

The Impact of Religious Affiliation and Race on Perceptions of Everyday Discrimination

Joshua Dudley

Oregon State University

3/13/2020

Introduction

Perceived discrimination has been a topic that has been explored extensively in various different countries and regions (Awad 2010; Litchmore and Safdar 2015; Godley 2018; Dixon 2019). A growing concern for affected groups has prompted many of these studies, as perceived discrimination has been found to potentially negatively impact one's health (Grollman 2012). Many of these concerns have been focused on minority groups in different regions because of the several studies that have found a link between belonging to a minority group and experiencing disproportionate levels of perceived discrimination (Awad 2010; Dixon 2019; Flores 2015; Harnois 2014; Litchmore and Safdar 2015; Shorey, Cowan, and Sullivan 2002). In 2019, it was found that 81% of Americans believed that Muslims were subject to discrimination, suggesting that Americans are aware of potential discrimination in their communities (Masci 2019). In more recent times, concerns have been expressed over policies pursued by the Donald Trump administration in the United States, which denied entry to citizens from seven majority Muslim countries (*National Immigration Law Center* 2019). Some activists believe that these policies pursued are highly tied to discrimination. The potential that the media has to impact levels of perceived discrimination has also led many people to be more attentive to what factors may perpetrate discrimination (Schmuck, Matthes and Paul 2017). Religious affiliation's effect on perceived discrimination has been a focal point for many people, due to negative depictions of specific religions in the media (Schmuck, Matthes and Paul 2017). The race of an individual has also been a major concern when looking at levels of perceived discrimination, as studies have found links between being a minority and earning less in wages (Vásquez 2011). Many religions not affiliated with Christianity, also tend to have higher numbers of racial and ethnic minorities,

which makes it important to consider how race and religion together will impact an individual's sense of experiencing everyday discrimination (*Pew Research Center* 2015). This paper evaluates how religious affiliation influences the likelihood that an individual perceives being discriminated against in everyday activities and will control for an individual's race.

Literature Review

The topic of perceived discrimination has been a focus for several different studies, but establishing the distinction between systematic processes of discrimination and everyday instances of discrimination is important. Systematic processes of discrimination include barriers that prohibit people from receiving essentials such as education, housing and jobs they are qualified for (Reskin 2012). In one study (Scheitle and Ecklund 2018), perceived religious discrimination in the workplace among U.S. scientists was a central concern. This study is different from the current study, as it focused on workplace discrimination, which could include systematic forms of discrimination, such as not being hired due to one's religion. The current study focuses on perceptions of everyday discrimination, such as someone feeling disrespected in public, which is less formal than systematic forms of discrimination. While both of these forms of discrimination could be related, they are not the same and could potentially have different impacts on an individual.

Within a wide system of discrimination that takes place day to day, this research will focus specifically on perceived discrimination, rather than what may be considered "real" discrimination. In several studies (Awad 2010; Litchmore and Safdar 2015; Scheitle and Ecklund 2018; Grollman 2012; Godley 2018), perceived discrimination is a sole focus, as respondents were asked questions through a survey about instances where they thought they were being

discriminated against. In a different study (Vásquez 2011), wage discrimination was specifically focused on, as it compared wages of non-indigenous employees to indigenous employees in Guatemala. This research focuses on real discrimination, as wage inequality is not necessarily being perceived by the individuals in the study. Vásquez is the entity bringing attention to wage differences between the two groups in his study, which is different from individuals perceiving some form of discrimination. The current study will be focusing on perceived discrimination, as it will focus specifically on respondent's perceptions.

Many studies have also explored perceived discrimination in several different countries (Awad 2010; Litchmore and Safdar 2015; Godley 2018; Dixon 2019). The current study will only be analyzing data within the United States. This could produce different results from these previous studies, as perceptions of discrimination may vary by region.

A fourth important distinction between the current study and past studies is the different types of perceived discrimination that are being measured. In one study, perceived group discrimination along with individual discrimination was explored (Litchmore and Safdar 2015). Group discrimination was gauged by asking respondents if they felt their group was being discriminated against. In the present study, only perceived individual discrimination will be measured. This distinction is important because levels of perceived individual discrimination and perceived group discrimination could potentially be impacted by different variables.

In the United States, where Christianity dominates, it is likely that being part of a minority religion will increase believers' sense of being discriminated against. One reason for this is Christianity and its other denominations made up 70.6% of the religious groups within the United States in 2014 (*Pew Research Center*). This suggests that Christianity and its other

denominations are in the majority among those who belong to a religion, which may lead them to perceive less discrimination than members of other religions. In a past study that looked at perceived discrimination among different religions in America (Awad 2010), it was found that Muslims reported higher levels of discrimination than Christians. This would suggest that there may be a connection between members of a minority religion and perceived discrimination, as Muslims are a minority in the United States (*Pew Research Center* 2014). A second reason members of religions that are not affiliated with Christianity may report higher levels of perceived discrimination is because they may be more aware of the discriminatory actions that are being committed against them. One study that focused on measuring perceived discrimination of Muslims that were exposed to “right-wing populist ads”, (Schmuck et al. 2017) found increased levels of perceived discrimination among these groups. Minority religions in the United States may be portrayed in a negative fashion in the media, which could potentially heighten their perceived levels of discrimination in the current study. This is because the media would make members of minority religions aware that their religion is being discriminated against, which would also make them more aware of possible discriminatory actions committed against them.

Respondents’ race or ethnicity is also likely to impact their perceptions of everyday perceived discrimination. It is expected that there will be a positive relationship between being an individual who is not white and perceived levels of discrimination. If someone is not white in the United States, they will most likely have higher levels of perceived discrimination because they are not part of the majority population (*U.S. Census Bureau* 2019). Past research in Canada that asked respondents what may have caused their discrimination, reported race as being the

most common factor (Godley 2018). While the current study is not asking respondents to say what they think caused their perceived discrimination, this finding supports the idea that being a person who is a racial minority in the United States may increase levels of perceived discrimination. This is because respondents in this past research indicated race as playing a big role in discrimination, which would suggest that being a racial minority in a predominantly white country, may increase levels of perceived discrimination. Another study that explored perceived discrimination among Anglos and Hispanics in California found that Hispanics had a higher chance of perceiving personal discrimination than Anglos (Shorey et al. 2002). Hispanics would be considered a minority group in this research, which supports the idea that racial minorities in the United States, may perceive higher levels of discrimination because they are also part of a minority population. A second reason that being a racial minority in the United States is likely to increase levels of perceived discrimination is because they may be more aware of discriminatory actions committed against them. In one study that was conducted in Spain (Flores 2015), it was found that immigrants thought their race was one of the main factors that led to the disrespect they received from others in the population. These findings would suggest that people may be aware of the factors that lead to their mistreatment, which has the potential to impact a respondent's awareness to discriminatory acts. In the present study, respondents who are not white may be more aware that their race could lead to discriminatory acts being committed against them, which could potentially heighten the extent to which they report acts of perceived discrimination. A white person may not be as aware of factors that cause acts of discrimination against them, which could potentially lead to less perceived discrimination among this group. A third reason that being a racial minority in the United States is likely to increase levels of

perceived discrimination in everyday activities is because of systemic discrimination. As stated previously, systematic processes of discrimination include barriers that prevent certain groups from obtaining things such as quality education (Reskin 2012). These barriers exist unequally for racial and ethnic minorities in America, which could potentially cause these individuals to be treated differently than white Americans in their everyday activities. This difference in treatment could potentially lead to racial minorities perceiving more discrimination in their everyday activities.

Throughout the United States, people simultaneously have religious and racial identities, and they are simultaneously judged by others for their race and possibly their religious identity. As a result, it is likely that the impact of religion on perceived discrimination, is moderated by the race of an individual. One reason for this is if someone belongs to two minority groups, they will probably have a higher chance of being discriminated against, which would raise their perceived levels of discrimination. The intersectionality framework can be used to help support this hypothesis (Grollman 2012). Intersectionality looks to explain how multiple forms of stratification have the ability to impact each other, as it assumes, they are interconnected. If religion and race are interconnected as the intersectionality framework predicts, heightened levels of perceived discrimination could potentially be seen in respondents that belong to the two proposed groups. In a study that measured the effect of perceived discrimination on adolescent's health (Grollman 2012), respondents who belonged to at least two disadvantaged groups experienced more forms of discrimination and more frequent discrimination than other groups. Disadvantaged statuses in this research included categories such as being an ethnic minority. In the present study, people who are not white are a minority in the United States (U.S. Census

Bureau 2019), which suggests they could fall under the same category as a disadvantaged group from the previous study. Religions that are not affiliated with Christianity, are also a minority in America (*Pew Research Center* 2014), which suggests they also may be able to be considered a disadvantaged group. This would suggest that being a member of a religion that is not Christianity and being a person who is not white could significantly impact levels of perceived discrimination. Additional research (Harnois 2014) has found support for belonging to multiple minority groups causing heightened levels of discrimination in the workplace. The workplace is more specific than what the present study is analyzing, but it is possible that this could also apply on a wider scale.

Data and Methods

This study draws on the 2018 General Social Survey (Smith et.al. 2018) focusing on adult's religious affiliation. The GSS is a nationally representative sample of American adults. Households are randomly selected, representing all regions of the United States. Interviews are conducted face to face with respondents. The total number of respondents included in this study is 2,292.

Everyday perceived discrimination was measured using several different indicators from the GSS (Smith et al. 2018). The five indicators were based on the prompt "In your day-to-day life how often have any of the following things happened to you?"

1. You are treated with less courtesy or respect than other people.
2. People act as if they think you are not smart.
3. People act as if they are afraid of you.
4. You are threatened or harassed.

5. You receive poorer service than other people at restaurants or stores.

The possible responses for all five questions above were “almost every day (1), at least once a week (2), a few times a month (3), a few times a year (4), less than once a year (5), never (6), do not know, and no answer”. For the present study, the possible responses were collapsed into three categories including 1-2 (1), 3-4 (2), and 5-6 (3). This decision was made to increase the reliability of the measure, as there is little difference between measures such as “almost every day” and “at least once a week”. The indicator “You are threatened or harassed” will also be weighted so that any response above 3 will count as a 1. The reason for this, is this indicator is much more serious than the others, and may be more targeted towards a specific group (Awad 2010). The scores of these five indicators will be combined for each individual respondent and then divided by 5 to assess the extent a respondent is perceiving discrimination. A lower score will represent higher levels of perceived everyday discrimination, while higher scores will represent lower levels of perceived everyday discrimination. One reliability problem present is the possibility that a respondent has been experiencing one of these indicators in the past few days consistently, which causes them to answer “almost every day”, even though it has only been happening to them recently. The use of five different indicators helps lessen this concern, as it is highly unlikely that someone will answer in a way that is not representative of their experiences to all five questions.

The measure of religious affiliation was constructed by collapsing the possible religious preferences in the GSS (Smith et. al. 2018) into three categories. These categories were religions affiliated with Christianity, religions not affiliated with Christianity (minority religions), and no religious affiliation. The categories considered to be affiliated with Christianity for this research

included “Protestant, Catholic, Orthodox-Christian, and Christian.” The groups considered to be minority religions in the GSS included “Jewish, Buddhism, Hinduism, and Moslem/Islam”. The third category used was “none”, as there may be something distinctly different about those who have no religious affiliation, as compared to those who do. These groupings were determined by looking at how *Pew Research Center* (2014) categorized different religions in their report on the religious makeup of the United States population. The decision was made not to include religious affiliations that only had one respondent in their category or those marked as “Other, don’t know, and no answer” (Smith et. al. 2018). The reason for not including religions with one respondent is there does not appear to be enough data to determine an association. The reason for not including the category of “Other” is because this category could include people that are more affiliated with Christianity, or less affiliated with Christianity, which could present a validity problem. This is because it is not clear what religious affiliation is being measured through this category.

The measure of race/ethnicity was determined by using the question in the GSS (Smith et.al. 2018) that asks “What is your race? Indicate one or more races that you consider yourself to be.” The data collected for this question was the 1st race that respondents considered themselves to be and had sixteen possible races to pick from including “White, Black or African American, American Indian or Alaska Native, Asian Indian, Chinese, Filipino, Japanese, Korean, Vietnamese, other Asian, Native Hawaiian, Guamanian or Chamorro, Samoan, other Pacific Island, some other race, and Hispanic”. Properly splitting different races into groups presents a challenge, as the number of respondents in the GSS for many groups is very low. In order to ease this problem, groups will be collapsed into 3 categories. The categories include White, Hispanic,

and Black or African American. The decision was made to create these three categories because religious experiences among Hispanics, Whites, and Black or African Americans differ significantly (*Pew Research Center* 2015). This would likely lead to differences in the levels of perceived discrimination between these three groups. The other races listed in the GSS have very few respondents, which would make it difficult to determine an association between their race, religion and levels of perceived discrimination, which is why they will not be included in the current study.

I predict that levels of everyday perceived discrimination will be the highest among those who are affiliated with a minority religion, over those who are affiliated with Christianity, or are not affiliated with any religion. I also predict that controlling for an individual's race will partially explain the relationship between religious affiliation and perceived everyday discrimination.

References:

- Awad, Germaine H. 2010. "The Impact of Acculturation and Religious Identification on Perceived Discrimination for Arab/Middle Eastern Americans." *Cultural Diversity and Ethnic Minority Psychology* 16(1):59–67. Retrieved January 23, 2020.
- Dixon, Angela R. 2019. "Colorism and Classism Confounded: Perceptions of Discrimination in Latin America." *Social Science Research* 79:32–55. Retrieved February 1, 2020.
- Flores, René D 2015. "The Resurgence of Race in Spain: Perceptions of Discrimination Among Immigrants." *Social Forces*, vol. 94, no. 1, 2015, pp. 237–269. Retrieved February 1, 2020.
- Godley, Jenny. 2018. "Everyday Discrimination in Canada: Prevalence and Patterns." *Canadian Journal of Sociology* 43(2):111-142. Retrieved January 23, 2020.
- Grollman, Eric Anthony. 2012. "Multiple Forms of Perceived Discrimination and Health among Adolescents and Young Adults." *Journal of Health and Social Behavior* 53(2):199-214. Retrieved January 23, 2020.
- Harnois, Catherine E. 2014. "Are Perceptions of Discrimination Unidimensional, Oppositional, or Intersectional? Examining the Relationship among Perceived Racial–Ethnic-, Gender-, and Age-Based Discrimination." *Sociological Perspectives* 57(4):470–87. Retrieved February, 2020.

- Litchmore, Rashelle V. H. and Saba Safdar. 2015. "Perceptions of Discrimination as a Marker of Integration Among Muslim-Canadians: The Role of Religiosity, Ethnic Identity, and Gender." *Journal of International Migration and Integration* 16(1):187–204. Retrieved January 23, 2020.
- Masci, David. 2019. "Many Americans See Religious Discrimination in U.S. – Especially against Muslims." *Pew Research Center*. Retrieved February 17, 2020 (<https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/05/17/many-americans-see-religious-discrimination-in-u-s-especially-against-muslims/>).
- National Immigration Law Center*. 2019. "One Year After the SCOTUS Ruling: Understanding the Muslim Ban and How We'll Keep Fighting It." Retrieved February 15, 2020 (<https://www.nilc.org/issues/immigration-enforcement/understanding-muslim-ban-one-year-after-ruling/>).
- Pew Research Center's Religion & Public Life Project*. 2014. "Religion in America: U.S. Religious Data, Demographics and Statistics." Retrieved February 9, 2020 (<https://www.pewforum.org/religious-landscape-study/#religions>).
- Pew Research Center's Religion & Public Life Project*. 2015. "Racial and Ethnic Composition - Religion in America: U.S. Religious Data, Demographics and Statistics." Retrieved March 2, 2020 (<https://www.pewforum.org/religious-landscape-study/racial-and-ethnic-composition/>).
- Reskin, Barbara. 2012. "The Race Discrimination System." *Annual Review of Sociology* 38(1):17–35. Retrieved March 13, 2020.
- Schmuck, Desirée, Jörg Matthes, and Frank Hendrik Paul. 2017. "Negative Stereotypical Portrayals of Muslims in Right-Wing Populist Campaigns: Perceived Discrimination, Social Identity Threats, and Hostility Among Young Muslim Adults." *Journal of Communication* 67(4):610–34. Retrieved January 24, 2020.
- Scheitle, Christopher P. and Elaine Howard Ecklund. 2018. "Perceptions of Religious Discrimination Among U.S. Scientists." *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 57(1):139–55. Retrieved January 23, 2020.
- Shorey, Hal S., Gloria Cowan, and Mary P. Sullivan. 2002. "Predicting Perceptions of Discrimination among Hispanics and Anglos." *Hispanic Journal of Behavioral Sciences* 24(1):3–22. Retrieved February 1, 2020.
- Smith, Tom W., Michael Davern, Jeremy Freese, and Michael Hout. 2019. *General Social Surveys, 1972-2018*. [machine-readable data file]. Principal Investigator, Tom W. Smith; Co-Principal Investigators, Peter V. Marsden and Michael Hout, NORC ed. Chicago: NORC.
- U.S. Census Bureau*. 2019. "U.S. Census Bureau QuickFacts: United States." Retrieved February 9, 2020 (<https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/US/PST045218>).
- Vásquez, William F. 2011. "Ethnic and Gender Wage Discrimination in Guatemala." *The Journal of Developing Areas* 44(2):109–26. Retrieved February 23, 2020.