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Attributions for Racial Inequality among Southern, Rural African Americans

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Introduction

Researchers examining explanations for economic and social problems have uncovered the existence of a “dual consciousness” among African Americans (Hirsch and Jack, 2012; Hughes and Tuch, 2000; Hunt, 1996, 2004, and 2007; Kluegel and Smith, 1986; Merolla et al., 2011; Welburn and Pittman, 2012). Derived from W.E.B. Du Bois’s ([1903] 1999) concept of the “double consciousness” (Hunt, 2007), a dual consciousness occurs when an individual simultaneously attributes outcomes, such as poverty or racial inequality, to *both* structural factors (such as discrimination or poor schools) *and* individualistic factors (such as a lack of motivation or ability). The proportion of respondents reporting this combination of beliefs varies substantially across different studies, however. For instance, using data from the General Social Survey (GSS), Hunt (2007) reveals that while 19.6% of whites exhibit a dual consciousness with respect to black-white inequality, 33.2% of African Americans do so. In more recent interviews with middle-class African Americans from New Jersey, Welburn and Pittman (2012) find that 70% of their sample demonstrate a dual consciousness when it comes to problems faced by African Americans. Given this finding, there is reason to believe that GSS results substantially understate the level of dual consciousness among African Americans (and perhaps whites as well).

Unfortunately, Welburn and Pittman’s (2012) research has not been replicated and there has been scant survey research published on the attitudes of African Americans toward economic outcomes since the emergence of the Black Lives Matter movement and the election of President Donald Trump, both of which would presumably influence the attitudes of African Americans. Further, the development of the specific measures in question goes back to work conducted upwards of 50 years ago and is derived almost exclusively from interviews with whites. Not only is it likely that the attitudes of African Americans have changed substantially since then, but the salient answer choices may not be provided, since the measures themselves are not based on the opinions of African Americans.

How an individual accounts for poverty and inequality is a critical component of his or her political attitude in general and racial attitude in particular (Apostle et al., 1983). There is robust empirical support for the relationship between asserting structural causes for racial inequality and support for targeted policies that seek to diminish racial inequality, such as Affirmative Action and jobs programs for racial minorities (Feagin, 1975; Kluegel and Smith, 1986; Hughes and Tuch, 2000; Kryson, 2000; Hunt, 2007). There is also evidence that those who identify individualistic explanations for poverty and inequality profess less support for such policies (Gilens, 1999; Kluegel, 1990; Krysan, 2000).

Beyond these political policy implications, it is also likely that attributions related to economic outcomes have motivational consequences at the individual

level. If an individual believes that one's economic status is determined by structural forces beyond their control, it is logical to assume that working hard to move up in society through traditional means is pointless (Mead, 1992; Hunt, 2007). This might even lead to "innovative" behaviors in order to make ends meet (Merton, 1957). However, if an individual believes that success is possible despite obstacles, he or she is likely to work hard in the pursuit of success.

The tension between structural and individualistic attributions for poverty is why researchers have been working for decades to understand respondents' explanations for the causes of poverty and inequality. This study expands on this literature by using open-ended questions to inquire into Southern, rural African Americans' thoughts about structural versus individualistic explanations for issues facing the African American community.

Background

Research on explanations for poverty and inequality began in the 1960s (Schuman, 1969; Feagin, 1972; and Apostle, et al., 1983). Schuman administered a survey of 2,584 whites in 1968. After mentioning three characteristics of black-white inequality (jobs, education, and housing), Schuman asks subjects whether racial inequality is primarily due to discrimination or individual actions taken by African Americans. 19% of the respondents in Schuman's survey indicate that the reason is a combination of both factors (i.e., a "dual consciousness"), while 54% say blacks themselves are mainly responsible, with 19% of respondents indicating that discrimination is the primary cause of racial inequality. Lacking established survey results indicating the prevailing white opinion on the specific characteristics of blacks themselves, Schuman follows up this question by asking, "What is it about blacks themselves that makes them have worse jobs, education, and housing?" Two-thirds of the sample indicate something to do with a "lack of motivation" among blacks, while 8% say that it is due to low mental ability or low morals (10% say they don't know).

Feagin (1972) asks 830 whites, 120 blacks, and 45 "others" to distinguish between three explanations for poverty: individualistic ("which placed responsibility for poverty squarely on the shoulders of poor people themselves," such as lack of thrift or lack of effort), structural ("which blamed external social and economic forces," including discrimination or the failure of society to provide schools), and fatalistic ("nonstructural factors more or less outside the control of individuals," including lack of ability or bad luck). Feagin (1972) derives the 11 separate items indicating individualistic, structural, or fatalistic explanations from two dozen pretest interviews. He reports that 53% of his sample say that individualistic factors are of high importance while only 22% and 18% assert structural or fatalistic explanations, respectively. Among blacks, however, Feagin

(1972) finds that 54% agree with structural explanations versus only 17% of whites. There is less difference in support for individualistic explanations, however, with 45% of blacks and 56% of whites citing them. Though Feagin (1972) does not specifically test for it, the relatively high percentage of blacks agreeing with both structural and individualistic explanations suggests a substantial dual consciousness in the sample.

A subsequent, broader inquiry into the racial attitudes of blacks and whites by Apostle, et al. (1983) finds blacks more likely than whites to assert structural explanations for racial inequality. They also report that blacks are less likely to agree with individualistic explanations for racial inequality. They do not, however, indicate the percentage of either race who exhibit a dual consciousness (i.e., identified structural and individualistic causes). Apostle et al. report that the various types of explanation for racial inequality were devised through pretest interviews with whites only, leading the authors to “suggest that a fuller inquiry into black interpretations of racial differences might be useful... start[ing] with qualitative interviews... and to plan the explanatory-mode questions so that they are in tune with black experience” (p. 202+204). This lacunae in their research informs the purpose of this study.

For almost 30 years, the specific survey questions that researchers use to assess structural and individualistic attributions have remained fairly consistent across different studies (derived, as they were, almost exclusively from interviews with whites), even though blacks might have alternative explanations for their disadvantaged status. For instance, in a phone survey of black, Latino, and white Southern Californians, Hunt (1996) uses Feagin’s (1972) questions to assess poverty attributions. He combines four items into his “individualism scale” including: “personal responsibility, lack of discipline among those who are poor,” “lack of effort by those who are poor,” “lack of thrift and personal money management,” and “lack of ability and talent among those who are poor.” Although Hunt (1996) drops Feagin’s (1972) fatalistic explanation (partly by including the “lack of ability and talent” option as part of the individualistic explanation) due to consistently low levels of support, he continues to utilize Feagin’s (1972) four structural items including: “low wages in some businesses and industries,” “failure of society to provide good schools for many Americans,” “prejudice and discrimination,” and “failure of private industry to provide enough good jobs.” Hunt (1996) finds that not only are blacks more willing “to invoke both [structural and individualistic] poverty explanations” (p. 301) than whites (i.e., a “dual consciousness”), but that they are also more inclined to provide individualistic explanations for poverty. Hunt (1996) did not predict this latter result, inconsistent as it is from previous findings (Apostle et al., 1983; Feagin, 1972; Kluegel and Smith, 1986).

In a follow-up to his 1996 publication, Hunt (2007) uses the General Social Survey (GSS) to measure differences between blacks, Latinos, and whites with respect to their beliefs about black-white inequality. The GSS item that Hunt (2007) analyzes begins with the following statement: “On the average, blacks have worse jobs, income, and housing than white people.” Respondents are then asked to select up to four explanations for such inequality. The GSS includes two individualistic answer choices: “Because most blacks have less in-born ability to learn” and “Because most blacks just don’t have the motivation or will power to pull themselves out of poverty.” The two structural answer choices from the GSS are: “Mainly due to discrimination” and “Because most blacks don’t have the chance for education that it takes to rise out of poverty.” Hunt (2007) finds that 33.2% of African Americans exhibit a dual consciousness by indicating agreement with at least one of the individualistic and at least one of the structural indicators. He also hypothesizes that the 12.5% of African Americans respondents who select the “None” option may subscribe to “other causes [for racial inequality] not tapped by the four NORC [i.e., GSS] items” (p. 405).

Apostle et al.’s (1983) suggestion to conduct qualitative interviews of African Americans is a method by which these “other causes” could be discovered. However, there have been few studies using interviews to examine the attributions of African Americans for poverty, racial inequality, and other social problems. Research by Hirsch and Jack (2012) and Welburn and Pittman (2012) are the exception. Both sets of researchers use the same dataset: interviews with middle-class African Americans from northern New Jersey conducted from November 2008 to January 2010. Most relevant to the current study, the researchers ask respondents open-endedly “What do you think are some of the biggest obstacles facing African Americans?” Although they did not specifically ask respondents what they think are the causes for the obstacles, both sets of researchers analyze responses for indications of whether respondents perceive those obstacles to be either structural or individualistic in nature. Welburn and Pittman report that roughly 70% of their respondents exhibit a dual consciousness and that this constitutes “strong support for previous research (e.g., Hunt 1996, 2007; Hughes and Tuch, 2000) that has shown that African Americans exhibit a dual consciousness when explaining their group’s position” (p. 529). However, it is noteworthy that their results show a level of dual consciousness that is more than double that reported by Hunt (2007) in his analysis of the GSS. This substantial difference is worth investigating in light of the above-mentioned influence of poverty and inequality attributions on political attitudes as well as individual behaviors. Interestingly, Hirsch and Jack find that racial solidarity is the second most frequently mentioned problem mentioned by their interviewees (45%). Respondents see this as intimately connected to other obstacles faced by African Americans, particularly economic problems. Racial solidarity is a factor that has

not been uncovered in previous research and is not neatly characterized as either structural or individualistic.

Shelton (2017) indirectly provides evidence to this effect in an analysis of GSS data, reporting that among both whites and blacks, “a privileged class position strongly influences beliefs about the causes of racial inequality.” In addition, he finds that African Americans from the Southern United States are more likely to attribute racial inequality to individualistic factors than non-Southerners. In discussing these findings, as well as the increasing number of “None” responses to the GSS item, Shelton (p. 87) echoes Apostle et al.’s (1983) call for a deeper investigation into the opinions of African Americans, saying that “Future research in this area must examine a wider range of possible explanations for the causes of racial inequality... that operate across various levels of analysis (e.g., structural, cultural, and individualistic).”

In this paper, I seek to complement and expand on the existing poverty and racial inequality attributions literature with evidence from the post-Obama era by examining an under-studied population: Southern, rural African Americans living in concentrated poverty. I use open-ended questions to capture a wide range of African Americans’ attributions for poverty, racial inequality, and other social problems. Ultimately, I consider whether or not these attributions align with the closed-ended answer categories of the GSS and other survey-based measures.

Data and Methods

This paper draws upon 38 qualitative interviews conducted in May 2018 with Southern, rural African Americans in a small town (less than 20,000) in which 42% of the residents live below the poverty line (including 51% of African Americans). I recruited the majority of respondents (N=31) by driving around African American neighborhoods and requesting interviews of individuals who were outside on their porches or in their yards. Upon approaching a potential respondent, I first established my identity by presenting them with my card, which shows my name and affiliation with the local university. Next, I explained the purpose of the interview and the basic questions I would be asking. I then informed them that their participation was completely voluntary. Once I obtained a participant’s consent, I conducted the interview on the spot. The response rate was roughly 50%. I recruited the remaining respondents (N=7) through personal contacts. Interviews lasted between 10 minutes and two hours, with the average being 24 minutes. I did not ask for names or other identifying information and have been careful to protect all respondents’ identities. I received approval from the Georgia Southwestern State University Institutional Review Board (IRB) to conduct this research.

I am Caucasian, so I was concerned going into the project since researchers have found that interracial interviewing can sometimes be problematic (Best, 2000;

Davis, 1997; Gunaratnam, 2003; Krysan and Couper, 2003; Rhodes, 1994; Seidman, 2006). Krysan and Couper (2003), for instance, find that African Americans report more conservative attitudes on racial policy issues as well as the level of discrimination in the U.S. when speaking with a white interviewer than with an African American interviewer. However, they also find that the race of the interviewer did not affect levels of support for the principle of racial equality. In other cases, race-of-interviewer effects are not found (even when race-related topics are discussed) or they occur in the opposite direction from what is expected (i.e., resulting in increased validity and higher levels of openness with interracial interviewing) (Anderson et al., 1988; Rhodes, 1994; Rubin and Rubin, 2012; Schuman and Converse, 1971; Tixier y Vigil and Elsassser, 1978; Twine, 2000). For instance, Anderson et al. (1988) find that African Americans are more likely to falsely claim that they voted in a Presidential election to an African American than to a white interviewer. Furthermore, Rubin and Rubin (2012) find that African American respondents are eager to instruct Herb Rubin (a white interviewer who asks questions about the topic of race) on race relations in America from their perspective. These findings allayed my initial concerns about the difficulty of obtaining accurate and complete answers from African American respondents.

Rubin and Rubin (2012) suggest that researchers can facilitate openness and honesty from respondents when conducting interracial interviews by being careful to communicate genuine curiosity, avoid being judgmental, and looking for opportunities to emphasize common ground. I integrated these techniques into my approach, presenting an overall demeanor of genuine curiosity throughout the interviews and being intentionally respectful and nonjudgmental in my reactions. Given my sensitive approach, I am hopeful that the substantial demographic distance between myself and my interviewees did not get in the way of receiving accurate and thorough information. I also mentioned up front that one of the goals of my research was to minimize the misunderstanding that society has of the perceptions of African Americans and that race relations could be improved through greater interracial understanding. Many of the respondents expressed agreement with that sentiment and participated enthusiastically in the interview.

I started by asking respondents the following question: "What do you think are the major issues or problems facing the African American community these days?" Aside from requests for clarification or elaboration, the next major question was: "What do you think are the reasons for these issues or problems?" Since I was especially interested in their opinion with respect to the weight of structural versus individualistic causes, I then asked: "Do you think the issues and problems you've mentioned are more the result of things going on *inside* the African American community, such as the behavior of black people themselves, or more the result of things going on *outside* the African American community, such as discrimination against black people?" By asking the questions in this way, I did not limit my

respondents to attributions strictly with respect to inequalities between blacks and whites, but also allowed for them to answer more generally regarding issues and problems facing the African American community. At the conclusion of each interview, I had respondents complete a short questionnaire indicating their age, sex, education level, and other demographic information.

Interviews were tape recorded and professionally transcribed. With the assistance of the NVivo qualitative data analysis program, I coded responses into categories that represented structural, individualistic, or explicitly combined (i.e., “dual consciousness”) explanations. I further coded the specific narrative justifications for these attributions into several subcategories representing the variety of specific structural and individualistic explanations articulated. These subcategories will be expounded in detail below. Methodologically, it has not been easy to distinguish between “problems,” on the one hand, and the cause of those problems, on the other. For example, “lack of unity among African Americans” is mentioned by respondents as a problem in and of itself, but is also invoked as a cause of broader problems facing African Americans. In general, I treated “problems” as equivalent to the causes of those problems in categorizing the respondents’ attributions.

Results

The sample consists of 23 men and 15 women. They range from 20 to 75 years of age with a mean of 43 years. Of those who indicate their education, one less than a high school diploma, 18 have a high school diploma, ten have some college or an associate’s degree, four have a bachelor’s degree, and one has a master’s degree.

Of the 38 respondents, most have a lot to say about racial inequality and the problems facing the African American community, the ways that the problems are interconnected, and the underlying reasons for them. It is clear that many have personally experienced what they talk about, have thought deeply about the issues, and have strong feelings. There is also substantial diversity in their viewpoints, with some respondents disagreeing with each other. Only one respondent expresses that, in her opinion, there are not current inequalities between blacks and whites.

As shown in Table 1, unemployment is the most frequently cited problem facing the African American community, with 20 respondents mentioning this issue. It is most commonly described as an issue of discrimination in hiring (N=16), while for others it is simply an issue of the lack of available jobs (N=6, two respondents said both). Discrimination in the criminal justice system follows closely behind problems with employment, with 19 respondents mentioning this issue. Given the number of high-profile police shootings of black men in recent years, this is not surprising. The next most frequently mentioned issue has to do with education, which 17 respondents mention. Eleven respondents say that the

system is not adequately serving blacks, while six say that blacks are not taking education seriously enough. Right behind that is concern related to the fragility of the black family, which 14 respondents mention. Eleven respondents mention lack of social unity within the African American community, with several expressing dismay that some blacks deliberately undermine the strivings of other blacks. Eight respondents state that a “victim mindset” among African Americans is a problem. Respondents mention drugs and black-on-black violence less frequently, with only five respondents each. Three respondents mention financial illiteracy, and only three mention housing discrimination or access to home mortgages, despite it figuring prominently in previous studies and being part of the GSS prompt. Again, these numbers should be considered in light of the fact that some respondents characterize these issues as problems in themselves, while others brought them up when asked about the reasons for the problems. Given the unrepresentativeness of this particular sample, I make no attempt to generalize these findings to the wider population of African Americans, even Southern, rural African Americans.

Table 1. *Problems facing the African American community, as mentioned by respondents*

<u>Problem Mentioned</u>	<u>N</u>
Jobs	20
Criminal Justice System Discrimination	19
Education	15
Family Stability	14
Social Unity among African Americans	11
Victim Mindset among African Americans	8
Drugs	5
Black-on-Black Violence	5
Financial Illiteracy	3
Access to Housing/Loans	3

With respect to the attributions African Americans make for these problems, eight respondents refer exclusively to structural factors (i.e., discrimination), three cite solely individualistic factors, while 27 combine both structural and individualistic factors. Thus, the overwhelming majority of the sample (71%) display a “dual consciousness” when it comes to their explanations of the factors causing problems in the African American community. These answers, both to the general question on what they think are the reasons for the problems, as well as the more specific question asking them if they think the problems are due to internal or external factors, form the basis of the following assessment.

When asked whether internal or external factors are responsible for problems in the African American community, many respondents say something along the lines of, “it’s a little bit of both.” For instance, a 34-year-old man responds to the question by saying, “to be honest with you, I do think – I think it’s probably a little bit of both, because, of course, you have to take responsibility for yourself, but I do think that some things that have happened in the past, and, of course, systemic racism and things like that... does affect blacks – I mean, that still affects them today.” To this person, believing that discrimination is a factor holding African Americans back is compatible with the idea that blacks are partially responsible for their unequal status. A 23-year-old female makes a similar point, explaining, “I want to say it’s 50-50 with our [African Americans] behavior and with also society’s behavior.”

While a dual consciousness is the majority perspective, some respondents appear to not have been fully conscious of this belief until asked directly. For instance, a 21-year-old female, explaining how she thinks that both structural and individualistic factors are involved, tacitly reveals that perhaps she had not been aware that this is what she believes. With multiple pauses and rephrasing, she says,

Even though I can see; I can see, um, and I can recognize [pause] – like what am I trying to say - I can recognize the influences of society, that society has on like maybe some, some of the things that, um, [long pause] – I can see how society influences, can influence some of our, um, disparity and stuff like that, but, at the same time, I also recognize that I do have a lot of – what’s the word [pause], I have the ability to choose, that I can make decisions and stuff. Like, yeah [laughs], I can, I can y’know – I’m controlling this, y’know? Yeah.

The way she says “Yeah” at the end, as if she has just figured it out, suggests that it is likely that she has never previously verbalized such a perspective.

The overwhelming majority of the sample (35 out of 38) state that they believe structural factors are at least partially responsible for the current problems facing the African American community. This would include all those with a dual consciousness. The following quotes are illustrative of how the three most frequently mentioned issues (jobs, the criminal justice system, and education) are viewed as problems with structural causes. Respondents most frequently cite employment as a problem facing the African American community. When it comes to this issue, several respondents emphasize differences in starting pay for whites and blacks. For instance, a 48-year-old man says, “It’s like the job I work for, if they hired a black person, they start them out with \$8.00. If they hire somebody white, they gotta know they start them out with \$10.00.” Other respondents explain how equally qualified blacks are less likely to be hired than whites for the same

position. According to a 23-year-old man, “I honestly feel like – let’s just say me, and a white person was going – competing for a job, and we’re pretty much close. I really feel like that person would get the job over me.” Similarly, a 44-year-old woman states that, “if I were to go to certain places, like I’m just gonna say it, if I went to one of the smaller hardware store chains in [town] looking for a job, I probably wouldn’t get it, because it’s predominantly white, and they probably – they wouldn’t give it to me. I’m sure they probably wouldn’t give it to me. They wouldn’t give me the job.”

The problem facing the African American community that respondents cite second-most frequently is discrimination in the criminal justice system. When it comes to this issue, several respondents reference accounts of disparate treatment of murder suspects by law enforcement. For instance, a 44-year-old woman says, “If you have someone shoot up an entire school and walk out alive, just being honest, that wouldn’t have happened if he’d been black. They would have killed him. He would never have walked out of there alive.” Echoing this sentiment, the following 50-year-old man says that, “Just like in North Carolina, that boy went into that damn black church and shot mofos up. They took his ass to Burger King because he said he was hungry. Black man, he would’ve gotten his ass shot as soon as he walked the fuck out the damn there door there.” This person is referring to Dylann Roof, who murdered nine African Americans in a church in South Carolina in 2015. Roof was reportedly given a burger from Burger King after he was brought into custody in North Carolina. Another respondent appears to make reference to Philando Castile, who was fatally shot in 2016 by a police officer during a traffic stop when Castile was reaching for his driver’s license. The respondent explains, “You got black individuals getting pulled over for minor traffic situations and the person already got that gun out on them. If they reach for their license, they end up getting shot.”

Other respondents argue that it is more than just the police themselves. According to a 45-year-old man, “It ain’t just the police. It’s the judge. It’s the DA... It’s the whole system.” Respondents with familiarity on both sides of the law validate this point of view with personal experience. For instance, a 31-year-old woman who works at a juvenile detention facility states that she has observed that, “it would take maybe five steps for this poor white girl to be put in a youth detention center where it takes two for this poor black girl to go to a youth detention center.” A 30-year-old man witnessed similar things while serving time in prison. He says, “I’ve personally seen white and black come in for similar charges, or even worse charges. I’ve seen a black kid come in as an accessory to robbery and go to prison. I’ve seen a white kid come in who beat a man in the head with a pipe for a few dollars and he gets off with probation, [while] the black kid is facing prison time.”

Respondents typically regard education, the third most commonly mentioned problem, as a structural issue (i.e., the lack of high-quality schools). As a 26-year-old woman says, blacks are not prepared to succeed in the world because “in a community like this... there is so much poverty, and poor education, and poor educational opportunities.” Similarly, a 23-year-old woman believes that, “If you are down at the lower tier of society, you have to go into these educational systems that do not necessarily have the resources needed to equip you; that allow you to go into different places and new heights, and things like that.” A 21-year-old woman explicitly states that she does not think that the problem of lower educational achievement is due to blacks valuing education less than whites. As she says, “I don't think it's that we don't value school, because everybody preaches to you to go to school and do good and stuff like that, but I feel like it's an environmental thing too as far as black people not getting the same opportunities.”

Only two respondents characterize the above issues, and others that are mentioned less frequently, as being due to “systemic racism.” This suggests that most respondents are not familiar with that terminology since what they describe clearly includes instances of systemic/institutional, as opposed to individual, discrimination.

When describing the external causes for problems in the African American community, eight respondents distinguish between past and present discrimination. These respondents refer to the impact that the legacy of slavery, Jim Crow, and other historical mechanisms of institutional discrimination (such as past discrimination in housing) have on current black-white inequality. A 23-year-old man says, speaking of slavery, “I feel like years – hundreds of years of it, you can never really completely recover from something like that. And it's like a – you kinda grow into it. You kinda – I don't know how is that, but you grow into it and you kinda just fall into the system. And you have to work extra hard to get out of that system.” The 34-year-old man quoted previously who refers to “things that have happened in the past... that does affect blacks” specifically mentions anti-literacy laws, Jim Crow laws, and past discrimination in access to housing. He concludes with respect to this that, “Naturally, your net worth is going to be lower, so I think it's a generational thing.” A 20-year-old woman expresses that with respect to inequalities between blacks and whites, “I think some of it might have to do with the past, still dealing with racism, still dealing with the effects of colonialism, still dealing with that. Yeah, dealing with all of that so deeply ingrained that we can't really notice it, or see it to fix it.”

Others disagree about the usefulness of attributing current inequalities to past discrimination. For example, a 28-year-old male says,

A lot of people say with the slaves and all that, but this is the 21st century. So, I mean we don't live in those times anymore. You can't dwell in the

past because you won't be able to live in the future. The past dictates the future, but we've come a long way from that. So, if you're still living in the past, you're going to continue to have that attitude that your ancestors pave the way for you to have now... If you keep living in those times, you won't be able to move forward.

For some, the barriers toward advancement, whether past or present, explain why blacks have other problems, such as higher rates of criminality. For instance, a 46-year-old man, when explaining how current African Americans are impacted by past discrimination, says that,

It's a generational thing that is embedded in our DNA. It's embedded in us. So, it makes you mad at the other side... It would make you mad. You would commit more crimes. You would smoke more drugs. You would drink more because you are against the world when it comes to everything... The white race can't expect us to be this law-abiding citizen when we're at a 500-year late start... It does something to a man's psyche. Man, what you do. That goes into your son and goes into his son and so forth. So, it's a – for me it's a psychological slavery that did us worse than the physical.

Another 69-year-old man explains that he would steal food if discrimination led him to not be able to afford to eat: "When you won't give me a job, even though I'm qualified, I'm not gonna starve to death. I'm going to do whatever's necessary, if not to feed my family, to feed me. If I have to steal, if I have to go into the convenience store and steal some Twinkies because I'm hungry, that's what I'm gonna do. I'm not gonna stand outside the store and starve to death." A 41-year-old man, who has served time in prison for selling drugs, justifies his past criminality by explicitly blaming society. As he says, "It's a lot of blacks don't even like living the lifestyle that y'all hate us for, but we got responsibilities too. By any means necessary, the system already got us cut out. I went to prison for selling drugs. Because I was selling drugs, that didn't mean I want to sell drugs. It's because society forced me to sell drugs." This quote illustrates the association between an external locus of control at the individual level and structural explanations for criminal behavior. Another man who spent time in prison exhibits a similar perspective on the structural roots of black criminality, arguing that, "The behaviors within the community are worse because the community is in a box that most members of the black community feel that they can't escape from."

Not everyone feels that society is to blame, however. Illustrative of the lack of consensus on this issue is the following statement from a 28-year-old man

employed as a prison guard, who says that he encounters many young black men in prison who:

always say that the white man put them in their situation. It didn't. They didn't, and they feel that way just because the person that locked them up was white, that arrested them was white, and the judge that sentenced them, majority of the time, be white. So, they feel that a white person put them in the situation, but they did not. They're just the law enforcement officials that handled your case. Nine times out of ten, majority of the time they won't understand that when they first come in... It's the mindset that a lot of them have, especially the younger African Americans. They have the outlook of "the white man put me here."

A 41-year-old man, who has served time in prison agrees that this is an accurate characterization of some of the people he met in prison. He explains, "you've got people that always say 'These people did this. These people made me do this,' 'The police ain't no good,' 'White America, they doing this' – and you get caught up in that, and once you get caught up in that, that's how your mind's set. Your mind goes to thinking that way." He even admits to feeling this way himself, but says that while he was in prison, he realized that he was responsible for being there and that there was no one else to blame. Speaking of his changed perspective he explains, "I fell into the trap of going to jail, getting in trouble, fighting... blaming my problems on just, say, white America, like they did so much to me, when, really, in real life, it really wasn't that. I had to learn from myself it really wasn't that. I put myself in those positions. I put myself in those situations where I got in trouble."

When explaining how they characterize the individualistic side of the equation, not a single respondent refers to anything like the GSS answer choice, "Because most blacks have less in-born ability to learn." This is despite the fact that, according to Hunt's (2007) analysis, 13.9% of black respondents from 2000 to 2004 agree with that statement. Further, only three respondents in the current study (8%) express agreement with the other individualistic measure from the GSS (i.e., that black-white inequality is due to "lack of motivation or will power"), even though Hunt (2007) found that 44.9% of African American GSS respondents from 2000 to 2004 agree with that statement. That being said, eight respondents in the current study (21%) do characterize black-white inequality and problems in the African American community as being due, at least in part, to what they refer to as a "victim mindset." As those respondents describe, a victim mindset amounts to the mistaken belief that one cannot succeed in life via legal avenues because of discrimination or a disadvantaged background. This type of defeatism might be perceived by outsiders as simply laziness, but for the respondents in the current study it is apparently not as straightforward as that. To be clear, the respondents

who refer to the victim mindset all assert that discrimination is still an issue. They simply argue that whatever additional barriers to success exist due to discrimination against African Americans does not justify giving up on pursuing legal avenues to success, let alone engaging in criminal behaviors. For instance, in discussing the victim mindset, the following 34-year-old man explains his opinion that while African Americans certainly have greater obstacles to success than whites, that does not justify giving up entirely:

You look at the victim mindset. It hurts a lot of people. There's nothing that holds you back more than seeing yourself as a victim, as seeing yourself as somebody's the problem and not you. You know? Granted, it is gonna be harder when you don't have as many resources to play with as other people, but the victim mindset – I've seen so many people that just shoulders it. I've had my dad tell me this one time, just ridiculous, was saying "Oh, the white people aren't gonna let you get anything." So, because you feel that they're not gonna let you get anything, so you're not going out and trying, you're not doing what you can do to make things happen. You're not – "Don't go to God about it. Don't do anything. Don't even worry about it." So, a victim mindset hurts them.

While not specifically mentioning the phrase "victim mindset," the prison guard quoted earlier says of this dynamic that, "When the opportunity presents itself, they don't take it because they think they're gonna be held down because of their skin color. And it's not." A 21-year-old woman refers to this attitude as the "slave mentality." After she says, "the slave mentality exists... even though we aren't slaves," I proceed to ask her what she means by that. She characterizes it as "feeling helpless and shit. So many African Americans feel helpless, or they feel like there's nothing they can do within their situation, or like 'I'm screwed,' or 'I'm always gonna feel like this. It's always gonna be a struggle,' and stuff like that. I feel like if you already are, if you already think defeated then, yea, you're gonna be defeated." This is the same woman who I quoted earlier as saying that she is in control of her situation. It seems that whether one has an internal or external locus of control is associated with whether they believe a person is justified in giving up on pursuing legal avenues to success, and, thus, whether or not a respondent identifies a "victim mindset" as a legitimate or illegitimate perspective.

Another factor that respondents (N=11) mention when asked about problems in the African American community and the reasons for those problems is a lack of social unity among African Americans. For instance, when asked what are the biggest issues facing the African American community, a 70-year-old woman states, "Part of it is a lack of cohesion. We're not all about the same thing."

She goes on to describe this division as equivalent to a “plantation mentality,” remarking that,

There was always a problem with the treatment of the house Negroes versus the treatment of the field Negro, and that has not gone away. It still exists today and that’s part of the problem. So, you have me, a college graduate who speaks well – you don’t know how many times people have said, “Oh, she sounds white” – and then there’s the woman who doesn’t even have a GED and she’s country and she’s got 1,001 kids. They think we can’t make a connection... They think I’m better than them.

A 21-year-old-woman says, “I think one of the biggest issues within the community is unity stuff. A lot of unity issues because people have different ideas for how they want to go about – how they feel like African Americans should go about as far as just civil rights.”

Several respondents express their belief that it is more than just a lack of unity; that African Americans sometimes deliberately try to undermine the success of other African Americans. For instance, a 41-year-old man says, “A lot of black America may not say it, but we die on each other. We won’t help each other grow. We would not let one black American have more than us. We’ll go broke just trying to stay on the same level with each other, instead of trying to help each other, build each other up. We won’t do that.” A common refrain used to characterize this phenomenon is that of “crabs in a bucket.” For instance, a 46-year-old man says, “We’re our own worst enemies. We call it – in the black community, crabs in a bucket mentality. Meaning that if one of us makes it up, we don’t wanna look back and get the other ones up, we’ll just let them stay down and we just keep crowding each other. Whereas the white guys I see more so they pull each other up a whole lot quicker than we do.”

This respondent goes on to describe how this also includes blacks’ reluctance to hire fellow blacks. As he says, “we tend not to support each other as much as the other guy supporting themselves. Whereas I might have a – let’s say I have a comrade that’s qualified for the job, I’m gonna ask that he’s more qualified than everybody else and I will even take into consideration a white guy for the job.” Part of his explanation for his reluctance to recommend a fellow black person for a job working alongside him is his concern over potential risks to his own job security. He is reluctant “because if [the person messes up, the boss] don’t want too many of you on the job and [the boss is] like ‘I gotta get rid of you because you brought this motherfucker in and he might not come to work on time or fuck up’... We don’t help each other.”

A few respondents say that they actually have had more success being hired or otherwise assisted by whites than fellow blacks. For instance, a 54-year-old

woman explains, “I’ve met some white people that will hire blacks before they will whites, and that’s just being honest.” A 34-year-old man contrasts the lack of support he has received from fellow blacks with that from whites, saying, “It seems like it’s everybody for themselves, and when I was telling somebody, ‘You don’t see the same type of support’ – I don’t notice it myself – I don’t feel like I am supported by blacks as I am by other races... Blacks don’t support black businesses as much. If you look at some black businesses, if they are successful, it’s not usually because a black person is supportive.” This man goes on to attribute the lack of cohesion in the African American community, at least in part, to the existence of welfare programs that diminish the necessity for mutual support. He says that “most blacks at the lowest household income, they’re gonna qualify for a lot of [welfare programs] so they don’t have to be as cohesive.” This respondent believes that government assistance causes problems in the black community by undermining mutual support systems among family and friends.

Three respondents in the current study assert that discrimination against African Americans does not exist anymore. For instance, a 56-year-old woman, when asked if discrimination is still a problem for African Americans, says the following:

I don’t think that’s true no more. Like in them olden days, those peoples died off. Those peoples are gone. It’s time for us to realize this generation, it’s not no race... When Dr. Martin Luther King set us free, we are free... It’s not no race, it’s not no issues because everybody got the ability to do what they want... It’s a nice time for us to go on and let the past be the past and let the future be the future.

Similarly, a 41-year-old man, replying to my question of if discrimination is a central factor behind the problems facing African Americans today, flat out says, “No.” He then elaborates saying, “The reason I’m saying that is because I got the same opportunities to make money just like the next man’s got opportunities to make money. It’s all depending on how far you’re willing to take it, how far you’re willing to take yourself.” A 28-year-old man, when asked the same question, responds, “Not really.” He goes on to explain that “life is what you make of it. Like I said, when the people keep saying ‘You’re held down because of your skin,’ you had a black president. You can’t use that excuse anymore. I mean, a black man made president. What can you say now? You can’t use that.” This opinion is expressed by a very small minority of respondents, but is evidence of the diversity of viewpoints in this sample of African Americans.

Summary and Discussion

The majority of respondents in the current study (71%) exhibit a dual consciousness when it comes to making attributions for poverty, racial inequality, and other social problems facing the African American community. While this is more than double the percentage that Hunt (2007) reports in his analysis of the General Social Survey, it is almost exactly the same percentage that Welburn and Pittman (2012) find in their qualitative interviews with African Americans from New Jersey. Likely, the GSS's closed-ended survey question format and limited number of answer choices is what distinguishes Hunt's (2007) findings from those of Welburn and Pittman and the current study, both of which utilize an open-ended question format. As we have seen, respondents in the current study attribute racial inequality to multiple factors that are not tapped by the GSS. These explanations include a more intricate understanding of the concept of "discrimination" that distinguishes between the effects of past versus present discrimination and between systemic and individual discrimination (neither of which are made by the GSS). The respondents in the current study also make reference to a "victim mindset" among fellow blacks as well as a lack of social unity in the African American community as explanations for racial inequality and problems in the African American community. Neither of those explanations are options in the GSS. Overall, these findings support Apostle et al. (1983) and Shelton's (2017) suggestion that researchers develop measures of racial inequality attributions that go beyond merely structural and individual levels. For instance, respondents in the current study who point to a lack of social unity in the African American community are not, strictly speaking, identifying a characteristic at either the structural or individual level. Conceptually, social unity may more accurately be considered a quality of the group, akin to social capital.

In the interest of meaningful trend analyses, methodologically it might be unwise to change the existing GSS item in question. It would make sense, however, to add a follow-up question for people who give the "None" response to determine if they subscribe to an alternate explanation for racial inequality not included among the existing GSS options. This would be consistent with Hunt's (2007) speculation that the high percentage of respondents providing the "None" response did not indicate a lack of belief in racial inequality, but rather the inability of the GSS item to measure the respondents' actual explanation for such inequality. Likewise, the current study finds that only one person actually denies the existence of racial inequality between blacks and whites. Rather, a full 68% of respondents (N=26) provide explanations for racial inequality that are not currently included in the GSS measure. Therefore, the current study suggests that Hunt (2007) may be correct in interpreting a "None" response to the GSS question as being an indication that respondents believe that racial inequality is due to reasons not listed in the GSS answer categories, rather than an indication that African Americans believe that

there is no racial equality. In addition, respondents who answer “Mainly because of discrimination” could be asked if they meant past or present discrimination.

Beyond these methodological implications, it is worth noting that the specific explanations given for racial inequality by respondents in the current study have parallels in the separate, but related, literature on the actual factors (as opposed to the perceptions of those factors, as examined here) that contribute to racial inequality (e.g., Wilson, 2009). For instance, the effects of past discrimination on current racial inequality (an issue mentioned by several respondents in the current study) has been the subject of numerous scholarly investigations, perhaps most notably by Massey and Denton (1993) in their work on the legacy of discrimination in the housing market. In addition, the fact that respondents in the current study mention a victim mindset is perhaps not surprising, given Lawrence Mead’s (1992) finding of a subculture of defeatism among some unemployed African Americans. He explains how this occurs when job seekers lose hope after not being hired and subsequently point the finger at others, including employers, for their inability to get a job. Similarly, the current finding on the perception of a lack of social unity in the African American community has also been previously examined by researchers studying factors contributing to racial inequality. In particular, the claim made by respondents in the current study regarding the lack of assistance they receive from fellow African Americans in trying to find a job (as well as their reluctance to help other African Americans) has been reported by Sandra Smith (2007) and William Julius Wilson (2009). Smith finds that job holders are hesitant to refer their friends and family for jobs because of their concern about the potential negative consequences for their own employment. These multiple parallels suggest that a more systematic examination of the overlap between these two areas of research may be worthwhile, particularly in discovering the actual attributions of African Americans.

The current findings also have implications for research on the connection between racial inequality attributions and policy support for ameliorative measures. Since the results suggest that respondents make important distinctions among structural as well as individualistic explanations for racial inequality, it is possible that the correlations between, for instance, structural attributions for racial inequality and support for Affirmative Action might depend on whether past or present discrimination is identified. Believing that past discrimination is a more important determinant of racial inequality than present discrimination is likely to influence one’s policy prescriptions. Similarly, the different types of individualistic attributions (i.e., whether one points to the “victim mindset” or a lack of social unity among African Americans) probably has an influence on the proposed actions one believes are needed to address racial inequality. Future researchers would be wise to make these distinctions when examining the relationship between attributions for racial inequality and support for race-related public policy.

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