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Social Relationships in the Church during Late Life: Assessing Differences between African Americans, Whites, and Mexican Americans

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to see if there are differences in the social relationships that older African Americans, older whites, and older Mexican Americans form with the people where they worship. Data from two nationwide surveys are pooled to see if race differences emerge in eleven different measures of church-based social relationships. These measures assess social relationships with rank-and-file church members as well as social relationships with members of the clergy. The findings reveal that older African Americans tend to have more well-developed social relationships in the church than either older whites or older Mexican Americans. This is true with respect to relationships with fellow church members as well as relationships with the clergy. In contrast, relatively few differences emerged between older Americans of European descent and older Mexican Americans. However, when differences emerged in the data, older whites tend to score higher on the support measures than older Mexican Americans.

INTRODUCTION

A number of studies suggest that greater involvement in religion is associated with better physical and mental health (Koenig, McCullough and Larson 2001). As this literature has matured, researchers have exerted considerable effort to explain how the salubrious effects of religion may arise. A number of potentially important mechanisms have been identified, including the use of religious coping responses (Pargament 1997), forgiveness (Worthington 1998), and a religiously-based sense of meaning in life (Park 2005). However, one promising line of research forming the focal point for the current study indicates that the social relationships people form with fellow church members may be an important factor (Krause 2008). It makes sense to focus on church-based social ties because researchers have been arguing for over a century that social relationships lie at the very heart of religion. For example, James Mark Baldwin, an early president of the American Psychological Association, argued that, “The fact is constantly recognized that religion is a social phenomena. No man is religious by himself, nor does he choose his gods, nor devise his offerings, nor enjoy his blessings alone.” (Baldwin 1902:325).

As researchers probed more deeply into the nature of social relationships in the church, it quickly became evident that the members of some racial and ethnic groups report they are more deeply involved with co-religionists than members of other racial groups (e.g., Taylor,

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Chatters and Levin 2004). Specifically, this research suggests that older African Americans are more likely than older Americans of European descent to give as well as receive social support from their fellow church members (Krause 2002a). Although a number of important insights have emerged from this research, virtually every study has involved African Americans and whites. It is time to explore church-based social relationships that are maintained by members of other racial groups, especially older Mexican Americans. There are two reasons why it is important to study older Mexican Americans. First, recent demographic projections suggest that older Hispanics will soon overtake older African Americans to become the second largest minority group of older adults in the United States (Federal Interagency Forum on Aging Related Statistics 2008). This is noteworthy because Mexican Americans are the largest Hispanic group in America. Second, older Mexican Americans live in a very different cultural world than older whites or older African Americans. Older whites and old African Americans live in every state in the nation. But in contrast, older Mexican Americans tend to live along the border of the United States and Mexico, thereby facilitating contact with relatives who still live in Mexico. In addition, in contrast to older whites and older African Americans, English is not the first language of many older Mexican Americans.

The purpose of the current study is to see if differences emerge in eleven different dimensions of church-based social relationships among older African Americans, older Americans of European descent, and older Mexican Americans. There are three reasons why the findings of this research are important. First, the data come from two nationwide surveys that were devoted exclusively to the study of religion and health among older members of these racial groups. Second, there do not appear to be any other studies that examine race differences in church-based social relationships among the members of these three racial groups. Third, the population of older people in the United States is growing rapidly. In 2007, people age 65 and over accounted for 12 percent of the total population. However, by 2030, the older population is projected to represent nearly 20 percent of the total U. S. population (Federal Interagency Forum for Aging Related Statistics 2008). Because the proportion of older people is growing rapidly, it is imperative that researchers learn more about the extent and nature of their involvement in religion.

The discussion that follows is divided into three sections. First, research is reviewed that provides several reasons why social relationships in the church may be developed more fully among older African Americans and older Mexican Americans than among older whites. Following this, the study samples and measures are presented in section two. Third, the findings are reviewed and discussed.

ASSESSING RACE DIFFERENCES IN CHURCH-BASED SOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS

There are compelling historical reasons why older African Americans and older Mexican Americans may have more well-developed social ties in the church than older Americans of European descent. It is important to examine historical factors because, as C. Wright Mills (1959:3) argued, “Neither the life of an individual nor the history of a society can be understood without understanding both.” It makes sense to assess wider historical forces when studying older minority group members because, as the discussion that is provided below will reveal, older African Americans and older Mexican Americans have faced centuries of discrimination and prejudice. And these historical factors may have an especially pronounced effect on these older adults because they came of age during a time when racial prejudice and discrimination was especially overt.

THE HISTORICAL EXPERIENCES OF AFRICAN AMERICANS

Historical influences on the development of the church in the African American community were discussed some time ago, by Nelsen and Nelsen (1975). As these investigators argue, the church became the center of the African American community since its inception. Due to centuries of prejudice and discrimination, African American people turned to the church for spiritual, social, and material sustenance primarily because it was the only institution in their community that was built, funded, and wholly owned by African American people. Consequently, the church became a conduit for the delivery of social services, and the first schools for African American children were located in them as well. In fact, it is not surprising to find that many of the great political leaders in the African American community have strong ties to the church, and many have been members of the clergy (e.g., Martin Luther King, Jr.).

Perhaps no one wrote more on the early history of the church in the African American community than W. E. B. Du Bois. Strong themes involving social relationships emerge from his work. Writing in 1887, he concluded that, "The Negro church ... provides social intercourse, it provides amusement of various kinds, it serves as a newspaper and intelligence bureau, it supplants the theater, it directs the picnic and excursion, it furnishes the music, it introduces the stranger to the community, it serves as a lyceum, library, and lecture bureau, it is, in fine, the central organ of organized life of the American Negro" (Du Bois 2000:21). Later, in 1899, Du Bois (2000:34) went on to argue that social ties in Black churches were even stronger than those that are found in white congregations: "Without wholly conscious effort the Negro church has become a centre of social intercourse to a degree unknown in white churches even in the country."

Although the observations of Du Bois (2000) were made over a century ago, discussions about the strong social ties that exist in Black churches may also be found in the work of contemporary scholars. The importance of church-based social relationships in the African American community is perhaps nowhere more evident than in the work of the noted African American theologian, J. Deotis Roberts (2003:78), who maintained that, "The black church, as a social and religious body, has served as a kind of 'extended family' for blacks. In a real sense then, thousands of blacks who have never known real family life have discovered the meaning in real kinship in the black church." emphasis these scholars have placed on the importance of social relationships in the Black church is well founded because Krause (2002a) reports that scores on ten out of twelve church-based social relationship measures are higher for older African Americans than older whites.

HISTORICAL EXPERIENCES OF MEXICAN AMERICANS

Like older African Americans, older Mexican Americans have also struggled with pernicious historical circumstances. There are two ways in which these historical forces have come into play. First, the conquest of Mexico by the Spanish caused a great deal of pain and suffering (Leon 2004). Carrasco (1990) documents the shocking extent of this problem. He reports that in 1500 there were 25 million indigenous people living in Mexico, but due to factors such as disease and slavery, this population was reduced to 1 million by 1600. Given this data, it is not surprising to find that Leon (2004:198) refers to this period of colonization as the "Mexican diaspora."

Second, the deleterious consequences of colonization were exacerbated by a number of subsequent historical events including the Mexican American War of 1848, the Mexican Revolution of 1910, and the great labor shortages during World War I. Each of these events rekindled earlier conditions of subordination and diaspora that were encountered during the Spanish colonization. The vestiges of these historical events are evident in the way

contemporaneous scholars view Mexican American culture. For example, Rodriguez (1994:69), argues that: “What makes the experience of Mexican Americans unique compared to other ethnic populations that migrated to this country is their psychohistorical experience and their subsequent subjugation, all taking place in what the indigenous peoples considered to be their own land.” Rodriguez goes on to point out that physical colonization of Mexican Americans has been accompanied by psychological colonization that fosters “... feelings of inferiority, lack of self-worth, hostility, apathy, (and) apparent indifference ...”

So like African Americans, many Mexican Americans turned to the church for solace and support. The wide majority (about 80%) of older Mexican Americans affiliate with the Catholic Church (Fernandez 2007) and as a result, discussions of religion in this ethnic group often focus on this specific faith tradition. In his insightful essay on the Catholic Church in the Mexican American community, Goizueta (2002:121) underscores the important social function that membership in this faith tradition provides “... what Euro-Americans find most striking about Mexican American popular Catholicism (is) its decidedly communal character.” Goizueta (2002:122) goes on to point out that the “... community is the very source of personal identity. Individuals are not building blocks of community; community is, instead, the foundation of individual personhood.”

Many scholars consider Virgilio Elizondo to be the founder of U.S. Latino theology (e.g., Matovina 1991). Like many before him, Elizondo (2000:128) discussed the plight of contemporary Mexican Americans: “The Mexican Americans living in that vast borderline between the United States and Mexico have ... (been confronted with) ... countless insults and put-downs suffered ... even in the present time.” But he went on to identify the source of resilience that Mexican Americans found in the social ties that arise at church: “They discovered the joy of giving and sharing, and the happiness of being able to be themselves without the need for masks or artificiality. Through the power of the Spirit, they all experienced a new interpersonal communion” (Elizondo 2010:109).

Taken as a whole, the literature that has been reviewed in this section suggests that longstanding historical problems have placed the church at the center of the African American and Mexican American communities. However, of the two, the historical circumstances of African Americans were more pernicious because they were enslaved in masse.

The discussion that has been provided so far suggests that discrimination that was encountered by African Americans and Mexican Americans created especially close social ties in the places where they worshiped. However, the reasons why this may be so are still not entirely clear. Turning to two additional factors provides the necessary insight. The first applies to members of both racial groups while the second is more unique to African Americans. First, according to the deprivation-compensation hypothesis that was discussed by Glock (1964), marginalized members of society tend to develop a more profound intrinsic religious involvement and a closer relationship with God in order to compensate for their plight. Since church-based social relationships are a vital part of a religious life, it seems reasonable to argue that they represent another way in which the deprivation-compensation process becomes manifest. Although findings from empirical tests of this perspective are inconsistent, support for this view was found recently by Schieman and his colleagues with data provided by older Whites and older Mexican Americans (Schieman *et al.* 2006). In addition to this, Paris (1995) provides a second reason why social ties may be especially close in the Black church. He discussed the decimating impact of slavery on the African American family at length: “... no one can possibly imagine the intense pain they must have experienced in being cut off from their tribal solidarity and family identity” (Paris 1995:89). But Paris (1995:89) went on to point out that, “Yet in this abysmal cauldron of

hatred and abuse, slaves gradually built their own culture of meaning and value that expressed the moral and religious strivings of their souls.” And as the insights provided by Roberts (2003) that were discussed above reveal, the vestiges of these efforts may be found in the family emphasis that is especially evident in the contemporary Black church.

Because an assessment of church-based social ties among older African Americans, older whites, and older Mexican Americans has not appeared previously in the literature, the analyses that follow are primarily descriptive in nature. Even so, these analyses are comprehensive because an effort is made to see if mean levels of eleven church-based social support measures differ significantly across the three racial groups.

DATA AND METHODS

STUDY SAMPLES

As noted above, the data for the current study come from two nationwide surveys. Older African Americans and older Americans of European descent participated in the first survey whereas the second survey focused solely on older Mexican Americans. For convenience, the first survey is referred to below as the Religion, Aging, and Health Survey (i.e., RAH) and the second is called the Religion, Aging, and Health, Mexican American Survey (RAHMA).

RAH SURVEY DATA

The population for the RAH Survey was defined as all household residents who were either African American or white, noninstitutionalized, English-speaking, and 66 years of age or older. Geographically, the study population was restricted to all eligible persons residing in the coterminous United States (i.e., residents of Alaska and Hawaii were excluded). In addition, the study population was restricted to individuals who were currently practicing Christians, people who were Christian in the past but no longer practice any religion, and individuals who were never affiliated with any faith at any point in their lifetime. People who practice a religion other than Christianity (e.g., Jews or Muslims) were excluded because it would be difficult to devise a set of religious support measures that are suitable for persons of all faiths.

The sampling frame consisted of all eligible persons contained in the files that are maintained by the Center for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS). It should be emphasized that people are included in this list even if they are not receiving Social Security benefits. A five-step process was used to draw the sample from the CMS data base (see Krause 2002a) for a detailed discussion of these procedures).

Interviewing for the first wave in the RAH Survey began in March 2001, and concluded in August 2001. The data collection was performed by Harris Interactive (New York). Four waves of interviews have been conducted so far. But because the goal of the current study is to describe church-based social relationships, only the data from the first wave of interviews are assessed below. A total of 1,500 Wave 1 interviews were completed face-to-face in the homes of the older study participants. Older African Americans were over-sampled so sufficient statistical power would be available to examine race differences in religion. Consequently, the sample consisted of 748 older whites and 752 older African Americans. The overall response rate for the study was 62%.

Although there are 1,500 participants in this study, not all respondents are included in the analyses presented below. Some cases are excluded because people must attend church on a regular basis in order to build close ties with the people who worship there. Consequently, when the study questionnaire was designed, the research team decided that it did not make

sense to ask about things like receiving social support from fellow church members if people either never go to church, or if they only attend worship services once or twice a year. Based on this rationale, 374 study participants are excluded from the analyses presented below because the questions dealing with church-based relationships were not administered to them. As a result, data are available for 600 older African Americans and 513 older Americans of European descent.

Some study participants did not provide valid answers for all social support items. Therefore, missing values were imputed with the EM procedure (see Graham 2009).¹ Table 1 contains basic descriptive data on the older African Americans and older whites who were included in this sample.

RAHMA SURVEY DATA

The population for the RAHMA Survey was defined as all Mexican Americans aged 66 and over who were retired (i.e., not working for pay), not institutionalized, and who speak either English or Spanish. The sampling frame consisted of all eligible study participants who resided in the following five-state area: Texas, Colorado, New Mexico, Arizona, and California. The sampling strategy that was used for the widely-cited Hispanic Established Population for Epidemiological Study (HEPESE) was adopted for the current study (see Markides 2003 for a detailed discussion of the steps that were followed). All interviews were conducted by Harris Interactive (New York) in 2009. The interviews were administered face-to-face in the homes of the older study participants. All interviewers were bilingual and study participants were offered the choice of being interviewed in either English or Spanish. The wide majority of interviews (84%) were conducted entirely in Spanish. A total of 1,005 interviews were completed successfully. The response rate was 52%.

Consistent with the strategy discussed above, the church-based social relationship measures were only administered to older Mexican Americans who reported that they attend worship services more than three times a year. As a result, data were available for 663 study participants.

At first it may seem as though comparing older Mexican Americans who reside in five states only with older African Americans and older whites who reside in the entire coterminous United States is inappropriate and that a better test would involve assessing members of the three racial groups who reside only within the five states that were sampled for the RAHMA study. However, it is important to keep several issues in mind. First, Census data reveal that approximately 82% of older Mexican Americans live in the five states that were sampled for this study (Harris Interactive, personal communication). Second, in contrast, preliminary analysis of the data from the RAH survey (not shown here) reveal that only a small number of older African Americans reside in the five sampled states: Texas ($N = 50$), New Mexico, ($N = 0$), Arizona ($N = 0$), Colorado ($N = 10$), and California ($N = 42$). As these findings indicate, it is not possible to make a meaningful comparison of the two racial groups based on data from the five state area only.

¹Some researchers have pointed out that standard errors derived from data that have been imputed with the EM procedure may be underestimated (e.g., Graham 2009). This means that some study findings may appear to be statistically significant even though this may not actually be the case. All analyses in this paper were re-estimated after list-wise deletion procedures were used to deal with item non-response. In no instance did a statistically significant relationship emerge from the imputed data but not from the data that were obtained with the list-wise deletion procedure. Moreover, in only one instance was a relationship estimated with the EM procedure ($p = .029$) more highly significant than the corresponding value that was estimated with list-wise deletion methods ($p = .055$). Given the fairly large number of significance tests that were conducted in this study, one might expect to get this type of result by chance alone.

Table 1 also contains descriptive data for older Mexican Americans. These data reveal some important demographic differences between the members of the three racial groups. First, the data indicate the level of educational attainment among older Mexican Americans ($M = 7.1$) is substantially lower than that of either older whites ($M = 12.6$) or older African Americans ($M = 10.3$). This represents yet another way in which the cultural world of older Mexican Americans differs significantly from the cultural worlds in which members of the other two racial groups live. Second, as anticipated, more Mexican Americans identify with the Catholic faith (77%) than either older whites (35%) or older African Americans (7%). Because of these, as well as other demographic differences in Table 1, the analyses presented below assess differences in church-based social relationships after the effects of age, sex, education, marital status, and identification with the Catholic faith have been controlled statistically.

SURVEY MEASURES

Before the RAH Survey was conducted, three years were spent carrying out a series of focus groups, in-depth interviews, and cognitive interviews with a separate sample of 399 older Americans of European descent and older African Americans (see Krause 2002b, for a detailed discussion of this item-development strategy). The goal of this intensive item-development program was to craft a set of religion measures that capture the way older whites and older African Americans experience religion in daily life. The open-ended, in-depth interviews were designed to capture key dimensions of religiousness among the older people in the two racial groups. In contrast, the cognitive interviews were used to determine whether study participants understood the newly devised survey items in the manner that was intended by the research team.

A similar, but abbreviated, set of procedures assessed the utility of the measures that were used in the survey of older Mexican Americans. Specifically, open-ended, in-depth interviews were conducted with 52 older Mexican Americans who were residing in South Texas (see Krause and Bastida 2009). The in-depth interviews and cognitive interviews were used, in part, to see if the church-based social relationship items that were devised in the RAH Survey capture the way older Mexican Americans view the social ties they have forged with fellow church members. These qualitative data suggest that this was the case. Because the majority of older Mexican Americans prefer to be interviewed in Spanish, the church-based support items were translated and back-translated from English into Spanish by a team of bilingual investigators.

The measures used to assess race differences in church-based social relationships are presented in Table 2. The procedures used to code the items are presented in the footnotes of this table. It should be emphasized that the same items were administered to the members of all three racial groups. The measures may be grouped into two broad categories. The first involves informal relationships with fellow church members and the second consists of social relationships with members of the clergy.

Emotional Support Received from Fellow Church Members—Emotional support is defined as the provision of empathy, caring, love and trust. This construct was assessed with three items. A high score denotes more emotional support.

Tangible Help from Fellow Church Members—Tangible support involves instrumental behaviors that help a support recipient directly. In this case, the support provider intervenes personally by taking practical action that is designed to help with things like transportation, housework, and yard work. A high score on these indicators stands for more tangible support.

Emotional and Tangible Support Given to Fellow Church Members—Research with the RAH Survey data suggests that providing assistance to co-religionists may have a more beneficial effect on health than receiving support from them (Krause, 2006a). Consequently, it is important to assess how often older African Americans, older whites, and older Mexican Americans act as support providers. Three items were included in both surveys to assess how often older people provide emotional support to the people in their congregation, and four indicators were used to determine how often they give tangible assistance to the people they worship with. A high score on either measure signifies that older study participants provided assistance to fellow church members more often.

Anticipated Support from Fellow Church Members—Anticipated support is defined as the belief that fellow church members are willing to provide assistance in the future should the need arise. It is important to assess this dimension of social relationships because research that was done in a secular setting by Krause (1997) reveals that anticipated support appears to exert a more beneficial effect on depressive symptoms than support that is actually provided by social network members. A high score on the three items that were designed to assess church-based anticipated support reflects greater certainty that fellow church members will provide support in the future if it is needed.

Negative Interaction with Fellow Church Members—The measures that have been discussed so far reflect the positive aspects of social relationships with fellow church members. However, researchers have known for some time that interaction with fellow church members may not always be pleasant and that, at times, interaction with fellow congregants can be conflicted, undesirable, and unpleasant (Krause 2008). In order to provide a more balanced view of social relationships in the church, measures of negative interaction were included in both surveys. Negative interaction is defined as unpleasant social encounters that are characterized by disagreements, criticism, rejection, and the invasion of privacy (Rook 1984). Excessive helping is also included under the broad rubric of this construct. As shown in Table 2, negative interaction with fellow church members is measured with five indicators. These items are coded so that a high score represents more frequent negative interaction.

Spiritual Support from Fellow Church Members—Spiritual support is relatively unique to religious settings. Spiritual support is assistance that is intended to increase the religious commitment, beliefs, and behavior of a fellow church member. There are a number of ways in which church members may exchange spiritual support. For example, they may share their own religious experiences with coreligionists; they may show them how to apply their religious beliefs in daily life, or they may help them find solutions to problems they encounter by turning to the Bible. Spiritual support is measured with five indicators. A high score denotes more frequent spiritual support.

Emotional and Tangible Support Received from the Clergy—A number of researchers have argued that of all the roles that people occupy in religious institutions, the role of the pastor is especially important because this is the most authoritative and prestigious position in the church (Stark and Bainbridge 1987). As a result, support provided by members of the clergy may be especially efficacious. Moreover, there is some evidence that the influence of the pastor may vary by race. Just as the church occupies a central role in the African American community, the pastor also appears to occupy an key role in the life of the Black church. Evidence of this may be found in the work of Maynard-Reid (2000). He points out that the earliest preachers in the African American community were former African priests and religious specialists. These early pastors retained their former priestly

roles, but added to them by including the charismatic authority of the prophet and the politician.

Although the role of the clergy in the African American community is well documented, it is more difficult to discern in a discussion of the role that pastors play in Mexican American churches. One of the contributions of the current study is to provide some insight into this issue by assessing the nature of the relationships that older Mexican Americans maintain with a member of the clergy. As shown in Table 2, relationships with clergy are measured in four ways.

The first measure of social ties with the clergy involves emotional support that is provided by a pastor, whereas the second has to do with the how often older study participants receive tangible help from their pastors. A high score on either measure denotes more frequent assistance.

Anticipated Support from the Clergy—Three items were used to assess the extent to which study participants believe their pastor would be willing to help in the future should the need arise. A high score on these indicators denotes greater anticipated support.

Negative Interaction with the Clergy—Research indicates that older people may also encounter negative interaction with their pastor. For example, one participant in a qualitative study by Krause, Chatters, Meltzer and Morgan recounted the problems that were created by the strict leadership style of her pastor: “For one thing, he refused to let our daughter have another pastor, that we had earlier, perform her marriage ceremony. He was very strict ... and there was just no reasoning with him. He did more harm than good, I think. A lot of people left” (Krause et al. 2000:522). Negative interaction was assessed in both surveys with five indicators. A high score denotes more frequent conflict with a member of the clergy.

RESULTS

The findings from this study are presented below in three sections. Data on the reliability of the church-based social relationships measures is presented first. Following this, the results from the analyses that were designed to assess race differences in church-based social relationships are presented. Then, some supplementary analyses are presented in the third section. These supplementary analyses, which have not been discussed up to this point, were performed to clarify the findings involving race differences in church-based social ties.

RELIABILITY OF STUDY MEASURES

Table 3 contains the internal consistency reliability estimates (i.e., Cronbach’s alpha) for the church-based social relationship measures. Separate reliability estimates are provided for each scale within each racial group. Researchers have yet to identify a cut point score that denotes an acceptable level of reliability. Some investigators maintain that a value of .80 indicates that a scale has satisfactory reliability (e.g., Maxim 1999). However, the advice provided by Nunnally and Bernstein (1994) is followed here. These investigators maintain that, “In the early stages of ... research, time and energy can be saved using instruments that have only modest reliability, e.g., .70” (Nunnally and Bernstein 1994:265).

A total of 33 reliability estimates are provided in Table 3. The data in this table suggest that, in general, the reliability estimates for the church-based social relationship measures are acceptable. There is, however, one notable exception. Six of these estimates fall below .70. It is important to note that five of the six estimates that are low involve negative interaction. Although the reason for this pattern of findings is not clear, perhaps the following explanation sheds some light on this issue. Cronbach’s alpha reflects the extent to which the

items in a scale are correlated with each other. So the correlation among the negative interaction items must be fairly high if these measures are to have an acceptable level of reliability. Put in a more general way, this means that when one type of negative interaction arises, another type of negative interaction should emerge, as well. The first item that is used to assess negative interaction with the clergy asks how often a pastor has been critical of a study participant (see Table 2). The second item asks whether respondents disagree with their pastor about how money is spent in the church. A moment's reflection reveals that criticism can arise for many reasons other than money and, as a result, the correlation between these items may be low. This issue is not uncommon and it is one reason why some investigators have attempted to deal with it by turning to the use of cause indicators within a latent variable modeling framework (see Bollen 1989).

ASSESSING RACE DIFFERENCES IN CHURCH-BASED SOCIAL TIES

Exploring Relationships with Fellow Church Members—A multivariate analysis of covariance model was used to test for race differences in the seven scales that assess social relationships with fellow church members. Two issues that are associated with the use of this statistical procedure must be discussed before the findings are presented. First, a preliminary analysis (not shown here) of the seven scales assessing relationships with fellow church members reveals that these scales are correlated (i.e., the average correlation among them .372). Consequently, a multivariate analysis of covariance model was estimated because this statistical procedure explicitly takes the correlation among the social relationship measures into account when race differences are being assessed. Second, race differences in the social relationship measures were obtained before, as well as after, controls were established for the following covariates: Age, sex, education, marital status, the frequency of church attendance, and whether study participants identify with the Catholic Church.

Table 4 contains the findings that were obtained from analysis of race differences in social relationships with fellow church members. The multivariate test of significance (not shown in Table 4) reveals that statistically significant race differences are present in one or more of the social relationship measures (i.e., Pillai's trace = .076; $F = 9.952$; hypothesis $df = 14$; error $df = 3524$; $p < .001$).

The findings in Table 4 suggest that in all but one instance, the adjusted means of the social relationship measures for older African Americans are higher than the adjusted means for older whites. More specifically, these data indicate that compared to older Americans of European descent, older African Americans get more emotional support (8.196 vs. 7.524; $p < .001$), more tangible support (6.588 vs. 5.699; $p < .001$), and more spiritual support (11.911 vs. 10.748; $p < .001$) from fellow church members. In addition, the results reveal that older African Americans provide more emotional support (8.527 vs. 7.654; $p < .001$) and more tangible help (6.365 vs. 5.590; $p < .001$) to the individuals in their congregations. However, even though older African Americans get more support from church members than older whites, the findings further reveal that older African Americans also encounter more negative interaction with fellow church members (5.780 vs. 5.601; $p < .05$). But in this instance, the magnitude of the difference between the adjusted means is not great. The findings that involve anticipated support represents the only instance where differences between older African Americans and older Americans of European descent failed to emerge in the data (9.744 vs. 9.579; *n.s.*).

The results in Table 4 indicate that, without exception, the mean scores of older African Americans on the social relationship measures are higher than those of older Mexican Americans. More specifically, the data reveal that compared to older Mexican Americans, older African Americans get more emotional support (8.196 vs. 7.574; $p < .001$), more

tangible help (6.588 vs. 5.567; $p < .001$), and more spiritual support (11.911 vs. 11.194; $p < .01$) from the rank-and-file members in their congregation. Similarly, older African Americans report that they provide more emotional support (8.527 vs. 7.487; $p < .001$) and more tangible assistance (6.365 vs. 5.590; $p < .001$) to their co-religionists. Finally, the results suggest that even though older African Americans are more likely than older Mexican Americans to expect fellow church members will provide support in the future (9.744 vs. 8.880; $p < .001$), older African Americans also indicate that they encounter more negative interaction with fellow church members (5.780 vs. 5.479; $p < .001$).

A different pattern of results emerges when the church-based social relationships of older whites are contrasted with those of older Mexican Americans. More specifically the findings reveal that statistically significant differences emerge between older whites and older Mexican Americans on only one of the seven measures. The data indicate that compared to older Mexican Americans, older Americans of European descent expect to get more support from fellow church members in the future (9.579 vs. 8.880; $p < .001$).

Taken as a whole, the data in Table 4 provide important new insights into the nature of race differences in church-based social relationships. More specifically, the results suggest that, in general, social relationships in the church appear to be more well-developed among older African Americans than among either older Americans of European descent or older Mexican Americans. In contrast, there are few differences in the level of involvement that older whites and older Mexican Americans maintain with the people in their congregations.

Assessing Relationships with Members of the Clergy—A second multivariate analysis of covariance model was used to assess race differences in social relationships with the clergy. Once again, this procedure was used because the data suggest that the four scales assessing social relationships with members of the clergy are inter-correlated (average inter-correlation = .241). The findings that were provided by these analyses are provided in Table 5.

The multivariate test of significance (not shown in Table 5) reveals that statistically significant race differences are present in one or more of the measures that involve social relationships with the clergy (i.e., Pillai's trace = .133; $F = 22.929$; hypothesis $df = 8$; error $df = 2574$; $p < .001$). Taken as a whole, the results involving race differences in social relationships with the clergy largely mirror the results involving social ties with rank-and-file church members. Specifically, the data suggest that compared to older whites, older African Americans receive more emotional (11.717 vs. 11.258; $p < .05$) and more tangible help (3.837 vs. 3.301; $p < .001$) from their pastors. In contrast, older African Americans tend to report that they encounter more negative interaction with members of the clergy than older Americans of European descent (3.502 vs. 3.245; $p < .001$). However, statistically significant differences in anticipated support from the clergy failed to emerge between older African Americans and older whites (12.698 vs. 12.932; $n.s.$).

The data in Table 5 indicate that older African Americans tend to score higher than older Mexican Americans on all of the measures of social relationships with the clergy. More specifically, the findings reveal that compared to older Mexican Americans, older African Americans receive more emotional support (11.717 vs. 9.302; $p < .001$) and more tangible help (3.837 vs. 3.417; $p < .001$) from their pastors. The results further indicate that older African Americans expect to get more support from a member of the clergy (12.698 vs. 10.856; $p < .001$) and they encounter more negative interaction with the clergy (3.502 vs. 3.256; $p < .001$) than older Mexican Americans.

The findings that arise from contrasting the social relationships with the clergy that are maintained by older whites and older Mexican Americans are mixed. On the one hand, older Americans of European descent indicate they get more emotional support (11.259 vs. 9.302; $p < .001$) from the clergy and they expect to get more support from their pastors in the future (12.932 vs. 10.856; $p < .001$) than older Mexican Americans. But on the other hand, statistically significant differences fail to emerge between older whites and older Mexican Americans with respect to tangible support from the clergy (3.301 vs. 3.417; *n.s.*) and negative interaction with the clergy (3.245 vs. 3.256; *n.s.*).

SUPPLEMENTARY ANALYSES

The data that have been presented up to this point suggest that the church-based social relationships of older African Americans tend to be more fully developed than those of older whites or older Mexican Americans. This brings up an important substantive issue: Are the social relationships that older African Americans maintain in the place where they worship unique to the church, or do older African Americans have more well-developed relationships with people outside their congregations, as well? Data were available in both surveys that make it possible to take a preliminary look at this issue.² Participants in both surveys were asked to report the amount of emotional support they receive from people who do not worship with them. It is important to emphasize that these secular support items were phrased exactly like church-based emotional support questions except that study participants were asked to think about assistance they received from people who do not attend the church where they worship.³ If the findings reveal that older African Americans do not get more secular support than older Americans of European descent and older Mexican Americans, then it would be possible to cautiously conclude that there may be something unique about the nature of the social relationships that arise in the Black church.

A univariate analysis of covariance model was estimated to see if differences exist between the three racial groups in the amount of emotional support that is received from people outside the place where they worship. The same covariates that were used in the previous sections were contained in this model. The data (not shown here) suggest that the adjusted mean for secular emotional support among older African Americans is not significantly larger than the corresponding estimate for older whites (9.908 vs. 9.733; *n.s.*). The findings further reveal that older African Americans get more emotional support outside of church than older Mexican Americans (9.908 vs. 9.509; $p < .05$), but the magnitude of the difference between the two groups is not substantively meaningful. In fact, the adjusted mean for older African Americans is only 4.2% larger than the adjusted mean for older Mexican Americans. When these results are contrasted with the data on race differences in emotional support received from fellow church members and emotional support provided by the clergy, it seems there may indeed be something unique about the social relationships that older African Americans form in the place where they worship.

DISCUSSION

Down through the ages, scholars and theologians have highlighted the social basis of religion. For example, the well-known Protestant theologian, Friedrich Schleiermacher (1799/1994:148), argued that, "If there is any religion at all, it must be social, for that is the

²The secular emotional support items were not administered until the second wave of interviews with older Americans of European descent and older African Americans. The analyses presented in the current study, therefore, compare secular support among older Mexican Americans at the baseline (and only) interview with Wave 2 reports of secular support by older whites and older African Americans.

³The following instructions were read to study participants when the secular emotional support items were administered: "Now I have some questions about people who do not attend your church. I'm thinking here of family members and friends who do not worship in the church you go to."

nature of man, and it is quite particularly the nature of religion.” Although there certainly is a strong social element in religious practices and beliefs, there may also be important variations in the extent to which this social influence is manifest. The data from the current study indicate that compared to older Americans of European descent and older Mexican Americans, older African Americans appear to have more well-developed social relationships with fellow church members as well as members of the clergy. Less consistent findings emerged when older whites were compared with older Mexican Americans. However, when differences emerged from the data, the findings suggest that older whites scored higher on the social support measures than older Mexican Americans.

The analyses in this study were based on the premise that both older African Americans and older Mexican Americans would have more well-developed social ties in the church than older whites because of the unfortunate history of race relations in this country. However, the data suggest that this is only true for older African Americans. A vitally important task involves identifying the reason why the church-based social relationships of older Mexican Americans are not on a par with those of older African Americans. Four issues come to mind.

First, as discussed above, the historical experiences of African Americans were far more pernicious than those of Mexican Americans. So if the developing close ties in the church is a valid way of compensating for problems with discrimination, one would expect to find the social ties formed by African Americans would be close than those of Mexican Americans.

A second possibility may be found in the qualitative study⁴ by Krause and Bastida (2009) discussed earlier. The older Mexican Americans in these in-depth interviews reported that the notion of suffering is deeply embedded in the ethos of Mexican American culture. Although this sense of suffering may be manifest in different ways, one expression is especially relevant for the current study. Krause and Bastida (2009) report that some study participants believe it is best to suffer in silence. The importance of suffering in silence was captured succinctly by one older woman: “I don’t think it’s necessary to let people know you are suffering. They would only be burdened unnecessarily” (Krause and Bastida 2009:120). Perhaps the proclivity to suffer in silence tends to offset the opportunities for developing the close social relationships that Elizondo (2000) and others maintain are present in the Mexican American church.

The third explanation for the relatively low levels of church-based support among older Mexican Americans has to do with differences in the historical role of the church in the African American and Mexican American communities. Recall that Nelsen and Nelsen (1975) point out that the church occupied a central role in the African American community because it was the first institution to be wholly owned and operated by African Americans. But the same was not true for Mexican Americans. Dolan and Hinojosa (1994) wrote a detailed history of Mexican American Catholicism from 1900 through 1965. As these investigators report, the Catholic Church was initially run by priests who were not Mexican American and as a result, they did not speak Spanish. Moreover, the clergy did not understand Mexican American culture and many of the unique Mexican American customs, such as making *mandas*⁴, were viewed as superstitions. Consequently, many Mexican Americans viewed the church with suspicion. As Fernandez (2007:51) reports, “... the lingering feeling of Mexican Americans toward the official Church is that it is an Anglo institution.” If this observation is valid, then it would not be surprising to find that older

⁴Mandas, or promesas, are a true religious quid pro quo whereby a Mexican American makes a solemn promise to the Virgin or one of the saints if the deity will grant a request. So, for example, they may promise to make a pilgrimage to a sacred shrine if the deity cures a loved one who is ill.

Mexican Americans might be less willing to develop close social relationships within the church.

Fourth, consistent with a number of other studies, the findings from the current study reveal that the wide majority of older Mexican Americans are Catholics. This is important because a recent study by Krause (2010) reveals that older Catholics, who are either white or African American, tend to get less church-based emotional support than older Protestants. However, the findings in the current study emerged after affiliation with the Catholic faith was included as a covariate. This suggests that the differences in church-based support between older Mexican Americans and older African Americans must be due some factor other than affiliation with the Catholic Church.

Regardless of the underlying mechanism that may be at work, great care must be taken in interpreting the differences in the church-based social relationships that are maintained by older Mexican Americans and older African Americans. The data do not indicate that social relationships in Mexican American churches are therefore inadequate in any way. Instead, a better interpretation would be, for example, that older Mexican Americans do, indeed, get emotional support from their fellow church members, it is just that older African Americans get more of it. Put in a more general way, care should be taken not to confuse the absolute level of emotional support that older Mexican Americans receive at church with the difference in church-based emotional support between older Mexican Americans and older African Americans.

As this discussion reveals, there is a good deal that researchers do not know about race differences in the social relationships that older people maintain in the places where they worship. There are at least five ways to move this literature forward. First, researchers should explore other dimensions of church-based social ties that were not examined in the current study. For example, a study by Krause and Cairney (2009) reveals that some older people have an especially close companion friend in their congregation. Research is needed to see if there are race differences in the proclivity to form this type of especially close relationship. Second, researchers need to expand the scope of inquiry by assessing church-based social relationships in other racial groups, such as Asian Americans, as well as the relationships that older Jews form in the places where they worship. Third, more research is needed to see how social relationships form over time. Fourth, there is some evidence that social relationships in the church vary by both gender and race. However, this research has only involved older African Americans and older whites (Krause 2006b). Similar studies are needed to see if differences in church-based social ties vary by gender in the Mexican American community. Fifth, the findings in the current study provide some evidence that social relationships in the church vary by race, but no empirical evidence was presented to show why this may be so. Sweeping historical forces were evoked to explain these race differences, but as the findings with older Mexican Americans reveal, this explanation was not sufficient. In addition to describing race differences, it is time to explain why they arise.

Demographic projections predict that by the year 2050, only 61 percent of older Americans will be non-Hispanic whites (Federal Interagency Forum on Aging Related Statistics 2008). Although American society is rapidly becoming more racially diverse, research on religion has not always kept up with these developments. It is hoped that the findings from the current study will encourage further work along these lines. Gathering data on older minority group members is expensive and time consuming, but the rich insights that are afforded by this work are well worth the effort.

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Table 1

Preliminary Descriptive Data

	Black (N = 600)	White (N = 513)	Mexican American (N = 663)
Age	74.5 (SD = 6.1)	75.0 (SD = 6.6)	73.4 (SD = 6.2)
Percent male	.32	.39	.39
Percent currently married	.37	.59	.56
Education	10.3 (SD = 3.3)	12.6 (SD = 3.2)	7.1 (SD = 4.0)
Percent Catholic	.07	.35	.77
Frequency ^a of church attendance	7.1 (SD = 1.5)	7.1 (SD = 1.6)	7.0 (SD = 1.5)

^aChurch attendance scores range from 3–9.

Table 2**Social Relationship Measures**Social Relationships with Rank-and-File Church Members

- 1 Emotional Support Received from Church Members^a
 - A. Other than your minister, pastor, or priest, how often does someone in your congregation let you know they love and care for you?
 - B. How often does someone in your congregation talk with you about your private problems and concerns?
 - C. How often does someone in your congregation express interest and concern in your well-being?
- 2 Tangible Support Received from Church Members^a
 - A. How often does someone in your congregation give you a ride to church services?
 - B. How often does someone in your congregation provide you with transportation to other places, like the grocery store or doctor's office?
 - C. How often does someone in your congregation help you with things that need to be done around your house, such as household chores or yard work?
 - D. How often does someone in your congregation help out when you or a family member are ill?
- 3 Emotional Support Provided to Church Members^a
 - A. How often do you show someone in your congregation that you love and care for him/her?
 - B. How often have you talked with someone in your congregation about his/her private feelings and concerns?
 - C. How often have you expressed interest and concern in the well-being of someone in your congregation?
- 4 Tangible Support Provided to Church Members^a
 - A. How often do you provide transportation to church for someone in your congregation?
 - B. How often do you provide transportation for someone in your congregation to other places, like the grocery store or the doctor's office?
 - C. How often do you help someone in your congregation with things that need to be done around his or her home, such as household chores or yard work?
 - D. How often have you helped take care of someone in your congregation when he/she was ill?
- 5 Anticipated Support from Church Members^b
 - A. If you were ill, how much would someone in your congregation be willing to help out?
 - B. If you needed to talk to someone in your congregation about your problems and private feelings, how much would someone in your congregation be willing to listen?
 - C. If you needed to know where to go to get help with a problem, how much would someone in your congregation be willing to help you find it?
- 6 Negative Interaction with Church Members^a
 - A. How often does someone in your congregation make too many demands on you?
 - B. How often are the people in your congregation critical of you and the things you do?
 - C. How often are you bothered by cliques in your congregation?
 - D. How often are people in your congregation unwelcoming to you?
 - E. How often have people in your congregation failed to provide support when you were counting on it?
- 7 Spiritual Support from Church Members^a
 - A. Not counting Bible study groups, prayer groups, or church services, how often does someone in your congregation share their own religious experiences with you?
 - B. Not counting Bible study groups, prayer groups, or church services, how often does someone in your congregation help you find solutions to your problems in the Bible?
 - C. Not counting Bible study groups, prayer groups, or church services, how often do the examples set by others in your congregation help you lead a better religious life?

- D. Not counting Bible study groups, prayer groups, or church services, how often does someone in your congregation help you to know God better?
- E. E. Not counting Bible study groups, prayer groups, or church services, how often does someone in your congregation help you live according to your religious beliefs?

Social Relationships with the Clergy

- 1 Emotional Support from the Clergy^a
 - A. How often does your (MINISTER, PASTOR, OR PRIEST) speak with you about your private problems and concerns?
 - B. When talking with your (MINISTER, PASTOR, OR PRIEST) on an individual basis, how often does he or she express interest and concern in your well-being?
 - C. How often has your (MINISTER, PASTOR, OR PRIEST) visited you or a family member at the hospital?
 - D. How often has your (MINISTER, PASTOR, OR PRIEST) visited you or a family member when you/they were ill?
 - E. When a family member or close friend died, how often has your (MINISTER, PASTOR, OR PRIEST) provided comfort?
- 2 Tangible Support from the Clergy^a
 - A. How often has your (MINISTER, PASTOR, OR PRIEST) helped out with things that needed to be done around your home, such as repairs, yard work, or household chores?
 - B. How often has your (MINISTER, PASTOR, OR PRIEST) told you who to see for help with practical matters, like buying a car, buying a kitchen appliance, or finding a job?
 - C. How often has your (MINISTER, PASTOR, OR PRIEST) helped you get community services, like financial assistance or medical care?
- 3 Anticipated Support from the Clergy^b
 - A. If you needed to talk about your private problems and concerns, how much could you count on your (MINISTER, PASTOR, OR PRIEST) to help out?
 - B. If you needed spiritual guidance and advice, how much could you count on your (MINISTER, PASTOR, OR PRIEST) to help out?
 - C. If you were in the hospital, how much could you count on your (MINISTER, PASTOR, OR PRIEST) to visit you?
- 4 Negative Interaction with the Clergy^a
 - A. How often has your (MINISTER, PASTOR, OR PRIEST) been critical of you and the things you have done?
 - B. How often do you disagree with your (MINISTER, PASTOR, OR PRIEST) face-to-face about how money is spent in your church?
 - C. How often has your (MINISTER, PASTOR, OR PRIEST) failed to provide support when you were counting on it?

^aThese items are scored in the following manner (coding in parentheses): never (1), once in a while (2), fairly often (3), very often (4).

^bThese items are scored in the following manner: none at all (1), a little (2), some (3), a great deal (4).

Table 3

Reliability Estimates for the Church-Based Social Relationship Measures

	Black (N = 600)	White (N = 513)	Mexican American (N = 663)
<u>Church Members</u>			
Emotional support received	.764	.822	.838
Tangible support received	.809	.714	.730
Emotional support provided	.828	.857	.862
Tangible support provided	.777	.740	.808
Anticipated support	.887	.901	.886
Negative interaction	.733	.592	.607
Spiritual support	.902	.890	.946
<u>Clergy</u>			
Emotional support received	.828	.801	.787
Tangible support received	.846	.669	.839
Negative interaction	.591	.531	.609
Anticipated support	.890	.850	.863

Table 4

Relationships with Fellow Church Members

	Black (N = 600)	White (N = 513)	Mexican American (N = 663)	Black versus White	Black versus Mexican American	White versus Mexican American
Emotional support received	8.196 ^a (8.765) ^b	7.524 (7.602)	7.574 (6.999)	$p < .001^c$	$p < .001$	N.S.
Tangible support received	6.588 (6.954)	5.699 (5.517)	5.567 (5.377)	$p < .001$	$p < .001$	N.S.
Emotional support provided	8.527 (9.055)	7.654 (7.817)	7.487 (6.883)	$p < .001$	$p < .001$	N.S.
Tangible support provided	6.365 (6.538)	5.590 (5.779)	5.353 (5.052)	$p < .001$	$p < .001$	N.S.
Anticipated support	9.744 (10.189)	9.579 (9.736)	8.880 (8.354)	N.S.	$p < .001$	$p < .001$
Negative interaction	5.780 (5.794)	5.601 (5.612)	5.479 (5.458)	$p < .05$	$p < .001$	N.S.
Spiritual support	11.911 (12.844)	10.748 (10.749)	11.194 (10.348)	$p < .001$	$p < .01$	N.S.

^aMean adjusted for age, sex, education, marital status, frequency of church attendance, and affiliation with the Catholic church^bUnadjusted mean^cSignificance tests for adjusted means

Table 5

Relationships with the Clergy

	Black (N = 600)	White (N = 513)	Mexican American (N = 663)	Black versus White	Black versus Mexican American	White versus Mexican American
Emotional support received	11.717 ^a (12.172) ^b	11.258 (11.190)	9.302 (8.942)	$p < .05^c$	$p < .001$	$p < .001$
Tangible support received	3.837 (3.965)	3.301 (3.278)	3.417 (3.312)	$p < .001$	$p < .001$	N.S.
Negative interaction	3.502 (3.494)	3.245 (3.246)	3.256 (3.262)	$p < .001$	$p < .001$	N.S.
Anticipated support	12.698 (13.069)	12.932 (12.985)	10.856 (10.479)	N.S.	$p < .001$	$p < .001$

^aMean adjusted for age, sex, education, marital status, frequency of church attendance, and affiliation with the Catholic church

^bUnadjusted mean

^cSignificance tests for adjusted means