
Research Note

Perceptions of Discrimination in a Recreation Context

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The purpose of this study was to test two competing theoretical perspectives on intergroup relations in a recreation context. Specifically, we examined how Spanish language maintenance (an indicator of cultural assimilation), primary structural assimilation (extent of contact with Anglo Americans), and educational attainment (an indicator of socioeconomic assimilation) among Mexican Americans affected perceptions of discrimination in a recreation context. Consistent with the assimilationist perspective, respondents with greater levels of education and lower Spanish competency were less likely to report discrimination against their ethnic group. The study suggests that identifying the correlates of perceived discrimination in a recreation context can assist policymakers and managers in developing more targeted strategies when addressing discrimination issues.

KEYWORDS: *Assimilation, discrimination, ethnic group, recreation*

Introduction

Recently the effect of perceived discrimination on recreation participation has been the subject of a number of empirical investigations. West (1989) found that African Americans in the Detroit area were less frequent users of regional parks partly because of perceptions of prejudice and discrimination. Blahna and Black (1993) in a series of focus group interviews found that discrimination was a significant inhibitor of park use among African American and Hispanic college students in the Chicago area. Floyd, Gramann, and Saenz (1993) reported that perceived discrimination among Mexican Americans tends to be negatively correlated with use of some public recreation facilities in the Southwest U.S.

In these studies discrimination is treated as an explanatory variable in relation to recreation behavior. This approach reflects the longstanding concern with matters of equality and equity regarding minority access to public recreation facilities. For example, the marginality hypothesis has been used to explain "under-participation" of minority groups in wildland recreation

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(Washburne, 1978). The marginal status of African Americans in the U.S. society attributed to historical patterns of discrimination is hypothesized to negatively impact their recreation participation. This paper represents a different approach to and rationale for examining perceptions of discrimination in recreation settings.

In this analysis, perceived discrimination is treated as a dependent variable in order to understand how perceived discrimination varies across different segments of an ethnic minority group. This analytical strategy could lead to policy actions that are designed to address specific discrimination concerns rather than broad actions based on assumptions of homogeneity within minority groups. Investigating perceptions of discrimination in a recreation context also contributes to an extensive literature on intergroup relations, particularly the present state of inter-ethnic relationships in the U.S.

Theoretical Framework

Two competing theoretical perspectives provide empirical expectations with respect to perceptions of discrimination. The first, known as the ethnic enclosure hypothesis, is largely based on Gordon's (1964) theory of ethnic assimilation. Assimilation refers to "a process of boundary reduction that can occur when members of two or more societies or of smaller cultural groups meet" (Yinger, 1981, p. 249). According to Gordon, this progresses along seven dimensions (cultural assimilation, structural assimilation, marital assimilation, identificational assimilation, attitude receptional assimilation, behavioral receptional assimilation, and civic assimilation), albeit at different rates. Of these seven dimensions, Gordon suggested that cultural assimilation is the first to occur. However its achievement does not necessarily lead to the subsequent types. Structural assimilation is viewed as the key subprocess as intergroup interaction begins to occur in primary group relationships (e.g. friendships, family). Its occurrence is thought to lead to the remaining types of assimilation. Thus, behavioral receptional assimilation, the absence of discrimination, should be predicted by increased cultural and structural assimilation. In other words, assimilation theory suggests that as ethnic minority group members acquire greater knowledge of the dominant culture, become socially integrated, and experience upward social mobility they should experience greater acceptance among majority group members and perceive less discrimination.

An alternative view, the ethnic competition hypothesis, makes the opposite prediction. This perspective grew out of the work of Glazer and Moynihan (1963) and others who have argued that ethnicity is an emergent phenomenon aroused in the defense of social or economic interests. Recently, it has been highlighted in the work of Portes and colleagues. The hypothesis suggests that increased knowledge of the dominant culture and increased socioeconomic standing leads to greater perception of discrimination and more critical assessments of the dominant society (Portes, 1984; Portes, Parker & Cobas, 1980). The reasoning behind this position as stated

by Portes (1984) is as follows: "It is only when minorities start to abandon their internal colonies, neighborhoods, and enclaves and compete directly with other groups that awareness of racial and cultural differences will be heightened and form the basis for mobilization" (p. 385). According to this view, higher educational attainment, increased language competency, and greater familiarity with the dominant society leads to a heightened awareness of discrimination (Portes et al., 1980).

Empirical tests of the predictions made by the ethnic enclosure and ethnic competition hypotheses are few and have produced inconsistent findings. Consistent with the ethnic enclosure hypothesis, Aguirre, Saenz, and Hwang (1989) reported that less discrimination was perceived among persons of Mexican origin who had higher levels of English competence, education, and friendship ties with non-Mexicans. Hwang and Murdock (1991) concluded, based on aggregate level data, that familiarity with the dominant culture and language and increased social interaction with Anglos leads to identity assimilation among Hispanics. On the other hand, Portes (1984) studied the immigration experiences of Cubans and found that Cuban workers who had labor market experiences outside the ethnic enclave had greater perceptions of discrimination than those who did not. In an earlier study involving persons of Cuban and Mexican origin, Portes et al. (1980) found that greater upward socioeconomic mobility and knowledge of English were associated with greater perceived discrimination against their own group.

In this analysis, we examine how maintenance of Spanish language (an indicator of acculturation), primary structural assimilation (extent of majority group contact), and educational attainment (an indicator of socioeconomic mobility) among Mexican Americans affects perceptions of discrimination in a recreation context.

Data and Methods

The analysis is conducted with data obtained from a subsample of 100 persons of Mexican origin interviewed by telephone in the spring of 1990. The sampling frame included households with telephones from one largely metropolitan and one nonmetropolitan county in southern Arizona. The sample was developed from a list of randomly generated telephone numbers obtained from a national survey sampling firm. Of the 6,000 numbers provided, 1,291 (21.5%) were ineligible cases (e.g., businesses). Despite several callbacks, telephones were not answered at 949 numbers (15.8%). Forty-nine numbers (0.8%) were not called because of tracking errors. Of the remaining 3,711 numbers, 1,341 (36.1%) completed the interview, 21 (0.6%) terminated the interview before it was completed, and 2,349 (63.3%) refused to participate. The characteristics of the sample approximated those of the study area population as measured by a Bureau of Census Public-Use Microdata Sample with respect to age, gender, and percentage of Mexican origin persons. The major departure from census sample data is that the respondents tended to be of higher socioeconomic status than Mexican Americans

sampled by the Bureau of the Census. This may be due more to differences between face-to-face and telephone interviewing than to the cooperation rate. Further details on the sampling methodology and issues relating to the low rate of cooperation are discussed elsewhere (Floyd, et al., 1993).

The independent variables in the analysis include a measure of Spanish maintenance, primary structural assimilation (an ordinal measure of out-group contact), educational attainment (measured in number of years), chronological age, and gender of respondent. The latter two variables are treated as controls in the data analysis. Age is controlled since younger respondents may perceive discrimination differently than older respondents (Portes, 1984). Previous research suggests that females are more likely to be receptive to dominant group cultural characteristics, such as language (Sole, 1978).

Spanish maintenance was measured by asking respondents to report their ability to understand, speak, and read in that language. Response categories for these three questions were: (0) Not at all, (1) Poor, (2) Fair, (3) Good, (4) Excellent (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.93$). It is important to note that this study uses Spanish maintenance as a measure of acculturation rather than knowledge of English. This is consistent with established theory in the linguistic, anthropological, and sociological literature (cf. Hoijer, 1974; Stevens & Swicegood, 1987; Alba, 1990; Giles & Johnson, 1987). Spanish maintenance was also employed to overcome problems associated with multicollinearity, particularly with a small sample. Knowledge of English was moderately correlated with measures of primary structural assimilation ($r = .36$), educational attainment ($r = .48$), secondary structural assimilation (extent of contact with majority group in neighborhoods and at work) ($r = .38$).

Primary structural assimilation was measured by asking respondents to indicate the ethnicity of friends or family members who were most likely to accompany them on visits to a recreation area. A second item asked about the ethnicity of friends that respondents talked to at least once a week. Response categories for both items were: (1) Anglo, (2) Black, (3) Persons of Mexican descent, and (4) Other (specified by the respondent). Mexican Americans who usually visited recreation areas with persons of their own ethnic background *and* talked regularly with such persons on a weekly basis were coded as having "Mexican" primary relationships and were considered to rank low in primary structural assimilation. In contrast, Mexican Americans who responded that *both* their recreation visits and weekly conversations were mainly with Anglos were considered as having "Anglo" primary relationships and to be "high" on primary structural assimilation. Respondents who answered "Anglo" to one question and "Mexican descent" to another, or who responded "Mixed" to both items, were coded as "intermediate" in primary structural assimilation.

Perceptions of discrimination were measured by responses to three statements. The first item read, "There are some outdoor recreation areas I have been to where people of my ethnic background are not welcome." The second item read, "Police in some outdoor recreation areas I have been to often

hassle people of my ethnic background." The final item read, "The presence of other ethnic groups at outdoor recreation areas sometimes makes me feel uncomfortable." Responses ranged from *strongly agree* (5) to *strongly disagree* (1). The responses were summed to form an overall measure of perceived discrimination. The content of these items are similar to perceptions expressed by respondents in West's (1989) study. They are also similar to measures used in the 1979 National Chicano Survey (Arce, 1985). However respondents were not asked about personal discrimination but about discrimination against other members of their ethnic group. Cronbach's alpha for the perceived discrimination scale was .57. Factor analysis of the scale items suggested moderate convergent validity. Factor loadings for the perceived discrimination items ranged from 0.64 to 0.83. The perceived discrimination scores ranged from 3 to 12, with a mean of 7.22. Higher scores reflected greater perception of discrimination.

Four regression models were developed to show the effect of the independent variables on the three individual measures and the summated measure of perceived discrimination.

Results

The regression results are shown in Table 1. For each model the unstandardized and standardized regression coefficients, R^2 and adjusted- R^2 , are shown. Three of the four models are statistically significant. When the summated measure of perceived discrimination is the dependent variable (Model 1), Spanish comprehension and education show significant effects. Respondents with greater knowledge of Spanish are more inclined to report discrimination against members of their ethnic group. Respondents with more years of education were less likely to report discrimination.

When the statement "There are some outdoor recreation areas I have been to where people of my ethnic background are not welcome" is the dependent variable similar results are obtained (Model 2). Respondents who exhibit greater comprehension of Spanish show greater agreement with this statement. Those with higher levels of education tended to disagree with this statement. In model 3, where the statement "The presence of other ethnic groups at an outdoor recreation area sometimes makes me feel uncomfortable" is the dependent variable, only education shows a significant effect. There was less agreement with this statement among respondents at higher levels of education attainment. Finally, the model regressing the statement "Police in some outdoor recreation areas I have been to often hassle people of my ethnic background" on the independent variables did not achieve statistical significance. In no instance, did primary structural assimilation (i.e., the extent of contact with Anglos in primary social groups) bear a significant relationship to perceived discrimination.

Discussion and Implications

How minority groups perceive discrimination in the larger society has been studied from two theoretical perspectives: ethnic enclosure and ethnic

TABLE 1
OLS Regression Analysis of Perceived Discrimination on Spanish Comprehension, Primary Structural Assimilation, and Education Attainment (Controlling for Age and Sex)

Independent Variables	Models ¹			
	1	2	3	4
Spanish Comprehension	.18 ² (.32)**	.07 (.30)**	.04 (.15)	.07 (.27)
Primary Structural Assimilation	.20 (.06)	.21 (.15)	-.04 (-.03)	.03 (.02)
Education	-.24 (-.37)**	-.08 (-.27)*	-.13 (-.44)**	-.04 (-.13)
Age	.02 (-.12)	-.001 (-.03)	-.004 (-.06)	-.04 (-.13)
Sex	.42 (.10)	.22 (.11)	.18 (.09)	.02 (.01)
Intercept	8.93	2.27	3.79	2.87
<i>F</i>	5.02 (5,88 df)	3.14 (5,88)	4.96 (5,88)	1.81 (5,88)
<i>p</i>	.0004	.0119	.0005	.1194
<i>R</i> ²	.22	.15	.22	.09
adjusted <i>R</i> ²	.18	.10	.18	.04

¹In model 1 the dependent variable is the overall (summated) measure of perceived discrimination. In model 2, the statement "There are some outdoor recreation areas I have been to where people of my ethnic background are not welcome" is the dependent variable. In model 3 the statement "The presence of other ethnic groups at an outdoor recreation area sometimes makes me feel uncomfortable" is the dependent variable. In model 4 the dependent variable was the statement "Police in some outdoor recreation areas I have been to often hassle people of my ethnic background."

²Top coefficient is the unstandardized coefficient; number parentheses is the standardized coefficient.

** denotes significance at $p < .01$; * denotes significance at $p < .05$

competition. While limited, our analysis provided no evidence of the position suggested by Portes and colleagues that ethnic assimilation contributes to the rise of perceptions of discrimination. Rather the results of our test are more consistent with Aguirre et al.'s (1989) finding that more educated persons of Mexican descent perceive lower levels of discrimination compared to those with less education. There was also a tendency for respondents with greater Spanish maintenance to report discrimination against their ethnic group. Hence, perception of ethnic-based discrimination tends to be greater among those who exhibit low socioeconomic mobility and acculturation. Contrary to Aguirre et al.'s study however we did not find that perceptions of discrimination lessened as the degree of contact with majority group members in primary relationships increased.

The limitations of this study include the fact the analyses were conducted with a limited sample. However the results as stated are consistent with previous studies. The fact that the study data were collected by a telephone survey may have also limited the generalizability of our findings as Hispanic telephone ownership is known to be lower than that of the general population. Further, the results may have been weakened by measurement error in the measures of perceived discrimination. Although limited by many factors, the results of the study have important implications.

Current use trends on national forests and parks in many parts of the U.S. suggest that intergroup relations have already become an important concern for managers and policymakers. Indeed, much of the recent research on Hispanic recreation has been motivated by the need of managers and other decision makers to understand the attitudes and behaviors of an increasingly ethnically diverse clientele (Ewert, Chavez, & Magill, 1993). As mentioned some of this research has provided empirical documentation of perceived prejudice and discrimination in recreation contexts. Institutional responses to discrimination—actual or perceived—necessitate an understanding of the cultural and structural bases of its perception among ethnic minority group members. This line of research and our results suggest that it is important to recognize that perceptions of discrimination are likely to covary with cultural and socioeconomic factors. This study goes beyond the simple assertion that Hispanics differ from Anglos. It provides insight into the fact that there are vast differences in opinions and viewpoints regarding the perception of discrimination among people of Mexican descent. In particular, institutional programs generally labeled as “diversity training” should increase awareness of the diversity of opinion and perception within an ethnic minority group.

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