

## **Evangelical Christians and Racial Inequality: An Analysis of Explanations of Inequality**

### **Introduction**

Many in our society contend that we live in a true meritocracy. It is claimed that if one works hard enough and possesses the proper motivation, one can achieve his or her goals. Individualism is a value held sacred by many Americans, who believe the individual is responsible for his or her own destiny. Studies have shown that white, conservative Protestants tend to hold more individualistic attitudes than other Americans<sup>1</sup>. These studies have also shown members of white conservative Protestant churches to cite individualistic explanations of racial inequality more often than structural explanations. Analyzing these trends within the paradigm of symbolic interactionism, we can see how these attitudes are created and internalized by members of these religious groups. Furthermore, if we as a society hope to lessen racial inequality, we will need to understand how individuals perceive the problem and what solutions will be most effective.

### **Explanations of Racial Inequality**

Emerson, Smith, and Sikkink (1999) argue that while many studies have been conducted to find out how Americans explain racial inequality (specifically black-white inequality), very few have focused on the importance of religion on influencing these explanations. The authors chose to focus specifically on white, conservative Protestants, who make up almost twenty-five percent of the American population. They note that the stereotype of these individuals as uneducated, rural Southerners is untrue; evangelical Christians (a term used concurrently with conservative Protestants) are represented nationwide and in all socioeconomic classes. “What distinguishes this group, we argue, are not these structural factors, but a subculture that stresses, through theological linkages, a particular way of viewing the world.”<sup>2</sup>

Emerson et al. (1999) borrow from Swidler (1986) the idea of a cultural toolkit, which is a collection of ideas, habits, skills, and styles that allow “individuals and groups to organize experiences and evaluate reality.”<sup>3</sup> As these authors are interested in determining how evangelical Christians view racial inequality, they seek to determine what “tools” are in this group’s cultural toolkit. Emerson et al. claim these tools are *accountable freewill individualism*, *anti-structuralism*, and *relationism*<sup>4</sup>. *Accountable freewill individualism* refers to evangelical Christians’ strong doctrine of individualism, specifically rooted in the belief that God has given humanity the ability to choose their own destiny, and any shortcomings in one’s life are the result of poor decision-making on the part of the individual. *Anti-structuralism* refers to “an inability to perceive, unwillingness to accept, or negative reaction to macro social structural influences.”<sup>5</sup> Thus, larger social forces are ignored and individualistic explanations are embraced. Finally, Emerson et al. note *relationism* as another tool in the cultural toolkit of white conservative Protestants, which places a large emphasis on interpersonal relationships. The authors claim *relationism* stems from the belief that humanity has fallen from God’s grace, and the key to salvation is a personal relationship with Jesus Christ<sup>6</sup>. By transposing these beliefs to society as a whole, “[w]hite conservative Protestants often see social problems as rooted in poor relationships or the negative influence of significant others.”<sup>7</sup> Thus, evangelical Christians are more likely than other Americans to attribute racial inequality to dysfunctional relationships among the black population. Relying on the “tools” of *accountable freewill individualism*, *anti-structuralism*, and *relationism*, Emerson et al. hypothesize that white conservative Protestants are more individualistic and less structuralist than other Americans in their explanations of racial inequality, which Emerson et al. claims is a bold statement given the overall individualistic attitudes of Americans as a whole.

Employing both quantitative and qualitative methods, Emerson et al. were able to support their hypothesis that evangelical Christians rely on individualistic explanations of racial inequality more so than the rest of the population. It was found that while one-half of white Americans think that Blacks are not motivated and consequently are poorer than the white population, two-thirds of white conservative Protestants hold this belief. Furthermore, one-half of all white Americans believe that Blacks lack educational access and that this can help explain racial inequality. Only one-third of white conservative Protestants share this belief. Finally,

one-third of white Americans believe that the cause of racial inequality is discrimination, while only one-fourth of white conservative Protestants cited discrimination as a cause of racial inequality. All findings were statistically significant.<sup>8</sup>

If white, conservative Protestants tend to believe that racial inequality exists due to individual reasons, what are the implications for society as a whole? Emerson et al. claim that reducing racial inequality through government programs will be problematic and resisted by evangelical Christians<sup>9</sup>. Because of their denial of structural causes of racial inequality, Emerson et al. argue that white conservative Protestants indirectly contribute to racial inequality (414). If evangelical Christians tend to believe the black population lacks hope and vision, and also suffers from relational dysfunction and lack of responsibility, how can the government effectively employ structural programs to reduce racial inequality? The theoretical implications of this issues will be explored in the following section.

Hinojosa and Park (2004) cite a paradox that exists among the white population in the United States: “While white Americans believe inequality is a bad thing, they consistently oppose government programs to solve it.”<sup>10</sup> Hinojosa and Park extend the research of Emerson et al. (1999) to determine if there is something distinctive about the cultural toolkit of white conservative Protestants from those toolkits of other religious beliefs. They also seek to determine the effect of religion on African Americans’ explanations of racial inequality. It is hypothesized that white conservative Protestants are more individualistic than those in larger society as a whole and also than those in other religious traditions. It is also hypothesized that due to the “communitarian ethos” of the black church, blacks in religious denominations would be more prone to cite structural explanations of racial inequality than their white counterparts<sup>11</sup>. Lastly, it is hypothesized that those most socialized within a religious tradition will most exemplify its characteristics. Thus, it is expected that the frequency of church attendance will significantly impact attitudes regarding racial inequality.

Data from the 1996 General Social Survey were used to test these hypotheses. They determine that religion is indeed significant in determining racial attitudes<sup>12</sup>. They argue,

Interestingly, where religion is significant, its effect is either to deny a structural cause—mainliners and Catholics deny discrimination and black Protestants deny lack of educational opportunities—or to affirm the individualist explanation—evangelicals affirm lack of motivation<sup>13</sup>.

While Hinojosa and Park find white conservative Protestants to be more individualistic than those in other religious traditions, they were surprised that followers of mainstream Protestantism and Catholicism were not more structural in their explanations of racial inequality. The authors also find that being black makes one much more likely to affirm the structural model of racial inequality, but being a black Protestant makes one much less likely to affirm structural explanations<sup>14</sup>. Again, the emphasis on individualism by Protestantism is apparent in this finding. Lastly, the hypothesis regarding the frequency of church attendance and its impact on racial attitudes was not supported. The researchers were puzzled by this and called for more research into determining why church attendance would not affect beliefs on racial inequality, when religion has been demonstrated to have a significant effect on such attitudes. They conclude their argument stating that while evangelical Protestants rely more on individualistic explanations of racial inequality than do those in other religions, it is clear that all religions play a role in the formation of inequality attitudes<sup>15</sup>.

In a smaller study, Barnes (1997) claims that while there may have been a decline in “old fashioned” racism, it has only been replaced by attitudes and behaviors that are less obvious<sup>16</sup>. To test this, she designed a survey that was administered to a historically black Baptist church and a historically white Baptist church, both of which have been active in the same community for over 110 years and lie only one block from one another<sup>17</sup>. Analysis of the surveys noted a difference in the general racial attitudes of the two congregations. “The European-American congregation expressed a higher degree of racial negativity than the African-American congregation.”<sup>18</sup> Further analysis demonstrated that while many religious white people support racial equality in policy, they do not do so in practice<sup>19</sup>. Barnes cites a reliance upon the Protestant ethic to explain this phenomenon: “This ethic assumes equal access by all to the economic, social, and political factors needed to bring about ‘success.’ This implies that, by and large, society’s underclass exists chiefly by their own design.”<sup>20</sup> According to Barnes, this belief is more apparent in the white congregation than in the black congregation. She claims, “African

American respondents support the need for intervention by governmental and social institutions and individuals to counteract racism. European-American respondents did not support this stance as readily.”<sup>21</sup> Again, we see more reliance on individualistic explanations among white Christians than black Christians.

In *Divided by Faith*, Emerson and Smith (2000) echo the assertion that while overt racism may be on the decline, subtle or aversive racism continues to permeate the evangelical Christian community. They posit, “Contemporary evangelicals’ explanations for racial inequality, then, are essentially unchanged from a century ago...Now, as then, the racial gap is not explained by unequal opportunity or discrimination or shortcomings of the society as a whole, but rather by the shortcomings of blacks.”<sup>22</sup> They argue that this constitutes racism, as they are blaming a group of historically repressed people for their own inequality.

They go on to reiterate elements of the Protestant ethic noted by Barnes (1997) and the religious paradox noted by Hinojosa and Park (2004). They argue that white conservative Protestants are more receptive to helping those black Americans whom they perceive as trying to work hard to better their situation, yet “are also more likely to oppose government assistance of any type to blacks.”<sup>23</sup> Emerson and Smith attribute to this to attitudes that support laissez-faire capitalism, where “individuals should be free to pursue their own ends, and rewards should be distributed based on effort.”<sup>24</sup> By ignoring the structures that contribute to racial inequality in the United States, the authors argue these structures all allowed to continue operating unimpeded. This is how evangelical Christians inadvertently contribute to the racial inequality that exists in our society, and in fact help to reproduce it. Emerson and Smith quote Cornel West as stating that these individuals “rarely, if ever, examine the innumerable cases in which black people do act on the Protestant ethic and still remain at the bottom of the social ladder. Because of this, they continue to champion effort and, in doing so, inadvertently contribute to racialization.”<sup>25</sup>

### **Theoretical Analysis**

It has been shown that white conservative Christians tend to hold individualistic explanations of racial inequality while denying structural explanations, such as education and

discrimination, as possible causes. What the above studies have not demonstrated (with the exception of Emerson and Smith) is how these identities are created within this religious group. Without an understanding of this identity formation that stresses individualism, we as a society cannot hope to effectively close the racial gap that exists between blacks and whites. An understanding of Herbert Blumer's theory of symbolic interactionism and George Herbert Mead's concept of the self can help us to better understand how these attitudes and identities are created, and in doing so, can potentially help society as a whole begin to alleviate racial inequality.

Herbert Blumer coined the term "symbolic interactionism" in 1937 and sociologists view him today as one of the founders of the paradigm. To begin, it is useful to outline the three premises that define symbolic interactionism, according to Blumer (1969). "The first premise is that human beings act toward things on the basis of the meanings that the things have for them."<sup>26</sup> Blumer notes that these "things" are not confined to physical materials like chairs and trees; rather, they include "everything that the human being may note in his world."<sup>27</sup> Thus, activities of others and guiding ideals are classified under "things." Moving along, Blumer states, "The second premise is that the meaning of such things is derived from, or arises out of, the social interaction that one has with one's fellows."<sup>28</sup> In other words, meaning isn't inherent to a thing or object; it is created through interaction with other human beings. Lastly, Blumer states, "The third premise is that these meanings are handled in, and modified through, an interpretative process used by the person in dealing with the thing he encounters."<sup>29</sup>

Thus meaning is central to the foundation of symbolic interactionism. Blumer argues that too often meanings gets looked over or counted as unimportant. He posits, "The position of symbolic interactionism...is that the meanings that things have for human beings are central in their own right. To ignore the meanings of things toward which people act is seen as falsifying the behavior under study."<sup>30</sup> But we must remind ourselves that objects do not inherently have meaning for human beings; rather, meaning is created: "Symbolic interactionism sees meanings as social products, as creations that are formed in and through the defining activities of people as they interact."<sup>31</sup> It must also be noted that "meanings play their part in action through a process of self-interaction,"<sup>32</sup> which Blumer describes as communication of an individual with oneself.

In order to act on something we must negotiate the meaning of the object with ourselves to determine the appropriate course of action.

Blumer's ideas of symbolic interaction can help explain how evangelical Christians form and perpetuate their beliefs regarding racial inequality. As stated previously, humans act toward objects based on the meaning that object has for them. "This meaning sets the way in which he sees the object, the way in which he is prepared to act toward it, and the way in which he is ready to talk about it."<sup>33</sup> Citing the importance of social interaction, Blumer says that "[t]he meaning of objects for a person arises fundamentally out of the way they are defined to him by others with whom he interacts."<sup>34</sup> If we remember that objects can entail ideas, we can apply this statement to explanations of racial inequality made by evangelical Christians. If white conservative Christians define inequality to their fellow members as something caused by individual reasons rather than social ones, then other members of the religious group will act toward racial inequality in a similar fashion. For them, the object of racial inequality takes on a meaning defined in individualistic terms, therefore negating the need to look for structural answers to the problem.

Blumer's ideas can be further used to understand how these attitudes and beliefs are created in a group environment. He states, "People cluster in different groups, belong to different associations, and occupy different positions. They accordingly approach each other differently, live in different worlds, and guide themselves by different sets of meanings."<sup>35</sup> Analyzing white conservative Protestants from this standpoint makes it clear how this group can form and disseminate their beliefs on racial inequality. They have clustered into a group based on a common theological belief system that emphasizes personal responsibility for one's life situation. There is a clear emphasis on the ability of human beings to make free choices, thus if one's life turns out to be of poor quality, then it must have something to do with choices previously made. Evangelical Christians are guided by this set of meanings, and employ these meanings to explain racial inequality.

In an earlier work, Blumer (1958) explores the group process through which racism arises. He states, "[o]ne should keep clearly in mind that people necessarily come to identify

themselves as belonging to a racial group; such identification is not spontaneous or inevitable but a result of experience.”<sup>36</sup> Blumer argues that people do not instinctly identify with members of their own racial group, and consequently do not instinctly harbor prejudice toward those of other racial groups. Racial identity is a group process that forms through social interaction of people of one group who define the characteristics of other groups to be different from their own. Blumer states, “To characterize another racial group is, by opposition, to define one’s own group.”<sup>37</sup> Thus by defining blacks as lacking motivation and the desire to better their lives, white conservative Protestants necessarily define themselves as adherents to hard work and the desire to improve their own lives.

Emerson and Smith (2000) note in their research the importance of group solidarity among white conservative Protestants. Just as Blumer theorized, when people cluster into groups they live in a world differentiated from that of other groups. Specific identity formation takes place within a group by establishing group boundaries and social solidarity<sup>38</sup>. By establishing group boundaries, distinctions are made between members of the group and everyone else. “Groups must symbolize and utilize symbolic boundaries to both create and give substance to shared values and identities. In many respects, we know who we are by knowing who we are not.”<sup>39</sup> Thus, evangelical whites can identify themselves by the fact that they are hardworking and motivated to better their own lives. They therefore realize they are different than blacks, who due to their lower social status in most areas of life, must not be working hard enough to achieve a similar social standing. These evangelicals can then identify even more strongly with their own group, and the idea that racial inequality is caused by individual actions or lack thereof is perpetuated.

George Herbert Mead’s work on the self is also of great use in understanding how white conservative Protestants form an identity around the principle of individualism. Like Blumer, Mead emphasizes the importance of the social group in understanding the actions of an individual. He argues, “[t]he individual experiences himself as such, not directly, but only indirectly, from the particular standpoints of other individual members of the same social group, or from the generalized standpoint of the social group as a whole to which he belongs.”<sup>40</sup> Accordingly, racial identity formation is rooted in social interaction. People define their

identities, and consequently other groups' identities, through interaction. "The self, as that which can be an object to itself, is essentially a social structure, and it arises in social experience."<sup>41</sup> As individuals are socialized within conservative Protestant denominations, they internalize the values and beliefs of others, and the ideals behind the Protestant ethic become ingrained in their identities.

According to Mead, as an individual interacts with others in his/her group, he/she begins to understand the attitudes and opinions of others towards him/herself. Mead calls this the *generalized other*, and by taking on the form of the generalized other, and individual can direct his/her behavior accordingly to conform to group norms and values. He states that it is in the form of the generalized other that the "community enters as a determining factor into the individual's thinking."<sup>42</sup> Evangelical Christians form their beliefs about racial inequality by taking on the generalized other, which in their social group emphasizes individualism and self-reliance. Accordingly, they believe those who experience inequality should fix the problems themselves.

Similarly, Mead states that individuals adopt group attitudes toward the solution of social problems. He says

The self-conscious human individual, then, takes or assumes the organized social attitudes of the given social group or community (or of some one section thereof) to which he belongs, toward the social problems of various kinds which confront that group or community at any given time and which arise in connection with the correspondingly different social projects...in which that group or community as such is engaged<sup>43</sup>.

He gives the example of a politician who identifies with the attitudes of his political party, and then consequently acts "in terms of the organized attitudes of the party as a whole."<sup>44</sup> We can apply this to evangelical Christians, who identify with the strong individualistic ethic of their social group. They in turn act toward racial inequality, which can be seen as a social problem, in anti-structuralist ways. They argue that the solution to lessening racial inequality lies with the individual, not society.

## **Conclusion**

White conservative Protestants tend to propose individualistic solutions to the problem of racial inequality. As has been demonstrated, these evangelical Christians form an identity that stresses that importance of the individual in ensuring economic, material, and spiritual success in life. They tend to deny structural explanations, such as discrimination and lack of quality access to education, as reasons blacks suffer from inequality. They also tend to oppose structural solutions, such as affirmative action, for lessening racial inequality. What, then, can society do when such a large part of the population believes the solution to the black-white socioeconomic gap is for blacks to motivate themselves and work harder for their goals?

Emerson and Smith (2000) propose that evangelical Christians should engage in a more serious reflection on race-relations, and should do so with educated others<sup>45</sup>. They claim this will help evangelicals to see racial problems from another point of view, and thus to see possible solutions other than politely asking blacks to work harder. Following this, Christians should “bring together this knowledge with Christian understanding of freedom, love, universalism, justice, unity, and community.”<sup>46</sup> If evangelicals can look past pure individualistic solutions and engage structural solutions with traditional Christian values, the authors argue gap between whites and blacks in the U.S. can begin to shrink.

From a symbolic interactionist viewpoint, we need more interaction between white conservative Protestants and the black population. If meaning is created through interaction, then surely more contact with other groups could help evangelical Christians to see the blame for racial inequality doesn't fall on the black population, buy rather they would begin to see that despite the fact that many black individuals are motivated to change their lives and are willing to work as hard as it takes, there are larger forces that serve to limit full equality in our society. Perhaps then more in our society would be willing to support structural solutions for a structural problem.

#### BIBLIOGRAPHY

Barnes, Sandra L. 1997. “Practicing What You Preach: An Analysis of Racial Attitudes of

Two Christian Churches.” *The Western Journal of Black Studies* 21:1-11.

Blumer, Herbert. 1958. “Race Prejudice as a Sense of Group Position.” *The Pacific Sociological Review* 1:3-7.

Blumer, Herbert. 1969. *Symbolic Interactionism*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

Emerson, Michael O. and Christian Smith. 2000. *Divided by Faith: Evangelical Religion and the Problem of Race in America*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Emerson, Michael O, Christian Smith, and David Sikkink. 1999. “Equal in Christ, But Not in the World: White Conservative Protestants and Explanations of Black-White Inequality.” *Social Problems* 46:398-417.

Hinojosa, Victor J. and Jerry Z. Park. 2004. “Religion and the Paradox of Racial Inequality Attitudes.” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 43:229-238.

Mead, George Herbert (Charles Morris, ed.) 1934. *Mind, Self & Society from the Standpoint of a Behaviorist* (Works of George Herbert Mead, vol. 1). Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

## NOTES

---

<sup>1</sup> Barnes 1997; Emerson and Smith 2000; Emerson, Smith and Sikkink 1999; Hinojosa and Park 2004

<sup>2</sup> Ibid. (p. 399)

<sup>3</sup> Ibid. (p. 400)

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid. (p. 401)

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid. (p. 414)

<sup>10</sup> Hinojosa and Park (p. 229)

<sup>11</sup> Ibid. (p. 231)

<sup>12</sup> Ibid. (p. 235)

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

- 
- <sup>14</sup> Ibid.  
<sup>15</sup> Ibid. (p. 236)  
<sup>16</sup> Barnes 1997 (p. 1)  
<sup>17</sup> Ibid. (p. 2)  
<sup>18</sup> Ibid. (p. 3)  
<sup>19</sup> Ibid. (p. 4)  
<sup>20</sup> Ibid.  
<sup>21</sup> Ibid. (p. 5)  
<sup>22</sup> Emerson and Smith 2000 (p. 109)  
<sup>23</sup> Ibid.  
<sup>24</sup> Ibid. (p. 110)  
<sup>25</sup> Ibid. (p. 113)  
<sup>26</sup> Blumer 1969 (p. 2)  
<sup>27</sup> Ibid.  
<sup>28</sup> Ibid.  
<sup>29</sup> Ibid.  
<sup>30</sup> Ibid. (p. 3)  
<sup>31</sup> Ibid. (p. 5)  
<sup>32</sup> Ibid.  
<sup>33</sup> Ibid. (p. 11)  
<sup>34</sup> Ibid.  
<sup>35</sup> Ibid. (p. 21)  
<sup>36</sup> Blumer 1958 (p. 3)  
<sup>37</sup> Ibid. (p. 4)  
<sup>38</sup> Emerson and Smith 2000  
<sup>39</sup> Emerson and Smith 2000 (p. 143)  
<sup>40</sup> Blumer 1934 (p. 138)  
<sup>41</sup> Ibid. (p. 140)  
<sup>42</sup> Ibid. (p. 155)  
<sup>43</sup> Ibid. (p. 156)  
<sup>44</sup> Ibid.  
<sup>45</sup> Emerson and Smith (p. 171)  
<sup>46</sup> Ibid. (p. 172)