WHY CAN’T WE BE FRIENDS:
THE ROLE OF RELIGIOUS CONGREGATION-BASED
SOCIAL CONTACT FOR CLOSE INTERRACIAL
adolescent friendships

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I explore the role of congregational racial composition on adolescent interracial friendships. I hope to make two contributions. (1) Since little is known about adolescents in multiracial congregations, by focusing on them I add to this line of inquiry. (2) I suggest that those interested in adolescent interracial friendships need to pay attention to the racial composition of adolescent religious congregations. I use contact theory and hypothesize that adolescents attending multiracial congregations are more likely to have a close interracial friendship than those attending uniracial congregations. I also expect increased interracial social contact in schools and neighborhoods to increase the likelihood of adolescent close interracial friendships. I use National Study for Youth and Religion Wave (NSYR) 1 data. The findings suggest that increased interracial social contact in religious congregations has a significant positive effect on close adolescent interracial friendships. School racial composition also has a positive effect, but neighborhood is not significant.

Religious congregations are the most active and largest type of volunteer organization in the United States. The more than 300,000 American congregations (Chaves 2004) play a key role in a number of areas of social life. One of those areas is adolescent social and spiritual development. Smith (2003) argues that religious organizations benefit adolescents by providing them with moral directives, spiritual experiences, and role models, among other things. Moreover, congregations perform various social functions: services to the poor, generating cultural capital, and civic training (Wuthnow 2004; Cnaan et al. 2002; Putnam 2001; Smith 2003).

Although congregations play an important social role in many areas of life, they remain largely racially homogeneous. One of the most common phrases about race and religion is that “11 a.m. on Sunday is the most segregated hour in the U.S.” Recent studies suggest that 90% of U.S. congregations are composed of at least 95% of one racial group (Emerson and Smith 2000; Chaves 2004; Emerson and Woo 2006). A number of factors contribute to the uniracial congregational tendency. Emerson and Kim (2003) suggest that membership recruitment, historical and cultural factors (racism, language barriers, etc.), and residential segregation help explain this tendency.

Nevertheless, there are a number of multiracial congregations in the U.S. A congregation is normally considered multiracial when 20% or more of its members is racially different than the dominant racial group (Emerson and Kim 2003; Emerson and Woo 2006). Organizational researchers identify 20% as the critical point at which the minority group’s
presence is significant enough to make a difference (Emerson and Kim 2003; Kanter 1977; Pettigrew 1975; Pettigrew and Martin 1986). Based on this definition, about 7% of American congregations are multiracial (Chaves 2004).

WHY DO MULTIRACIAL CONGREGATIONS MATTER?

Some scholars have challenged the effectiveness of multiracial congregations. Edwards (2008) finds that some multiracial congregations strongly reinforce white cultural norms and perpetuate racial inequality. Others have discussed the benefits of congregational racial homogeneity. For instance, Dudley and Roozen (2001) find that racial-ethnic homogeneity provides a sense of religious vitality, especially for minority groups. Similarly, homogeneous immigrant congregations have been identified as an important social institution in immigrants’ lives that strengthens collective identity (Warner and Wittner 1998). Nonetheless, as I will discuss, multiracial congregations have significant social benefits. There are theological implications for some religious groups. For example, 60% of strong Evangelicals believe that integrating congregations was important and congruent with their faith (see Emerson and Smith 2000, Ch. 6). However, multiracial congregations are also important in two specific sociological ways: opportunities for interracial contact and multiracial social networks.

A lot of sociological research devotes attention to the character of intergroup relations. Social contact is highlighted as an important factor in improving such relations (Allport 1954; Sherif 1961; Sigelman et al. 1996; Ellison and Powers 1994). Contact between racial groups is believed to have an effect on both behavior and attitudes. In terms of behavior, Ellison and Powers (1994) show that African Americans who had early contact with other racial groups are more likely to have close interracial adult friendships. With regard to attitudes, Yancey (1999) argues that whites who attend multiracial congregations show less social distance towards African Americans and are less likely to stereotype them. His study also indicates that residential integration, which does not guarantee contact between groups, does not alter intergroup attitudes. Hence, actual social interaction between different racial groups is important.

Allport’s (1954) contact hypothesis is the most widely tested and used theoretical position in regards to intergroup relations. His proposition essentially pertains to social interaction, but he specifies four important conditions for improved intergroup relations: equal group status, common goals, cooperation, and authority support. Empirical evidence supports this proposition; social contact, under the above conditions, generally produces positive intergroup outcomes.

While Allport’s contribution to the study of intergroup relations is nontrivial, his hypothesis only specifies the conditions under which contact produces positive outcomes; it does not specify how and why contact achieves them. Pettigrew (1998) suggests four processes in an attempt to specify the causal mechanisms operating through contact: learning about the outgroup, changing behavior, generating affective ties, and in-group reappraisal. He argues that contact opens up these processes and mediates intergroup attitudinal change. Furthermore, Pettigrew highlights interracial friendships as a key factor in intergroup relations. He says that “intergroup friendship is potent because it invokes all four mediating processes. This suggests that constructive contact relates more to long-term close relationships than to initial acquaintance—a dramatic shift for the intergroup contact research literature” (Pettigrew 1998:76).
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These mechanisms can be extended to the dynamics of multiracial congregations. Interracial contact in multiracial congregations sets in motion the four processes, which in turn produce more positive intergroup relations. In multiracial congregations different racial and ethnic groups have an opportunity to learn about different worship practices connected with other racial-ethnic groups. They also have the opportunity to form affective ties that matter socially (friendships, acquaintances, strong ties, weak ties, etc.). Consequently, this social contact can produce an in-group reappraisal, though that is not necessarily guaranteed. There are challenges in multiracial congregations. Previous research in multiracial congregations points to differences in worship, language, and theological viewpoints as challenges to a multiracial space (Emerson 2006). Despite these challenges, people who attend multiracial congregations are, all other things equal, more likely to have interracial ties than other Americans (Emerson 2006).

Most of the extant contact literature focuses on how social contact leads to intergroup attitudinal changes. My focus here by contrast is to show how contact produces changes in friendships structure, specifically how interracial contact in multiracial congregations is associated with having close interracial friendships, an important behavioral factor in long term positive intergroup relations.

Previous studies also show that the racial and ethnic composition of one’s social ties matters in a variety of ways. Kao (2001) finds that students’ peer behavior affect educational outcomes, varying by race. Because most students largely maintain racially homogeneous friendships, racial groups have differential access to peers with high educational achievement and attainment (Kao 2003). In another context, Granovetter (1973) argues that social ties play a key role in obtaining employment. Weak social ties outside of one’s own primary network are especially important. Given the U.S. racial homogeneity in social relationships, multiracial social ties may play an important role in improving the educational achievement and job advancement of minority groups.

Religious congregations are one of the main places religiously associated Americans develop and maintain social relationships outside of school and family. For instance Wuthnow (1994) finds that religiously based small groups foster friendships (albeit homogeneous ones). Indeed, personal social ties are often the reason people join religious congregations (Stark and Bainbridge 1980). Consequently, congregational racial heterogeneity may have a place in shaping larger societal race relations. Although there are such government initiatives as affirmative action and school desegregation intended to reduce inequality between racial groups, personal social ties continue to be important.

EXISTING LITERATURE ON MULTIRACIAL CONGREGATIONS AND ADOLESCENT FRIENDSHIPS

Previous research on multiracial congregations provides several key insights into the social dynamic affecting multiracial congregations. However, this literature focuses largely on adults who, compared with adolescents, have a certain degree of choice in where they attend religious services. Adults with previous multiracial social ties can “choose” to attend a multiracial congregation. Thus, multiracial congregations potentially are comprised of adults who have multiracial ties that, for the most part, precede attendance of this congregation. On the other hand, most adolescents do not choose their religious congregations; rather they mostly attend with and because of their parents. Data from National Study for Youth and Religion (NSYR) suggest that 71% of adolescents attend religious services with
their parents. Removing parents who do not attend religious services from the sample increases that figure to 84.5%, and omitting adolescents who do not attend religious services increases the figure to 92%. Hence, for adolescents, multiracial congregations are largely the agents of social change by modeling a multiracial environment and providing opportunities for interracial social contact and friendships. Rather than reflecting a selection effect the multiracial religious experience shapes adolescent multiracial social ties largely independently of personal attitudes. Therefore, attendance of a multiracial congregation helps shape their multiracial relationships. The present study seeks to add to the existing literature on this topic by examining *adolescents* in multiracial congregations.

There exists a significant body of scholarly work on adolescent and childhood interracial friendships (Quillian and Campbell 2003; Joyner and Kao 2005; Moody 2001; Kubitschek and Hallinan 1998; Hallinan and Williams 1989; Hallinan and Smith 1985; Hal- linan 1982; St. John and Lewis 1975). Most of this research focuses on school factors that affect interracial relationships. School organization, tracking, classroom composition, extracurricular activities, and especially school racial composition are important factors that affect interracial friendships. Indeed, schools are one of the main places where adolescents have the opportunity to interact with other racial and ethnic groups. However, very little attention is paid to the effects of religion and religious organizations. The only way that a few studies account for religious effects is by controlling for religious schools. I argue that the racial composition of adolescent religious congregations likely has a significant effect on their friendship choices. Therefore, studies of adolescent interracial friendships need to pay more attention to the racial composition of adolescents’ congregations. This study is an attempt to investigate the extent to which religious congregations matter for adolescent interracial friendship choices.

**HYPOTHESES**

This study analyzes the relationship for U.S. adolescents between congregational racial composition and having interracial friendships. Specifically, this paper examines whether adolescents that attend multiracial congregations are more likely to have a close interracial friendship compared with those attending uniracial congregations.

**H1:** Net of all factors, adolescents who attend multiracial congregations are more likely to have a close interracial friendship.

Since my theory is about social contact between racial-ethnic groups, I further investigate whether adolescents who are racial-ethnic minorities in their congregations are more likely to have a close interracial friendship. Stated another way, adolescents who are racial-ethnic minorities in a uniracial congregation are more likely to have a close interracial friendship. Although these congregations are not organizationally multiracial, there is widespread opportunity for interracial contact from the adolescent’s perspective—e.g., a black adolescent who attends a 95% white congregation. Organizationally, we would not categorize the congregation as multiracial, but for the adolescent there are plenty of opportunities for interracial social contact. Previous literature (Moody 2001; Quillian and Campbell 2003) suggests that low heterogeneity settings limit interracial friendships. This is true, but I am suggesting that whether the adolescent is a part of the minority or majority racial-ethnic group significantly affects their friendship choices.

**H2:** Net of all factors, adolescents who attend uniracial congregations, in which they are racial-ethnic minorities, are more like to have a close interracial friendship.
Using contact theory, I also expect to find that adolescent neighborhood and school racial composition have a significant effect on their close interracial friendships. Adolescents who live in neighborhoods and schools that are increasingly not of their own race will be more likely to have close interracial friendships. This is not a measure of racial diversity but of interracial social contact opportunities.

**H3:** Adolescents who attend school that are increasingly not of their own race are more likely to have an interracial friendship.

**H4:** Adolescents who live in neighborhoods that are increasingly not of their own race are more likely to have an interracial friendship.

**DATA AND VARIABLES**

I analyze Wave 1 data from the National Study of Youth and Religion (NSYR) to examine the relationship between social ties and attendance of a multiracial congregation. Wave 1 includes information on the races of the adolescents’ best friends. The NSYR is a nationally representative telephone survey of 3,290 U.S. English and Spanish speaking teenagers between the ages of 13 and 17, and of their parents. It also includes 80 oversampled Jewish households, bringing the total number of completed NSYR cases to 3,370. The NSYR was conducted from July, 2002, to April, 2003, by researchers at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill using a random-digit-dial (RDD) telephone survey method employing a sample of randomly generated telephone numbers representative of all household telephones in the fifty United States. The national survey sample was arranged in replicates based on the proportion of working household telephone exchanges nationwide. This RDD method ensures equal representation of listed, unlisted, and not-yet-listed household telephone numbers. Eligible households included at least one teenager between the ages of 13-17 living in the household for at least six months of the year. In order to randomize responses within households and so to help attain representativeness of age and gender, interviewers asked to conduct the survey with the teenager in the household who had the most recent birthday.

The NSYR was conducted with members of both English and Spanish speaking households. Participants were offered a financial incentive to participate. All randomly generated telephone numbers were dialed a minimum of 20 times over a minimum of five months per number, spread out over varying hours during week days, week nights, and weekends. The calling design included at least two telephone-based attempts to convert refusals. Households refusing to cooperate with the survey but established by initial screening to include children ages 13 to 17 in residence and with telephone numbers able to be matched to mailing addresses were also sent by mail information about the survey, contact information for researchers, and a request to cooperate and complete the survey; those records were then called back again for possible refusal conversions. Ninety-six percent of parent complete households also achieved teen completes. Diagnostic analyses comparing NSYR data with 2002 U.S. Census data on comparable households and with comparable adolescent surveys—such as Monitoring the Future, the National Household Education Survey, and the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health—confirm that the NSYR provides a nationally representative sample without identifiable sampling and nonresponse biases of U.S. teenagers ages 13-17 and their parents living in households (for details, see Smith and Denton 2003). For descriptive purposes, a weight was created to adjust for number of teenagers in household, number of household telephone numbers, census region of resi-
dence, and household income. A separate weight is used in multivariate analyses\(^1\) that control for census region and household income, which adjusts only for number of teenagers in household and number of household telephone numbers.

The dependent variable in this analysis is close interracial friendships. The survey question measures the number of close friends of a different race that the adolescent respondent has. The exact wording of the question is as follows: [referring to their five best friends listed] “Which, if any, of these people are of a different race than you?” This variable was recoded into a dichotomous variable so that adolescents either have a close friend of a different race or not. This was done to capture the significant difference between having no interracial friendships and having at least one. Close ties with even one member of a different race in these settings makes a difference, compared to none. I also estimated a series of models allowing number of friends to vary from 0 to 5 and found similar results.

The key independent variable here is congregational racial composition. The exact wording of the survey question is as follows: “About how many of the people in the religious services that you normally attend are the same race as you? Would you say: all, nearly all, most, about half, few or none?” As mentioned above, a congregation in which 20% or more is racially different than the main racial group is a multiracial congregation (Emerson and Kim 2003; Emerson and Woo 2006). However, due to the fact that it is difficult to interpret what these response categories mean in terms of percentages, this variable is recoded using “about half” as defining multiracial. I code “few” and “none” as a uniracial-minority (teen is racial-ethnic minority) congregation. “All,” “nearly all,” and “most” are coded as uniracial-majority (teen is racial-ethnic majority). There are 482 respondents who report that their congregations are “about half” the same race as them. This constitutes 17.7% of those religiously affiliated who responded to this question and 14.6% of the entire survey. Eleven percent of religiously affiliated adolescents attend a uniracial-minority congregation.

I measure neighborhood racial composition by neighborhood percentage not of the adolescent’s race. Using Census data, I matched adolescent’s neighborhood percentage with all of the other NSYR variables. I also measure school racial composition by school percentage not of the adolescent’s race. The NSYR has matched the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) codes for each respondent using this code. I thus matched public and private school data from the NCES Common Core of Data (2002-2003) and the Private School Survey (2003-2004) to the individual respondents. With school racial distribution information from these datasets I calculate school percentage not of the adolescent’s race for whites, African Americans, and Hispanics. For instance, if an African American respondent attends a school where African Americans comprise 25% of students, then the school percentage not of their race would be 75%. In this way, I created a contextual picture and examined how interracial contact in different contexts simultaneously matters for interracial friendships.

The control variables I use are of three types: adolescent, family, contextual and attendance interaction. For adolescent controls, I use adolescent race, age, gender, and religious service attendance. Family controls include whether the household has at least one member of a different race, and combined (if two parent household) average education and income. Contextual controls include adolescent major religious tradition, census region, and neighborhood and school racial composition. Attendance interaction variables include multiracial congregation x religious service attendance and interracial congregation x religious service attendance.

\(^1\) All use subject to http://about.jstor.org/terms
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My analyses are limited to African Americans, whites, and Hispanics. Asians, islanders, Native Americans, and other race categories are not included in this paper’s analyses. I think it unwise to combine these groups, as interracial friendships make work differently for each group. These three racial group comprise approximately 95% of the NSYR sample. The N for my models is 2,725 (3,340 respondents in Wave 1 of the NSYR). The overwhelming majority of cases excluded from the analysis were those who did not attend church (N= 619). Also excluded were a few respondents who reported that they had no close friendships.

**RESULTS**

First, close interracial friendships do vary by adolescent race; 33% of whites reported having at least one interracial friendship compared with 40% for African Americans. Hispanic adolescents, at 59%, are significantly more likely to have a close interracial friendship compared to African American and white adolescents. Quillian and Campbell (2003) had similar findings. They find that there is an overall tendency towards same-race friendships but that Hispanics are significantly more likely than African Americans or Whites to be involved in an interracial friendship.

Descriptive analysis also reveals some patterns between congregational racial composition and interracial friendships. Most American adolescents who attend religious services are in uniracial congregations. This varies somewhat by religious tradition (See Table 1) insofar as Catholic and non-Christian adolescents are more likely to attend multiracial and uniracial-minority congregations. These results are consistent with previous research on multiracial congregations that finds that these two religious traditions are more likely to have increased levels of diversity (see Ch. 3 in Emerson and Woo 2006). Jewish adoles-

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Congregation</th>
<th>CP</th>
<th>MP</th>
<th>BP</th>
<th>Catholic</th>
<th>Jewish</th>
<th>Other</th>
<th>TOTAL</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Uniracial-Minority</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multiracial</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Chi-square p:.000

Source: NSYR Wave 1 2002-2003

Uniracial-Minority: respondent is racial-ethnic minority in a uniracial congregation
TABLE 2:

ADOLESCENT INTERRACIAL FRIENDSHIPS BY CONGREGATIONAL RACIAL COMPOSITION (PERCENT)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Congregational Racial Composition</th>
<th>No Interracial Friends</th>
<th>At Least 1 Interracial Friend</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Uniracial-Majority</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multiracial</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uniracial-Minority</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

TOTAL 62 38

Chi Square p: .000  
Source: NSYR Wave 1 2002-2003

Uniracial-Majority: respondent is racial-ethnic majority in a uniracial congregation  
Uniracial-Minority: respondent is racial-ethnic minority in a uniracial congregation

cents are less likely to be in uniracial-minority and multiracial congregations, which is to be expected given the racial-ethnic composition and history of the religious tradition.

The data also show a general tendency towards same-race friendships. Overall, 62% of adolescents report having no close friends of a different race. These results are consistent with the literature on interracial friendships (Quillian and Campbell 2003; Moody 2001; Hallinan and Williams 1989). However, 50% of adolescents from multiracial congregations report having at least one close interracial friendship compared to 35% of adolescents from uniracial congregations (See Table 2). The distribution for adolescents in uniracial-minority congregations is even more stark with 64% having at least one friend of a different race. These descriptive results suggest that social contact may have an important connection to the racial composition of adolescent friendship structure.

I use binary logistic regression with nested models to examine the relationship between multiracial congregations and friendship patterns. The first model includes only the key independent variable. In the second model, I add the adolescent control variables race, gender, and age. In the third model, I control for household racial composition, parent income, and education. In model four, I add Census region, religious tradition, neighborhood racial composition, and school racial composition. I also analyzed nested models with interactions between multiracial congregation and (1) each racial group and (2) gender. I also used interaction variables: neighborhood and school composition with (1) each racial group and (2) gender. The only statistically significant interaction was a positive (0.039): black*neighborhood racial composition. That means that the effect of multiracial congregations does not operate particularly strongly for any racial group or gender.

Finally, in model five I add the interaction variables. I also ran nested models where the independent variable was added in model four instead of model one. Adding the independent variable in model 4 does not change the results significantly. Therefore, I use the variable entry order described previously.
## TABLE 3:
ODDS RATIOS OF ADOLESCENT FRIENDSHIPS (WITH ATTENDANCE INTERACTIONS)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Congregation</th>
<th>Model 1</th>
<th>Model 2</th>
<th>Model 3</th>
<th>Model 4</th>
<th>Model 5</th>
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<tr>
<td>Multiraciala</td>
<td>1.814***</td>
<td>1.909***</td>
<td>1.861***</td>
<td>1.638***</td>
<td>2.030**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.20)</td>
<td>(0.22)</td>
<td>(0.22)</td>
<td>(0.20)</td>
<td>(0.54)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Uniracial-Minoritya</td>
<td>2.938***</td>
<td>2.782***</td>
<td>2.457***</td>
<td>1.988***</td>
<td>1.043</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.43)</td>
<td>(0.42)</td>
<td>(0.38)</td>
<td>(0.33)</td>
<td>(0.35)</td>
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<td>Adolescent</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>Blackb</td>
<td>1.227</td>
<td>1.248*</td>
<td>0.813</td>
<td>0.799</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.13)</td>
<td>(0.14)</td>
<td>(0.17)</td>
<td>(0.17)</td>
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<td>Hispanicb</td>
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<td>2.572***</td>
<td>1.507**</td>
<td>1.491*</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.37)</td>
<td>(0.34)</td>
<td>(0.24)</td>
<td>(0.24)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Female</td>
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<td>0.835*</td>
<td>0.811*</td>
<td>0.815*</td>
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<td></td>
<td>(0.070)</td>
<td>(0.069)</td>
<td>(0.069)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Age</td>
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<tr>
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<td>(0.031)</td>
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<td>Church Attendance</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
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<td>(0.018)</td>
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<td>Family</td>
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<td>Parents’ Education</td>
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<tr>
<td>Parents’ Income</td>
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<tr>
<td>Multiracial Household</td>
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<td>(0.32)</td>
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<td>Contextual</td>
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<tr>
<td>Southc</td>
<td>0.895</td>
<td>0.896</td>
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<td></td>
<td>(0.080)</td>
<td>(0.080)</td>
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<td>Black Protestantd</td>
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<td>Catholicd</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.44)</td>
<td>(0.45)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

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Table 3 (Continued)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Model 1</th>
<th>Model 2</th>
<th>Model 3</th>
<th>Model 4</th>
<th>Model 5</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Multiracial School</td>
<td>6.926*** (1.71)</td>
<td>6.926*** (1.71)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Interactions</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Multiracial * Attend</td>
<td>0.944 (0.062)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uniracial-Minority * Attend</td>
<td>1.209*** (0.10)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>0.505*** (0.023)</td>
<td>0.387* (0.18)</td>
<td>0.374* (0.17)</td>
<td>0.250* (0.12)</td>
<td>0.246* (0.12)</td>
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<tr>
<td>N</td>
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<td>2725</td>
<td>2725</td>
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<tr>
<td>Pseudo R^2</td>
<td>0.0205</td>
<td>0.0423</td>
<td>0.0505</td>
<td>0.104</td>
<td>0.105</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Standard errors in parentheses
*** p<0.001, ** p<0.01, * p<0.05

Note:
a. Reference category: Uniracial-Majority congregation
b. Reference category: Whites
c. Reference categories: Midwest, Northeast & West
d. Reference category: Evangelical Protestants

Uniracial-Majority: respondent is racial-ethnic majority in a uniracial congregation
Uniracial-Minority: respondent is racial-ethnic minority in a uniracial congregation

Source: NSYR Wave 1 2002-2003

Table 3 displays strong support for hypothesis one. The multiracial variable is statistically significant throughout all of the models. Regression results confirm that adolescents attending a multiracial congregation are significantly more likely than those attending uniracial congregations to have at least one close interracial friendship, net of all other factors. The results are similar for adolescents attending uniracial-minority congregations; they are significantly more likely to have a close interracial friendship.

Model five, though, suggests that religious service attendance may work differently for uniracial-minority and multiracial congregations. The interaction between attendance and uniracial-minority is significant, showing that increased uniracial-minority congregation attendance increases the likelihood of having a close interracial friend. This is not true for multiracial congregations. Those who attend more do not have a higher likelihood of being in a close interracial friendship. Adolescents who attend multiracial congregations more regularly are no more likely to have a close interracial friend than those with low frequency of attendance.

Hypothesis three is only partially confirmed. As expected, the percentage of school that is not of the adolescent’s race has a significant effect on whether they have a close interracial friendship. However, the neighborhood percentage not of the adolescent’s race is not
significant. This perhaps indicates that school-based interracial social contact, more so than residential integration, may be one of the key factors in facilitating close interracial friendships among American adolescents. Perhaps this also suggests that adolescents have more contact with peers at schools and religious congregations (for the religiously affiliated) than in their residential neighborhoods.

There are some noteworthy control variable relationships. First, Hispanics are significantly more likely than Whites to have an interracial friendship. The coefficient decreases as contextual variables such as school and neighborhood racial composition are added, but it is still significant at the .05 level in model five. When contextual variables are controlled for African Americans are no more likely than whites to have a close interracial friendship. This implies that Hispanics, as a racial-ethnic group, have a proclivity toward close interracial friendships. This finding is consistent with Quillian and Campbell (2003), who argue that interracial friendships are more likely to involve Hispanics and Asians than they are African Americans and whites.

In addition, female adolescents, net of all measured factors, are significantly less likely than male adolescents to have multiracial friendships; 57.4% of male adolescents reported having at least one multiracial friendship compared to 44.7% of females. Still, those who attend multiracial congregations are more likely to have multiracial friendships than those attending uniracial congregations. Perhaps, the general homophily tendency is stronger for females than it is for males; females are more likely to choose friends that are similar in various ways (race, SES, etc.) regardless of whether or not they attend a multiracial congregation.

The family control variables are not significant in models four or five. In model three, adolescents from multiracial households (in which at least one member is of a different race) are significantly more likely to have a close interracial friendship compared with those from uniracial households. The statistical significance disappears controlling for contextual variables, suggesting again that friendship formation may have more to do with contact in institutions such as congregations and schools. The religious tradition in which the adolescent is located is not related to whether adolescents have a close interracial friendship in model four, and attendance of a multiracial congregation does not vary by Census region.

The results indicate that social contact matters. Interracial contact in congregations and schools, net of all other examined factors, is related to a higher likelihood that U.S. adolescents will have close interracial friendships.

**DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION**

The purpose of this study is to examine the relationship between adolescent religious congregation racial composition and close interracial friendships. I hypothesized that adolescents attending multiracial and uniracial-minority congregations would be more likely to have close interracial friendships. Results confirm this hypothesis, demonstrating that, net of all other control variables, attendance at multiracial and uniracial-minority congregations are significantly associated with having a close interracial friendship. Congregational racial composition is one of the few consistently significant variables in the models. These results both confirm and build upon previous findings by Christerson and Emerson (2003) and Emerson et al. (2002) that multiracial congregations are populated with people who “are more integrated across race than the general population” (Christerson and Emer-
That is, for adolescents, multiracial congregations influence their friendship choices. I emphasize again the non-voluntary nature of most adolescent religious congregation attendance. As discussed above, 92% of religiously involved adolescents attend with and because of their parents. This gives us some confidence that the causal direction is as hypothesized and that this is not a selection effect. The current findings also indicate that being in a uniracial-minority congregation (where interracial social contact opportunities abound from the adolescent’s perspective) is important for interracial friendships. The findings suggest that increased opportunities for interracial social contact have implications for the racial composition of friendship structures. This reinforces a long standing line of research in social contact theory that suggests that “contact” has many benefits that have positive consequences for intergroup relations.

The present findings are similar to those in school settings. The institutional racial composition has a significant effect on adolescent interracial friendships. Additionally, low levels of heterogeneity generally limit primary interracial relationships. This study shows that beyond the multiracial congregation effect, low levels of racial-ethnic heterogeneity in religious congregations can, for a minority, facilitate adolescent interracial friendships. Adolescents who are minorities relative to their congregations were significantly more likely than those who are majorities in uniracial congregations to have a close interracial friendship. Therefore, in racially homogeneous congregations, the adolescent’s own race/ethnicity in relation to the majority racial-ethnic group is a significant factor. Although the organization itself is not technically multiracial, adolescents in uniracial-minority congregations benefit as it relates to interracial friendships. Scholars interested in studying individuals in congregations, as it relates to racial composition, need to pay attention to this particular factor.

It is worth reiterating that more frequent multiracial congregation attendance does not increase the likelihood that an adolescent has a close interracial friendship; adolescents who attend sparsely are just as likely as those who attend regularly to have a close interracial friendship. On the other hand, attendance by minorities relative to their congregations does significantly increase the likelihood of having a close interracial friendship. Stated differently, those who are minorities in their congregations who attend more have a higher likelihood of being in a close interracial friendship than those who attend less. An alternative explanation is that the social mechanism at work here is not increased interracial contact; rather it is simply the availability of other racial-ethnic groups. Following that line of thinking, adolescents attending uniracial-minority congregations have no choice but to form friendships with other races because of scarcity of same race individuals. However, there is evidence from the school literature that indicates that same race friendships are more salient for small racial-ethnic minorities (Quillian and Campbell 2003) in schools. Small racial-ethnic minorities, at least, in schools have a strong tendency to maintain same race friendship networks. I refer to this study because it demonstrates that interracial friendship formation is not simply about the availability of other races.

The results also suggest that despite the multiracial and uniracial-minority congregation influence, there is a strong same-race friendship tendency among U.S. adolescents. The majority of U.S. adolescents do not have a close interracial friendship. As discussed above, this trend is consistent with the previous literature on adolescent friendships (Quillian and Campbell 2003). Yet, school racial composition seems also to play an important role in how likely an adolescent is to have a close interracial friendship. When the per-
Why Can’t We Be Friends: The Role of Religious Congregation

Percentage at school of different races increases, the likelihood that adolescents have a close interracial friendship also increases. This result may seem intuitive; going to a school that is increasingly not of one’s own race increases the likelihood that one would come into contact with other racial groups. However, that assumes that because one’s school is populated with other racial groups, one interacts with those groups. Given the stark residential segregation of U.S. neighborhoods, the results suggest that the prospect of change in interracial relationships is more heavily dependent upon the racial compositions of other social institutions, such as schools, and in the current study, religious congregations. The current results suggest that school racial composition continues to be an important factor in interracial friendships.

There are limitations to the present analysis worth noting. First, there is some causal order ambiguity. It is not known for sure whether respondents had multiracial friendships prior to attending a multiracial congregation or vice versa, but I think, for adolescents, it is plausible to construct multiracial congregations as the independent variable. As I discuss above, the majority of adolescents have fewer degrees of choice as to where they attend religious services because of attending with parents. Future studies need to examine longitudinal relationships between friendship formation and multiracial congregation membership, focusing on the temporal order in which these occur. It is true that multiracial congregations tend to have individuals who have significantly more multiracial social ties (Emerson and Woo 2006). Therefore, if parents attend these congregations, familial interracial ties could reasonably shape adolescents’ interracial ties also. However, given the various ways that multiracial congregations form, multiracial congregations may also be an agent of social change propelling congregants to diversify their social networks outside of the congregations. For instance, some multiracial congregations were once uniracial and, as a result of a changing neighborhood or a congregational need for resources, became multiracial (Emerson and Kim 2003). Hence, these congregations may have members who have multiracial social ties formed after experiencing interracial contact in their congregations. Future waves of NYSR will enable further analyses and examination of change among adolescent attendance, especially providing the ability to look at change in social ties as a result of multiracial congregation attendance.

To conclude, there is a strong general tendency in the U.S. towards uniracial social ties and congregations. However, racial-ethnic diversity and interracial social contact in religious organizations has implications beyond matters of theology. Multiracial networks have significant implications for interracial harmony and equality in the U.S. Racial-ethnic diversity in religious organizations plays a part in this endeavor. Those interested in issues of racial harmony and equality have reason, then, to pay attention to the racial composition of religious congregations as an important site where inter-racial social contact is established.

NOTES

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REFERENCES


Why Can’t We Be Friends: The Role of Religious Congregation


