

Multiple Dimensions of Racial Group Identification Among Adult Black Americans

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Although increasing attention has been brought to examining group identity among Black adults, we know little about reference groups within the overall racial group category. Using National Study of Black America data for 2,107 respondents, the present study highlighted various components of group identification among adult Black Americans. Structural equation modeling revealed three dimensions to identity (masses, elites, and rebels) variously associated with a set of sociodemographic and residential variables. Respondents who were older, married, less educated, and living in the South and in rural areas were most likely to identify with the masses. Older, rural, less educated, and married people also felt close to elites, as did those with low incomes. Finally, the young, males, those with low incomes, and not from the South felt close to rebels. The results support describing at least three reference groups within what is typically called Black group identity.

Experiencing racism provides a unique set of societal restrictions that create dilemmas for developing self-esteem. In this situation, feelings about the self must often be developed through alternative frames of reference, in

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part by separating one's personal sense of self from the negative perceptions attached to one's racial group membership. The manner in which individuals relate to their group as a source of strength, common history, and identification is an important part of this process and an issue that deserves greater sociological and psychological scrutiny.

Reflecting its importance in Black lives, research on group identity has been the focus of much of the social psychological literature on Black Americans (Cross, 1991; Demo & Hughes, 1990; Helms, 1990). In the psychological literature, there has been a substantial increase in studies focusing on racial identity development in particular (e.g., Helms, 1990; Helms & Parham, 1991; Parham, 1993; Parham & Williams, 1993; Plummer, 1995; Stevenson, 1995; Watts, 1992; White & Parham, 1990). Much of the theory development in this area has been driven by Cross's model of nigrescence (Cross, 1971, 1978, 1991). Although this work has brought us a far distance in terms of helping to see identity as a complex and multidimensional process, there remains little empirical research on the impact of family, community, and other larger societal influences on the promotion or inhibition of mature racial identities (Allen & Thornton, 1992; Allen, Thornton, & Watkins, 1992; Broman, Jackson, & Neighbors, 1989; Demo & Hughes, 1990; Ellison, 1991; Taylor & Thornton, 1993). Furthermore, few works have explored the composition of "Black" as a referent, for identification is assumed to be with the racial group *per se*. We examine this assumption here, highlighting identification with various subgroups within Black America.

Our results raise a number of important questions regarding the varied connections between sociodemographic and subgroup differences in feelings of closeness to three reference groups. There are a number of these relationships, as well as the dynamics of these crosscutting allegiances, that remain unclear. How these factors interrelate with cultural contact and individual commitment to the group needs to be examined in subsequent research. This and other work will add to a more complete understanding of this complex and important issue.

LITERATURE REVIEW

CORRELATES OF BLACK IDENTITY

It is not easy to characterize the potential reference groups involved in group identification among Black adults, in part because of limited research

on this issue. Among sociologists, social class is traditionally seen as the primary determinant of racial group identity. Class position is associated with changes in worldviews and life chances that flow from market position and social prestige (Landry, 1987; Weber, 1946; Wilson, 1979). Further, class measures a particular set of subjective experiences that are believed to transcend racial boundaries. Nonetheless, among Black Americans, its effects on group identity are usually found to be mixed. When related at all, class is generally negatively associated with closeness to Blacks (Allen, Dawson, & Brown, 1989; Allen & Hatchett, 1986; Parham & Williams, 1993).

Some researchers, using militancy (a willingness to use violence to achieve rights) as a measure, found group identification strongest among those of lower socioeconomic status (e.g., Allen et al., 1989), whereas others describe upper-class Blacks as the most militant and strongly group identified (Kronus, 1971; Marx, 1969). Broman, Neighbors, and Jackson (1988) discovered that class was associated with identification in varying ways. They found that age, education, region, and urbanicity were positively related to identification. Older, less educated respondents in urban areas and highly educated Blacks living outside the West were most likely to feel close to other Blacks.

Gurin, Hatchett, and Jackson (1989) used two measures of identity—common fate and whether respondents felt more Black than American. They describe those of upper socioeconomic status and men as having stronger identities based on the first measure. The second measure revealed that younger respondents and those not employed full-time were more likely to identify with being Black than being American. What these studies all have in common is that they envision group identity as a globally positive or negative feeling toward Blacks as a category.

In practice, this has meant that the Black referent is seen as a homogeneous entity. However, in reality, one interacts with subgroups within the racial category and not with the race per se (Lau, 1989). Ignoring this, as many researchers do, assumes that there are no racial group subdivisions of note and that race alone is primary in group identification. Thus, rarely in the empirical literature are feelings toward the group viewed as a mixture of positive and negative feelings or involving an affinity with some aspects of the group coupled with attempts to disassociate from others (Jackson, McCullough, & Gurin, 1988; McAdoo, 1985; Thornton, Chatters, Taylor, & Allen, 1990). Nevertheless, mixed feelings toward the group are especially true for minorities, who must contend with the negative images of their group that permeate society. Among psychologists, Cross's recent development of

the nigrescence model comes closest to appreciating this distinction (Cross, Parham, & Helms, 1991). In his stages of development, Black identity can contain anti-Black and White cultural attitudes across the life span with one theme or another predominating at any given time. Nonetheless, our reading of his work suggests that the model says much more about the process by which Blacks begin to bond with other Blacks as a group than it illuminates explicit reference groups within Blackness.

Some emerging evidence suggests that racial group identity is a set of superordinate-subordinate reference groups that differ by individual and situation (Cross, 1985; Light, 1981). Light (1981) suggested that a wide range of boundaries delimits any ethnic group and may be continental, national, regional, or local in focus. Allen and Hatchett (1986) identified two subgroups within the racial category. Mainstream groups (those whom the larger society perceives as successful and holding relatively prestigious positions) were held in high esteem, particularly by younger and lower-income respondents. Older and less educated adults identified with nonmainstream Blacks (those holding relatively nonprestigious positions). Later, Allen et al. (1989) found that identification with masses (nonmainstream) and elites (mainstream) was negatively associated with socioeconomic status. Collectively, these works suggest an array of potentially important boundaries prioritized in a variety of ways, in part determined by social location and experience.

Although widely discussed in the literature, a formal description of the internal dimensions of group identification among Black Americans has rarely been attempted. This article will extend previous analyses by including a wider selection of demographic variables (gender, marital status, urbanicity, and region) than was incorporated by previous works. The purpose of the present research is to investigate the components of group identity, focusing on the specific subgroups (i.e., reference groups) within that identity and the sociodemographic factors that correlate with feelings toward these groups. Further, the present analysis will explore other possible reference groups within the racial category by analyzing the total sample instead of the subsample used in Allen et al. (1989). This analysis is not an exhaustive examination of all the factors influencing identity or all the dimensions to identity. Rather, the purpose of this research is to offer some initial hypotheses about this important question and provide some data that tentatively support them in the hopes that subsequent research will refine them as more evidence is gathered.

METHODS

DATA AND SAMPLE DESCRIPTION

Data used in this study came from the National Survey of Black Americans 1979-1980 (Neighbors & Jackson, 1984), a multistage area probability sample of the adult Black population. This data set contains 2,107 respondents between the ages of 18 and 101 years. The mean age for the respondents is 43 years ($SD = 17$ years). Females made up 62% of the sample, and respondents in a legal or common-law marriage made up 42% of the sample. With respect to educational attainment, 44% had less than 12 years of school, whereas 8.8% had a college degree. More than half of the respondents (53%) resided in the South, the majority lived in urban areas (79.8%). Twenty-five percent of the respondents reported that their family income was under \$5,000, whereas 22.5% had a family income above \$20,000. The rest of the sample (42.4%) had a family income ranging between \$5,000 and \$19,999. A detailed description of the sample and the sampling procedure of the National Study of Black Americans is provided elsewhere (see Neighbors & Jackson, 1984).

MEASURES OF RACIAL GROUP IDENTIFICATION

Racial group identification was measured by a 10-item scale. The following is a sample question used to measure racial group identification: "How close do you feel in your ideas and feelings about things to those of Black people who are poor? Do you feel very close, fairly close, not too close, or not close at all to Black people who are poor?" Table 1 presents the description of the 10 items used in this analysis.

DATA ANALYSIS

Data analysis was undertaken in two phases via LISREL VI software (Jöreskog & Sörbom, 1986). First, a confirmatory factor analysis was performed to evaluate the measurement model of Black racial group identification (Black identity). This measurement model, as described in Table 1, encompasses three dimensions of racial group identification. Next, a simple path model was examined with three dimensions of racial group identification

TABLE 1
Description of Items Used in the Measurement Model of Black Identity

Identification with the masses
How close do you feel in your ideas and your feelings about things to those of Black people who are poor?
How close do you feel in your ideas and your feelings about things to those of religious church-going Black people?
How close do you feel in your ideas and your feelings about things to those of young Black people?
How close do you feel in your ideas and your feelings about things to those of middle-class Black people?
How close do you feel in your ideas and your feelings about things to those of working-class people?
How close do you feel in your ideas and your feelings about things to those of older Black people?
Identification with the elites
How close do you feel in your ideas and your feelings about things to those of Black elected officials?
How close do you feel in your ideas and your feelings about things to those of Black doctors, lawyers, and other Black professional people?
Identification with the rebels
How close do you feel in your ideas and your feelings about things to those of Black people who rioted in the cities?
How close do you feel in your ideas and your feelings about things to those of Black people who have made it by getting around the law?

as endogenous variables, and seven sociodemographic variables as exogenous variables, that is, age, gender, marital status (married vs. otherwise), education, family income, region (South vs. others), and urbanicity (urban vs. rural). The purpose of the path analysis is straightforward. We examine the direct effect of the sociodemographic variables on three dimensions of racial group identification. We expect that these variables will exert differing effects on three dimensions of racial group identification.

RESULTS

DIMENSIONS OF RACIAL GROUP IDENTIFICATION

Table 2 presents the standardized factor loadings, the reliability, and error estimates of 10 observed measures on three dimensions of racial group

TABLE 2
Standardized Maximum Likelihood Factor Loadings
on Three Dimensions of Black Identity Model

<i>Dimension × Item^a</i>	<i>Loadings^b</i>	<i>Reliability</i>	<i>Errors</i>
Identification with the masses			
Close to poor Blacks	.517	.267	.733
Close to religious Blacks	.596	.355	.645
Close to young Blacks	.534	.285	.715
Close to middle-class Blacks	.609	.370	.630
Close to working-class Blacks	.678	.459	.541
Close to older Blacks	.642	.412	.588
Identification with the elites			
Close to Black elected officials	.851	.724	.276
Close to Black professionals	.774	.600	.400
Identification with the rebels			
Close to Blacks who rioted	.729	.532	.468
Close to lawless Blacks	.576	.332	.668

a. See Table 1 for full description of the items.

b. All factor loadings are significantly different from zero at .05 level or less.

identification. The first dimension (identification with the masses) was measured by six observed items that assessed the degree of closeness of the respondents toward six groups comprising the Black masses. They had relatively high factor loadings of .517 to .678 and were statistically significant. Overall, the factor loadings, and the reliability and error estimates suggest that the dimension of identification with the masses was relatively well assessed by these six items.

The second dimension of racial group identification was measured by two items designed to assess the respondents' closeness toward two Black elite groups: elected officials and professionals. The results in Table 2 reveal that two observed items of the dimension of identification with the elites had high and statistically significant factor loadings ranging from .774 to .851. Together, the standardized factor loadings, the reliability, and the error estimates confirm that the two items were appropriate indicators of this dimension of racial group identification.

The third dimension was measured by two items: closeness toward Blacks who rioted and lawless Blacks. This dimension was named identification with the rebels. Table 2 results also suggest that these two items had high and statistically significant factor loadings ranging from .576 to .729. Overall, the standardized factor loadings, the reliability, and the error estimates of the two items confirm that they are appropriate measures of this dimension.

TABLE 3
Correlations Among Three Dimensions and Goodness-of-Fit of the
Measurement Model of Black Identity

Correlations ^a			
1. Identification with the masses	1.000		
2. Identification with the elites	.730	1.000	
3. Identification with the rebels	.127	.243	1.000
Goodness-of-Fit Index ^b			
Goodness-of-fit index	.965		
Adjusted goodness-of-fit index	.940		
Root mean square residual	.042		
Bentler-Bonett normed index ^c	.927		
Bollen incremental fit index ^c	.934		
Hoepfer's CN ^c	245.815		

a. All coefficients of correlation are significantly different from zero at .05 level or less.

b. Chi-square (32 *df*) 311.320 ($p = .000$).

c. For an in-depth discussion of these measures of fit, see Bollen and Long (1993).

Table 3 presents additional results of the confirmatory factor analysis to further explain the relationships among three dimensions of Black racial group identification. Correlations among the three dimensions ranged from .127 to .730. Although there was a high correlation between identification with the masses and identification with the elites ($r = .730$), it is far from unity (i.e., $r = 1.00$). The significant relationships among the three dimensions suggest that racial identification is not a unidimensional construct. Each dimension refers to a specific subgroup of the Black population and has a unique theoretical meaning in the measurement of racial group identification.

Table 3 also provides information on the goodness-of-fit measures of the measurement model of Black racial group identification. The significant chi-square indicates a lack of fit. However, the chi-square is considered a nonreliable measure of fit for the large sample size (see Bollen, 1989). Other measures of fit presented in Table 3 indicate that the measurement model of Black racial group identification had an acceptable degree of fit, suggesting that the model was relatively well supported by the data. Explanations for these measures of fit have been well presented in the literature (see Bollen, 1989).

EFFECTS OF SOCIODEMOGRAPHIC VARIABLES

We used LISREL IV software (Jöreskog & Sörbom, 1986) to examine the direct effects of the sociodemographic variables on the dimensions of racial

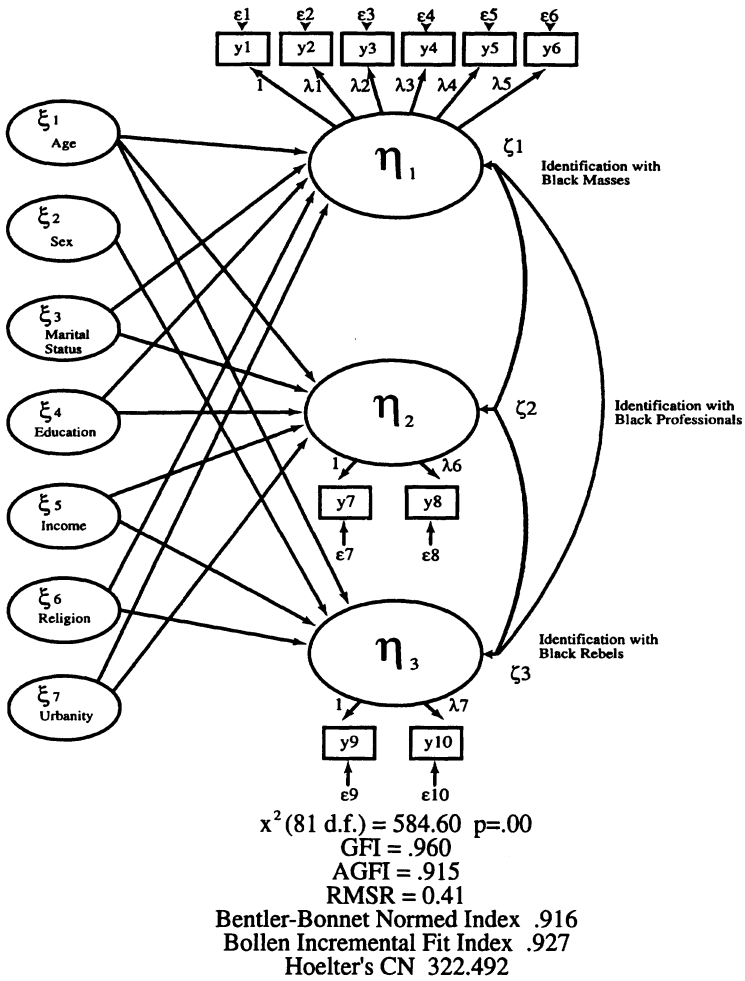


Figure 1: Path Model of Significant Demographic Variables and Black Identity

identity. This method of data analysis allows us to examine the effects of seven exogenous variables on three correlated endogenous variables while taking into account the errors in the structural equations and their correlations. The path model of the sociodemographic variables on the identity dimensions is presented in Figure 1. All measures of fit presented in Figure 1 indicate that the path model had an acceptable fit with the data.

TABLE 4
The Effects of Demographic Variables on
Three Dimensions of Black Identity

	<i>Identification With</i>		
	<i>Masses</i>	<i>Elites</i>	<i>Rebels</i>
Dimensions			
Age	.246*	.200*	-.292*
Gender	.003	.025	.179*
Marital status	.079*	.069*	.012
Education	-.115*	-.117*	.034
Income	.011	-.075*	-.175*
Region	.079*	.043	-.112*
Urbanicity	-.131*	-.190*	-.018

* $p < .05$.

Table 4 presents the effects of age, gender, marital status, education, family income, region, and urbanicity on the dimensions of Black identity. The findings reveal that age had a significant effect on identification with the masses ($\gamma = .246, p < .05$), elites ($\gamma = .200, p < .05$), and rebels ($\gamma = -.292, p < .05$). Older Blacks tended to identify with the masses and professionals more than their younger counterparts; younger Blacks, however, were more likely to identify with rebels. Gender had a significant effect on identification with the rebels ($\gamma = .179, p < .05$), suggesting that men identified with rebels more than women. Marital status was associated with identification with the masses ($\gamma = .079, p < .05$) and with the elites ($\gamma = .069, p < .05$), with married Blacks identifying with both the masses and elites.

Education was significantly associated with identification with the masses ($\gamma = -.115, p < .05$) and the elites ($\gamma = -.117, p < .05$). Blacks with higher levels of education tended to identify with the masses and elites to a lesser degree than did those with lower levels of education. Individuals with higher incomes tended to identify with the elites ($\gamma = -.075, p < .05$) and Black rebels ($\gamma = -.175, p < .05$) to a lesser degree than did those with lower incomes. Blacks who lived in the South were more likely to identify with the masses ($\gamma = .079, p < .05$) to a greater degree than did those from other parts of the United States, whereas they tended not to identify with rebels ($\gamma = -.112, p < .05$). Urban Blacks also were less likely to identify with the masses ($\gamma = -.131, p < .05$) and elites ($\gamma = -.190, p < .05$) than were their rural counterparts.

DISCUSSION

Emerging work describes group identity among Black adults as a heterogeneous and complex phenomenon. Among researchers who explore the issue, there have been two reference groups identified within the racial category (Allen et al., 1989). The present analysis expands the scope of this research by identifying a third referent to group membership and augments our understanding of the influence of sociodemographic factors on its contours. Closeness to the masses, reflecting a perceived common fate with most of Black America, is one important referent to identity. The elites are another, associated with the realization that racial interests are best served through Black leadership. Finally, the third dimension is the rebels. This segment of Black America involves those who succeed outside the law.

A variety of sociodemographic variables influence attachments to each of these reference groups. Older, married (vs. nonmarried), those with lower levels of education, and those from the South and rural areas feel especially close to masses. These same groups (except the married and Southerners) feel closer to elites. Additionally, elites are held in more intimate regard by those with lower incomes (vs. higher). Finally, those who circumvent the law are seen as an important referent by young male respondents, those with little income and from outside the South.

In total, the associations between education, income, and identity paint a picture of an intricate set of interconnections within Black communities, with certain segments more or less linked to each other. Older respondents, those with little education, and those living outside of cities are most strongly identified with the mainstream, the mainstay, of Black elites and the masses. Lower income is associated with ties to only rebels, whereas living in the South is linked to positive feelings with the masses. Thus, conservative segments of Black America feel the greatest affinity with wider segments of the community. Parts of this conservative element also holds strong feelings toward those who exist outside the mainstream, the rebels. Older, upper-income, and female respondents, as well as Southerners, feel enmity toward rebels.

In contrast, rebels attract the most disfranchised sectors of Black communities: the young, males, poor, and non-Southerners. Rebels long have been a significant segment of Black communities, their existence reflecting one type of reaction to restricted chances for socioeconomic success in America. Their attempts to gain a measure of economic success receive mixed reviews

from mainstream Black society, some identifying with them, whereas others distance themselves from at least their aberrant behavior; the most educated are neutral, however. It is not surprising that the dispossessed of Black society are most connected with lawbreakers and those having achieved a measure of success outside the mainstream. Research on the underclass and poverty suggests that a sizable and growing segment of Black America is comprised of young, urban residents, the poor, and males marginally attached to the labor force and, ultimately, to society (Wilson, 1987, 1989). To empathize with rebels is a reflection of the dire economic straits envisioned by large segments of Black America, intimating the social ambiguity experienced by these groups. That Allen et al. (1989) did not uncover this third dimension may be due to their using a smaller sample for their analysis or that exploring dimensions of group identity was not the major focus of their analysis.

Among the sociodemographic variables, the most consistently predictive is age. Older Blacks felt closer to the masses and elites, whereas younger respondents felt connected to rebels. Age has been found to be strongly predictive of all kinds of racial attitudes, including both intra- and intergroup identity (Broman et al., 1988; Gurin et al., 1989; Thornton & Mizuno, 1995; Thornton & Taylor, 1988a, 1988b). Black elders hold stronger views on racial solidarity than do their younger counterparts (e.g., Smith & Thornton, 1993), a disposition enhanced by growing up in an era when racial strictures were supreme determinants of one's life and when personal and racial group fortunes were inextricably intertwined. The elderly distance themselves from rebels perhaps because they are envisioned as reflecting poorly on Black communities and jeopardizing the attainment of group goals. That younger adults identify with rebels may be related to (a) the restricted economic options for many of them, (b) feelings of estrangement from the mainstream of Black communities, and (c) not sharing the cultural ethos that developed among older Blacks in the South. Younger respondents may envision the route taken by rebels as a more appealing or realistic means to the ends of economic success. It remains unclear if these relationships represent aging, cohort, or period effects. Some work suggests that this may be a cohort effect related to experience with various civil rights eras (Brown, 1991). Subsequent research should examine more closely this growing evidence of a bond between age and group identification.

Measures of social class were inconsistently associated with the dimensions of Black identification. Although education and income fit the general pattern, there is some variation. Generally, we found social class negatively associated with identity. Increased education is accompanied by psychological distance from most Black communities but, interestingly, is unrelated to feelings toward the rebels. This association suggests that the well educated

are alienated from the core of Black society (masses and elites) but remain ambiguous toward those who are outside of or work against the system. Perhaps they are ambiguous about the methods they have taken to get success or maybe they understand why others might take a different route, especially those with fewer resources available to them. In contrast, income was related to feelings toward rebels and elites. Those of higher income distanced themselves from elites and rebels and felt no special feeling toward the masses. This ambiguous bond of the middle class to other Blacks is also described in Parham and Williams (1993).

This general malaise among the middle class toward other Blacks, even those of similar social class background, may reflect their relatively recent social mobility. The ambiguous joining with other aspects of Black society draws parallels to groups described by the marginality literature (Park, 1927; Stonequist, 1961). It hypothesizes that persons attempting to move into a new setting with a group reluctant to accept them will become strangers to both the old and the new settings. Caught between two conflicting social groups, these people are prone to a measure of social ambiguity, divided loyalties, and/or psychological distress. The distress of this position for many in the middle class has received only scant attention (Banks, 1984; Lacayo, 1989). Nevertheless, feelings of isolation and divided loyalties are documented among middle-class Blacks living in predominantly White neighborhoods (Tatum, 1987).

The conventional view is that social location, norms, and roles provide the framework from which people work. Identity is in essence a matter of being designated by a name, accepting it, internalizing the role requirements accompanying it, and behaving according to those prescriptions; social location almost seems deterministic of identity. Nevertheless, the individual has impact as well, for identity is not simply imposed from the outside. People differ in their definitions of group boundaries and the strength and direction of identification, clearly seen in the research on racial identity development (e.g., Cross et al. 1991; Parham & Williams, 1993; Stevenson, 1995). Furthermore, the present analysis indicates that racial group identity involves a selective process, for it is targeted to specific subgroups and not to a globally undifferentiated entity.

Other factors not addressed here need to be considered in future analyses. How close the individual is to different sociocultural and symbolic realities is affected particularly by such things as the level and type of contact with other group members (Adoni & Mane, 1984; Allen & Hatchett, 1986). One's cultural environment plays a key role in hindering or enhancing the affinity (Cornell, 1985, as cited in See & Wilson, 1988). Broman et al. (1989) found identity positively related to being raised in a concordant race group environ-

ment. Parham and Williams (1993) found that the region of socialization was related to where one appeared in stages of development of nigrescence. This cultural basis to affiliations influences both how psychologically and structurally integrated to the group one might be, such as in the special effort Black parents make, for example, to socialize their children to racial identity when living in predominantly White neighborhoods (Tatum, 1987; Thornton et al., 1990). We need to understand better how the quality of contact and of interaction affect the nature of group identity. Like those who live in White areas, perhaps Blacks living in rural areas identify more closely because they need to make a special effort to maintain an affinity they cannot take for granted. Subsequent work also needs to explore racial residential patterns more generally (e.g., Broman et al., 1989) but also, given the age of data used for this analysis, how many of our results may be due to a cohort effect.

Group identity is a complex interaction between personal and social definitions. To have identity means to join with some people and depart from others, both within and without the group. Because identity is not imposed by society in an absolute way, individuals often differ in how they define group boundaries and how strongly they identify with their own and other groups. Consequently, the process by which joinings and departures are determined and the type of identity developed will vary among group members (Broman et al., 1988; Thornton et al., 1990; Thornton & Taylor, 1988a, 1988b). Moreover, one's global view of the group may often be at odds with how one feels about specific subpopulations within the larger group. Differences are made into boundaries only when those differences are made significant by any number of personal and social factors.

Socially prescribed and individual designations do not always correspond (Becker, 1963). Identities are sustained and claimed in reciprocal relationships, giving purpose, direction and guidance to one's life. Psychologists document the process of partial identification by members of pariah or socially despised groups with members of socially respected groups. This process of ambivalent identification generates complex ethnic boundaries (Horowitz, 1985, pp. 166-184). For Black Americans, race and nation produce omnipresent and often counterposing roles; strongly identifying with one often means conflict with the other. The mixed and often antagonistic messages emanating from both reference groups suggest that Black racial group identification involves a valence of positive and negative feelings.

The present analysis provides an extended understanding of works by Allen et al. (1989) and Broman et al. (1988) about group identification among Black adults as a multidimensional phenomenon. The use of a multidimensional construct of Black identity has both theoretical and empirical implications. Theoretically, the multifaceted nature of Black identity suggests that it

is shaped by different reference sources. In addition, each dimension of Black identity may have different causes and effects. At the empirical level, the use of the more intricate construct of Black identity allows investigators to examine the directions and magnitudes of the relationship between a particular variable with each dimension of Black identity. We demonstrated this issue by the examination of the relationships between seven sociodemographic variables and three dimensions of Black identity.

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