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The Affordable Hypothesis Punitive beliefs, violent beliefs, and race

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Abstract

This study introduces the Affordable Hypothesis, an idea suggesting that whites can afford to harbor violent beliefs in interpersonal and criminal justice system situations because of their generally vicarious involvement in such violence. Conversely, blacks do not foster violent beliefs (contrary to the black subculture of violence thesis) because their relationship with such violence is substantially more real based on offending and victimization data. Using aggregated GSS data 1972–1996, whites were found to have more violent beliefs than blacks in interpersonal and criminal justice system situations net a variety of controls. Implications from these findings are discussed. © 2001 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

Introduction

In the United States, involvement in conventional street crime is a staggering social problem for Blacks, but not for Whites. Blacks are significantly more likely than Whites to be arrested for violent crimes, such as murder (8:1), rape (5:1), robbery (10:1), and aggravated assault (4:1) (U.S. Department of Justice, 1997); moreover, the arrest process itself (measured by police use of force and incidents of police brutality) is generally a more violent experience for blacks than whites (see Kennedy, 1997). The homicide rate for Black males 12–24 years old is 115 per 100,000; the comparable rate for Whites is 12 per 100,000 (U.S. Department of Justice, 1994). Since most crimes are intraracial, Blacks suffer with commensurately imbalanced victimization rates. For example, among 15–24-year-old Black males, homicide is the leading cause of death (U.S. Department of Justice, 1994). Over the life course, Blacks are seven times more likely to be incarcerated than Whites. Although

Blacks comprise 12 percent of the population and Whites 80 percent, there are more Blacks than Whites incarcerated in state prisons. In sum, crime is a monstrous social problem for the relatively small African American population and a negligible irritant for the majority white population.

Literature review

One explanation for the African American over-involvement in violent, conventional street crime is that a machismo-based subculture exists, particularly among young, urban males, which stresses violence as a means of earning and defending status. According to the black subculture of violence thesis (Wolfgang & Ferracutti, 1967), the slightest affront necessitates a violent response in order to save face. Consequently, violent interpersonal crime is a normative, not deviant, characteristic of certain African American communities. Investigations of the Black subculture of violence thesis abound. Some have supported the theory (Harer & Steffensmeier, 1996; Hartnagel, 1980; Magura, 1975; Messner, 1983;

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Sampson, 1985), while others have not (Ball-Rokeach, 1973; Cao, Adams, & Jensen, 1997; Dixon & Lizette, 1987; Erlanger, 1974; Kornhauser, 1978, pp. 186–188; Nettler, 1978; Sampson, 1987; Shoemaker & Williams, 1987). The majority of these refutations of the theory employed survey-research methods; it is possible that persons of either race, who most vociferously advocate violence (e.g., persons involved in committing Part I Index offenses), are not those completing the General Social Survey (GSS). It is worth noting that varied qualitative researchers (e.g., Anderson, 1994; Cleaver, 1970; Scott, 1993) have demonstrated the existence of a criminal normative system that was analogous to the one described by the Black subculture of violence thesis.

In addition to subcultural theory and its variants, criminologists have found that the relationship between race and violent beliefs was mediated by criminal victimization, fear of crime, and punitive beliefs. It was hypothesized that persons with victimization experience and fear of crime would express greater condemnation toward criminal offenders, yet inconsistent results have been reported in determining the effect of victimization and fear on racial attitudes toward violence (see Hurwitz & Peffley, 1997; Liska, Lawrence, & Sanchirico, 1982; Stafford & Galle, 1984). In contrast, researchers have consistently found that Whites were more retributive, punitive, and unforgiving in their beliefs than Blacks. This “law-and-order” belief system common among some Whites (e.g., Browning & Cao, 1992; Hamilton & Rytina, 1980) contributed to their advocacy of violence administered by the criminal justice system (Aguirre & Baker, 1993; Barkan & Cohn, 1994, 1998; Bohm, 1992; Cohn, Barkan, & Halteman, 1991; Sandys & McGarrell, 1995; Warr & Stafford, 1984). The integral distinction between punitive beliefs and subculture-based violent beliefs is that punitive beliefs imply the administration of state or criminal justice system violence, whereas the subculture of violence implies interpersonal violence.

Purpose of the study and hypotheses

The Black subculture of violence thesis has been often contradicted with the finding that Whites, not Blacks, felt violence was an appropriate means of resolving interpersonal disputes and facilitating criminal justice policies. Instead of articulating an explicit reason for this, researchers simply noted that this detracted from the validity of subcultural criminological theories that implicated race. Perhaps because violent crime has been con-

strued as a Black phenomenon that necessitated White intervention (see Chambliss, 1994; Covington, 1995; Monteiro, 1994; Peterson & Hagan, 1984; Wilson, 1992), little thought was allocated to violent-belief systems among Whites. The current study attempts to address this void by introducing the Affordable Hypothesis.

No demographic group is more beleaguered by crime than African Americans. Although the staggeringly high offending and victimization rates are generally consigned to young, impoverished males, African Americans generally suffer from a criminal stereotype that causes considerable resentment (see Hagan & Albonetti, 1982; Miller, Rossi, & Simpson, 1986). Exposure to violence is such a brute social reality in the African American community that blacks see little use in advocating or fostering beliefs favorable to a phenomenon that inundates them. Conversely, Whites suffer from no criminogenic stereotype, are not implicated in a racialized theory of criminal violence, and experience offending and victimization rates that are disproportionately below their demographic numbers. The probability that most Whites will ever experience interpersonal or criminal justice system violence is quite low. Indeed, for higher socioeconomic strata of the White community, the chances of violent victimization are infinitesimal. A consequence of this vicarious relationship with violence is that Whites can afford to harbor violent beliefs although it is doubtful they would actually be willing or able to use violence in interpersonal disputes.¹ Affirming violence, particularly by advocating a rigid “law-and-order” perspective, is inconsequential for Whites who do not live in areas characterized by violent crime, who will not be harassed by the police, and who will never be involved in violent criminal offending that is potentially punishable by death. Violence is a novel, essentially nonreal phenomenon that Whites romanticize in their beliefs vis-à-vis Blacks. The central hypotheses of this study intend to demonstrate the Affordable Hypothesis.

Hypothesis 1: Whites are more likely than Blacks to foster violent beliefs in interpersonal situations.

Hypothesis 2: Whites are more likely than Blacks to be punitive and advocate criminal justice system or state violence.

Methods

The GSS conducted by the National Opinion Research Center is a national probability sample of

Table 1
Descriptive statistics for GSS sample 1972–1996

Variable	Mean	Standard deviation	Range
Education	12.36	3.20	0–20
Age	45.05	17.58	18–89
	N	Percent	
<i>Race</i>			
Whites	29,604	83.9	
Blacks	4783	13.6	
<i>Sex</i>			
Females	19,817	56.2	
Males	15,467	43.8	
<i>Political views</i>			
Extremely liberal	701	2.0	
Liberal	3387	9.6	
Slightly liberal	4055	11.5	
Moderate	11,553	32.7	
Slightly conservative	5027	14.2	
Conservative	4214	11.9	
Extremely conservative	851	2.4	
<i>Fear</i>			
Yes	9895	43.2	
No	12,986	56.8	
<i>Region</i>			
South	12,010	34	
Non-South	23,274	66	

English-speaking adults living in noninstitutional arrangements in the United States. The current study uses the cumulative GSS survey from 1972 to 1996 (total $N = 35,824$). See Davis and Smith (1996) for a discussion of sampling strategies and other methodology issues. The aggregated GSS data are ideal because of: (1) magnitude, (2) national scope, (3) inclusion of questions about approval of interpersonal and state violence, and (4) individual-level unit of

analysis that is most appropriate for the study of individual beliefs (Bernard, 1990; Luckenbill & Doyle, 1989).²

Two types of dependent variables were used: those that measured approval of interpersonal violence, and those that measured approval of state or criminal justice system violence and indicated punitive beliefs. The four dependent variables measuring interpersonal violent beliefs were: approval of adult male striking another adult male who had beaten/struck his child (no=0/yes=1), approval of adult male striking another adult male who had beaten/struck his wife (no=0/yes=1), approval of adult male striking another adult male who was drunk (no=0/yes=1), and approval of adult male striking another adult male for any reason (no=0/yes=1). The five dependent variables measuring state-violent beliefs were: support of capital punishment for convicted murderers (no=0/yes=1), approval of police striking an adult male who had attacked the police (no=0/yes=1), approval of police striking an adult male for any reason (no=0/yes=1), approval of police striking an adult male who was abusive (no=0/yes=1), and approval of police striking an adult male who was a murder suspect (no=0/yes=1). Reliable factor scales measuring these two general phenomena were unable to be constructed because hitting and police-force questions were administered sporadically in the GSS (see Davis & Smith, 1996).

Eight independent variables were used: race (White=0/Black=1), sex (female=0/male=1), education (highest year of completed education ranging from 0 to 20), political views (ranging from *extremely liberal*=1 to *extremely conservative*=7), age (ranging from 18 to 89), and year of survey (ranging from 1972 to 1996), region (Non-South=0/South=1), and

Table 2
Logistic regression coefficients for interpersonal violent beliefs: (1) child abuser, (2) domestic abuser, (3) drunkard, and (4) general approval of violence

Variable	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Education	-.06***	.02*	.06***	.10***
Race (black = 1)	-.38***	-.31***	-1.10***	-.69***
Sex (male = 1)	-.36***	-.28***	.08	-.19***
Region (South = 1)	.57***	.21***	.05	.10*
Fear (yes = 1)	.09	.12**	.12*	.17***
Age	.02***	-.02***	-.02***	-.01***
Political views	.00	.03	.08***	.03
Year	-.00	.02***	.02***	-.01***
<i>n</i>	7983	7887	7879	7797
χ^2	241.8	432.7	333.8	418.8
Pseudo R^2	.03	.05	.04	.05

* $P < .10$.

** $P < .05$.

*** $P < .01$.

Table 3

Logistic regression coefficients for criminal justice violent belief measures: (1) capital punishment and police violence against, (2) assaultive men, (3) murder suspects, (4) abusive men, and (5) general advocacy of police violence

Variable	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
Education	-.04***	.14***	-.11	.04***	-.08***
Race (black = 1)	-1.29***	-1.02***	.22**	-.67***	-.48***
Sex (male = 1)	-.45***	-.61***	-.06	-.43***	-.21***
Region (South = 1)	.05	.16***	-.16**	.16*	.20***
Fear (yes = 1)	.13***	.20***	.05	.09	-.10
Age	-.00	-.01***	.01***	.00	-.02***
Political views	.24***	.10***	.03	.04	.10***
Year	.03***	-.02***	-.00	-.02***	-.05***
<i>n</i>	18,540	9352	9519	9611	9523
χ^2	1472	744.6	140.4	76.6	385.2
Pseudo R^2	.07	.07	.01	.01	.04

* $P < .10$.

** $P < .05$.

*** $P < .01$.

fear of crime (no = 0/yes = 1). See Table 1 for descriptive statistics for these variables.

Logistic regression was used because of dichotomous dependent variables. Interpersonal and state/criminal justice system violent-belief measures were regressed on age, education, fear of crime, political views, race, region, sex, and year of survey. In addition to traditional demographic controls, region, fear of crime, and year of survey were also included. An extensive literature has indicated that a violent subculture characterizes parts of the Southern United States (e.g., Borg, 1997; Dixon & Lizette, 1987; Ellison, 1991); thus, a binary measure of region was included. Fear of crime (e.g., are you afraid to walk alone at night in your neighborhood) was also included to avoid specification error, given its relationship to attitudes toward violence (see Dull & Wint, 1997; Liska et al., 1982; Rountree, 1998). Year of survey was introduced as a control variable to capture possible period effects, which may exist due to the aggregation of the GSS from 1972 to 1996.

Results

Consistent with Hypothesis 1, the results unilaterally indicate that Whites are more likely than Blacks to advocate the use of violence in interpersonal situations. According to Whites, the relatively minor provocation of interacting with a drunkard and more serious interactions with a spouse and child abuser warranted violent retaliation. In fact, Whites, not Blacks, reported that violence was generally an appropriate method of social interaction. These findings were supportive of the recent research of Cao et al. (1997), who rejected Wolfgang and Ferracutti's (1967) Black subculture of violence thesis using

aggregated GSS data. Indeed, race was the most robust indicator of approval of interpersonal violence, followed by gender (males harbored more violent beliefs than females) and age (younger respondents were significantly more likely than older persons to approve of the use of violence). The race effect persisted while controlling for regional effects and fear of crime, both of which have been found to independently impact violent beliefs. See Table 2 for logistic regression coefficients for interpersonal violent beliefs.

Consistent with Hypothesis 2, the results also indicate that Whites are generally more approving of criminal-justice system or state violence (punitive beliefs) than Blacks. Whites significantly advocated capital punishment, police violence against abusive men, police violence against assaultive men, and police violence in any context. The advocacy of violent criminal-justice tactics by Whites is consistent with prior findings (Barkan & Cohn, 1994, 1998; Browning & Cao, 1992; Cohn et al., 1991). The only context in which Blacks were more likely than Whites involved approval of police striking a murder suspect. Two other noteworthy findings were that males were significantly more likely than females to advocate punitive beliefs and that net of controls, GSS respondents have been less approving of criminal justice violence since 1972. See Table 3 for logistic regression coefficients for punitive beliefs.

Discussion and suggestions for future research

With the exception of approval of police violence toward murder suspects, Blacks were never more likely than Whites to harbor violent beliefs. This anomalous race effect might be rooted in high Black

homicide offending and victimization rates. African American respondents are more likely than Whites to be personally victimized by violent crime and, consequently, might feel more anger toward persons suspected of committing a homicide. Nevertheless, this study provides preliminary support for the Affordable Hypothesis with two qualifications. First, questions pertaining to criminal victimization experiences were either asked too infrequently in the GSS (e.g., knowing a victim of homicide was only used from 1988 to 1991) or were indicative of low prevalence (e.g., 96 percent of the GSS respondents reported that burglary victimization was either inapplicable or had never occurred). Victimization experience is an important control that could have potentially mediated racial effects. Second, racial prejudice is another potentially important predictor of violent beliefs among Whites; however, the GSS employs indirect measures of racial bias (e.g., support of affirmative action) that pertain to a variety of ethnic groups. Although racial prejudice might impact beliefs pertaining to the appropriateness of violence, recent researchers contend that overt racial bias in crime and criminal justice matters is generally declining (DeLisi & Regoli, 1999). Future work should incorporate these measures to determine if the race effects found here were spurious.

Rejections of the Black subculture of violence noted the incongruence between offending and victimization data and the existence of a putative subculture, and instead suggested that structural-economic forces best explained racial differentials pertaining to crime (Sampson, 1987). The same structural-economic advantage that Whites generally enjoy possibly explains why they can so felicitously report that violence is okay. Violence is a novel, foreign, even exotic phenomenon that is outside of the behavioral repertoire of many Whites. This privileged immunity from experiencing violence renders violence an abstract phenomenon, making it quite simple for Whites to report that violence is appropriate (whether they would actually use it or not). Similarly, criminal justice system violence, such as police harassment and brutality (e.g., Browning, Cullen, Cao, & Kopache, 1994; Chambliss, 1994; Rome, Son, & Davis, 1995), is a problem many Whites will never have to “deal with.” Blacks do disproportionately deal with such problems and see little use in advocating such in their beliefs.

Notes

1. This study does not explore the meta-mechanics by which beliefs result in overt behaviors. Similarly, because of the vicarious white involvement in vio-

lence, it is doubtful that many whites would indeed employ violence in the contexts used in the GSS.

2. A few caveats are in order about GSS data. Smith (1981) found that less educated respondents, less punitive respondents, and nonwhites tended to give contradictory answers on the hitting questions of the GSS. Perhaps race-of-interviewer effects (a non-white respondent feeling less comfortable speaking with a white interviewer) causes the contradiction in GSS responses. Schaeffer (1980) found that race-of-interviewer did affect answers for Blacks, but only from 1972 to 1977. Using the 1972–1996 GSS may attenuate this problem.

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