Barriers to Voluntary Organization Membership: An Examination of Race and Cohort Differences

Sonia Miner¹ and Stewart Tolnay²

¹Family and Consumer Studies, University of Utah, Salt Lake City.
²Department of Sociology and Center for Social and Demographic Analysis, University at Albany, New York.

Objectives. This research uses age stratification, isolation, compensatory, and ethnic community perspectives to predict differences by race in the utilization of formal organizations across cohorts. Voluntary organizations are classified into three general types: social service clubs, job-related groups, and neighborhood organizations. We hypothesize that racial differences in organizational participation will be wider for older cohorts than for younger cohorts, as a result of historical racism. Moreover, we expect the racial differences across cohorts to be greater for those organizations (i.e., social service and job-related groups) where racial barriers to membership were strongest.

Methods. We use the National Survey of Families and Households (NSFH) and logistic regression analysis to determine the predicted probabilities of membership in organizations by race, age, and type of membership.

Results. The results reveal higher levels of participation in organizations for young Blacks (than for young Whites). At the oldest ages, however, the race differential reverses direction for social/service and job-related organizations. For neighborhood organizations, the race differential is more stable across cohorts, consistent with expectations.

Discussion. We interpret these race-cohort patterns as evidence of historical discrimination that affected the oldest cohorts to a greater extent—especially for social/service and job-related organizations.

INVOLVEMENT in formal organizations provides individuals with a direct linkage to the larger social structure. However, some social groups have been exposed to exclusionary rules for membership in certain formal organizations. For example, it is well-known that racial minorities have historically experienced barriers to some types of formal social activity in American society (Farley & Allen, 1987; Miner, 1993). Those formal organizations centered in the general society (e.g., country clubs, social/service and fraternal organizations) were more likely to maintain exclusionary policies. In contrast, African Americans have had relatively open access to church-related activities as well as to local neighborhood and school organizations (Milburn & Bowman, 1991). Historical barriers to formal participation have weakened substantially for the Black population in the years since the supportive legislation of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which prohibited discrimination in public accommodations and facilities. Because segregation and discrimination had been more effective at excluding African Americans from involvement in the formal sphere, this legislation should have had a greater impact on minority involvement in organizations rooted in the larger society than on those located closer to home in the African American community.

Prior research on minority membership in voluntary organizations typically has combined different age cohorts of individuals into a single group or all organizations into a single category, and this has yielded conflicting results. For example, Wright and Hyman (1958) concluded that Blacks had lower rates of membership than did Whites. This finding has led to the "isolation hypothesis," which suggests that Blacks are isolated from civic activities because they are excluded from meaningful involvement in the larger society. Others, however, have found greater formal participation among Blacks (see e.g., Babchuk & Thompson, 1962; Clemente, Rexroad, & Hirsch, 1975; Myrdal, Sterner, & Rose, 1944; Orum, 1966; Williams, Babchuk, & Johnson, 1973) and have argued in favor of the "compensation hypothesis," which claims that Blacks overcompensate for barriers to the larger society by becoming highly involved in available voluntary organizations. Another explanation of greater voluntary organization participation among Blacks is the "ethnic community perspective," which suggests that high levels of race and class consciousness lead to greater Black membership in formal organizations (Ellison & London, 1992; Olson, 1970). These conflicting findings about racial differences in voluntary organization participation may be due to a failure by previous investigators to distinguish simultaneously between different types of organizations (with varying barriers to membership) and to consider cohort differences within the minority and majority populations.

In this article, we use the National Survey of Families and Households (NSFH) to examine racial differences in membership in formal, voluntary organizations. Our analysis goes beyond previous research, which has been largely concerned with racial differences in voluntary organization participation (see e.g., Babchuk & Thompson, 1962; Clemente et al., 1975; Williams et al., 1973; Wright & Hyman, 1958) by focusing on cohort variation in racial differences—
specifically between African Americans and Whites. Jackson, Chatters, and Taylor (1993) point to the importance of the examination of the social experiences of separate birth cohorts of Black Americans as they move through the age structure. In this case, we argue that on the one hand, general reductions in barriers to membership and participation based on race over the past few decades should produce smaller racial differences for levels of membership among younger cohorts. On the other hand, the residual legacy of stronger discrimination and segregation in the more distant past should have created greater racial differences within the older cohorts. We also distinguish among different types of formal organizations, in recognition of a stronger tradition of exclusion practiced by certain types of organizations (George, 1988).

**Historical Experiences Across Cohorts**

"Age stratification theory" has been used to describe the differential experiences of cohorts throughout history (see Riley, Foner, & Waring, 1988; Riley, 1985). According to this perspective, each birth cohort experiences historical forces and events at a unique life stage. In turn, these unique experiences influence the socialization, roles, and quality of life for each cohort. Cohorts may vary in their experiences based on stratifying characteristics, such as race, ethnicity, and gender. Social changes occurring in society may alter these experiences and create new environments for social behavior. As a result, in the presence of social change, each new cohort can be exposed to a different social environment than that experienced by preceding cohorts. For example, racial minorities historically were blocked from many activities available to the majority group. Although informal and formal barriers to Black participation in membership organizations still exist, as civil rights legislation was implemented, formerly excluded groups were gradually granted greater access to many formerly restricted organizations (Jackson et al., 1993).

The civil rights movement is critical to this process because it had two effects on social participation for racial minorities. First, the Black community was empowered by the momentum of the movement, which resulted in a higher degree of social participation and community involvement (Olsen, 1970). Second, the legal barriers of segregation decreased when the civil rights legislation of the 1960s prohibited racial discrimination in many sectors of public life. In contrast, discrimination has been more persistent in some types of private organizations, such as country clubs and fraternal organizations. Therefore, it is important to distinguish between different types of organizations, which may vary in accessibility for minority group members. Cohort membership is also an important consideration, because older cohorts have experienced greater levels of social discrimination.

Overall levels of participation in formal organizations for the Black population, as a whole, may mask significant cohort differences. In addition, the effect of expanding civil rights for racial minorities on participation in formal organizations probably varies across cohorts. The effects of the dramatic societal changes of the 1960s and 1970s are more likely to be reflected in the organizational involvement of younger African Americans who (a) participated in the social movement that brought about those changes and/or (b) have benefited from the legal restrictions against racially motivated barriers (Ellison & London, 1992). In contrast, the level of participation in formal organizations among those African Americans who were middle-aged, or older, during these social changes may have been less influenced. As a result of the improved social environment for younger Blacks, racial differences (i.e., advantages for Whites) in organizational membership should be greater among older cohorts.

Age is important because there may be a stage in life during which people begin joining organizations and then remain members throughout the rest of their lives. Initiation into many voluntary organizations takes place early in adulthood, due to opportunities associated with labor force participation (e.g., labor unions, professional organizations), higher education (e.g., sororities, fraternities), and family status and the rearing of young children (e.g., church, leadership of youth, school groups). Rosow (1985) describes "institutional roles," which relate to work inside and outside the home, as following an inverted U-curve over the life course, peaking in mid-adulthood. Historical changes in the opportunities for formal activity (as described earlier) are likely to be of greater benefit to birth cohorts who were young and had not yet reached the ages during which initiation into voluntary organizations peaked.

Riley and colleagues (1988) describe the sociological significance of diversity in the social aging process. These authors argue, "There is diversity among individuals in the ways they grow older, depending on their locations in society, their relationships with other people, and their development of a social self." This process is examined by studies that focus on how people move through the changing society as they grow older, how age roles and transitions are experienced over the life course, and how socialization and allocation affect the experiences of aging people. These authors further explain that organizational constraints may block certain groups from some types of social participation; this blockage will vary by cohort. This is applicable to the study of race and cohort differences in voluntary organization membership due to the societal declines in overt racism and discrimination since the 1960s. Younger cohorts of Blacks are likely to experience different, perhaps less severe, blockages to voluntary organization memberships when compared with their older counterparts.

An alternative theoretical explanation for cohort variation in formal organization membership among African Americans is the "double jeopardy hypothesis." Proponents of this perspective argue that Black Americans experience racism throughout their lives, but that old age adds the disadvantage of ageism, which serves to further limit their standard of living (Dowd & Bengston, 1978; Ferraro, 1987). There is disagreement, however, about the utility of the double jeopardy argument in this context. For example, Ward (1978) examined racial differences in total voluntary organization participation by age group and found a contiguity of formal association participation for Blacks and Whites over all age groups. He concluded that there was little support for the double jeopardy effect of ageism and
changing accessibility of formal organizations over time in formal organization use when their cohort reaches old age. Babchuk and Booth. The NSFH makes it possible to determine participation rates for some types of organizations than for others. For example, recent research has argued that Blacks are likely to be heavily involved in neighborhood organizations (Milburn & Bowman, 1991) and church groups (George, 1988; Hatch, 1991; Miner, 1993; Ortega, Crutchfield, & Rushing, 1983). Participation in voluntary organizations reflects not only personal preferences, but also access to opportunity structures. Traditionally, the church has served as a major organizational participation outlet for Black Americans (George, 1988). One study of low-income, elderly people living in Philadelphia found that White elderly persons were more likely to be involved in nationality group organizations (e.g., Italian American centers), senior centers, and labor unions, whereas their Black counterparts were more likely to report participation in church groups, social or recreational activities, civic groups, and other groups (Clemente et al., 1975). More recent research finds no racial differences in the use of senior centers (Krow, Cutler, & Coward, 1990; Miner, 1993), possibly because of their increased availability in Black neighborhoods since the implementation of Title III of the Older Americans Act, which targets poor minority neighborhoods for the provision of senior centers (Gelfand, 1987). Although our research does not examine senior center organizations, the increasing availability of such centers serves as an example of the changing accessibility of formal organizations over time in the Black community.

Voluntary organizations vary in their purposes, eligibility requirements, goals, and functions in the community. Babchuk and Booth (1969) categorized voluntary organizations into six groups: church groups, job-related associations (e.g., farm organizations, professional associations, labor unions), recreational groups (e.g., bowling leagues, garden clubs), fraternal service organizations (e.g., Masons, service clubs, auxiliaries), adult leadership of youth programs (e.g., 4-H, YMCA, YWCA, Boy and Girl Scouts) and other organizations (e.g., veterans groups, co-op membership). Our research uses similar categories with some modifications. First, the specific types of organizations identified in the NSFH survey differ somewhat from those used by Babchuk and Booth. The NSFH makes it possible to determine membership in the following types of organizations: fraternal groups, service organizations, veterans groups, political organizations, labor unions, sport groups, adult leadership of youth, school groups, hobby or garden clubs, sororities and fraternities, nationality groups, literary or discussion groups, professional or academic societies, and church groups. Second, we attempt to split the groups into logical categories that vary with regard to the historical access/barriers for African Americans. For this reason, we conceptualize the following three main groups: (a) social/service groups (fraternal groups, service organizations, political organizations, sport groups, hobby or garden clubs, sororities/fraternities, nationality groups, and literary groups); (b) labor-related organizations (labor unions, professional organizations, farm and veterans groups); and (c) neighborhood-based groups (church groups, school organizations, and adult leadership of youth).

These groups vary in several respects for African Americans, including level of interaction with the majority White population, concentration in the minority community, and the strength of historical barriers to their involvement. As a result, cohort variation in the level of Black participation in some types of formal organizations should be more intense than corresponding variation in other types of organizations. For example, the participation in widely accessible neighborhood or community organizations (e.g., church groups, youth, and school-related organizations) has been possible for all age cohorts because of a relative absence of restrictive barriers (Milburn & Bowman, 1991). In contrast, among organizations which have been historically less accessible for African Americans (e.g., political, professional, and fraternal organizations), greater cohort variation in participation should exist—the relaxation of restrictive policies had a greater effect on access for younger cohorts (Smith & Thornton, 1993; Jackson et al., 1993). Some of this greater membership among younger Blacks in traditionally segregated organizations might also be due to greater access to the Black fraternal organizations that were founded in response to this segregation.

HYPOTHESES, DATA, AND METHOD

Hypotheses

Our primary objective in this analysis is to examine racial differences in the participation in formal organizations across birth cohorts. The major research question is whether the race differential is smaller among younger cohorts due to increased opportunities for the involvement of African Americans in formal activities that were historically unavailable to them. In addition, we estimate cohort and racial differences for three types of voluntary organizations, with varying histories of exclusion of Blacks. The following two hypotheses summarize our expectations:

Hypothesis 1: Younger cohorts of Black and White respondents will have similar rates of voluntary organization membership, but older Blacks will report lower rates of membership than their White counterparts because of greater discrimination in the past. Hence, the older cohort of Blacks will be more influenced by an "isolation" type of effect.
Hypothesis 2: Cohort variation in race differences will be more pronounced for some types of formal organizations than for others. Specifically, it will be weaker for organizations that historically have been more open to Blacks (e.g., neighborhood-based organizations) and stronger for those with history of racial exclusion (e.g., job-related groups and social/service organizations).

Data and Variables
This research uses the 1988 National Survey of Families and Households (Sweet, Bumpass, & Call, 1988), which is based on a national probability sample of 13,017 respondents ages 19 and older. The main sample consists of 9,643 respondents. The oversample of households including Blacks, Hispanics, single-parent families, cohabiting couples, and persons who were recently married has 3,374 respondents. Our analyses are restricted to non-Hispanic Blacks (N = 2,391) and non-Hispanic Whites (N = 9,419), ages 20 and older. Another analysis (not shown here) examined membership patterns for Hispanics. In general, the overall membership patterns for Hispanics more closely resembled those for Whites than those for Blacks. We have chosen not to report the findings for Hispanics due to the complicating influences of immigration and language differences, as well as the possibility of substantial variation in ethnic origins.

The dependent variables in this analysis are dichotomous measures constructed to represent the respondent's membership in three distinct types of voluntary organizations: (a) neighborhood-based organizations (church, school groups, and adult leadership of youth); (b) job-related organizations (labor unions, professional organizations, farm and veterans groups); and (c) social/service organizations (fraternal groups, service clubs, political groups, nationality groups, fraternities/sororities, hobby, literary and sport groups). The National Survey of Families and Households asked respondents about each of these organizations separately, and we have combined them into the three general groups.

The independent variables of primary interest are race (1 = White, 0 = Black) and age group (young = 20–39 years, middle-aged = 40–59 years [the reference category], and old = 60 years and older), which are included in order to determine the racial and cohort differences in the use of different types of formal organizations. In addition, a variety of control variables are included in our models to avoid drawing inferences based on spurious or suppressed relationships—especially those involving age and race. The control variables fall into three categories. The sociodemographic variables are: gender (1 = female); home ownership (1 = owns home); income (in thousands of dollars; missing cases were recoded to the mean and a dummy variable [1 = missing] was added to return missing cases to the analysis—see Cohen & Cohen, 1983); time in current residence (0–30+ years); type of residence (rural, suburb, urban [reference category]); residence in the southern United States (1 = South); and car accessibility (1 = has driven a car in the past month). Health status is measured by a scale of functional disability needs (needs help with the following tasks: personal hygiene, transfer, working for pay, household tasks, climbing stairs, and walking six blocks). Family status includes: number of siblings; number of children; and living arrangement (live alone [reference category], married and living with a spouse present, and living with nonspouse others). Our primary interest is in racial and cohort differences in level of participation in the three types of voluntary organizations, so we devote little attention to the control variables.

Method of Analysis
The dependent variables in these analyses are dichotomous measures of whether or not a respondent reports at least one membership (1 = yes, 0 = no) in each of the three different types of organizations. We use binary logistic regression analysis to estimate the effects of the independent variables on the likelihood of formal organization membership. On the right-hand side of the equation are all of the independent variables described earlier, plus all relevant first-order multiplicative interaction terms between race and cohort. The interaction terms allow us to determine the statistical significance of race differences across cohorts. The coefficients from this analysis, which describe the effect of the independent variables on the logged-odds of membership, are used to derive the predicted probability of membership for particular race-cohort groups. This is done by inserting the appropriate values for the independent variables into the estimated logistic regression equation to derive L, the predicted log likelihood. L can then be used in the following equation to generate the predicted probability of membership (P): P = 1/(1+e^-L). In estimating the probabilities for each race-cohort group, we have manipulated the values for the dummy variables representing race and cohort while fixing all remaining independent variables at their means. By manipulating the values, we mean setting them to 0 or 1 in order to identify every possible race-cohort combination. For example, when estimating the predicted probability for Blacks who are 20–39 years of age, the value for “race” is set to 0 and the value for “young” is set to 1. All other age groups are set to 0. The same values for race and age group are also maintained in the interaction terms.

Findings
Table 1 shows the proportion of respondents (by race and cohort) reporting membership in the three general groups of voluntary organizations. Also shown are the proportions reporting membership in the specific, constituent organizations within each general group. For Blacks, the most common type of organization membership is the neighborhood groups, specifically church groups. Church group participation is strongest among the older cohort for both Blacks (67%) and Whites (52%). Young and middle-aged Whites are most likely to belong to social/service organizations (60% in each category), and older Whites (54%) are most often members of neighborhood organizations. In Table 1, we see that the youngest cohort of African Americans is nearly as involved in the three (bolded) overall voluntary organization categories as their young White counterparts. However, for some specific organizations (i.e., all organizations but sports groups and professional organizations),
Black youth had greater membership participation. This pattern holds even in the more exclusive social/service type of organizations. This Black "advantage" is almost never present in the oldest age cohort (with the exception of greater church group membership and slightly greater labor union participation). This suggests a greater willingness of young Blacks to join voluntary organizations of all types when compared with their White counterparts. This pattern was not predicted by our hypothesis, but it does give credence to the notion that barriers to voluntary organization participation have declined for young Blacks.

Table 2 reports the results of the analyses for the three general types of formal organization membership (social/service, job-related, and neighborhood organizations). Due to oversampling of minorities in the NSFH, sampling weights were used in a supplementary analysis to ensure representative proportions in the sample. The findings of that analysis were virtually identical to those reported here. For simplicity, we chose to report the unweighted results. Although the coefficients are reported for all variables on the right-hand side of the equation, we are most interested in those for race, age, and age-race interactions. The coefficients in Table 2 were used to generate predicted probabilities of membership by manipulating the coefficients for age and race, including their interaction, while holding the remaining variables constant at their mean values. These predicted values are paneled in Figure 1, which displays graphically race differences in organizational membership by cohort.

Looking first at the findings for participation in social service organizations (Figure 1a), we find clear evidence of a race-related "crossover effect." That is, younger Blacks are actually more likely to be members of social/service organizations than are younger Whites. In contrast, the relative disadvantage for African Americans in the oldest cohort is striking. The evidence in Figure 1a supports our hypothesis that younger cohorts of Blacks are not as disadvantaged, relative to Whites, as their older counterparts with regard to voluntary organization membership. The significantly higher level of membership for Blacks than Whites within the youngest cohort, again, was not anticipated by our hypotheses.

The evidence in Figure 1b also suggests a race-related "crossover" in the level of participation in job-related organizations. The higher level of participation for Blacks in the two younger age categories is once again reversed at the oldest ages, where Blacks report a lower level of member-
ship than Whites. This pattern is also consistent with our hypothesis of cohort variation in race differences; however, the pattern is not as strong as was observed for social/service organizations. Again, the higher levels of participation in job-related organizations for Blacks compared to Whites within the younger age cohorts was not anticipated by our hypotheses.

A somewhat different pattern emerges in Figure 1c, which shows levels of membership in neighborhood organizations. Blacks maintain higher levels of involvement in neighborhood organizations even at the oldest ages. This pattern of organizational participation (i.e., the lack of a race-related crossover at the oldest ages) supports our hypothesis of weaker cohort variation in race differentials in this type of organization. That is, because of the relative abundance of these neighborhood activities in Black communities, and a lack of discrimination associated with membership, older Blacks faced fewer barriers to involvement—especially in church-related activities.

**DISCUSSION**

The evidence presented here has shown that there is a significant racial crossover, in certain types of voluntary organization participation, for older respondents. More specifically, although younger Blacks report more involvement than their White counterparts in voluntary organizations, this advantage actually reverses at the oldest ages for social/service and job-related organizations. Consistent with our expectations, membership in neighborhood organizations followed a somewhat different pattern, with generally stable racial differences across cohorts. These results support our hypothesis of cohort variation in racial differences in social/service and job-related organization participation. This result is consistent with the argument that historical discrimination blocked older Blacks from participation.

The shifting race differential (across cohorts) in levels of participation in voluntary organizations cannot be accounted for by the dominant paradigm used to explain higher levels of involvement for Blacks (Babchuk & Thompson, 1962; Olsen, 1970; Orum, 1966; Williams et al., 1973). The ethnic community hypothesis (Ellison & London, 1992), which suggests that subcultural norms associated with pride in the minority community result in higher levels of participation among Blacks, and the compensation hypothesis, which argues that Blacks overcompensate for barriers to the larger society by becoming highly involved in available voluntary organizations, do not hold for all age cohorts, across all types of organizations. Additionally, with regard to the ethnic community hypothesis, there is no evidence to suggest that older Blacks have a lower sense of ethnic community or race consciousness than younger Blacks (Smith & Thornton, 1993). Consequently, these two perspectives need revision if they are to account for the racial crossover at older ages for participation in social/service and job-related organizations. It is possible that the isolation hypothesis (Wright & Hyman, 1958), which suggests barriers to civic activities among Blacks, has played a role in the types of social participation of the oldest Black cohort. We suggest that the most plausible explanation for the crossover is the historical differences in the experiences of the cohorts. If we are correct, then theories that seek to explain racial differences in formal organization participation must consider the unique experiences of different age cohorts, rather than proposing models that apply to all age groups.

Ellison and London (1992) allude to this phenomenon when they suggest that perhaps the theoretical perspectives that explained racial differences in social and political participation in the 1960s and 1970s are no longer relevant to predicting the current trends in collective involvement. We would amend that sentiment to suggest that these older perspectives (i.e., isolation and compensatory hypotheses) may still be relevant for some cohorts (the oldest), but that new ideas should be applied to explain racial differences among younger age groups. Specifically, older cohorts were blocked from participation (isolation perspective) in certain organizations (i.e., social/service and job-related organizations) during their formative membership-joining years. To compensate for barriers to exclusive organizations (compensatory perspective), they joined organizations that were available to them (i.e., neighborhood and church organizations). Meanwhile, younger cohorts of Blacks have experienced fewer barriers to membership (i.e., professional and fraternal groups) and may also have a wider selection of all-Black organizations available to join (i.e., Black soror-
ties/fraternities, political groups, nationality groups; for more specific information on membership in these organizations by race and age cohort, see Table 1). Further research could benefit from examining whether greater Black participation among the younger cohort is a result of decreased segregation in organizations or whether it can be accounted for primarily by the creation of all-Black, race-segregated organizations that are more widespread in the Black community today (when compared with the past).

The patterns of voluntary membership by race and cohort can also be explained by the age stratification theory, which suggests that over time, age cohorts move through the age structure and experience a society that is constantly changing (Riley, 1985). Each cohort has unique experiences associated with the age at which its members experience historical periods and societal changes. Intracohort variation exists in the life course of subcohorts, which are divided along the lines of race and other stratifying factors (Uhlenberg & Miner, 1995). Current younger cohorts of Blacks are joining formal organizations at a time when there are lower levels of overt racism and segregation that could block their participation. Meanwhile, older Black cohorts have lived through a time when they felt unwelcome in the more exclusive voluntary organizations (identified here as social/service and job-related organizations).

In addition, social attitudes regarding racism have changed over time with cohort succession. Schuman, Steeh, and Bobo (1985) argue that current cohorts of older Whites hold more prejudiced attitudes about Blacks and exhibit more racist behaviors than do younger White cohorts. This would be relevant for current older cohorts of Blacks who may feel uncomfortable and unwelcome in the exclusive organizations dominated by their White age peers. In contrast, it is likely that younger cohorts of Blacks are not experiencing the same degree of racism directed toward their organization membership by their White age peers. In other words, racism, discrimination and barriers to voluntary organization membership may also vary by cohort, influenced by the prevailing social attitudes of the cohort, which are based on the cohort’s experience through the age structure. Smith and Thornton (1993) argue that older Black cohorts have a greater sense of Black group solidarity and racial self-identity and seek to socialize primarily with these race peers. They state:

Blacks often must develop self-esteem through alternative frames of reference and by separating one’s sense of self from the negative perceptions attached to racial group membership. This was particularly true during the era in which present Black elders reached maturity—an era when race was paramount and omnipotent in determining one’s life course. Relating to one’s group as a foundation of strength, support and common history is an important resource for coping with a hostile environment. (p. 204–205)

These authors and others have described the importance of the local church and other neighborhood organizations for elderly persons in the Black community (Smith & Thornton, 1993; Milburn & Bowman, 1991); these organizations allow for group solidarity and the maintenance of a strong sense of self. Younger cohorts of Blacks may not rely as heavily on group solidarity in collective activity, because their experiences in social/service and job-related voluntary organizations are not as negative (due to a decline of overt racism).

Although it may be obvious, we also want to emphasize that the race and cohort patterns described here cannot be attributed to a simple “age effect” that predicts declining membership at older ages. First, an age effect might result in different levels of membership across cohorts, but it should not produce varying race differentials across cohorts: It is such differentials that are most critical for our hypotheses. Second, a simple age effect would not predict the stronger race crossover that we observe for voluntary organizations with a history of greater discrimination against African Americans (social/service and job-related). In one sense, the neighborhood voluntary organizations included in our analyses serve as a kind of “control group.” Because African Americans traditionally have had greater access to such organizations—especially church-related organizations—differences across cohorts should not be as marked for them. Firebaugh and Chen (1995) make similar arguments to support their inference of a cohort effect in voter turnout among American women since the 1950s.

Our findings do suggest that historical differences in levels of segregation in formal organization memberships have influenced cohorts of Blacks and Whites differently; however, we must acknowledge that the evidence is still indirect and must remain so until better data are available. The ideal research design would allow researchers to track racial differences in formal organization participation by using longitudinal data to follow cohorts across time. At present, the lack of longitudinal data based on a large sample of Blacks (especially Black elders) makes such a research design impossible. The second wave of the National Survey of Families and Households is not helpful in this regard because the voluntary organizations were grouped together in categories that are not consistent with those used here. As mentioned earlier, it would also be useful to know whether the organizations joined by younger Blacks tend to be segregated by race or whether younger Blacks have become more integrated into voluntary organizations that are traditionally all-White. Until better data are available, our explanation based on differential historical experiences across cohorts seems the most plausible way to account for the race and cohort patterns in organizational participation reported in this study.

Finally, in this research we examined age and race as contexts in which to study voluntary organization membership. We acknowledge that there are other variables that could also play roles, such as gender. We recommend that future research focus on gender stratification as well as additional stratifying variables, such as class and ethnicity, by age cohort to determine differences in voluntary organization membership for these subcohorts over the life course.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The authors would like to acknowledge the suggestions of three anonymous reviewers whose helpful comments improved this manuscript.

Address correspondence to Sonia Miner, PhD, Family and Consumer Studies, 228 Alfred Emery Building, University of Utah, Salt Lake City, UT 84112. E-mail: sonia.miner@fcs.utah.edu