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Does anti-Semitism among African Americans simply reflect anti-White sentiment?

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Abstract

In his classic essay (1967) titled “Negroes Are Anti-Semitic Because They’re Anti-White,” writer James Baldwin argues that African American resentment of Jews reflects generalized anti-White sentiment. The current study examines levels of anti-Semitic attitudes in the United States among African Americans and other racial/ethnic groups. Using General Social Survey (2000) data for a nationally representative sample of adults ($n = 1,118$), this research investigates whether variation in anti-White attitudes explains variation in anti-Semitic attitudes. Multiple indicators are used to operationalize anti-Semitic and anti-White attitudes. One such indicator is the degree to which one opposed living in a Jewish (or White) neighborhood. Control variables include measures of perception of wealth for Jews and Whites. A series of logistic regression analyses offers mixed results. One analysis indicates that while some anti-Semitic attitudes are strongly associated with anti-White attitudes, African Americans are still significantly more likely than White, Latino, and Asian groups to express anti-Semitic views when the level of anti-White sentiment is held constant ($p < .05$). In a second analysis the respondent’s race is not a significant effect on expressed anti-Semitism when controlling for anti-White attitudes.

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1. Introduction

James Baldwin wrote a 1967 essay titled, “Negroes Are Anti-Semitic Because They’re Anti-White,” and provided an interesting social science hypothesis in the essay title. Throughout his essay, Baldwin posits that the heightened level of anti-Semitic attitudes within the African American community can be explained by their generalized anti-White sentiment. Moreover, African Americans’ resentment of Jews results from the perception that Jews benefit from Whiteness while exploiting poor Blacks. He discusses this resentment as appearing in different interactions between Blacks and Jews, from urban spatial proximity to daily social and

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economic relations. Baldwin examines this complex social problem from a literary perspective while offering a testable social science proposition. His commentary indicates that while at one time Jews may have had similar life chances as African Americans, they have become members of the White ruling class who exercise discrimination towards Blacks both on the individual and institutional level. Baldwin argues that African Americans express this feeling of betrayal in the form of anti-White sentiment, which he argues is being mistaken for a particular prejudice towards Jews, or anti-Semitism.

This study tests the degree to which variation in anti-Semitism can be explained simply by anti-White sentiment. If Baldwin is correct, the relationship between race and anti-Semitic attitudes will be wholly explained by variation in anti-White attitudes. In other words, Baldwin's thesis suggests that controlling for anti-White attitudes will eliminate the apparent relationship between being African American and holding anti-Semitic beliefs.

2. Review of literature

Baldwin (1967) in, "Negroes are Anti-Semitic Because They're Anti-White," proposes that African American resentment of Jews reflects generalized anti-White sentiment; he finds that "the Negro is really condemning the Jew for having become an American White man—for having become, in effect, a Christian" (p. 137). Baldwin discusses the economic and social interactions that African Americans have with Jews. He writes that the "butcher was a Jew and, yes, [African Americans] certainly paid more for bad cuts of meat than other New York citizens, and [they] often carried insults home, along with the meat" (Baldwin, 1967, p. 27). He further illustrates Black–Jewish conflict by stating that it is "bitter to watch the Jewish storekeeper locking up his store for the night, and going home. . . with *your* money in his pocket, to a clean neighborhood, miles from you, which you will not be allowed to enter" (Baldwin, 1967, p. 135).

Several studies attribute Black anti-Semitism to being a response to Jewish whiteness. Brodtkin (2000) suggests that during the 1940s to mid-1960s, there developed "a new, hegemonic version of Jewishness as a model minority culture that explained the structural privileges of white maleness as earned entitlements" (p. 139). She argues that the "privileges of whiteness, especially occupational and residential mobility" were "extended to American Jews after World War II" (p. 187). Goldstein (2006) argues that in order to position themselves among white Americans, Jews "hoped that they could assuage the doubts of the dominant society by affirming their place as unqualified whites. Central to this effort was demonstrating a clear social distinction between themselves and America's principal racial outsiders, African Americans" (p. 51). For example, "In Chicago, Jews also participated in the movement to keep African Americans out of certain residential neighborhoods" (Goldstein, 2006, p. 68). Resulting from shifts in demographics up to the 1920s, "the city's South Side, home to many Central European Jews, was quickly becoming absorbed by the emerging 'Black Belt.' . . . As a result of these shifts, some of the city's most prominent Jews became interested in establishing restriction movements" (Goldstein, 2006, p. 68).

Greenberg (2006) suggests that the rise of identity politics in the 1960s "dealt Black–Jewish relations another blow as both communities turned inward" (p. 205). Identity politics, with

its emphasis “on group membership and its rejection of pluralism and even of cross-cultural coalition” ushered in new issues and inflamed Black–Jewish relations (Greenberg, 2006, pp. 205–206). Given this relationship, Blacks and Jews share a complicated history of conflict and cooperation. A study evaluating preferred social distance from Jews found that African American attitudes towards Jews are highly complex and increasingly difficult to determine in large studies (Raden, 1998, p. 266). Raden (1998) found that Blacks “did not want greater social distance” which suggests that evaluations of Black anti-Semitism should be made on a “dimension-by-dimension basis” (p. 266).

Some scholars have attributed Black anti-Semitism to urban economic difference and competition. Marx (1967) found that anti-Semitism is more likely in Black communities because Blacks and Jews are not economic equals; he writes that for African Americans, “anti-Semitic stereotypes appear to be much more related to actual experiences with Jews in the economic world” (p. 167). D’Alessio and Stolzenberg (1991) found that race had no significant direct effect on attitudes towards Jews. They found, however, that race has an indirect effect on self-reported attitudes towards Jews through the intervening variable education.

Given the forms of social and economic inequality relevant to Jewish and Black relations, the Black–Korean conflict most commonly discussed as part of the events of the Los Angeles Riots of 1992 offers an instructive comparison to Black–Jewish conflict in the 1960s as similarly positioned groups. Freer (1994) argues that Black–Korean conflict “has a fundamentally economic root cause” (p. 176). Conflict over limited resources and their respective vulnerable positions, exacerbated by unattended state responsibility led to a crisis between these two underprivileged groups. Resulting from this situation, Freer (1994) argues that the “cyclical distrust that appropriation of racist images breeds between the two groups serves to narrow the scope of their conflict” (p. 192). Thus, economic constraints of the slightly better economically positioned Koreans, who arguably act as a “replacement” to Jews in the urban context, led to discontent between the two groups over access to limited resources.

3. Data, variables, and methods

The data used in this study originate from the 2000 General Social Survey (GSS). The GSS is a cross-sectional sample of noninstitutionalized persons living within the continental United States ages 18 years or older. This is ideal for the current study because it collects both demographic and attitudinal data and thus is an effective and practical resource for studying racial and ethnic prejudice in the United States. The sample for the current study included 1,118 respondents.

This study utilizes two different dependent variables to measure levels of anti-Semitism. The first asks respondents the degree to which they would favor or oppose living in a neighborhood that is half Jewish. The second variable used to operationalize anti-Semitism inquires about the respondents’ attitude towards having a close relative marry a Jewish person. Levels of opposition are recorded into dummy indicators (i.e., opposed versus not opposed).

For each dependent variable there is a corresponding control variable asking respondents the same question, only with regards to Whites (rather than Jews). This variable is essential to Baldwin’s thesis; if he is correct, the relationship between race and anti-Semitic attitudes

is spurious and should be essentially zero when anti-White sentiments are controlled in the model. Other control variables considered include measures of the respondent's perception of wealth for Jews and Whites, as well as the respondent's race, sex, and age.

The variables used in this study to evaluate levels of prejudice towards Jews (and Whites) draw from similar logic found in Bogardus' Social Distance Scale. Bogardus (1959) states that the "study of distance between racial groups is one of the best approaches to the study of racial relations, for it is an aspect of human relations that can be measured, and hence can be considered with a degree of precision" (p. 30). He finds that "social nearness or social farness may itself constitute positive social valence or negative social valence" (Bogardus, 1959, p. 80). Thus, Bogardus' scale is especially relevant for this particular study, which argues that preferred social distance is a form of prejudice.

4. Results

Table 1 presents the results from a logistic regression analysis of the probability that the respondent would oppose living in a neighborhood that is half Jewish. The analysis considers the effects of a dummy variable that the respondent would also oppose living in a neighborhood that is half White and a dummy variable that the respondent's race is classified as African American. Other dummy variables used in the equation includes the respondent's perceived wealth of Jews in the United States, the perceived wealth of Whites in the United States, a dummy variable for respondent's sex, and age of the respondent.

The coefficient for opposition to living in a neighborhood that is half White is significant ($p < .05$) and relatively large, indicating that anti-White attitudes are strongly related to anti-Semitic views. These results are consistent with Baldwin's thesis. However, the coefficients for the race and sex variables, when holding constant anti-White attitudes, still achieved statistical significance ($p < .05$). This suggests that anti-White sentiment does not fully explain variation in anti-Semitism. Moreover, especially relevant for Baldwin's thesis, respondents who identified as African American are still more likely than non-African Americans to express anti-Semitic views when anti-White attitudes are held constant. These results are incongruous with Baldwin's thesis.

Following the same structure of the model presented in Table 1, Table 2 displays the results of a logistic regression analysis of the probability that the respondent would oppose a close relative marrying a Jewish person. Similar to the model presented in Table 1, the coefficient for opposition to having a close relative marry a White person indicates that anti-White attitudes significantly explain variation in anti-Semitic views. Unlike the model presented in Table 1, the coefficient for the race variable, when holding constant anti-White attitudes, did not achieve statistical significance at the .05 level. These results offer some support for Baldwin's thesis.

5. Summary and conclusion

The current study examines and tests James Baldwin's thesis that African Americans have higher than average levels of anti-Semitic attitudes because of their generalized anti-White

sentiment. In his essay, Baldwin suggests that variation in anti-Semitic attitudes should be explained by variation in anti-White attitudes and that the association between race and anti-Semitism is spurious. The results from the current study are mixed; they offer only partial support for Baldwin's hypothesis. Race maintains a statistically significant relationship with opposition to living in a neighborhood that is half Jewish when controlling for anti-White attitudes. However, race is statistically unrelated to opposition to a close relative marrying a Jewish person when controlling for anti-White attitudes.

Although written over 40 years ago, James Baldwin's essay continues to be relevant to contemporary racial divides. Intergroup prejudice among marginalized groups remains a pertinent subject for contemporary research, and furthermore the social problem of prejudice between African Americans and Jews deserves further attention. More specifically, the results in this note suggest that African American preferred social distance from Jews exists significantly on the neighborhood level, but interpersonal social distance is not significant to race. Research in this area should seek to explain this phenomenon further because of the larger social impacts of racial/ethnic segregation in neighborhoods today.

Appendix A.

Tables 1 and 2 present the results that the respondent would oppose living in a neighborhood that is half Jewish and the respondent would oppose a close relative marrying a Jewish person, respectively.

Table 1
Opposed to living in a neighborhood that is half Jewish.

Variables	<i>b</i>	S.E.
Opposed to living in a neighborhood that is half White	2.504*	0.269
African American respondent	1.050	0.265
Perceived wealth of Jews	-0.126	0.097
Perceived wealth of Whites	0.005	0.119
Male respondent	0.476*	0.225
Age	-0.007	0.007
Constant	-2.441	0.501

* $p < .05$.

Table 2
Opposed to a close relative marrying a Jewish person.

Variables	<i>b</i>	S.E.
Opposed to a close relative marrying a White person	2.402*	0.406
African American respondent	-0.077	0.276
Perceived wealth of Jews	-0.045	0.079
Perceived wealth of Whites	0.168	0.102
Male respondent	0.163	0.182
Age	0.014*	0.005
Constant	-3.101	0.429

* $p < .05$.

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