

**Durability and Variability in Racial Inequalities:
Mapping the Dynamics of Racial Relations in the U.S. States 1990-2012**

Sarah K. Bruch
University of Iowa
sarah-bruch@uiowa.edu

Joe Soss
University of Minnesota
jbsoss@umn.edu

Abstract

In this paper, we develop a more relational approach to understanding racial inequalities and specifying how racial group positions matters for understanding politics and policies. We draw on constructivist, relational, and positional theories of race to conceptualize two dimensions of racial relations – exclusion and subordination. We present unique measures of these two dimensions of relative racial group positions for Blacks, Latinos, and whites using aggregate state-level data from a variety of sources including the U.S. Census and the Annual Social and Economic Supplement to the Current Population Survey. Using these measures of relative group position, we provide a descriptive analysis examining the patterning of relative racial positions for Blacks, Latinos, and whites across the American states from 1990 to 2012.

The persistence of racial inequalities remains a deeply troubling feature of American society. Influential observers have often predicted that racial inequalities would progressively decline over time due to legal protections against discrimination, the rise of egalitarian norms, and declines in explicit negative attitudes toward historically marginalized groups. The actual historical record, however, has been far more complex. Significant changes in laws, norms, and attitudes have reduced racial disparities in many domains of social life. Yet the institutionalized legacies of racial oppressions of the past continue to combine with a multitude of current day practices to make race-based patterns of segregation, disparity, and inequity familiar features of the American landscape.

Surveying economic, social, and political institutions in the U.S. today, one finds limited and sporadic gains in some arenas, stalled progress in others, and stubbornly durable inequalities in far too many. This variegated landscape of inequalities allows some observers to point optimistically to good-news trends, even as it provides others with evidence to support portrayals of racial subjugation as an unchanging feature of American life.

To move beyond this impasse – to make sense of this complex landscape and strengthen our understandings of racial inequalities – we argue that scholars should (1) draw more explicitly on the resources provided by social theories of race and relational understandings of inequality and (2) integrate these theoretical insights more fully into our measurement of racial inequalities and our empirical analyses of racial effects. In this paper, we draw on constructivist theories of race to explain how racial boundaries, groups, and understandings emerge from ongoing social processes and patterns of practice. We make use of relational theories to draw attention to the structures and processes that organize social transactions and the mechanisms that reproduce or transform them. And we draw on positional theories that specify actors' locations in structured relations vis-à-vis one another, the boundaries of institutions, and resources relevant to specific fields of social interaction. Combining these theoretical traditions and insights, we develop a more relational approach to understanding racial inequalities and specifying how racial group positions matters for politics and policies. We conceptualize racial marginalization along two dimensions. The first focuses on exclusions and captures the degree to which a group is positioned

outside the boundaries of significant societal institutions and relations. The second focuses on subordination and captures the degree to which a group occupies inferior positions within significant societal institutions and relations.

Data

Using data from the U.S. Census, the Annual Social and Economic Supplement to the Current Population Survey, and the National Center for Educational Statistics Common Core of Data for 1990-2012, we use indicators of socioeconomic position for Blacks, Latinos, and Whites along three dimensions: work, residency, and education.

Consistent with theories of social closure, each component of Exclusion is designed to capture the relative degree to which racial groups are able to traverse a socially meaningful and socioeconomically consequential institutional boundary. In the area of work, we use access to full-time employment as a measure of the degree to which Whites and Blacks are able to gain entry into a key labor market institution. For residency, we capture exclusion by measuring the degree to which Blacks and Whites are able to gain access to home ownership. For education, we quantify exclusion by measuring the degree to which Blacks are segregated from Whites in elementary and secondary (K-12) schools, which we estimate by calculating the Index of Dissimilarity based on racial enrollment figures for students in each school.

To construct our Subordination measure, we employ indicators of superior and inferior positioning in these three domains of socioeconomic relations. In the area of work, we rely on differences in mean levels of wage and salary income. For residency, we calculate the median values of homes owned by Black and White Americans. Finally, for our third dimension, we use differences in levels of educational attainment measured along a five-point scale: less than high school, high school diploma, some college but no degree, two-year college degree, and four-year college degree or higher degree.

To summarize positions along these three dimensions, we create two simple additive indexes, Exclusion and Subordination, each of which summarizes differences in relative group positions across the states. Specifically, we standardize each component and then average them together in a manner that

gives equal weight to each dimension. The values of Exclusion and Subordination increase when Black state residents occupy positions that are inferior to those of Whites. To facilitate comparisons across the two measures, we divide each index by the number of its constituent components (3) and center it at a mean of zero.

Analysis

Using these measures of relative group position, we provide a descriptive analysis examining the patterning of racial positions across the American states from 1990 to 2012.

In preliminary work, we examine the trends over time in the two measures of racial marginalization along with the percentage of the state population that is Black. The first clear pattern is that, once we average out differences across states, mean values for our measures of *Exclusion* and *Subordination* vary some over time but also track each other fairly closely. This pattern, of course, is what one would expect to see if exclusion and subordination are, as Blumer (1965) suggests, two dimensions of a common construct. *Exclusion* and *Subordination* both decline in the mid-to-late 1990s, remain relatively stable in the early 2000s, and then increase in the late 2000s.

In the late 1990s, we observe an earlier and sharper decline in *Exclusion* relative to *Subordination*, leading to a brief gap between the measures of relative racial position. During the 2000s, we also see that *Exclusion* increases to a more substantial degree than *Subordination* and ends the period higher. Far more striking, however, is the durability of relative racial group positions over time. Although individual states exhibit considerably more variation in these measures over time, the average relationship based on all states remains quite consistent over this period. Neither *Exclusion* nor *Subordination* moves more than a one-quarter of a standard deviation away from its mean in over the two-decade period.

[Figure 1 here]

Although each measure has limitations, the two indexes fit well with the ideal criteria laid out in the preceding section. They measure relative group positions between racial categories; they indicate the positions of Blacks and Whites vis-à-vis each other and vis-à-vis bounded statuses; they capture the

concatenation of positions along multiple dimensions; and they incorporate indicators of positioning in spatial, social, and economic relations.

Ideally, the two measures of group position should provide information that allows researchers to distinguish dimensions of racial relations in each state and, hence, should not exhibit exceptionally highly correlations with one another. Thus, it is reassuring to find that, although the measures track each other time, a fuller analysis of state/year patterns suggests we are capturing distinct dimensions of racial marginalization. The correlation between *Exclusion* and *Subordination* is low ($r=0.16$). Moreover, states exhibit a variety of combinations of socioeconomic *Subordination* and *Exclusion*. Figure 8 offers a presents a visual mapping of the states along the axes defined by these two dimensions. Here, one can see considerable empirical support to our conceptual argument that group inferiority/superiority (measured by *Subordination*) is related to but not the same as group exclusion/inclusion (measured by *Exclusion*).

Figure 2 also shows a considerable amount of variation along these axes, suggesting that the positions of racial groups vary substantially across the states in ways that might have significant implications for politics and policy. Because *Subordination* and *Exclusion* are centered at their means, we can use their intersection to define four quadrants of racial positioning in the states – each of which contains a substantial number of state observations. A similar number of states fall into three of the four quadrants: the high exclusion/high subordination quadrant (16), the low exclusion/low subordination quadrant (12), and the high exclusion/low subordination quadrant (13). A slightly smaller number of states (9) can be classified as combining relatively low exclusion with relatively high subordination.

[Figure 2 here]

Observing the states in Figure 2, one can also see that the overall correlation between the two racial position measures masks substantial regional differences. Figure 3 shows the relationship between *Subordination* and *Exclusion* separately by region. Here, one can see that the correlation between the two position measures is stronger in the Midwest and West regions ($r=0.25$ and $r=0.21$ respectively), than in the North and South regions ($r=0.14$ and $r=0.01$ respectively). In addition, Figure 3 reveals a strong regional patterning of racial positions. The states of the Midwest, for example, generally combine the

highest levels of *Exclusion* ($\mu=0.46$) with fairly average levels of *Subordination* ($\mu=-0.01$). By contrast, states in the South exhibit the highest levels of *Subordination* ($\mu=0.22$) but do not stand out in terms of *Exclusion* ($\mu=-0.11$). States in the West are characterized by a distinctively low combination of both *Subordination* ($\mu= -0.19$) and *Exclusion* ($\mu=-0.36$). Finally, the states of North exhibit a more varied range of positions: Like the Midwest, we observe higher levels of *Exclusion* ($\mu=0.02$) than *Subordination* ($\mu=-0.17$) in this region, but states in the North are observed all four quadrants.

[Figure 3 here]

The last issue to examine with our measures of relative racial positions is their association with racial composition. For measures of group position to augment analyses based on racial composition, they must also have some independence from the Black percentage of state populations. Figures 4 and 5 show the location of states mapped by the Black percentage of the state population and *Subordination* (Figure 4) and *Exclusion* (Figure 5). Overall *Subordination* has a moderate, significant correlation with the Black percentage of state populations ($r=0.46$), however this association varies substantially across regions with a weak (and insignificant) relationship in the West ($r=0.07$), a moderate association in the Midwest ($r=0.21$), and a relatively strong relationship ($r=0.53$) in the North and South. The association between *Exclusion* and the percentage of the Black population in a state also varies substantially across regions. Overall *Exclusion* is weakly (and insignificantly) correlated with the Black percentage of state populations overall ($r=0.02$), but the relationship is stronger in the Midwest and West ($r=0.27$ and $r=0.26$, respectively). Another interesting pattern that is seen in Figures 10 and 11 is that although there is a great deal of variation in the percentage of the Black population of the states in the South, the levels of *subordination* are relatively high across most of the Southern states.

[Figures 4 and 5 here]

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Figure 1. Trends in White/Black Subordination and Exclusion, 1990-2012

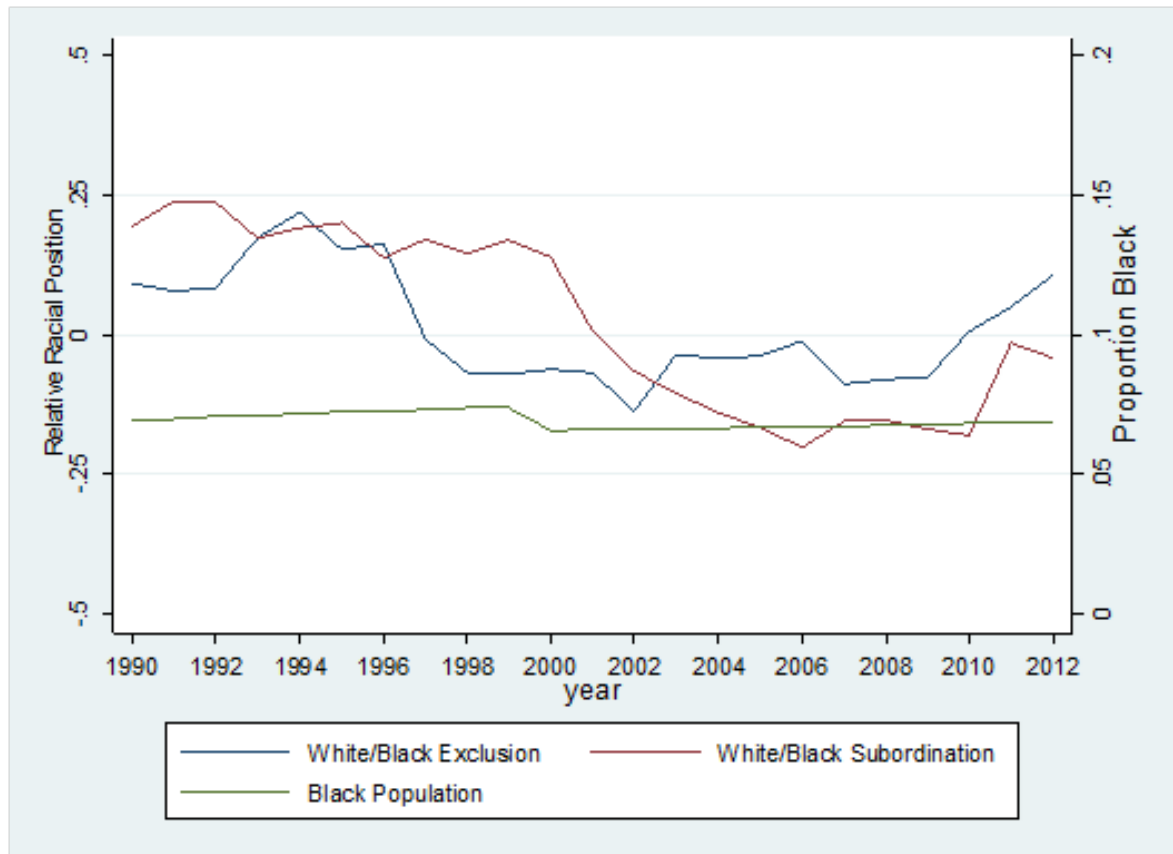


Figure 2. Scatterplot of States by White/Black Subordination and Exclusion



Figure 3. Regional Scatterplots of States by White/Black Subordination and Exclusion

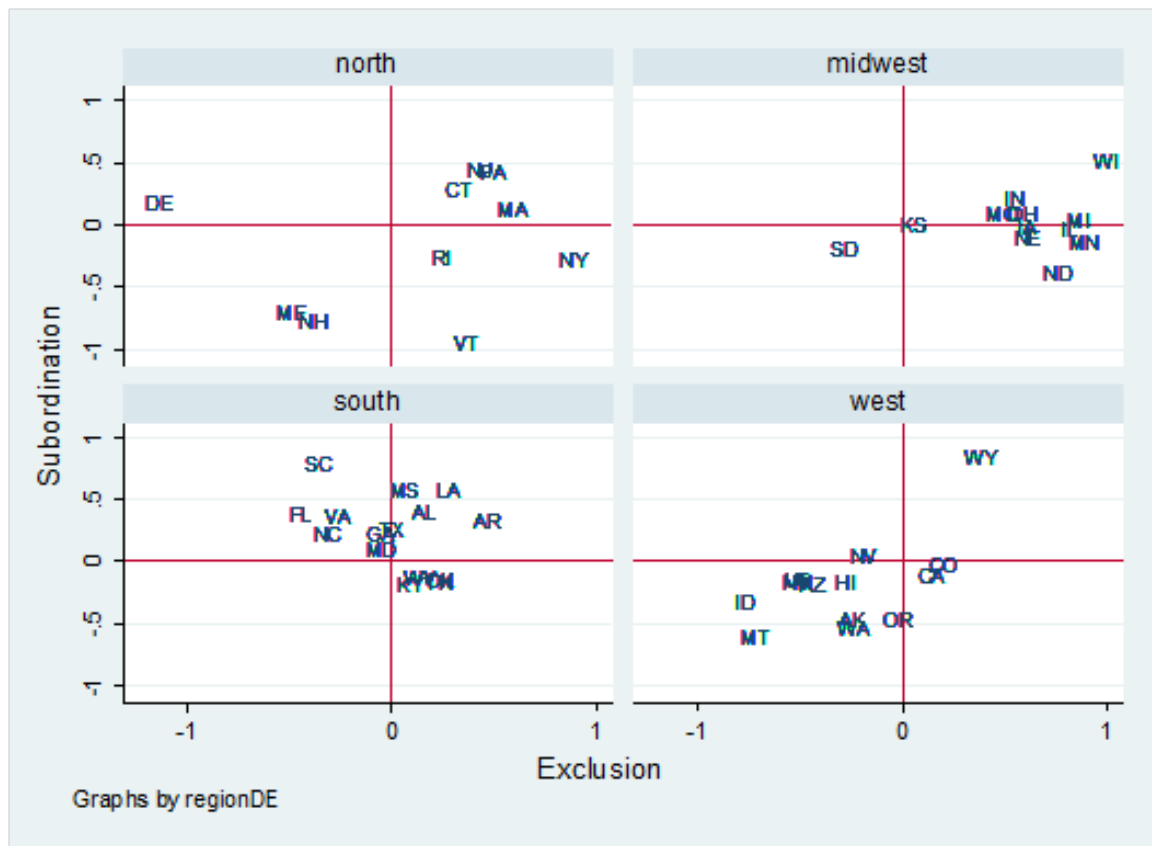


Figure 4. Regional Scatterplots of States by White/Black Subordination and Black Composition

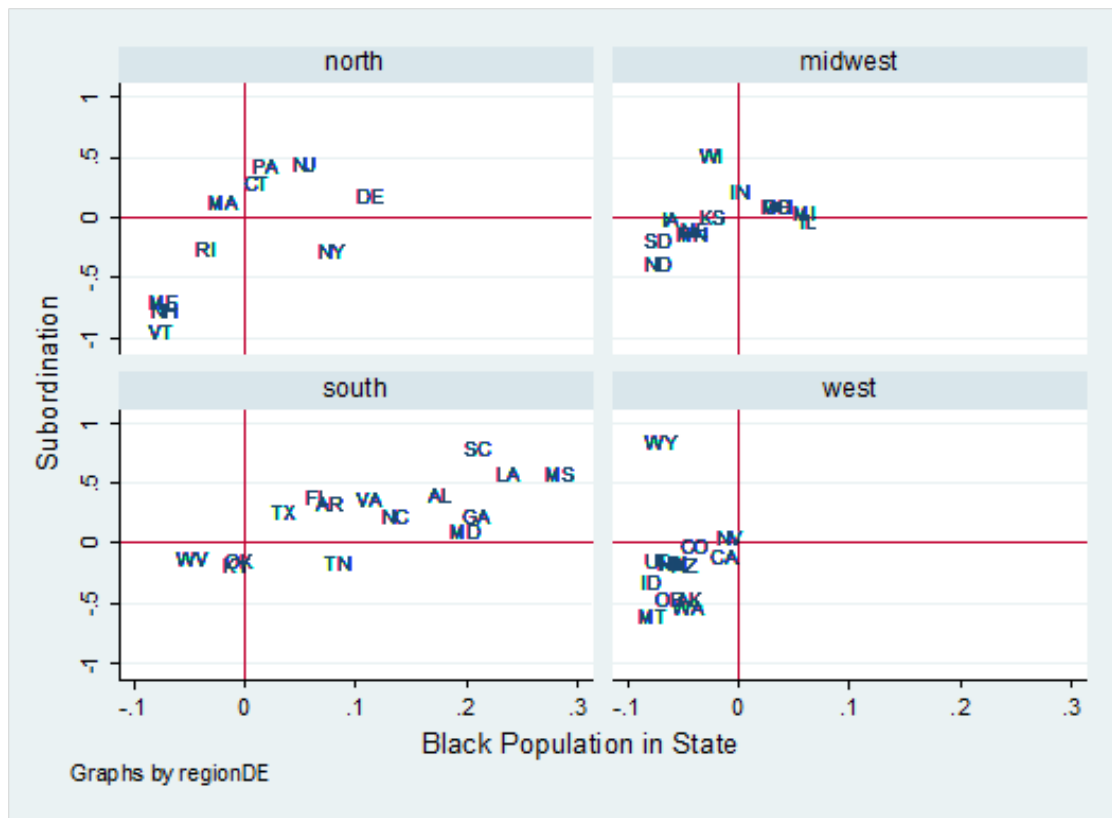


Figure 5. Regional Scatterplots of States by White/Black Exclusion and Black Composition

