However, in reduced-form models that exclude citizenship, Hispanic residential integration with white non-Hispanics is associated with friendship exposure ($p<.05$).

For Hispanics, citizenship is a marker of inter-group friendship and attainment: higher SES, joining, socializing, and friendship networks account for almost 40% of the association between citizenship and Hispanic’s 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.

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 population is unimportant for racial minorities’ friendship exposure to whites, only that such population variation is limited in the sample, as in the nation as a whole. Finally, Hypothesis 4, which predicted parallel patterns for Asians and Hispanics in comparison to blacks, was partially supported and Hypothesis 2 strongly so. Social participation factors are robust predictors of interracial friendship exposure for all groups, so Asians and Hispanics, many of whom are immigrants or the children of immigrants, are not only like blacks but also like whites in this respect. Differences between blacks and other minority groups are limited to residential integration (Hypothesis 3 is supported only for blacks and for Hispanic noncitizens), language use, and citizenship.

Discussion

Prior research has indicated why bridges across major social divides are so important as America becomes more ethnically diverse and at the same time more economically unequal. By various measures, 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—despite the fact that those ties are more likely than same-race ties to fade over the life course. But my results emphasize the continuing importance and range, for white Americans, of opportunity for contact. For whites, the odds of having an out-group friend increase rapidly as the metro population goes from all white to “just” 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 and only large metros are becoming majority minority—is shaped significantly by this macrostructural factor. Conversely, for racial minorities, access to and participation in secular civic groups and work-based socializing is most important as a predictor of having a white friend. For all racial groups, in fact, “joining” in the broad sense—involvement in nonreligious groups, socializing with coworkers, and having more friends overall—is the structural factor robustly associated with interracial exposure in friendships. And these factors channel much of the friendship advantages of higher class status.

On the other hand, living in whiter neighborhoods appears to be a unique marker only for the social relationships of blacks and of Hispanic noncitizens. It is also a controversial marker, inside and outside the black community, as discussions of “integration fatigue” and social
engineering challenge the integrationist ideal (Charles 2005). 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. Higher-status blacks have more opportunity for interracial 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 by immigrant minorities (Portes and Zhou 1993).

The positive paths linking class status to having friends of another race signal double trouble in the sense that 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 racially diverse coworkers with whom to socialize. Finally, 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. So those lower-status minorities who “bridge” on one important dimension (race) often bridge on others (economic status and community influence) as well.

These findings also underline the importance of strengthening civic life—for purposes of bridging, not just bonding—in what Arthur Schlesinger (1944) famously termed “a nation of joiners” but where contemporary research has charted marked decline in associational life and other traditional indicators of connectedness or social capital (Paxton 1999; Putnam 2000). The effects of socializing with coworkers highlight the importance of the workplace as a social institution for crossing racial and other divides (Estlund 2003). Some workplaces are quite segregated by race/ethnicity, of course, and this appears to vary by locale according to industrial structure. Workplaces can also be conflict-ridden. But like organized associations, workplaces show multiple features, missing or fragile in neighborhoods and other loosely bounded 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.

For these reasons and more, more research is needed on the causal mechanisms that underlie the structural patterns uncovered in this study and on the links among networks, associational involvement, trust, political and social attitudes, lifestyle, and experiences of discrimination in varied contexts. Using the same survey data, for example, Putnam has 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).

But diverse environments also make it more possible to create social bridges in ways that are important for each of us and for society as a whole. The 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 dominate settlement patterns worldwide and become ethnically diverse to an unprecedented degree.

References


Granovetter, Mark. “The Strength of Weak Ties Hypothesis.” American Journal of Sociology 78(6):


1 In the models, I used Census 2000 data on racial make-up at the metro level, since these data were collected in the SCCBS survey year (1999) and thus offer the most contemporary measures of the local “pool” of contacts for survey respondents. But since the SCCBS data included only 1990 tract geography, the tract-level measures are from the 1990 Census. Friendship formation lags changes in the pool of potential contacts.

2 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.

3 These rates compare favorably with random digit dial (RDD) phone surveys conducted by major polling organizations and leading survey research firms, although the average SCCBS interview was 50% longer (in call time) than the average for those others (Holbrook, Krosnick, and Pfent, n.d.). The adjusted cooperation rate, which varied across community samples in the SCCBS, is the share of eligible respondents reached who agreed to participate and completed the interview. Cooperation with telephone surveys has dropped in the past two decades even as costs of face-to-face interviewing have risen sharply (Weisberg, Krosnick, and Bowen 1996). Phone surveying is much more cost effective, but how representative, reliable, and valid are the data? The SCCBS samples are carefully weighted to reflect age, gender, education level, and ethnic composition of the local and national populations. In addition, to maximize both contact and cooperation rates, the SCCBS survey personnel made up to 10 call-backs for all but “hard” refusals (Roper Center 2001). But failed contact and cooperation raise the question of response bias in the specific relationships of interest in the study. The most careful studies of response rate and data quality across multiple surveys and survey modes suggest that nonresponse bias is typically modest in comparison to social desirability, satisficing, and other sources of bias in survey research (Chang and Krosnick 2003; Green and Krosnick 2001; Holbrook, Green, and Krosnick 2003; Holbrook, Krosnick, and Pfent, n.d.). In addition, Robert Putnam reports, in personal communication with the author, that “the harder interviews were only modestly different from the easy ones,” that the “people who were harder to find at home” (limiting the contact rate) were somewhat more likely to be young, black, and urban, while “the people who were harder to convince to take the interview” (limiting the cooperation rate) were slightly older, whites, and more prejudiced. “But these differences were modest,” he notes. For this study, I found no significant associations between cooperation rates, which range from 30% to 57% across the 29 locales, and key variables or effects of interest.

4 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 (e.g., Baerveldt et al 2004; Quillian and Campbell 2003).

6 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.