Equal in Christ, But Not in the World: White Conservative Protestants and Explanations of Black-White Inequality*

MICHAEL O. EMERSON, Rice University
CHRISTIAN SMITH, The University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill
DAVID SIKKINK, University of Notre Dame

To further understanding of Americans' explanations for racial inequality, and the implications these explanations have for reducing black-white socioeconomic inequality, we explore the role of religion. We argue that the cultural tools of a religious subculture shape the rationale for racial inequality. Examining white conservative Protestants, who comprise nearly 25 percent of white Americans, we identify religious cultural tools we call "accountable freewill individualism," "anti-structuralism," and "relationalism." Based on these, we hypothesize that white conservative Protestants explain inequality in more individualistic and less structural terms than other white Americans. We also expect them to emphasize perceived dysfunctional social relations among African Americans in their explanations. Using the 1996 General Social Survey and qualitative data from 117 in-depth interviews, these hypotheses are clearly supported. Religion, it appears, has an independent effect on explanations of racial inequality. Based on these findings, we suggest that rationales for racial inequality are not mere defenses of socioeconomic privilege, but, more fundamentally, defenses of identity, culture, and worldview.

Despite decades of policy efforts and programs, U.S. black-white socioeconomic inequality remains pervasive. African Americans fall below the poverty line more than three times as frequently as non-Hispanic whites, and the median household wealth of African Americans is but eight percent that of Anglos (Oliver and Shapiro 1995). How do white Americans account for these differences? The answer has important and wide-ranging implications for addressing persistent black-white inequality. For example, public opposition or indifference to government action is sufficient to derail existing programs and stymie the development of new ones (Burstein 1979; Kluegel and Bobo 1993).

A short, relatively recent, but growing list of research focuses on how Americans explain black-white inequality (Allen 1994; Apostle et al. 1983; Bobo 1989; Kluegel 1985, 1990; Kluegel and Bobo 1993; Kluegel and Smith 1982, 1983,1986; Schuman 1975; Sigelman and Welch 1991; Sniderman and Hagen 1985; Wellman 1977). As Kluegel and Bobo (1993) note, these works delineate the main explanations, and the basic social correlates and causes of these explanations. Though some suggest the importance of religion in shaping explanations of black-white inequality (e.g., Kluegel 1990; Sniderman with Hagen 1985), with the exception of Apostle et al.'s (1983), Allen's (1994) and Allen and Kuo's (1991) research, religious

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influences remain unexamined. And these works give but rudimentary treatment of the relevant religious conditions. We still simply do not know if and how religion influences explanations of the black-white gap.

We argue that religion does influence how people explain inequality—in this case, black/white socioeconomic inequality. While this in and of itself is important to establish, the implications are substantial. As we claim in the discussion section, because religion plays a part in racial inequality explanations, racial inequality may be far more difficult to reduce via government policies and programs than previously understood.

To address the missing religious factor in explanations of inequality, we argue that understanding the cultural tools (Clydesdale 1997; Hart 1992; Swidler 1986) people use to make sense of their world illuminates how they construct reality—including their explanations of inequality. We examine this argument using a specific group—white conservative Protestants—because of their clearly defined subcultural “tool kit.” For this group, which comprises nearly 25 percent of the white American population (Woodbury and Smith 1998), religion plays a key part in their cultural construction of reality, and provides a set of tools with which they make sense of and negotiate their realities (Berger and Luckman 1967; Sewell 1992; Swidler 1986). A focus on this group is particularly germane due to their large influence politically and socially (Pew Center Report on America’s Churches 1996; Sherkat and Ellison 1997).1

The stereotype of white conservative Protestants as rural, lower-class southerners is inaccurate. White conservative Protestants work in all occupations, live in every region of the country, are married, single, young, old, have children in public schools and private schools, and have incomes and education comparable to other Americans. What distinguishes this group, we argue, are not these structural factors, but a subculture that stresses, through theological linkages, a particular way of viewing the world.

Our argument is straightforward. We hypothesize that white conservative Protestants are more individualistic and less structuralist than other white Americans in their explanations of inequality. Given Americans’ pervasive individualism (e.g., Bellah et al. 1985), and that the crux of white racial ideology in the post-civil rights era is a near absolute denial of structural causes and a strong affirmation of individual causes to racial issues (Bonilla-Silva and Lewis 1997; Essed 1996; Schuman 1975), this is a bold expectation. For full understanding of the individualist versus structuralist hypothesis, it must be nuanced: white conservative Protestants tend to avoid acknowledging contemporary social structures that deny the importance of individual determination (what we refer to as individualism-denying structures). We arrive at these expectations by arguing that religious identity and subculture matter.2 Without considering such effects on explanations of racial inequality, our understanding is incomplete, and policies and programs meant to reduce racial inequality may be stymied.

1. With our focus on conservative Protestants this work sets itself within a growing body of literature focusing on the cultural, attitudinal, and material consequences of conservative Protestantism (Darnell and Sherkat 1997; Ellison, Bartkowski and Segal 1996a, 1996b; Ellison and Sherkat 1993a; Emerson 1996a; Sherkat and Ellison 1997). These works draw on “insider documents” written by subcultural elites to specify the causal links between conservative Protestantism and the dependent variable of interest. Implicitly and explicitly, then, these works claim that the conservative Protestant effect results from moral entrepreneurs connecting core beliefs and the particular dependent variable. This paper is an important test of the conservative Protestant effect in that few insider documents exist specifically arguing for a “Christian” position on black-white inequality, and even the few that tangentially do either are difficult to find in traditional conservative Protestant subcultural outlets (such as Christian and family bookstores), argue for a position not traditionally associated with conservative Protestants, or both.

2. As we show elsewhere (Emerson and Smith 1999), and note in the conclusion, religious subcultures vary by race in the United States. Thus, we find very different results for white and black conservative Protestants. Religious subculture, it appears, intensifies the positions of racial groups, at least in explanations of racial inequality.
Theoretical Background

The Cultural Tool Kit

Ann Swidler (1986) claims that culture creates ways for individuals and groups to organize experiences and evaluate reality. It does so by providing a repertoire or "tool kit" of ideas, habits, skills, and styles. This tool kit does not determine perspectives or actions, but limits them, in the same way carpenters are limited by the tools available.

For many Americans, religion plays a key role in defining both the cultural tool kit, and which tools are functionally most important to them. According to Swidler (1986:281), "as certain cultural resources become more central in a given life, and become more fully invested with meaning, they anchor the strategies" and realities that people develop. For many religious Americans, their faith-based assumptions and beliefs are central to informing their views. Sewell (1992) argues that a key feature of these guiding assumptions and beliefs is their transposibility. That is, using schema or generalized procedures, people not only employ their cultural tools in the context which they were first learned, but transpose or extend them to new and diverse situations (e.g., Sherkat and Ellison 1997). Accordingly, we must identify the core cultural tools of the conservative Protestant tool kit that serve as the framework for hypothesizing about their explanations for black-white inequality.3

Cultural Tools in the White Conservative Protestant Kit

The cultural tools in the white conservative Protestant tool kit that we expect are important in shaping explanations of inequality generally, and racial inequality specifically, are "accountable freewill individualism," "anti-structuralism" (an inability to perceive, unwillingness to accept, or negative reaction to macro social structural influences), and "relationalism" (assigning central importance to interpersonal relationships).4 Though white conservative Protestants have access to the wider society’s tools (based on their social locations) they appear to rely more heavily on their own subcultural tools. Further, though others tools exist in the tool kit, and these tools are malleable, we find a high degree of consistent reliance on these three tools in contemporary explanations of inequality.

Individualism is very American, but it is the type of individualism and the ferocity with which it is held that distinguishes white conservative Protestants from others. White conservative Protestants are certainly not what Hunter (1991) calls progressives. Though progressives, like conservative Protestants, hold to the centrality of the individual, progressives believe morality to be the prerogative of each individual, and individual happiness as perhaps the greatest goal. And most important for our present purposes, progressives view humans as essentially good, provided they are released from social arrangements that prevent people from living happily, productively, and equally—e.g., racism, inequality, and poor educational opportunity (Fine 1997). Thus, from this view, though individuals are pivotal, they are shaped in profound ways by social structures and institutions.

In contrast, white conservative Protestants are accountable freewill individualists. That is, unlike progressives, the individual is constructed as an entity independent of macro social

3. Though this work focuses on racial inequality, our theoretical argument applies more broadly to racial inequality in general, and to other measures. For example, in analyses not shown here, white conservative Protestants in both the bivariate and multivariate cases differ from other white Americans in their understandings of other forms of inequality, and in general political conservatism.

4. If we define a social structure as a system of socially interrelated parts, relationalism is structural, which contradicts the cultural tool of anti-structuralism. This is a semantic difficulty rather than a conceptual difficulty, however. White conservative Protestants are anti-macro structuralists, while at the same time supporting micro structuralism, that is, relationalism. To avoid the clumsiness of the terms anti-macro structuralism and micro structuralism, we simply use the terms anti-structuralism and relationalism.
structures and institutions. Individuals have freewill and are individually accountable for their own actions. This view is directly rooted in *theological understanding*, as discussed in a somewhat overstated and gender-exclusive way by Stark and Glock (1969:80–81):

Underlying traditional Christian thought is an image of man as a free actor, as essentially unfettered by social circumstances, free to choose and thus free to effect his own salvation. This free-will conception of man has been central to the doctrines of sin and salvation. For only if man is totally free does it seem just to hold him responsible for his acts. . . . In short, Christian thought and thus Western civilization are permeated with the idea that men are individually in control of, and responsible for, their own destinies.

Contemporary white American conservative Protestantism is perhaps the strongest carrier of this freewill-individualist tradition. The roots of this individualist tradition run deep, dating back to shortly after the sixteenth-century Reformation, extending to much of the Free Church tradition, flowering in America’s frontier awakenings and revivals, and maturing in spiritual pietism and anti-Social Gospel fundamentalism. Though the larger American culture is itself highly individualistic (e.g., Bellah et al. 1985), the close connection between faith and freewill individualism to the exclusion of progressive thought leads us to expect conservative white Protestants to be even more individualistic than other white Americans.

But individuals do not simply have the freewill to make the choices they deem best. They are individually accountable for their freely-made choices to family, others, and most importantly, God. So, quite unlike progressives, there are right and wrong choices determined by a divine lawgiver. This again is rooted in white conservative Protestant theology. Based on a literalist interpretation of the Bible, white conservative Protestants distrust human propensities (as the result of original sin). They view humans, if not rooted in proper interpersonal contexts, as tending to make wrong choices. For this reason, the importance of relationalism for conservative Protestants moves to the forefront.

In this group, relationalism (a central emphasis on interpersonal relationships) derives from the theological view that human nature is fallen and that salvation and Christian maturity can only come through a “personal relationship with Christ.” It is difficult to over-emphasize the importance of this relationship for conservative Protestants. It is a bedrock, non-negotiable belief, fundamental to their theology. By transposing these theological understandings, white conservative Protestants place strong emphasis on family relationships, friendships, church relationships, and other forms of interpersonal connections. Healthy relationships encourage people to make right choices. As such, white conservative Protestants often see social problems as rooted in poor relationships or the negative influence of significant others (Emerson 1996; Emerson and Smith 1999:chapter 4). Given this, and the emphasis on personal accountability, we expect conservative Protestants to attribute racial inequality, at least in part, to greater perceived relational dysfunction among black Americans.

What is more, to the degree that Swidler and Sewell are correct, white conservative Protestants can be expected not only to interpret race issues by transposing accountable freewill individualism and relationalism, but they should find structural explanations that deny the centrality of individual determination irrelevant or even wrong-headed more often than other white Americans. The inability to see or unwillingness to accept non-individually-based alternatives is a corollary to accountable freewill individualism. This of course makes sense using the tool kit metaphor. As carpenters are limited to building with the tools in their kits, so white conservative Protestants are profoundly constrained by their cultural tools. Though much in Christian scripture and tradition suggests the influence of social structures on human behavior (e.g., Sider 1997), the stress on individualism is so complete and so long-standing in American conservative Protestant culture that such tools nearly are subculturally unavailable. And this unavailability goes deeper. According to white conservative Protestant theology, humans, because they are sinful, are strongly inclined to ignore their own personal sin by shifting blame elsewhere, such as “the system” (see Ellison and Sherkat 1993a, 1993b).
are thus also anti-structural because, in their view, invoking social structures falsely shifts guilt away from its root source—the accountable individual. 5

In short, we expect white conservative Protestants, in comparison to other white Americans, to explain the black-white socioeconomic gap in more individualistic and in less structural terms. We also expect white conservative Protestants to highlight perceived dysfunctional relationships among African Americans.

Because many American values derive largely from the confluence of evangelical Protestant Christianity and Enlightenment philosophy, within the context of conditions encountered in the new world (Marsden 1991; Woodbridge, Noll and Hatch 1979), we anticipate the differences between white conservative Protestants and other white Americans to be one of degree rather than kind. White Americans as a whole are more individualistic than structural, but because of their indigenous, theologically-based subcultural tools, white conservative Protestants should be even more individualistic and less structural than other white Americans. Thus, we expect a cultural basis for explanations of inequality. Specifically, because of our data, we test this expectation by focusing on explanations of racial inequality.

Data and Methods

Among whites, how do we determine who is and is not a conservative Protestant? We operationalize the construct as those who self-identify as either evangelicals or fundamentalists and meet two core hallmarks of conservative Protestantism: they believe in an afterlife, and view the Bible as being either the literal or inspired word of God. This measurement method has the advantage over simply operationalizing based on denominationalism, in that individuals can be conservative or not, despite their denominations. This operationalization also is a refinement over simple adherence to a set of theological beliefs in that it captures those who also consciously self-identify with the conservative Protestant movement. 6

To compare with other Americans, we use the 1996 General Social Survey (GSS), which contains the relevant religious self-identity question 7 and commonly used racial inequality questions. Then, for fuller analysis and understanding, we draw on 117 face-to-face interviews with self-identified white evangelical Protestants. 8 These 117 interviews, part of a larger study of evangelical Protestants, ask respondents for their racial inequality explanation(s). The respondents were selected in two ways. First, 68 respondents were drawn from survey follow-up. That is, we first conducted a national, random-digit-dial telephone survey of 2,592 respondents. From that survey, we sampled evangelicals with whom we conducted in-depth, face-to-face interviews. This method gave us a nationally representative sample of respondents to interview (we interviewed respondents from 23 different states). 9

5. While we expect white conservative Protestants to avoid referencing macro structural forces more than other white Americans, we also note that they are not wholly anti-structuralist. They often recognize the importance of micro structures, such as family and church.

6. Though we view our operationalization as conceptually superior, using religious self-identity rather than conservative denomination makes little empirical difference for explanations of black-white inequality. Further, limiting conservative Protestants to the same definition we use, but only those who interpret the Bible literally, word for word, makes little empirical difference. The results we report, then, are not an artifact of our particular operationalization, and are therefore definitionally robust.

7. The religious identity question reads as follows: "When it comes to your religious identity, would you say you are a fundamentalist, evangelical, mainline, or religiously liberal Protestant or do none of these describe you?" 9

8. Because evangelicals and fundamentalists, both conservative Protestants, did not differ in their explanations of black-white inequality (based on General Social Survey data), interviewing only evangelicals should in no way bias our results. For comparative purposes, we also interviewed a handful of self-identified fundamentalists. Though small in number, we detected no differences in their and evangelicals' explanations on this matter.

9. The states were Alabama, California, Colorado, Georgia, Illinois, Indiana, Louisiana, Maryland, Massachusetts, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, New Jersey, New York, North Carolina, Ohio, Oregon, Pennsylvania, South Carolina, Texas, Virginia, Washington, and Wisconsin.
Second, 49 conservative Protestants were drawn from our “local knowledge” strategy. That is, concerned that we interview people from strong evangelical churches, we surveyed pastors in 12 metropolitan areas for the key evangelical Protestant churches in the area. We called pastors until core churches clearly emerged. We then contacted those churches and asked for a random sample of four to six names (93% of contacted churches agreed to provide names). Names and telephone numbers in hand, we contacted these parishioners for interviews, and our cooperation rate was 99 percent. Ancillary analysis of the two samples revealed no sociodemographic differences (Smith et al. 1998).

**Results**

*Explaining Racial Inequality: The Views from Survey Data*

The key set of GSS questions on how Americans explain racial inequality begins: “On average blacks have worse jobs, income, and housing than white people. Do you think these differences are . . .? Respondents are then asked to respond yes or no to each of four possible explanations, and they can respond affirmatively to more than one or negatively to all. The four possible explanations in the survey are:

1. Because most blacks have less in-born ability to learn?
2. Because most blacks just don’t have the motivation or will power to pull themselves up out of poverty?
3. Because most blacks don’t have the chance for education that it takes to rise out of poverty?
4. Mainly due to discrimination?

Following Kluegel (1990) and Kluegel and Bobo (1993), we classify the ability and motivation options as individualistic explanations, and the education and discrimination options as structural explanations limiting individual responsibility. Armed with our knowledge of white conservative Protestants’ cultural tools, we expect conservative Protestants to support the individualistic explanations more and structural explanations less than other whites.

But one explanation—ability—poses a problem. It is an “old-time” biological explanation, which despite some recent efforts to revive (for example, Herrnstein and Murray’s *The Bell Curve* 1994), has not been a socially acceptable explanation for decades (Essed 1996; Kluegel 1990; Snideman and Hagen 1985; Wellman 1977). We thus expect very few Americans, regardless of religious identity, to adopt this explanation.

Table 1 allows us to examine these expectations. Explaining the black-white socioeconomic gap in terms of inferior in-born ability is easily the least cited explanation. Only about 1 in 10 Americans views this as an explanation, and conservative Protestants do not differ from other white Americans.

If we compare the rank order of the explanations, we see that they are similar for both white conservative Protestants and other white Americans. They do not differ in kind, then. But the similarities end here, as they do differ in degree.

Turning first to the more theoretically interesting individual-level explanation—lack of motivation or willpower to rise out of poverty—white conservative Protestants are clearly more likely to flag this reason. Whereas half of other white Americans resonate with this individualistic explanation, nearly two-thirds of white conservative Protestants agree ($\chi^2 = 7.0, \text{df} = 1, p < .01$).

In contrast, white conservative Protestants are significantly less likely to explain racial inequality in structural terms that limit the centrality of freewill individualism. Though almost half of other white Americans cite lack of access to quality education as an explanation, only one-third of white conservative Protestants agree with this reason ($\chi^2 = 12.0, \text{df} = 1, p < .01$). For the discrimination explanation, conservative Protestants are again different from other white Americans.
Table 1 • Explanation for the Black-White Socioeconomic Gap, White Conservative Protestants and Other White Americans

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Explanation</th>
<th>Other Whites</th>
<th>Conservative Protestants</th>
<th>N</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Individual</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ability</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>1521</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Motivation</td>
<td>51%</td>
<td>62%**</td>
<td>1471</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Structural</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>46%</td>
<td>32%**</td>
<td>1524</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discrimination</td>
<td>36%</td>
<td>27%*</td>
<td>1493</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes:
* Difference between conservative Protestants and other whites statistically significant ($\chi^2$, p < .05, 2-tailed)
** $\chi^2$, p < .01, 2-tailed
Source: General Social Survey, 1996.

Only about one-quarter of white conservative Protestants, compared to slightly over a third of other Americans, agree that discrimination explains the racial disparity ($\chi^2 = 4.9$, df = 1, p < .05).10

Table 1 provides evidence for the hypothesis that conservative Protestants are more individualistic and less structural in their explanations of black-white inequality than other white Americans. The full implications of these differences are best seen when comparing the gap between the percentage of individual versus structural responses. If we take the percentage responding affirmatively to the motivation reason, and subtract the percentage citing discrimination, we find that the conservative Protestant gap (35 percentage points) is more than twice as large as the gap for other Americans (15 percentage points). For the motivation/education disparity, the conservative Protestant gap (30 percentage points) is six times as large as the gap for other whites (5 percentage points). Thus, the stronger emphases placed on individual causes and the weaker emphases placed on structural causes by conservative Protestants, when combined, lead to an impressive deviation from other whites.11

This finding holds at least in the bivariate case. But perhaps the apparent effect of religious identity results from socioeconomic differences, or regional differences, or differences in these factors when the respondents were in their formative years. Or quite possibly, conservative Protestants may be more racially prejudiced than other white Americans. All these are alternative explanations that we must test.

Table 2 contains a comparison of means for variables that help us test these alternative hypotheses. We include sex, age, education, family income, size of place, a measure of traditional prejudice and, as a measure of the socioeconomic context of respondents’ upbringings, their fathers’ socioeconomic status. To capture respondents’ cultural context we include region

10. Because respondents can cite more than one explanation, we also classified them as individualists only (cited only ability or motivation), intermediatists (cited both individual and structural reason[s]), and structuralists only (cited only education or discrimination). Following the same pattern, conservative Protestants are significantly more likely to be individualists only and significantly less likely to be structuralists only when compared to others. We found no difference in the proportion who were intermediatists.

11. These general patterns are even larger when we compare white conservative Protestants to self-identified theologically liberal Protestants, who possess a very different set of theologically-based cultural tools (Hart 1992). For the individual-level explanation of motivation, while 62 percent of white conservative Protestants flag this reason, only 40 percent of white theologically liberal Protestants do. For the structural explanation of education, the comparative percentages are 32 percent and 58 percent; for discrimination, the comparative figures are 27 percent and 43 percent. These comparative percentages provide evidence of a religious factor in explanations of black-white inequality beyond white conservative Protestants. For these two groups, not only are the differences large, but the explanations’ rank order changes. For white conservative Protestants, motivation is the most frequently cited reason, followed by education and discrimination. For theologically-liberal Protestants, education is the most frequently cited reason, followed by discrimination, and then motivation.
Table 2 • Comparison of Means for White Conservative Protestants and Other White Americans

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Other Whites</th>
<th>Conservative Protestants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>.46</td>
<td>.41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>45.5</td>
<td>48.6*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>13.5</td>
<td>13.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family Income</td>
<td>15.9</td>
<td>16.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Father’s Socioeconomic Index</td>
<td>48.7</td>
<td>46.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Town (2500 to 9999)</td>
<td>.07</td>
<td>.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rural (&lt;2500)</td>
<td>.10</td>
<td>.16*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Current Region</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Northeast</td>
<td>.21</td>
<td>.10**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Midwest</td>
<td>.24</td>
<td>.30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South</td>
<td>.33</td>
<td>.39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>West</td>
<td>.22</td>
<td>.21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Region at Age 16</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Northeast</td>
<td>.24</td>
<td>.13**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Midwest</td>
<td>.29</td>
<td>.31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South</td>
<td>.27</td>
<td>.41**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>West</td>
<td>.16</td>
<td>.15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foreign Country</td>
<td>.04</td>
<td>.01**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Racial Attitudes</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Traditional Prejudice</td>
<td>.12</td>
<td>.10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes:
* Difference between means statistically significant, p < .05
** Differences between means statistically significant, p < .01
The N ranges from 1966 to 2349
Source: General Social Survey, 1996.

of current residence. To measure the respondents’ cultural context during their formative years, we include the respondent’s region of residence at age 16. As we show elsewhere (Smith et al. 1998), white conservative Protestants no longer differ from other white Americans in education or family income. But there are some important differences. White conservative Protestants are, on average, three years older than are other white Americans, and more likely to live in rural areas (less than 2500 people). They are also half as likely to live in the Northeast. Further, when examining the region they lived in at age 16, they again were less likely to have lived in the Northeast (and a foreign country), and were significantly more likely to have lived in the South.

Table 3 contains three logistic regression models, one for each of the explanations of black-white inequality that we found bivariate differences. In each case, even when including measures of alternative hypotheses, conservative Protestant identity has a statistically significant effect. White conservative Protestants, net of other important factors, are more likely to explain black-white inequality as a lack of motivation and are less likely to explain the gap as unequal access to educational opportunities or discrimination than are other Americans.12

Using the GSS questions, our hypotheses are clearly supported. We could stop here, but we

12. We also ran alternative logistic regression equations for each of the three dependent variables to explore the impact of including attendance at worship services. We included the attendance variable as another independent variable, as an interaction with the conservative Protestant variable, and even estimated equations with attendance squared to test for a curvilinear effect. In all cases for all models the attendance variables were not only far from statistically significant, but had only minuscule impact on the conservative Protestant beta, reducing it by an average of .03.
Table 3 • Logistic Regressions of Explanations for Black-White Socioeconomic Gap. White Americans: 1996

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Lack Motivation</th>
<th>Lack Educational Opp</th>
<th>Discrimination</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Religious Ident*</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conservative Protestants</td>
<td>.50 (.19)**</td>
<td>-.62 (.19)**</td>
<td>-.40 (.20)**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Location</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>.12 (.13)</td>
<td>-.32 (.12)**</td>
<td>-.44 (.13)**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age (×10)</td>
<td>.10 (.04)*</td>
<td>.15 (.04)**</td>
<td>.14 (.04)**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>-.18 (.03)**</td>
<td>.12 (.03)**</td>
<td>.02 (.03)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Income</td>
<td>.02 (.01)</td>
<td>-.02 (.01)</td>
<td>-.06 (.01)**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Father’s Socioeconomic Index (×10)</td>
<td>-.11 (.04)**</td>
<td>.10 (.04)**</td>
<td>.00 (.04)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Town (2500 to 9999)</td>
<td>-.37 (.25)</td>
<td>.00 (.24)</td>
<td>.05 (.26)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rural (&lt;2500)</td>
<td>.22 (.22)</td>
<td>-.36 (.21)</td>
<td>-.51 (.24)*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Region</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Northeast</td>
<td>.24 (.27)</td>
<td>-.04 (.25)</td>
<td>-.06 (.26)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Midwest</td>
<td>.03 (.25)</td>
<td>.07 (.24)</td>
<td>-.24 (.24)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South</td>
<td>1.01 (.24)**</td>
<td>-.53 (.23)**</td>
<td>-.28 (.24)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Region at 16</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Northeast</td>
<td>-.33 (.26)</td>
<td>-.14 (.25)</td>
<td>-.05 (.25)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Midwest</td>
<td>-.08 (.25)</td>
<td>.04 (.23)</td>
<td>.16 (.24)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South</td>
<td>-.67 (.26)**</td>
<td>-.16 (.25)</td>
<td>-.38 (.26)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Racial Attitudes</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Traditional Prejudice*</td>
<td>.85 (.23)**</td>
<td>-.15 (.18)</td>
<td>-.40 (20)*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pseudo R²</td>
<td>.13</td>
<td>.09</td>
<td>.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>χ²</td>
<td>166**</td>
<td>12**</td>
<td>77**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>1165</td>
<td>1209</td>
<td>1184</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes:
* Comparison category is all non-conservative Protestants (including Catholics, those of other religions, those with no religious preference, and the non-religious). Values are betas. Standard errors are in parentheses.
*b The prejudice index follows Kluegel’s measure of traditional prejudice. A score of “2” was assigned if a respondent said “Yes,” they favor a law against racial intermarriage and agreed (slightly or strongly) that whites should have the right to segregate neighborhoods. A score of “1” was assigned if a respondent said “Yes” to the Intermarriage item or agreed with the Segregation item, but not both. A score of “0” was assigned to respondents who said “No” to the Intermarriage item, and disagreed with the Segregation item.
* p < .05 ** p < .01
Source: General Social Survey, 1996.

would be viewing only a tiny part of the picture. Key limitations of the GSS data are that (1) only 4 explanations are offered, though previous research has revealed others; (2) the survey is closed-ended, so people are not able to offer what comes to mind; and perhaps most importantly (3) we can only infer why conservative Protestants differ from other Americans. Though the results are consistent with expectations, we cannot know if the cultural tools we hypothesize as distinctive are truly being used. The qualitative interviews allow us to address these limitations.

Explaining Racial Economic Inequality: The Views from In-Depth Interviews

In the personal, in-depth interviews with evangelicals, we asked essentially the same question stem used in the General Social Survey: “Studies show that on average blacks have
worse jobs, income, and housing than white people.” (We added “studies show” to avoid the statement being perceived as the interviewer’s opinion.) However, rather than follow with closed-ended options, we simply asked, “Why do you think this is?” The responses from this method gave us much richer information than the GSS. Most importantly, they let us see the respondents employing their available cultural tools, transposing them to give rationales for black-white inequality.

A pivotal and dearly-held assumption for a large majority of the respondents is that all Americans have equal opportunity. According to one Presbyterian woman in her mid-60s, for example, “they [African Americans] have all the opportunities we [Anglos] have.” Another woman, in her mid-20s and a member of a nondenominational church, confidently put it this way: “If they want to achieve the same level as a white person, they can.”

The concept of equal opportunity both derives from and maintains accountable freewill individualism. As already noted, much of conservative Protestant theological thought views humans as free actors who are personally responsible for and in control of their own destinies (Glock and Stark 1969). It takes but a limited transposition of this freewill individualist perspective to arrive at equal opportunity. Further, freewill individualism requires a belief in equal opportunity, or the world would be grossly unfair and God unjust.

And here we see how the cultural tool kit limits possible explanations. The equal opportunity assumption, combined with the concept that we are equally created, sets the equation used to solve the “Why do we have a racial socioeconomic gap” question:

Equally Created + Equal Opportunity + X = Unequal Outcome

Armed with this equation, the possible range of explanations is curtailed. Assuming people seek cognitive consistency (Festinger 1957), one cannot solve for X with an explanation such as unequal access to education or structural discrimination, for example. The cultural tools have limited the possible solutions. Only a few main explanations are now available.

Which predominate? The explanations and the percentage of evangicals citing each are reported in Table 4.13 We collapsed three miscellaneous types of explanations—ability, lack of information by blacks to take advantage of available opportunities, and black spiritual weakness—into one category (Other). We did this because few evangicals cited these explanations. Even in combining them, they were mentioned by just 8 percent of white evangicals. As with the General Social Survey data, God-ordained differences are rarely cited, even among conservative Protestants. If it is not God-ordained or the result of spiritual weakness, then what explains the vast inequities?

Given their tools, the large majority of the respondents solved the equation with lack of motivation, and as we will see, closely related “cultural” arguments. Nearly three-quarters of the respondents cited these reasons. If there is one overarching theme that most respondents shared in using these explanations, it was that black Americans lack hope and vision. They lack the ability to see what is truly possible. Representative of this perspective was Thomas (not his real name). A member of a nondenominational church, who, as an economically successful graduate of an elite undergraduate evangelical college and elite MBA program, has risen far beyond the status of his parents, Thomas pensively reflected on this issue, solving the equation with “culture” and lack of motivation:

I am wondering if there is a vision that a person can see or can capture. I think often times there is not. A vision of the world in which people are going to need to function. I probably kept myself going, not knowing exactly what I wanted to do down the road. But just knowing that I wanted to get good grades to keep the doors open. And fortunately I had just enough discipline to get myself through . . . If [African Americans] have a chance to catch a vision it would help people stay focused

13. After reading through each and every interview, we created ten categories that captured all the main themes in the responses. We then read through each interview again, coding the responses. Some evangicals cited one reason, others as many as four. However many they cited, we recorded them.
Table 4 • Explanation for Black-White Socioeconomic Gap, White Evangelicals

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Explanation</th>
<th>Percent Citing</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Black Culture (individualism, relationalism)</td>
<td>52%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack Motivation/Initiative</td>
<td>48%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Culture, Motivation, or Both</td>
<td>72%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>History</td>
<td>29%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Welfare</td>
<td>21%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discrimination</td>
<td>21%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No Inequality</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes:
N = 117
* Totals add to more than 100% because respondents could cite more than one explanation.
* Total is not the sum of culture and motivation because many respondents cited both.
Source: Pew Evangelical Interviews.

enough to get themselves there [to economic success]. Everyone wants to be the pro athlete born with natural skills. But it takes effort to get there. Maybe they just don’t have quite the drive or courage and don’t know what its going to take to be on the other side. It takes initiative and it takes an extended family. I think its tough for people who don’t have that extended family to catch the vision.

Thomas was reflexive, building an understanding of racial inequality with his cultural tools. From the viewpoint of Thomas, he “succeeded” because of what he did and because of significant others, independent of any macro social structures. He had enough vision to direct himself. Conversely, the inability of African Americans to “catch the vision” was central for him, which results from lack of individual initiative and cultural deficiencies (really, dysfunctional relationalism) such as family breakdown. This lack of vision was repeated over and over, and serves to show the optimism in the conservative Christian American way.

Thomas, like the majority of respondents, pointed to what we categorize as “cultural” reasons, a category not even included in the GSS list of explanations for the black-white gap. What is meant by culture? As elaborated by the respondents, culture amounts to either aggregated accountable freewill individualism or relationalism. Because evangelicals are “aggregationists” (they see social groups and society not as something unique, but as the sum of individuals), their use of “cultural” accounts often meant projecting an individual problem (bad choices) across many individuals. Having too many children is one example. As this non-denominational women from Ohio somewhat roughly put it: “So many black people have too much [large numbers of] kids. I only had two because I feel as though that’s what I can afford. And. I mean, sometimes I think they just don’t use the brains God gave them.” Failing to know God properly is another example, as expressed by this Pentecostal woman: “I know myself that when people find God, one of the first things they do is clean up and get a job.” Another commonly-cited reason was that blacks choose not to speak “mainstream” [white] English. According to one southern Presbyterian man, “The blacks are not willing to accept that to learn correct English is a major step toward advancing in society.” In their use of these cultural reasons, they do not mean culturally-constructed norms (e.g., norms which value children), but rather that blacks are making poor choices (e.g., black individuals do not exercise responsibility in child-bearing, faith, or speech). In this sense, the only difference between
the black motivation category (they lack initiative) and the black culture category (e.g., they have too many babies) is that the culture category does not reference motivation specifically.

A second dimension of the black culture category, and intertwined with the first, draws on evangelicals’ cultural tool of relationalism. Here, respondents transpose the understanding that people tend to make wrong choices if they are not in proper relational contexts with others. As a result, black individuals are seen as not doing as well economically because their families lack strong bonds, or because significant others do not steer them to make right choices. As this Congregational woman told us, “I see the break-up of the family as being key to the whole thing, just the non-blessedness of the people. [For those who are not poor] I think it’s because they have been in Christian families.” Even in cases of relational dysfunction, however, the onus for achievement remains on the individual (who is the ultimate accountable entity), as this young Baptist man illustrates: “They have really dropped the ball when it comes to family responsibility for raising their children. I hate that the kids have to suffer for that, but the kids’ responsibility is to say, ‘I’m not going to let that happen [to me].’”

In short, for most white conservative Protestant respondents, blacks suffer from relational dysfunction and a lack of responsibility. And these deficiencies are debilitating in the American system, as this Missionary-church man from the Midwest communicated: “I don’t know if our society really allows laid-back people to succeed. You have to be an achiever in this country to succeed. You can’t just do whatever.” In short, black individuals—be it a lack of motivation or responsibility, an inability to envision the possibilities for improvement, or an inability to take advantage of them—are rendered less competitive in the marketplace. As we have seen (Table 4), nearly three-quarters of respondents solved the racial-inequality equation in this way.

But what we have not yet mentioned is the irritation this question raised for a number of the white conservative Protestant respondents. These respondents appeared to be friendly, open, committed, caring people. But many did not like it when asked this race question. Either they did not agree with the premise of the question (those who denied there was inequality), or they were irritated by blacks themselves (or the seemingly implicit suggestion that whites were somehow at fault). A sub-explanation contained within the motivational and cultural explanations was the “lazy-butt account.” When this account was offered, it was almost always done so in conjunction with anger or irritation, as these responses convey:

There are a lot of people just sitting back on their butts, saying because of circumstances in the past you owe me this and you owe me that. There’s a lot of resentment in the white community because of that and we just kind of need to get over all of that and move forward. Everybody is responsible for their own actions. Life is not the circumstances; life is how you deal with the circumstances and how it makes you better and how you move forward. (Baptist man)

A lot of them don’t care. They don’t want to work. . . You go downtown and you see some of these apartments, low-income housing. It’s trash. I mean, they don’t care and then they complain. Well, get off your duffer and do something. Make a better life for yourself. Clean up your house, pick up your trash, get some kind of job. (Wesleyan woman)

I think they chose to live like that because it is an easier way out. I am a firm believer in this: God said he would provide for our needs, and he does. But if you want out of a gutter, you’re going to have to work to get out of a gutter. (non-denominational man)

The lazy-bottom account and other responses of irritation were offered by respondents from their 20s through their 80s, across denominations and income levels, and in all parts of the country. While we want to stress that many respondents did not use this account, we also want to be clear that many respondents did find the question offensive. What is it about inequality and black Americans that arouse such responses? After all, the respondents talked much about love for their neighbors, particularly those in the Christian family. African Americans are by and large Christian (a larger percent self-identify as Christian than in white America), so they should be particularly exempt from such responses. What then is so offensive?
African Americans, despite their Christian association, violate key tenets of white conservative Christianity. African Americans, in their eyes, are not true accountable freewill individualists, are relationally dysfunctional, and sin both by relying on programs rather than themselves, and by shifting blame to structurally-based reasons for inequality. Most directly, though African Americans may be Christians, they are not good American Christians. African Americans violate and challenge much of what is core to white American conservative Christianity. On the face of it, the question about why racial inequality exists is not a religious question. Yet, because of the close historical and present-day connection between faith and the American way of life (at least for white conservative Protestants), it is a religious question for these respondents. Racial inequality challenges their world understanding, and it challenges their faith in God and in America. And insofar as it does, it is capable of arousing impassioned responses, for they are now dealing not just in mundane policy matters, but with issues of cosmic significance. To these respondents, inequality, especially black-white inequality, is America’s thorn in the side. If only blacks would “catch the vision,” change their habits, stop trying to shift blame, and apply themselves responsibly—in short, act more Christian, as they define it—racial inequality would be but a memory. As this Free Church man put it, “The Christian life is one that is free, and we’re told that if we get into the Word and we meditate on the Word, what happens to us is that we become prosperous and successful. So if it’s a problem of poverty, people come to Christ and find out who they are, then they find ways to become successful.”

The remaining cited explanations were offered much less often. About one in five respondents cited welfare, by which they meant Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC), food stamps, and related programs for the poor. Because welfare is most certainly structural, we must examine what white conservative Protestants mean when they reference it as a cause of racial inequality.

When people employed this explanation, it was used in one of two distinct ways. For one group, welfare undermined accountable freewill individualism and relationalism, and it was African Americans who were to blame for accepting welfare. These respondents almost always also combined welfare with the black culture or motivation explanations. This Baptist woman from a northern state, as was common, linked welfare to family dissolution:

I think ultimately it goes back to the fact that they have a lot of single parent homes. [Any idea why they have a lot of single parent homes?] Well, in a lot of instances there was no family to start with. [What do you mean?] I mean the AFDC payments. A woman gets money for each child she has and there is never a husband involved. In this area it is very common for a black girl in her late teens to be having her third or fourth baby, unmarried. My daughter works in OB (obstetrics), that is how I know. Very common, because they get their AFDC payments.

Welfare does not just break down the family, it leads to individual sin. Further, it is blacks who, perhaps because they are seen having less initiative or moral fortitude, are more likely to receive welfare. It was also common to link welfare directly to the demise of individual initiative/responsibility of African Americans. This blue-collar man from the Northeast related a personal story to illustrate his point:

I was standing in line at a McDonalds for lunch one day. There was a young black girl that walked up to the counter next to me and there was a black girl working behind the counter, and they knew each other. They had a ‘Help Wanted’ sign out. The girl behind the counter said ‘Let me get you an application.’ And the girl on my side said, ‘How much do they pay?’ She told her $5.25 an hour, and she said, ‘Well I can make that much on welfare. Why should I come to work?’ So I think that through the welfare system they have grown dependent on it and to count on that rather than count on themselves.

Welfare is clearly seen as violating the Protestant work ethic, either causing people to lack individual motivation and responsibility, or catering to their human tendency to look for the easy road.
But respondents did not always view blacks as directly to blame in citing welfare. A second meaning in citing welfare, and employed in about half the welfare references, was that the government was to blame. By trying to solve individual-level problems with social programs, the government is not only foolish, but as one Presbyterian women put it, creating a system “no different from slavery.” Another woman, a member of an Assembly of God church, was not shy in implicating the government, even while making welfare recipients seem less than admirable: “It has to be blamed on the government. The government makes it easier for somebody to sit home and collect welfare and have baby after baby.” The theological understanding of social structure as co-opting freewill individualism (anti-structuralism) clearly plays a role here. Because systems and programs are viewed as obviating personal responsibility and not changing the hearts of individuals, they are ultimately destructive. A woman who attends a Free Church had this to say about the welfare system: “it’s just bondage, you know, and Jesus wants to be our source and he wants to set us free from bondage.” Because it is bondage, only one answer remains. A married Christian Reformed Church mother of two communicated this. After implicating the welfare system as a system in which “we have paid their mothers to have their fathers stay away from home,” she was asked what Christians should do about the welfare system. She replied, “They should get involved in politics and get rid of the welfare system. [Do away with it entirely?] Yeah.” Welfare is seen as both terribly misguided and sinful, running counter to most things American and, in their understanding, most things Christian. It is far better, according to this Assemblies of God women, to “give them the basics of God and teach them about Jesus. That is going to bring them a whole lot more out of poverty than it is to give them a welfare check.”

After culture or motivation, “history” was the most commonly cited explanation (by 29% of the respondents). For three-quarters of those citing history, it appeared a creative way of holding firmly to the conservative Protestant schema and the current-day equal opportunity assumption without placing direct culpability on the present society.

About 1 in 7 evangelicals simply denied that there was any inequality, such as this Church of Christ man: “I’d have to see this to believe it. I don’t believe that.” In fact, we were sometimes told we were asking the wrong question, such as occurred with this well-to-do Congregational man: “I think a better question is: Why is there a substantial growing percentage of economically wealthy blacks in this country? How did they achieve that? This is what we ought to be studying.”

The final categories we briefly explore are education and discrimination. These explanations were the only given contemporary structural explanations not charged with undermining accountable individualism. But even here, their use was mixed. Half of the respondents citing discrimination or education also named culture or motivation, and the ordering of these varied. Some clearly favored structural explanations, others an individual responsibility or relational explanation, even while recognizing the existence of discrimination. This Michigan man, after saying blacks are trapped in urban centers and being asked why, responded:

One way is through the banking history and not approving mortgages. Another way is not allowing people to buy homes. But let’s not confuse tactic with result. It may be—and I would probably agree—that it is more difficult for a black you to succeed in life than [for a] light you to succeed in life. So be it. If you want to succeed, you are going to go out and do. That is the kind of possibility thinking that needs to occur in this country.

This man clearly grasped structural constraints, but it is here that we can perhaps see the conservative Protestant cultural tools operating most powerfully. His central religious tools of anti-structuralism and accountable freewill individualism render structural issues secondary to the belief that obstacles, with individual drive, can be overcome. Accountable individual initiative conquers all.

Thus, with a few exceptions, respondents solved for X using the equation we introduced earlier: Equally Created + Equal Opportunity + X = Unequal Outcome, where X is equal to
Table 5 • Explanation of Black-White Socioeconomic Gap, by Evangelical Ranking, Whites

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Explanation</th>
<th>Weak-to-Moderate</th>
<th>Strong</th>
<th>Difference</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Anti-Structural Culture or Motivation (CM)</td>
<td>65%</td>
<td>80%</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CM, History, or Welfare</td>
<td>75%</td>
<td>95%</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indiv-Denying Structural Education or Discrimination</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>34%</td>
<td>−1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education or Discrimination Only</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>−16</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes:
N = 103 (smaller N than in Table 3 result of 14 interviews not given evangelical ranking).
a Evangelical ranking of 1 to 7 on 10-point scale, with 10 indicating theologically consistent with evangelical hallmarks and closely connected with evangelical institutions (churches, colleges, para-church ministries).
b Evangelical ranking of 8 to 10 on 10-point scale.
c Strong minus Weak-to-Moderate percentage.
The “no inequality” and “other” categories showed no sample differences.
Source: Pew Evangelical Interviews.

individual, relational, historical, or governmental deficiency. The religious cultural tools of conservative Protestants clearly appear to be transposed in explaining black-white inequality.

One further test of our argument is available. At the conclusion of each interview, interviewers ranked the evangelical respondents based on their adherence to theologically evangelical hallmarks, their strength of connection with evangelical institutions (churches, colleges, para-church ministries), and strength of identity as an evangelical. These subjective rankings ranged from 1 (evangelical in name only) to 10 (strong “card carrying” evangelicals).14 About half the interviewed evangelicals were classified as strong evangelicals (8 or higher), and the other half as weak-to-moderate (1–7). After finding no differences on socioeconomic indicators (except that strong evangelicals were about 5 years younger on average), we compared these two groups by broad explanation categories. These are reported in Table 5.15

Though we must limit our interpretations to the sample, the differences between these two relatively homogenous groups impressively illustrates the centrality of the religious factor. White evangelicals steeped most deeply in the institutional subculture and theology of conservative Protestantism accentuate the general evangelical patterns. They are more likely to cite black culture or lack of motivation than are other evangelicals. Whereas two-thirds of moderate evangelicals cite black culture or motivation, 80 percent of strong evangelicals do—a full 15 percentage point difference. If we also include the anti-structural rationales of history and welfare, the gap between weak-to-moderate and strong evangelicals widens to 20 percentage points. Though 75 percent of weak-to-moderate evangelicals cited one or more of these reasons, an amazing 95 percent of strong evangelicals did so.

Turning to the individualism-inhibiting structural reasons, Table 5 shows essentially identical percentages of weak-to-moderate and strong evangelicals citing education or discrimina-

14. Interviewers, in a series of team meetings, were trained in the basic method to assign an evangelical ranking. Interviewers were told to note throughout the interview how strong the respondent’s evangelical identity appeared, as communicated in assent to specific theological positions, use of “evangelical” language, and connections with evangelical organizations and networks. All interviewers studied evangelicalism before interviewing, and in the team meetings, differences between strong and moderate to weak evangelicals were discussed.
15. Because the interviews were not truly randomly sampled, we do not report significance tests. The differences, then, reflect the sample and caution should be exercised in generalizing to the population.
tion (about one-third of each group). Alone, this suggests no religious effect. However, this is a misleading conclusion, as the next row of Table 5 suggests. If we consider the percentage of people citing only individualism-inhibiting structural rationales, 1 in 5 weak-to-moderate evangelicals are found in this category. For strong evangelicals, the comparable figure is but 1 in 20. Moreover, of the weak-to-moderate evangelicals who cite these structural reasons, only 41 percent also cite anti-structural reasons. For strong evangelicals who mention such structural reasons, however, 84 percent also give anti-structural reasons.

And the in-depth interviews reveal further distinctions. Strong evangelicals both assigned less importance to individualism-inhibiting structural explanations and were less confident in their role than weak-to-moderate evangelicals. For example, a moderately-ranked evangelical woman from a congregational church, when asked why the United States has black-white inequality, responded matter-of-factly, “It’s white dominance, even though we say we have all these laws and you know equal opportunity.” In contrast, a strongly ranked evangelical man from an Evangelical Free church first discussed the role of history, and then added:

I have to say, though, that I think another part of it is still prejudice. I think it is. [In what sense?]

Well, in that still, you know, given two equal candidates, you know, of course nowadays with the way some of the laws are, you almost have to give it to the minority person.

The probe in this case revealed his uncertainty about the actual role of discrimination, and even appeared to lead him to change his mind. He then finished in classical accountable freewill individualist form, saying that because African Americans are poorer, “they’re just more given to doing wrong kinds of things.”

The interviews, then, reveal how thoroughly individually accountable, relational, and anti-structural respondents were in their explanations (even when giving ostensibly social structural accounts), and how these appeared closely connected to the use of cultural tools provided by their religious subculture.

Discussion

Does religion influence how people explain black-white inequality? We find that for white conservative Protestants, religion has a clear and consistent effect. The cultural tools of accountable freewill individualism, anti-structuralism, and relationalism, nurtured in the cradle of the subculture, are repeatedly drawn upon to build rationales for racial inequality. As hypothesized, white conservative Protestants are more individualistic and less structural in their explanations of the black-white socioeconomic gap than other whites. The majority of this group also explains the inequality in terms of perceived relational difficulties between African Americans. We find these patterns by analyzing both quantitative and qualitative data. And not only did we find the religious factor by comparing white conservative Protestants to other whites, but also by comparing weak-to-moderate and strong evangelicals in the interview sample. The cultural tools in the conservative Protestant tool kit are not unique to American white conservative Protestants, but because they are indigenous, affirmed in the subculture, and held with characteristic evangelical vigor, they are more frequently transposed in explaining the black-white socioeconomic gap.

Much more study is needed. As with other recent works on conservative Protestants (Darnell and Sherkat 1997; Ellison, Bartkowski and Segal 1996a, 1996b; Ellison and Sherkat 1993a; Sherkat and Ellison 1997), researchers should attempt to specify further and then model the process through which the religious factor operates. Also, a weakness of the cultural-tools approach is that it fails to adequately tell us why only certain cultural tools both exist and are transposed. For example, we examined the role of religion as if it operates independently of race, conveniently done by examining just one race. But white American conservative Protestant religion, like nearly all American religions, crystallizes in the crucible of a
racially-divided U.S. The work of other researchers (e.g., Allan and Kuo 1991; Day 1996; Emerson and Smith 1999) suggests that conservative religion may have a divergent effect for African Americans in comparison to whites. Religion, it seems, plays a significant role and the role it plays cannot be understood apart from understanding the specific religious culture, which in the United States is born and nourished in a racially-charged context. Further, it may be fruitful to extend the cultural tools conceptualization toward the work of Sewell (1992) and related theorists, by viewing subculture as an ideological structure, based on actual and ideological resources, which generate transposable schemata. We have also limited our focus to Protestants. Research is needed to explore if our findings can be generalized to conservative Christians generally, regardless of denomination or tradition.

Perhaps the most important implication of these findings is what they mean for reducing racial inequality. If racial inequality must in part be addressed through government policies and programs, white conservative Protestants have and will oppose such policies and programs. This is not because they oppose the principle of racial equality, but, as we have seen, because they (1) do not see social structures contributing to the inequality, except where they are viewed as undermining accountable individualism; (2) believe the United States affords equal opportunity to its citizens; (3) explain inequality as the result of contemporary problems with African American individuals and their relationships; (4) understand the solution to social problems as changing individuals (Emerson 1996b; Emerson and Smith 1999, chapter 6); so (5) view government efforts to achieve racial equality as naive, wasteful, misguided, sinful, and often counteracting real solutions.

Holding to these views, to the extent that racial inequality results from the “sins” not only of African Americans, but also white Americans and social structures, white conservative Protestants indirectly contribute to the perpetuation of black-white (and likely other forms of) inequality. Further, their strong moral voice both in their communities and as a national political force may have an impact far beyond their own subculture. White conservative Protestants are important carriers of rugged individualism and likely serve as a resource and provide rationales for the larger conservative community.

Much recent work suggests that white opposition to government programs is the result of group- and self-interest (Bobo 1988; Bobo and Hutchings 1996; Jackman 1994; Kluegel and Smith 1986; Sidanius, Pratto, and Bobo 1996; A. W. Smith 1981; Wellman 1977). This paper does not challenge this body of work. What we suggest, though, is that rather than defining interest primarily in socioeconomic and political terms, we must also consider its cultural roots. White conservative Protestants explain black-white inequality by drawing from their cultural tool kit. In the end, this means they hold African Americans accountable for inequality and, as we noted, are irritated and uncomfortable with African Americans because they threaten their understandings, subculture, and faith. To this end, the racial inequality explanations of white conservative Protestants (and by extension, other Americans) are a defense not only of socioeconomic privilege, but, more fundamentally, of identity, culture, and worldview. If true, the ferocity with which many Americans will oppose government efforts toward racial equality will be more deeply rooted than we have understood, and the persistence of racial inequality far more entrenched.

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