Individualism, Self-Interest, and White Racism

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Tuch and Hughes's analysis is centered on the puzzle that has dom-
inated research on whites' racial policy views for almost two decades—
the disjuncture between whites' gradual elevation to apparently lofty
racial policy principles and their meager support for specific policies
designed to implement those principles. This disjuncture has been per-
sistently observed, and its meaning and significance have generated
continuing debate (see, for example, Jackman [1978]; Stinchcombe
and Taylor [1980]; Crosby, Bromley, and Saxe [1980]; Kinder and
Sears [1981]; McConahay, Hardee, and Batts [1981]; Jackman and
Muha [1984]; Pettigrew [1985]; Schuman, Steeh, and Bobo [1985];
Sniderman and Hagen [1985]; Dovidio and Gaertner [1986];
McConahay [1986]; Schuman and Bobo [1988]; Kuklinski and Parent
[1981]; Sigelman and Welch [1991]).

I suggest, however, that the so-called "gap" or "inconsistency" be-
tween whites' racial policy principles and their specific policy views is
illusory. Analysts' interpretation of whites' responses to survey items
on abstract racial policy principles has been too enthusiastic: whites'
endorsement of the principle of racial equality, or even racial integra-
tion, may be considerably more guarded than analysts have inferred.
At both the abstract and the applied level, many whites gravitate to a
policy solution that puts a priority on individual freedom of movement
with as little governmental intervention as possible. With an initially
weak conception of what constitutes racial integration or racial equal-
ity, whites are consistently following through (rather than inconsis-
tently backing off) when they oppose specific policy proposals that
would accelerate governmentally mandated racial integration or racial
equality. This interpretation is suggested by several pieces of evidence.
I discuss these, and pursue the implications for the place of individu-
alism and self-interest in the formulation of whites' racial policy views.

In their responses to one of the most common measures of abstract
racial policy principles (the NES item, "Are you in favor of desegre-
gation, strict segregation, or something in between?"), most whites do
indeed repudiate segregation—but the alternative to which most of

them turn is not desegregation but the elusive idea of "something in between" segregation and desegregation. Schuman, Steeh, and Bobo (1985:74–75) reported that the percentage of whites choosing "something in between" ranged from 46 percent in 1970 to 60 percent in 1978. In my own national survey in 1975, a similarly worded item again elicited the "something in between" response from whites more often than any other. When asked, "Generally speaking, are you in favor of racial integration, racial segregation, or something in between?," 16 percent of whites endorsed segregation, 35 percent favored integration, and 44 percent chose "something in between" (Jackman, 1994:231–32). Schuman, Steeh, and Bobo (1985:95–96) provided evidence from a split-ballot experiment that the NES's placement of the segregation item in the interview schedule (immediately after an item on the particularly sensitive issue of federal school intervention) was inflating the proportion opting for "something in between," but in my own survey the segregregation item enjoyed a more pristine location prior to any specific policy questions.

The attraction of so many whites to "something in between" segregation and integration suggests that their support for racial integration should most generously be described as soft. What do whites have in mind when they slide into this enigmatic response? Perhaps they have learned that Jim Crow segregation laws are no longer acceptable (hardly a daring stance since such laws have long since been abolished), but on the other hand enforced racial integration is not enticing either. I venture that for most whites "something in between" conjures up the idea of racial integration or segregation being decided on the basis of individual free will, without any external interference—so-called "voluntary integration." The introduction of "magnet schools" in many communities represents just such an option. Indeed, many whites may be thinking less about the civil rights or opportunities of blacks than about the rights of individuals (of any race) to live their lives as much as possible according to their personal proclivities.

Responses to the other standard NES measure of abstract racial policy principles may also be interpreted in this light. When asked, "Which of these two statements do you agree with more: Blacks have a right to live wherever they can afford to, or White people have a right to keep blacks out of their neighborhoods if they want to," over 80 percent of whites opt for the former principle (Jackman, 1994:231–32; Schuman, Steeh, and Bobo, 1985:74–75). However, what has been commonly interpreted as a brave new endorsement of blacks' rights may have more to do with a heightened commitment to individual rights and "free" competition. Individuals should be able to buy and sell in a free housing market, and they should also be able to decide whether they want to have contact with another racial group. No one

should be prevented from selling his house to whomever can afford it, and by the same token no one should be compelled to have contact with another racial group. Such a view falls considerably short of an abandonment of the racial *status quo*. Many whites appear to endorse a vaguely conceived laissez-faire situation of "voluntary integration" (and its silent partner, voluntary segregation) that would protect whites' personal freedom of choice without "forcing" them to conform to the requirements of either racial segregation or integration.

In this regard, it is salient that the urban residential segregation that characterizes race relations in the contemporary United States has a *de facto* quality that leaves most individual whites feeling personally blameless. The policies and practices that have produced residential segregation (see Judd, 1991; Massey and Denton, 1993) have had low public visibility and are buried in history, lost behind such positive terms as "suburban growth" and "urban renewal." Most whites are blissfully unaware of the policies pursued by federal and local governments and by the banking and real estate industries that established racially segregated neighborhoods. Whereas the racial segregation of the Jim Crow South required the continued active involvement of the white population in order to maintain it, contemporary racial residential segregation has achieved a pervasive separation of the two groups that is ready-made and self-perpetuating without individual whites having to take any active steps. Thus, much as most whites express a clear personal preference for neighborhoods that are all-white or mostly white (Jackman and Jackman, 1983:197; Farley et al., 1994), they are rarely called upon to act on their preferences. Segregation is so well entrenched that most whites can enjoy its benefits without exerting any personal effort and without feeling burdened by personal complicity. Blacks reside in different locations, and segregation in schools and jobs follow "naturally" from that. In such a situation, a laissez-faire approach by whites is sweetly convenient.

Taylor maintained that the principal issue of contention in whites' orientation to policies of racial integration since the 1950s has been over mandatory versus voluntary compliance (Taylor, 1986:24–38, 191–204). As though to underscore that point, Herrnstein (1990:6) carefully distinguished between "desegregation" (meaning racial segregation is made illegal) and "integration" (meaning equal proportionate representation of groups is mandated). It is well known that northern whites who opposed slavery in the 1860s did not generally have racial equality in mind as the obvious alternative. Likewise, in the latter half of the twentieth century, it seems that many northern whites who endorsed the civil rights movement by opposing the *de jure* segregation of the Jim Crow South did not object to the *de facto* segregation characteristic of the neighborhoods and schools of northern

cities. Indeed, many whites may not think of the latter as segregation at all, but as "something in between" segregation and integration. Thus, what is probably the most extreme form of spatial segregation ever practiced—with dramatic social and economic consequences (see Wilson, 1987; Massey and Denton, 1993)—is perceived by many whites as quite acceptable.

It is instructive that, when asked who benefits and who is hurt when "blacks generally live in black neighborhoods and whites live in white neighborhoods," the plurality opinion among whites (38 percent) was that both racial groups benefit and no one is hurt; this benign view of racial residential segregation is shared by only 14 percent of African Americans (Jackman, 1994:201). In the same vein, whites perceive much less racial discrimination than do blacks (Sigelman and Welch, 1991:52–63). And about three-quarters of whites believe that the federal government is doing "quite a bit" or "a lot" to promote integrated schools and equal job opportunities for blacks, whereas only about one-quarter of blacks share that perception (Jackman, 1994:241–43). Not unlike other dominant groups in different intergroup relationships and in other historical eras, American whites see much less to criticize in prevailing racial arrangements than do their unequal peers. Instead of faulting their own position vis-à-vis subordinates, whites are more inclined to exaggerate the significance of any policy attempts at amelioration of inequalities and to focus their energies on how to stem what looks to them like a swelling tide of redistributive change.

Whites' level of support for specific governmental policies on behalf of blacks' civil rights rises and falls in accordance with the degree to which those policies strike redistributively at the core of the relationship (Jackman, 1994:249–50, 254, 259). Those policies that most threaten whites' ability to maintain their racial latitude and advantage even elicit significant levels of reactionary opinion. For example, almost six whites in ten take the reactionary position that the government should do *less* to "make sure blacks and whites go to the same schools" (Jackman, 1994:254). The apparent support of whites for the general principles of racial integration and racial equality is an accident of measurement: the wording of items used to measure those principles confounds equality with individual rights, and thus obscures whites' resistance to redistributive change.

As they seek to protect their privileged racial interests, whites are unlikely self-consciously to assert a self-interested position. Like some other scholars, Tuch and Hughes appear to believe that one may test for the relevance of self-interest in motivating whites' racial policy views with attitudinal items that measure the articulation of self-interest in respondents' racial perceptions. While it is interesting to measure the extent to which people wear their self-interest on their sleeves, we

cannot take such items as an indicator of the place of self-interest in motivating people's policy views. This would not give humans the credit they deserve for psychological ingenuity as they strategically evolve belief systems that serve their interests. Slaveowners in the antebellum South did not defend the institution to which their interests were tied by crudely proclaiming their self-interest. Instead, they gravitated to a belief system in which slavery was depicted as serving the interests of both masters and slaves (much as many whites today see racial residential segregation as serving the interests of both whites and blacks). Indeed, slaveowners liked to complain paternalistically that slavery was a duty and a burden for slaveholders, who were obligated to take care of and watch over their childlike, irresponsible, and uncivilized charges: according to their way of thinking, slavery was more like a benevolent welfare system than a system of labor exploitation (see Genovese, 1974; Kolchin, 1987; Jackman, 1994). Self-interested people know how to be self-serving.

As I have argued elsewhere, the members of dominant social groups gravitate to belief systems that are geared toward enhancing their role in their unequal relationship with subordinates, glossing over the expropriative nature of institutional arrangements with subordinates and preventing or diverting challenge from subordinates (Jackman, 1994). Self-interested individuals tend to evolve attitudinal strategies that promote the interests of their group, since their long-term fate is linked to those other members of society who share similar life chances and who are subject to the same general constraints as themselves. As whites and privileged social classes in the United States have contended with defiant subordinates over the course of the twentieth century, they have developed ideologies in which individual rights have become the hallmark cry: such a stance offers a seemingly principled way of denying the moral legitimacy of egalitarian demands made on behalf of groups (Jackman and Muha, 1984; Jackman, 1994). The subordinate demand for equality has been blunted by fusing it with individualism, thus transforming it silently into its crippled relative, equality of opportunity. The latter goal, far from decrying inequality, lauds it—so long as the unequal distribution of resources results from an unfettered competition in which neither discrimination nor "reverse discrimination" gives anyone an "unfair" chance. As the policy debate has become locked on disputes about the adequacy of provisions for equality of opportunity, the failure to address inequalities in outcomes has been brushed aside.

At the end of their paper, Tuch and Hughes optimistically propose that "education programs aimed at increasing whites' understanding of the insidious nature of past and present racial discrimination, of the effects of structured inequality, and of the negligible impact on whites

of most race-targeted policies will improve the prospects for successful interventions." The thought is seductive, but, like many other seductions, it would probably result in disappointment. Along with many students of prejudice (for example, Allport [1954/1979] and Stephan and Stephan [1984]), Tuch and Hughes seem to assume that the source of prejudice lies in an unhappy misunderstanding: "if only whites realized. . . ." The assumption here is that logical consistency prevails over political convenience. People's attitudes are likened to a house of cards: knock down the faulty information that forms their foundation and the rest collapses.

But what if people tend to pursue policy goals on the basis of their group's interests and then, like heat-seeking missiles, find a set of beliefs that offers a convenient rationale for their policy stance? It may appear, in a snapshot, as though a person's racial beliefs are causing her negative policy views, but that impression is illusory. Assessment of the prevailing ideologies among dominant and subordinate groups in different relationships of inequality and in different historical eras suggests much about the human capacity to be inventive, logically inconsistent, agile, and elastically flexible in the adoption of ideas that are politically self-serving (Jackman, 1994). Specific ideas may be eagerly adopted or quietly abandoned, depending on their political utility in addressing the changing constraints that present themselves in an unequal relationship. The ideas that individuals hold at any one point in time form a patchwork of old and new fragments that have been snatched from the cultural menu and thrown together conveniently without attention to the logical consistency of the total package.

A public opinion survey provides a single snapshot of people's attitudes: we can discern that certain ideas tend to fall in together, but such data do not provide the basis for observing the causal ordering of those ideas or even if there is any causal ordering among them. Tuch and Hughes, like a number of other analysts, use survey data to test alternative attitudinal models of discriminatory racial dispositions (see, for example, Bobo and Kluegel [1993] and Farley et al. [1994]). In such studies, however, inferences about *causal* relations among different attitude measures are necessarily based on theoretical assumption, not empirical demonstration.

The assumption that discriminatory racial dispositions are literally caused by negative and faulty beliefs has had a venerable place in the analysis of prejudice (see, for example, Allport [1954/1979]). However, such a model of cognitive functioning assumes a degree of logical consistency and political disinterest that belies the human record. I have argued that whites' racial policy goals are not caused by their racial beliefs, but instead whites adduce such beliefs in the service of

their policy goals, as they seek to preserve the racial privileges to which they have long since become accustomed.

If whites could indeed be "taught" that their racial beliefs were "wrong," Tuch and Hughes might be disappointed that whites would not find themselves logically compelled to abandon their racial privilege. Instead, whites would simply grasp for new justificatory beliefs to replace the ones that had lost their credibility. The historical record shows that the specific beliefs that whites have employed to justify racial inequality have shifted and evolved as the constraints of the race relationship have changed from the inception of American slavery to the present (see, for example, Powdermaker [1939/1968]; Johnson [1943]; Myrdal [1944]; Jordan [1968]; Genovese [1974]; Fredrickson [1988]; Jackman [1994]). That long record of strategically evolving racial beliefs suggests that it is whites' racial interests—not specific faulty beliefs—that drive racial inequality. SSQ

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