Community Undesirability in Black and White: Examining Racial Residential Preferences through Community Perceptions

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While studies of racial residential preferences generally converge on the pattern that blacks prefer neighborhoods with a substantial proportion of African Americans, but whites are uncomfortable with no more than 20% black, the forces underlying these preferences receive comparatively less empirical attention. This paper uses perceptions of community undesirability as a measure of racial residential preferences to address this question. Data come from the Multi-City Study of Urban Inequality, which asked large samples of whites and African Americans in Atlanta, Boston, Detroit, and Los Angeles to rate the desirability of 5-7 local communities. In addition to the closed-ended ratings, this paper draws on a systematic analysis of open-ended survey data asking respondents to explain why they find communities undesirable. Overall, blacks rate most communities as more desirable than whites, and African Americans find desirable many of the communities in which they are the numerical minority. Whites rate mixed race communities as undesirable, in part because of a desire to avoid black neighbors, but also because of what may be an over-inflated perception of crime in those communities. Analyses of African American community ratings highlight the importance of racial climate in shaping perceptions of communities and argue against the assertion that racial composition alone is the key factor in black preferences.

The 1970s Motown hit, “Chocolate City, Vanilla Suburbs” (Malbix/Ricks Music, BMI, 1976)—though in need of some updating to reflect the increasingly multi-ethnic context of the United States in the 21st century—nevertheless, still aptly describes the residential patterns of many of the nation’s largest metropolitan areas. Social scientists continue to grapple with the question: Why do these patterns of segregation persist 30 years after the passage of the Fair Housing Act of 1968, which outlawed discrimination in the buying and renting of housing?

One answer to this question—racial residential preferences—was invoked by Justice Kennedy in a 1992 U.S. Supreme Court ruling that ended a court-ordered school integration program in DeKalb County, Georgia (Yinger 1995, p. 119):

The District Court has heard evidence that racially stable neighborhoods are not likely to emerge because whites prefer a racial mix of 80 percent white and 20 percent black, while blacks prefer a 50%-50% mix. Where resegregation is a product not of state action, but of private choices, it does not have constitutional implications. It is beyond the authority and practical ability of the federal courts to try to counteract these kinds of continuous and massive demographic shifts (Freeman v. Pitts).

Considerable research reports the numbers cited in this ruling (e.g., Clark 1992; Farley et al. 1993, 1994; Zubrinsey and Bobo 1996). Less well understood, however, are the factors that

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drive these preferences. Some argue that the pattern of preferences reflects a benign “neutral ethnocentrism”—namely, the desire of all to live with their own kind—and are untainted by racial prejudice (e.g., Clark 1986, 1988, 1992, 1999, Patterson 1997; Thernstrom and Thernstrom 1997). Others suggest, instead, that racial residential preferences are imbued with racial significance—either as expressions of racial prejudice by whites (e.g., Bobo and Zubrinsky 1996; Charles 2000a, 2000b; Farley et al. 1994) or a response to racial hostility among blacks (e.g., Feagin and Sikes 1994). Alternatively, it may not be race, per se, but race-associated concerns (largely related to social class) that shape these preferences (Harris 1999, 2001). Shedding light on which of these forces underlies residential preferences is the focus of this paper. As Justice Kennedy’s Supreme Court ruling testifies, significant policy implications rest on our understanding of both the pattern of preferences and, perhaps more importantly, the reasons behind them. For example, choices based on neutral ethnocentrism suggest few policy steps need to be taken. Alternatively, if these choices are a reflection of concerns about racial discrimination, or are expressions of racial prejudice, the policy implications are quite different.

Many models seeking to explain racial residential segregation hinge on assumptions about the reasons underlying racial residential preferences (e.g., Clark 1992; Feagin and Sikes 1994; Patterson 1997; Thernstrom and Thernstrom 1997), but fewer empirical studies directly address the question (for exceptions, see Bobo and Zubrinsky 1996; Charles 2000a, 2000b; Farley et al. 1994; Pettigrew 1973). The present paper seeks to complement and extend the existing analyses in two ways: (1) as an alternative to studies that rely on questions about hypothetical neighborhoods, I use respondent evaluations of actual communities in their metropolitan area to measure residential preferences; and (2) I examine the reasons underlying these preferences by asking blacks and whites themselves to explain why they prefer particular communities.

Background

In the traditional study of racial residential preferences, survey respondents are asked to react to hypothetical neighborhoods with different proportions of white and black residents (Clark 1992; Farley, Fielding, and Krysan 1997; Farley et al. 1978; Farley et al. 1994; Krysan and Farley 2002; Zubrinsky and Bobo 1996) or, in a recent innovative study, to “draw their own” hypothetical (preferred) neighborhood (Charles 2000a). These studies generally find that whites desire neighborhoods with few or no black residents, while African Americans find most attractive those neighborhoods with a substantial black presence, though what that percentage is depends on how preferences are measured.\(^1\) While numerous studies report the patterns of preferences, fewer examine the forces that underlie them. One that does is Bobo and Zubrinsky (1996), who elaborate on the following social psychological model:

\[\text{T}\text{hree hypotheses are typically considered. These hypotheses are, first, that perceived differences in socioeconomic status that heavily coincide with racial/ethnic boundaries contribute to racial residential preferences; second, that members of all social groups tend to be ethnocentric, expressing preference for association and interaction with fellow racial/ethnic group members; and third, that more active out-group avoidance or domination are at the root of racial residential preferences. (p. 885)}\]

Using questions about hypothetical 50–50 neighborhoods in Los Angeles, they find little support for either the perceived socioeconomic differences or the in-group preferences hypothesis. Instead, feelings of warmth or coldness toward whites best predicted black prefer-

\(^1\) For example, when asked which hypothetical black-white neighborhood is most attractive, the majority of African Americans select the 50–50 neighborhood (Charles 2000b; Farley et al. 1994; Zubrinsky and Bobo 1996). But Charles’ (2000a) approach allowing for multi-racial/ethnic neighbors and asking respondents to create their own hypothetical configuration, reveals that African Americans’ ideal neighborhood is about one-third African American. Finally, Krysan and Farley (2002) note that although the 50–50 hypothetical neighborhood is rated most attractive, African Americans are willing to consider moving into neighborhoods with far fewer African Americans.
ences, while prejudice rooted in group domination (Blumer 1958), out-group affect, and negative racial stereotypes were each important predictors of white attitudes. In other analyses, Zubrinsky and Bobo (1996), Farley et al. (1994) and Charles (2000a, 2000b) also demonstrated the importance of stereotypes.

Though the hypothetical neighborhood approach used in these studies provides important information, it has some shortcomings. First, survey questions asking about hypothetical neighborhoods that vary only on racial composition gloss over important distinctions, such as the difference between whites who oppose mixed neighborhoods because of a perceived reduction in overall status (where race is a master status) and those who object because of class considerations (Berry 1979; Leven et al. 1976). According to the latter, race may be a “proxy” (Harris 1999) for a range of class-related characteristics that people want to avoid, such as lower housing quality, neighborhood deterioration (Skogan 1990), poorer city services and schools (Frey 1979), and higher crime rates (Berry and Kasarda 1977; Frey 1979; Harris 2001; Morenoff and Sampson 1997).

For example, Harris (1999, 2001) points out that studies of preferences using the hypothetical neighborhood approach do not control for any other features of a neighborhood. The result may be an erroneous attribution of the motivation behind certain preferences to race, rather than what are in essence class-based objections. Harris (2001) found that racial composition significantly predicted respondent satisfaction with actual neighborhood, but after controlling for a range of nonracial characteristics, racial composition fell out of significance. Other analyses of actual mobility behavior (Crowder 2000) or hypothetical factorial survey designs (Emerson, Yancey, and Chai 2001; Shlay and DiGregorio 1985; St. John and Bates 1990) also report that social class considerations such as environmental cleanliness, crime, and housing quality are important predictors, but they differ from Harris because they show such controls do not eliminate the effect of racial composition. This body of research, though showing conflicting results, nevertheless establishes the importance of considering both racial and non-racial neighborhood features when examining preferences. In this study, I do so by asking people about the desirability of specific, well-known communities with a range of social, economic, and racial characteristics.

By treating community undesirability ratings as a source of information about racial residential preferences and, ultimately, patterns of residential segregation, I am making several assumptions. First, I assume that subjective evaluations figure prominently in individual’s mobility thoughts and behavior, as Lee, Oropesa, and Kanan (1994) and Logan and Collver (1983) suggest. Moreover, I assume that subjective perceptions influence overall patterns in the urban landscape, as Logan and Collver (1983) also argue:

Ultimately, all models of . . . spatial differentiation must rely on some assumptions about people’s mental images of the region in which they live. In our view, residents’ perceptions of what their community and other communities are like are as important to urban theory as the information on objective characteristics on which most urban research is based. (p. 432)

Applied to the issue of racial residential segregation, if blacks and whites know about and hold very different perceptions of communities, they may be propelled to seek housing in different areas, thus erecting barriers to the future integration of single-race communities, or working against the maintenance of currently racially mixed ones.

There is evidence that people do think of communities as having different reputations and identities (Congalton 1961; Curtis and Jackson 1977; Semyonov and Kraus 1982; though Felson 1978 is inconsistent on this point). For example, a community’s socioeconomic characteristics are an important feature of community perceptions, though so too are proximity, population density, population aging, and racial composition (Logan and Collver 1983; Semyonov and Kraus 1982). Logan and Collver (1983), comparing middle class and working class respondents, conclude that there is a “general social consensus as to the important distinctions
between communities” (p. 432). However, the possibility that the social consensus breaks down along racial lines is not examined.

Though less common than studies of hypothetical neighborhoods, there are a handful of analyses of community desirability ratings, all of which are based on the Multi-City Study of Urban Inequality (MCSUI), the dataset also used in this analysis (Charles 2000b, 2001; Farley et al. 1993; Zubrinsky and Bobo 1996). In particular, Charles (2001) included an examination of the basic patterns of community desirability ratings in her comprehensive assessment of several different measures of residential preferences in the MCSUI. She concluded that blacks and whites shared, to some degree, their views of various communities, but there were notable exceptions: areas with high concentrations of racial/ethnic minorities were considered undesirable by many whites, but these same communities were rated among the most desirable by racial/ethnic minorities. Charles (2001) also reported a general consensus about which communities were considered welcoming to minorities.

The present article uses the MCSUI data, but extends existing analyses in two central ways. First, while existing studies examined racial differences in community evaluations, formal tests were not conducted, nor were controls for social and demographic characteristics introduced. Second, while existing studies provide insights into broad patterns of community desirability ratings, we know almost nothing about the racial (and non-racial) content of the images and perceptions in influence actual mobility behaviors and decisions and, hence, segregation patterns.

With such an understanding, the significance of “preferences” as a cause of segregation can be placed in its larger context; a context that also provides important clues about the nature of their influence on patterns of behavior.

2. Moreover, I am not arguing that preferences are the only factor contributing to residential segregation. Rather, the evidence is clear that a complex array of factors are responsible for the persisting patterns of segregation, including discrimination at many points in the process of buying, selling, and renting homes (for a comprehensive review, see Yinger 1995).
Data And Methods

The data come from the Multi-City Study of Urban Inequality (MCSUI), which interviewed large samples of adults living in Atlanta, Boston, Detroit, and Los Angeles. Conducted in the mid-1990s, these face-to-face surveys consisted of multi-stage area probability samples of adult household residents in each metropolis. Block data from the Census of 1990 were used to construct the sampling frame. In all areas, blacks were over-sampled, resulting in data from approximately 2,810 non-Hispanic whites and 3,108 non-Hispanic African Americans. Of particular interest to this research, respondents in Atlanta, Boston, Detroit, and Los Angeles were asked to rate 5–7 communities in their own metropolis in terms of their desirability as a place to live (on a four point scale).  

A central component of this study is a systematic analysis of the responses to an open-ended follow-up question asked of those respondents who considered a community undesirable: “Why do you say that (NAME OF AREA) is an undesirable place to live?” The verbatim responses to this question were entered into FoxPro, a relational database program used to facilitate the coding and analysis of open-ended data. A complex coding scheme captured as fully as possible the range of responses. Nine general substantive themes were identified (largely inductively), and include mentions of the presence of certain racial groups or the racial mix of an area, the types of people who live there, characteristics of the community and housing, city services, geography, and social class. Within these main themes, there were several variations (for example, characteristics of housing and community included crime and safety, industry/pollution/noise, deterioration of property, and crowdedness). A single respondent’s answer could be coded under an unlimited number of themes and their variations.

A research assistant coded all of the responses for all four metropolitan areas, after a training period during which two independent coders achieved an acceptable overall agreement rate of at least 70 percent in each of the four cities. Because of the possibility of multiple codes for each respondent, agreement within any particular theme (for example, agreement about whether or not a given respondent mentioned the “crime” theme) was much higher. The detailed coding scheme was collapsed to capture more concisely the general neighborhood dimensions.

The 23 communities were chosen purposively so that in each site respondents were asked about well-known areas with expensive housing, as well as others with more modest housing values and/or varying racial compositions. Among the 23 communities are predominantly white working, middle and upper middle class communities, which have differing histories of racial conflict. Communities also had a range of racial compositions, from less than one percent to 64 percent African American, including racially mixed middle class and poorer areas. Data for the community characteristics discussed throughout the paper come from the 1990 Census and various Uniform Crime Reports. While most areas are “places,” as defined by the Census, a few communities are well-recognized neighborhoods within their respective metropolitan areas. For these locations—South Boston, Baldwin Hills, Midtown, and Canoga Park—crime
data are not available, and Census characteristics are based on an aggregation of the appropriate Census tracts. Because the communities are neither a random sample of communities, nor do they include all possible communities, my research focuses on depth and complexity, rather than breadth and generalizability.

Results

This analysis begins by answering an important initial question about community recognition. To hold an image of a community—and, indeed, to consider moving into it—requires some knowledge of it, no matter how limited it may be. Despite our efforts to pick well-known communities, some respondents, nevertheless, said they “did not know” a community. This is an initial way that blacks and whites may differ: they may simply be familiar with different kinds of communities. Indeed, given the residential isolation and segregation in the central city of large segments of the black population, differences in “don’t know” responses may be expected, especially for those communities that are located further from the city’s core. While other researchers assess whether there are racial differences in knowledge of housing costs (Bobo and Zubrinsky 1996; Charles 2000b, 2001; Farley et al. 1994), black-white differences in whether or not a respondent has even heard of these 23 communities have not been examined.

The percentage of respondents who did not know enough about a community to rate its desirability ranges from 8 to 36 percent, and there are many communities where blacks and whites hold different levels of awareness. A series of logistic regression models (not shown, but available from the author) that control for age, education, income, gender, and homeownership show statistically significant racial differences in community recognition for 16 of the 23 communities. In eight of these (Roswell/Alpharetta, Norcross, Marietta/Smyrna, Lowell, Glendale, Canoga Park, Alhambra, and Pico Rivera), blacks are more likely to say, “don’t know” than whites. The pattern is consistent with the expectation that blacks will be less familiar with communities that are less proximate to the central city. By contrast, the eight communities about which blacks are more knowledgeable, with two exceptions, have fairly sizeable black populations (Decatur, Brockton, Cambridge, Baldwin Hills, Culver City, Southfield, South Boston, and Newton).

Though limited by our sample of only 23 communities, the pattern is, nevertheless, suggestive: blacks and whites appear to have different levels of basic awareness of different kinds of communities in their metropolitan area. Moreover, the types of areas that are better known by different racial groups are consistent with persisting patterns of segregation: our data suggest that housing searches for blacks may be biased away from suburban—whiter—communities about which they have less knowledge; whites’ housing searches may be biased away from racially mixed communities, in part, for the same reason. A larger study in which a broader range of communities is included would allow a more definite test of this hypothesis.

What happens among those respondents who do know enough about our 23 communities to rate their desirability as places to live? Our first question is: To what degree do blacks and whites agree about which communities are undesirable? Figure 1 shows the proportion of black and white respondents within each metropolitan area that rated a particular community as very or somewhat undesirable. Looking across all four panels, it is clear that whites and blacks hold different views about the undesirability of most of the 23 communities. The largely non-significant Spearman’s rank order correlations between black and white aggregate ratings bear this out: .086 in Atlanta (n.s.); .900 in Boston (p = .037); -.200 in Detroit (n.s.); .286 in Los Angeles (n.s.). Only in Boston is there a statistically significant positive correlation between aggregate black and white desirability ratings.

At an individual level of analysis, there are only three communities where race of the respondent is not a statistically significant predictor of a respondent’s community undesirability
rating: Norcross, Marietta/Smyrna, and Newton. In the remaining twenty communities, blacks rate fourteen as more desirable than whites, and whites rate six as more desirable than blacks. The racial differences persist even after controlling for education, income, gender, age, and homeownership (analyses not shown, but available from the author). Our second question, returning to the community-level unit of analysis, is: Which communities, in particular, are rated as undesirable? And to what degree does a community’s social class or racial composition help distinguish between those that are rated in the aggregate as desirable and undesirable? For example, are communities with higher social class less likely to be rated as undesirable? How do whites evaluate communities with a significant African American population? And how do African Americans rate communities that are overwhelmingly white? To help address the first of these questions, the communities in Figure 1 are arranged within each graph in the order of median housing values. The communities with the highest 1990 Census median housing values are at the top; the lowest are at the bottom. In

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7. In these models, which combined blacks and whites, the various demographic predictors do not show clear and consistent patterns across the range of communities. However, in the next section, I report results for models run separately for each racial group.
addition, the numbers in parentheses next to the name of the community provide the percentage of African American residents in each area, according to the 1990 Census.\(^8\)

Across all four cities, there is a general correspondence between median housing values and aggregate community undesirability, particularly for whites. In Boston, for example, Newton has the highest median housing values and is clearly considered a desirable place to live: only about 10 percent of white respondents rate it as very or somewhat undesirable. By contrast, South Boston, Lowell, and Brockton, all of which have about the same median housing values, are rated as much less desirable: nearly 7 out of 10 white Bostonians consider these communities to be very or somewhat undesirable places to live. In Detroit, the contrast between Taylor and Troy makes a similar point for whites.

Though important, class does not explain it all, as the outliers of Decatur, Southfield, and Baldwin Hills highlight. Each of these is a prosperous middle class community; but each has an aggregate undesirability rating that is out of line with its relative social class standing. Each of these also has an African American population that is one-third or more. In Atlanta, Decatur’s housing values are comparable to Norcross and Marietta/Smyrna; but clearly Decatur is considered less desirable by most white Atlantans. Similarly, in the Detroit area, Southfield is considered somewhat or very undesirable by over 40 percent of whites; only Taylor, with its very low housing values (about one-half that of Southfield’s) is considered less desirable by whites. Thus, social class is not solely responsible for shaping undesirability ratings. As Charles (2001) observed of these same data, communities with relatively high concentrations of African Americans are also considered among the least desirable among whites, even in those communities with relative affluence.

Compared to the results for whites, social class is even less clearly related to African American desirability ratings. For example, South Boston is clearly more undesirable than the economically comparable communities of Lowell and Brockton. In Detroit, Taylor is viewed as less undesirable by blacks than the more prosperous Warren and Dearborn. Decatur, Southfield, and Baldwin Hills are also outliers in African American ratings because blacks evaluated these communities as more desirable than the predominantly white communities that were equally—or in some cases more—prosperous. Thus, of the 23 communities we asked about, blacks find most desirable those communities that are both middle class and have more than a handful of African American residents.

But what is equally clear is that race does not overwhelm the evaluations of African Americans. In Atlanta, for example, nearly 80 percent of African Americans rated five of the six communities as somewhat or very desirable. This finding is particularly striking in light of the considerable range of racial compositions across these communities, from a low of 4% African American in Roswell/Alpharetta to a high of 64% in the Tri-Cities. And, even among communities with almost no African American residents, there is a wide variation, with South Boston and Dearborn considered particularly undesirable, while equally “white” communities such as Newton and Troy are evaluated quite positively.

Returning to the individual level of analysis, although race of respondent is the most consistent predictor of respondent’s ratings of a community’s undesirability—significant in 20 of the 23 communities—it is not the only demographic characteristic that influences the ratings. In additional analyses, the effect of respondent’s education, income, gender, age, and homeownership were examined, separately for blacks and whites. Of these characteristics, only education and age had somewhat consistent effects, and Table 1 reports the regression coefficients for these two variables. Among whites, education and age show significant effects for 12 and 8 communities, respectively. In particular, communities that were both

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8. The presentation in Figure 1D of only African American population figures masks the racial and ethnic diversity of the Los Angeles communities. The proportion of Asians and Hispanics, respectively, in these communities is as follows: Glendale (14% and 20%); Culver City (12% and 19%); Canoga Park (10% and 22%); Baldwin Hills (8% and 12%); Palmdale (4% and 22%); Alhambra (38% and 36%); Pico Rivera (3% and 83%).
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Notes:
* p < .05   ** p < .01   *** p < .001
Community desirability is coded 1–4, where 1 = very desirable and 4 = very undesirable. Models also include controls for homeownership, gender, income, and race of interviewer, though coefficients are not reported for these variables.
Krysan predominantly white and of medium to low housing costs showed such effects. For example, well-educated and younger white respondents were more likely to evaluate these kinds of communities more negatively than their less well-educated and older counterparts. At the same time, well-educated whites rated more positively the mixed race, medium housing cost communities of Cambridge, Midtown, and Decatur. The predictors of African American desirability ratings were even less consistent than for whites: education and age significantly predicted the evaluations of just four and five communities, respectively. While age was inconsistent in direction (and the communities that showed an effect did not reveal any clear pattern), African Americans with more education were particularly likely to find the predominantly white, relatively inexpensive communities of Warren, Lowell, and Taylor to be undesirable places to live.

The analysis thus far highlights three patterns: (1) blacks and whites disagree about community undesirability ratings for most of the 23 communities and these disagreements persist after controlling for differences in demographic characteristics; (2) when the community is the unit of analysis, it is clear that objective indicators of community racial composition and overall social class do not, neatly and precisely, coincide with aggregate community undesirability ratings; and (3) when the individual is the unit of analysis, regression analyses show that race of respondent is the most consistent predictor of undesirability ratings, although other demographic characteristics, such as education and age, also show some effect on community undesirability ratings.

We now turn to an examination of what whites and blacks say when they are asked directly about their images of those communities they consider to be undesirable places to live. For example, when whites object to Southfield and Decatur, do they mention the racial composition or something else? When blacks object to Dearborn, is it because there are too few blacks or too many whites? When whites or blacks object to various communities, are social class considerations a part of their answer? To address these questions, Table 2 shows the proportion of respondents who mentioned each of 13 different themes when describing why they consider a community undesirable. Bear in mind that these results are restricted to only those individuals who said a particular community was undesirable. Our discussion begins with the results for white respondents.

We might expect that direct class and class-associated characteristics would predominate discussions about the undesirability of a community as a place to live (St. John and Bates 1990). Thus, responses like the following would be commonplace:

I lived in Warren. It is a dumpy city. They need to do some cleaning up. [Any other reasons?] It’s sectioned off. [What do you mean?] Some sections are definitely lower class people, don’t have money to take care of property and maybe some just don’t care.

... I don’t know what the city offers other than auto dealers. [Any other reasons?] It’s a low class or working class town. They always had a good football team. That’s it.

However, as Table 2 suggests, these specific reasons (Deterioration, Services, and Lower Class) do not dominate whites’ descriptions of even those communities that are low on several socioeconomic characteristics (such as Taylor and the Tri-Cities). Instead, in 17 of the 19 communities rated undesirable by at least 20% of whites, either Residential Environment or

9. A formal regression analysis that could ascertain with more precision the independent effect of a community’s racial composition, median housing value, and other characteristics such as crime, would be desirable. However, such an approach is not possible because our data—at the aggregate level—are comprised of just 23 non-randomly selected cases (i.e., communities). As such, the present analysis is perhaps best thought of as a case study of 23 communities that capitalizes on the depth of the case study approach and offers conclusions that are suggestive and nuanced, rather than definitive and generalizable.

10. “Deterioration” includes both generic comments about the area not being “good” and specific references to run-down property, vandalism, and graffiti. “Services” include government and non-government services such as police, roads, schools, health clubs, shopping, etc. Lower Class is respondent references to the lower social class of the community.
Crime was the modal response. Thus, whites who object to these communities view them as having too much congestion, traffic, people, noise, and crime:

The worst. I’ve been there a couple of times. It’s the most congested. I’d never want to work there or live there. Too much pavement, cars; too little green. Everything impersonal, a lot of congestion—people, buildings, and freeway traffic.

It’s not safe. There’s robbery, shootings, my car got stolen from church. [Anything else?] It’s a melting pot of dirt bags. [What do you mean?] Kids 11 and 12 shooting people.

Of central interest for this analysis of racial residential preferences is the degree to which respondent objections to communities are racialized. Interestingly, South Boston and Dearborn (where fewer than 1% of the residents are African American) show the highest percentage of whites mentioning racial reasons—27 percent in both cases (see Table 2). In these virtually all-white communities, this prominence is derived in part from their long histories of racial conflict. The conflict in South Boston is connected to the busing controversy (Formisano 1991), and in Dearborn to the militant segregationist Orville Hubbard, who served as mayor for decades (Good 1989). Here, whites express either a principled objection to the community’s racist climate or history or a desire to avoid the racial conflict they associate with these communities.

I think it is a bigoted community trying to get out of a hole. I’ve been pulled over by the police because I had a black person in the car.

They are closed minded towards blacks. Even though I am white, I notice it. [Any other reasons?] No. I hear it’s racist—I’d never live in a racist place. [Anything else?] No.

I think every area has racial and ethnic violence, but this area has more fueled by their attitudes. [What do you mean?] Problems with leaders and the South Boston Catholic Irish. I’ve got Hispanics living next to me. We aren’t pals, but I’m not trying to evict them either. [Any other reasons?] No.

The Racial Presence theme is also frequently mentioned by whites objecting to Dearborn (18%). But here, it is Arab-Americans—who comprised 16% of the population in the 1990 Census—whom whites want to avoid.

But how do whites explain their negative assessments of the prosperous, mixed-race communities of Baldwin Hills, Southfield, and Decatur, where race and class are pitted against each other? As Table 2 shows, between 14 and 18 percent of whites are explicit about the role of race in their evaluations. These whites are concerned about the presence of African Americans, but this theme that can be further divided into two types (breakdown not shown on the table). About two-thirds of the Racial Presence responses simply point to the presence of blacks as absolutely or relatively too many:

Unreasonable ratio—black to white.

Because I’m pretty sure that’s a black area. [Anything else?] No.

It’s just not an area I would want to live in. It’s about 90% black. [Note: The respondent is describing Baldwin Hills, which is 56% black.]

I’m white and it’s a very nice high class place for blacks to live, but I’m white.

The fourth example vividly captures the dominance of race over class for this respondent, since he notes that even though it is a nice “high class” place, he views it as a high class place for blacks; and, therefore, an undesirable place for whites like himself.

11. The racial reasons shown in Table 2 are divided into three sub-categories. Racial Prejudice includes mentions of racial hostility, either in the community overall, or its residents, leaders or police; Racial/Ethnic Presence are mentions of a particular racial or ethnic group that makes it undesirable; Presence without Prejudice includes the sub-group of respondents who are coded under Racial/Ethnic Presence but not Racial Prejudice and so identifies respondents who object solely to the presence of an out-group (or the absence of their in-group), but do not see this as coupled with racial prejudice or discrimination. The Total Racial Reason category includes any respondent who mentioned a racial reason.
Table 2 - Proportion of Respondents Who Mention Each Theme when Explaining Why They Find a Particular Community to be an Undesirable Place to Live, by Race*

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<th>Taylor</th>
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### Los Angeles

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* Because more than one theme could be coded for a single respondent, the percentages do not sum to 100 percent. In addition, results are shown only for communities that were rated as undesirable by at least 20 percent of the respondents.

** “Type of People” refers to objections to a certain group of people, such as liberals, gays, students, “rednecks” and others (excluding mentions of racial groups, which are classified under Racial Reasons). Climate is a reference to the weather being undesirable. None of the Above means a response did not fit under any of the themes on this table.
The remaining one-third of the Racial Presence responses differ from the first set of examples because respondents object not simply to a community’s racial composition, but also to the negative characteristics they associate with the community. Among these are high crime and deterioration:

Crime. Too many blacks. Tends to let areas run down. Quality of neighborhood suffers.
Because of the Jewish and colored element. Or crime. Whichever you choose.

Very black. I don’t have anything in that sense against blacks, but they don’t maintain it well, also crime. Though it is a good area for blacks to live in.

The distinction between these two types of Racial Presence reasons reflects the debate about whether it is race, *per se*—that is, race as a “master status”—that results in whites simply not wanting to live with blacks because of a perceived loss of status (Berry and Kasarda 1977). Or if instead, objections arise because whites associate black or integrated neighborhoods with negative (often class-related) characteristics (Harris 1999, 2001; Taub, Taylor, and Dunham 1984). As the above analysis suggests, within the explicitly racial reasons, there is evidence for both interpretations, which is consistent with Bobo and Zubrinsky’s (1996) findings that whites are influenced both by prejudice emanating from a sense of group position, as well as negative racial stereotypes. However, while explicitly racial reasons are a non-trivial feature of whites’ descriptions of mixed-race communities, they do not overwhelm them. Indeed, for the most part, the theme that dominates whites’ images of Southfield, Decatur, and Baldwin Hills is the perception that these communities are rife with crime. As Table 2 shows, between 35 and 40 percent of whites who object to these communities say something like:

Crime—drugs—violence; breaking and entering. Just not a good place to live or visit.
Too many drugs, prostitution, and there’s not enough police protection—they don’t care.

At first glance, this pattern supports the racial proxy argument that whites avoid mixed communities not because they are averse to living with blacks *per se*, but because of such negative features as high crime rates (Harris 2001). But this interpretation merits further consideration because here the issue is one of community reputations and perceptions (rather than objective Census characteristics), and because of the complicated relationship between race and perceptions of crime. Gaubatz (1995) argues that Americans generally have an exaggerated level of concern about crime—a level that is inconsistent with real changes and patterns in violent crime rates. More importantly, there is considerable evidence that race—and racial attitudes—are tangled up in perceptions of crime and fear of victimization (St. John and Heald-Moore 1995, 1996). For example, O’Brien and colleagues (1982, 1986) demonstrated that respondent’s satisfaction with their own neighborhood is affected by racial composition in part through its effect on perceptions of a community’s crime rates—but not actual victimization rates:

[I]t is not actual conditions in racially integrated neighborhoods which most bother whites, but rather their subjective perceptions of black residents as undesirable, either because they are seen as having lower status or because they are seen as culturally different and, therefore, dangerous. (O’Brien and Lange 1986:56)

Even more to the point, a recent study shows that among whites, the perceived proportion of blacks in a respondent’s neighborhood predicts a respondent’s perceived risk of crime—even when controlling for actual crime rates (Chiricos, McEntire, and Gertz 2001).

12. To some degree this may reflect social desirability pressures that make whites reluctant to voice their objections to a community based solely on its racial composition. The presence of modest race of interviewer effects for these questions suggests some evidence for this. Because even white interviewers may generate social desirability pressures for white respondents (Krysan 1998), we must therefore consider the results showing the proportion of respondents viewing communities as undesirable for explicitly racial reasons to be a conservative estimate of all racially motivated reasons.
Given this connection between race and perceptions of crime, white images of mixed-race communities as crime-ridden may reflect racial prejudice and stereotypes. One way to assess this in the context of our data is to use actual crime rates to determine if the crime rates in places like Southfield, Decatur, and Baldwin Hills are comparable to other predominantly white communities in their respective metropolitan areas. Then, if the reputation of the mixed race communities as crime-ridden is greater than the comparable predominantly white communities, then white perceptions may be based on stereotypical images (Farley et al. 1994; Hurwitz and Peffley 1997) and unfounded fears (Merry 1982), rather than objective features of the neighborhood.

In the Detroit metropolitan area, Dearborn (<1% African American) and Southfield (29% African American) provide the best comparison because they have similar socioeconomic characteristics, they both border the city of Detroit and, most importantly, they have comparable crime rates. Not only do whites consider Dearborn more desirable than Southfield, but also whites’ negative image of Southfield is comprised largely of the perception that crime is rampant in this community. As shown in Table 2, twice as many whites who find Southfield undesirable explain their rating as a function of crime as compared to Dearborn. Marietta/Smyrna (19% African American) offers the closest comparison for Decatur (39% African American). Again, white images of Decatur are fueled largely by concerns about crime, despite the fact that Decatur’s crime rates are lower than Marietta/Smyrna. Thus, “crime” as a “racial proxy” does figure prominently in respondent evaluations. But these comparisons with actual crime rates suggest that racial prejudice and stereotypes may be an important foundation for some of these perceptions. This makes it difficult to characterize “crime” as a “racial proxy” that is therefore distinct from a “racial” explanation.

Turning to the results for African Americans, whereas whites express concerns about residential environment and crime, blacks mention race and geography. Table 2 reports that in six of the 17 communities, Too Far was the modal response. This theme, which includes statements that a community is too far away in general and/or in relation to their workplace or children’s school, is often mentioned for the same communities for which a substantial proportion of African Americans indicated they “did not know” the community. That African Americans mention Too Far more often than whites is consistent with research showing that blacks, more than whites, consider local orientation—a desire for local jobs, activities, shopping, churches, and the possibility of interaction with friends and relatives—an important community feature (St. John and Clark 1984). However, the high proportion of Too Far responses may also be a function of residential segregation itself. Since blacks are largely concentrated in urban centers, certain communities—particularly those far from the city’s central core—may be highly undesirable (and in many cases unknown) to large proportions of blacks residents.

Apart from geography, it is the racial reasons that figure prominently in African American images of these communities. Blacks rated only six of the 23 communities as more undesirable than whites and for all but one the reasons have to do with race: between 46 percent and 83 percent of blacks who find South Boston, Dearborn, Warren, Troy, and Glendale undesirable give a racial reason. Since the African American population is between .5 and 2 percent in these five communities, it might be tempting to conclude that blacks find these communities undesirable because there are so few of “their own kind” or because they do not like communities with “too many” of “the other kind.” This would be consistent with the neutral ethnocentrism argument, but there is considerable evidence contradicting this interpretation.

First, other communities with equally small proportions of African Americans were not viewed with equal disapproval (see Figure 1). Second, if the “own kind” interpretation is correct, we would expect a preponderance of responses like: “Too few black people. I want to be with people of similar cultural background.” But blacks rarely give this reason. Instead, as Table 2 shows, the vast majority of black respondents who find, for example, South Boston or Dearborn undesirable (82 and 72 percent, respectively), paint an image of racial intimidation,
prejudice, and discrimination. Respondents recounted personal experiences or stories they had heard about how the residents of South Boston and Dearborn would receive them:

Very prejudice there. I used to work there. They threw bricks at us. We had to run to avoid being hurt. Because I’m black and they don’t like blacks. My girlfriend and I were in a car and a very elderly white woman stopped and gave us a look—if looks could kill, we’d be dead.

Only because of past practices of Dearborn. The people there are prejudice; even the Mayor. He didn’t want any blacks in Dearborn. I know I wouldn’t move to Dearborn if someone gave me a house there.

What it is with Dearborn is that they don’t like black people.

Just as we asked whether whites’ concerns about crime were grounded in reality, we need to ask the same question of blacks’ concerns about racial hostility and discrimination. Unfortunately, independent “objective” data on a community’s racial climate—such as incidence levels of racial discrimination—are not systematically gathered. However, one piece of evidence can be brought to bear. Much later in the MCSUI questionnaire, all respondents were asked: “if a black family moved into [Community Name], do you think they would be welcome, or do you think that the people already living there would be upset?” The percentage reporting that the community residents would be “upset” can be treated as another measure of racial climate—admittedly still perceptual, but nevertheless, independent of the results reported in Table 2 (which are based on the open-ended responses of just those African Americans who rated the community as undesirable). For the five communities with the highest level of mentions of racial prejudice in the open-ended responses (South Boston, Dearborn, Warren, Glendale, and Troy), an average of 76% of the total African American sample said the current residents of these communities would be “upset” (compared to 42% for the remaining 18 communities). These communities’ reputations for hostility toward African Americans are also widespread among whites: an average of 60 percent of whites said the current residents of these five communities would be upset at the arrival of a black family (compared to 25% for the other 18 communities). Though not an ideal comparison, these results provide some independent validity to the racial climate concerns expressed in the open-ended answers.

To be sure, not all predominantly white communities have this reputation and if the numbers of such communities in a metropolitan area are small, their effect on overall patterns of residential segregation will be slight. But the examples of Dearborn and South Boston vividly illustrate the pervasiveness and tenaciousness of a racially hostile community reputation. The future of such places as segregated communities seems secure.

**Discussion and Conclusion**

The goal of this analysis was to explore what could be learned about racial residential preferences by examining white and black subjective perceptions of actual communities in their metropolitan area. The data show that African Americans and whites do not view the same communities in the same way. These results run counter to Logan and Collvers’ (1983) conclusion that community reputations reflect a “shared social consensus”; rather, the results for these 23 communities suggest that this consensus can break down along racial lines. And, even where overall undesirability evaluations are similar, scratching the surface for the reasons underlying the ratings uncovers large racial differences and paints a complex picture of the reasons people give to explain their preferences. Indeed, the patterns suggest that the answer to the question of whether preferences are driven by race, class, or neutral ethnocentrism, is not straightforward.

First, the analysis argues against the conclusion that blacks find undesirable any community in which they would be in the numerical minority. To the contrary, blacks rated virtually
all of the communities we asked about—including some with just a tiny proportion of African Americans—as more desirable than whites did; and, indeed, in many cases such communities were considered highly desirable. This result qualifies the conclusion of some that blacks prefer only “50–50” neighborhoods, and instead lends credence to a more flexible view of African American preferences suggested by recent studies, (e.g., Charles 2001; Krysan and Farley 2002). In the present study, if the “ideal” 50–50 neighborhood is taken at face value, then black desirability ratings of Baldwin Hills (which comes closest to a 50–50 neighborhood) should be substantially more desirable than, for example, Culver City (which is only 10% African American). But both communities are considered very—or somewhat—desirable by the vast majority of Los Angeles African Americans. Thus, these findings join the growing body of research that cautions against the conclusion that African Americans will find attractive only those neighborhoods with a 50–50 racial composition.\(^\text{13}\)

In addition, the analysis draws attention to the importance of a community’s racial climate—that is, perceptions of whether African Americans will be met with hostility, discrimination, or prejudice, in a particular community. Studies using hypothetical neighborhoods—and even those using factorial designs incorporating other neighborhood characteristics—have overlooked the importance of this subjective perception. Researchers can, and have, interpreted African American preferences for mixed race communities in terms of racial numbers and, therefore, as evidence of neutral ethnocentrism. However, since African Americans asked about hypothetical neighborhoods that are overwhelmingly white are given no information about the area’s racial climate, this may be a mistaken attribution. Lacking such details, respondents may use racial numbers as a proxy for racial climate in shaping their answers. In this study, when African Americans were asked instead about actual communities—with actual histories of racial prejudice (or a lack thereof)—respondents made distinctions between those overwhelmingly white communities that have hostile reputations (e.g., South Boston and Dearborn) and those that do not (e.g., Newton). Overlooking the importance of racial climate may lead researchers to infer that reactions to predominantly white neighborhoods are expressions of “ethnocentrism” when they may instead be guesses on the part of respondents as to its racial climate.

It is important to consider one way that my choice of methods could contribute to a lack of support for the neutral ethnocentrism perspective. What people consider undesirable is just one part of the residential choice process. That is, in addition to understanding what makes people avoid particular communities, to fully understand residential patterns and preferences, we also need to understand what draws people to other areas. While we know which communities in this study were considered desirable, we do not know why. Thus, it is reasonable to expect that even if “neutral ethnocentrism” was an important motivation, we might not detect it with this question. That is, only when asking why people like a community might we hear such responses as: “I like Southfield because my neighbors share my culture.” Since we only asked why respondents did not like other communities, we may have under-estimated the role of neutral ethnocentrism.

For white respondents, there are no additional data to bring to bear on this question, but it is clearly an issue in need of additional research. However, a recent study (Krysan and Farley 2002) examined African Americans’ reasons for selecting a particular hypothetical neighborhood as most attractive (also using an open-ended survey question), and provides an additional piece of evidence calling into question the pervasiveness of “neutral ethnocentrism” as the key factor underlying African American residential preferences. Their study found that the most popular neighborhoods (selected by 73 percent of the respondents) were those where

\(^\text{13}\) To be sure, the hypothetical neighborhood and community desirability approaches are asking different questions: one asks if a community is a “desirable” place to live; the other asks for the “most attractive” neighborhood type. Each has different practical implications. However, understanding what African Americans deem desirable and undesirable is at least as important as knowing what is considered most attractive. This is particularly true since the “50–50” neighborhood is quite rare in this country (Cutler, Glaeser, and Vigdor 1999).
the racial composition was either 50–50 or approximately 70% African American. The two most common reasons given for these choices were a simple desire for a mixed neighborhood and references to the positive effects of integration on race relations; less than one percent mentioned cultural similarities. Only among the 20% of blacks who selected the all-black neighborhood as most attractive was there evidence of neutral ethnocentrism: seven percent mentioned cultural similarities, while 40% replied that they simply “preferred living with blacks.” Unfortunately, the latter response was not fully probed, so it is not clear if this preference is based on a desire to avoid whites, or an attraction to blacks. But, at most, the neutral ethnocentrism perspective appears to characterize about 10% of the African American respondents.

Turning to white preferences, one of the pressing debates is whether they are driven by race or race-associated (often class-based) concerns. Clearly, studies of residential mobility highlight the undesirability of poor neighborhoods and the movement away from them (e.g., South and Crowder 1997). Specific to racial residential segregation, the issue of social class has appeared most frequently in response to the question of whether racial differences in social class result in racial residential segregation. The bulk of the evidence suggests that it does not play a large role (Denton and Massey 1988; Farley et al. 1994; Galster 1988; Massey and Denton 1993), though there is a recent exception (Clark and Ware 1997).

However, this paper emphasizes subjective perceptions and preferences and the degree to which they are shaped by social class considerations, rather than whether objective indicators of social class explain larger patterns of segregation. Perhaps the most clear-cut conclusion from the present study is that it is problematic to characterize the question of race versus class as “either/or.” To be sure, social class shapes respondent evaluations: to some degree, whites of different social classes (as measured by education) do view at least some of the communities in this study differently; and, at the aggregate level, the socioeconomic characteristics of our 23 communities appear to play some role in shaping their undesirability. For example, the wealthier communities of Troy and Newton are markedly more desirable among whites than the working class community of Taylor. At the same time, however, whites perceive Southfield, Decatur, and Baldwin Hills—which are both racially mixed and economically prosperous—as less desirable than their equally or even less prosperous—but largely white—counterparts. A strictly class-based interpretation does not apply to these results.

When asked directly to explain their preferences, the question of whether it is race or class is equally complex. While the results show support for class-associated issues, there is an important caveat. On the one hand, whites mentioned crime quite frequently, and this is consistent with Harris’ (2001) racial proxy hypothesis. However, whites appear to over-state concerns about crime when the community is racially mixed—a perception that may be fueled in part by racial stereotypes. Thus, in assessing the degree to which evaluations are shaped by race, in addition to explicit racial reasons, crime and other social class-related characteristics—if they are an outgrowth of negative racial stereotypes—ought to be included in this count. In short, these results call into question the assumption that racial proxy concerns, in the context of perceptions and preferences, are conceptually separate from pure race concerns (Harris 2001). Indeed, pure race concerns may be an important part of what is structuring some proxy concerns insomuch as, for example, racial stereotypes operate to inflate the sense that whites have of the degree to which these “proxies” are, in fact, reality based. The analysis in this paper is only suggestive on this point, and there is a need for creative methodologies that can unravel these distinctions.

Although data constraints limit the ability to draw strong conclusions about the entangled nature of race and crime in this study, at the same time, the assertion is bolstered by a growing body of evidence that race and racial prejudice shape thinking and discourse about crime in America more generally. These studies use a variety of methodological approaches to demonstrate how crime is permeated by racial issues in the United States, beyond just perceptions of crime. Such investigations include studies showing that whites’ support for
capital punishment and a harsher court system is shaped consistently and significantly by their racial attitudes (Johnson 2001; Peffley and Hurwitz 2002), survey experiments demonstrating that evaluations of black—but not white—offenders predicts support for punitive policies (Peffley and Hurwitz 2002); and a multi-method analysis arguing that “crime” carries implicit racial messages that subsequently shape voter sentiments in political campaigns (Mendelberg 2001).

Taken together, the results of this analysis of the reasons whites and African Americans give for their community undesirability ratings remind us that residential preferences do not exist in a vacuum. Indeed, preferences are just one part of a complex system of inter-relationships among preferences, prejudice, public policies, discrimination, economics and employment patterns that create an “American Apartheid” (Massey and Denton 1993). This paper highlights the ways in which these preferences may be both created by, and expressions of, this complex system.

For example, the prominence of concerns about racial hostility among African Americans suggests ways in which residential preferences cannot easily be separated from the persisting effects of racial discrimination. Inasmuch as African American preferences are partly a response to concerns and experiences with white hostility and discrimination, they cannot easily be disentangled. Without measures of the “objective” racial climate, we cannot be certain whether these concerns might be over-stated. However, because not all of the predominately white communities we asked about shared this reputation and perception, it appears that African Americans do not necessarily assume that a lack of other blacks in a community necessarily translates into a racially hostile community.

What do our findings about community evaluations say about the prospects for integration? In essence, the preferences of blacks, when taken together with those of whites, create problems for future integration. On the one hand, whites’ devaluation of middle class racially mixed neighborhoods is discouraging, though it is important to note that there are certainly some whites who would consider moving to such communities. As noted in the discussion of the demographic predictors (Table 1), whites with more education rated such communities more positively and so this population may sustain the racial mix of these communities. But, in general, these communities will have difficulty remaining integrated if their reputations deter large numbers of whites from considering them a desirable place to purchase or rent a house or apartment. That whites are also less familiar with mixed race communities, as indicated by the level of “don’t know” responding, also works against future integration.

The possibility of future integration in places like Dearborn, Glendale, Warren, and South Boston seems unlikely. Most blacks (and a small group of whites) are unlikely to want to move to these places in the face of the racial hostility that is personally experienced by some blacks, and widely known among most blacks. The analysis also suggested that African Americans with higher incomes were particularly averse to these kinds of neighborhoods. Overcoming both the image and reality in such communities leaves little room for optimism, particularly if the majority of blacks feel as this respondent does about Dearborn: “They are still racist. (Any other reasons?) Nothing going to change until hell freezes over.”

But other predominantly white communities lacking such hostility are better prospects for integration. For example, the desirability ratings of places like Newton, Norcross, and Marietta/Smyrna provides some optimism. Blacks and whites agree that these three communities are quite desirable. For whites in the case of Marietta/Smyrna and Norcross, these communities have not acquired the images of high crime rates generally associated with other racially-mixed communities. Similarly, Newton represents a community that is predominantly white, but has escaped untainted by an image of racial prejudice and hostility. Presumably

14. However, it is noteworthy that nearly one-third of blacks, in the case of the two Atlanta-area communities, did not know enough about the community to give it a rating. Thus, for Norcross and Marietta/Smyrna, we must add the caveat that substantially fewer black respondents are familiar with the communities and thus, less likely to consider moving there.
both African Americans and whites would consider moving into any of these communities. In the case of Newton, though, given its high housing costs, the agreement between blacks and whites on its desirability may have little practical utility with respect to future integration since most blacks and whites are unable to afford homes in this community. Marietta/Smyrna and Norcross, however, have housing values closer to the median for the metropolitan area and may be more realistic options for many residents.

This analysis was based on a non-random selection of 23 communities across four metropolitan areas. While the findings highlight the complexity of white and black reactions to living in communities with each other, this study does not provide information on the mix of these different types of neighborhoods within a metropolitan area: How many Dearborns are there? How many Southfields? How many Newtons? What proportion of communities has the reputations of Taylor and Troy? Answers to these questions would allow a more direct assessment of the implications of these findings for patterns of segregation in a metropolitan area. Unfortunately, the existing data are not up to that task. What these data do provide, however, are insights into the reasons underlying these preferences, thus offering a crucial backdrop for future studies seeking to make this more direct connection. The results provide texture and nuance to discussions of racial residential preferences, where earlier research has tended toward broad claims and assumptions by either ignoring the question of what forces create the observed pattern of preferences, or making assumptions without a basis in data, for what those forces are. Thus, this study sheds some light on the “whys” of residential preferences. The next step is to take these preferences—recognizing their complexity—and connect them to the decisions people make when looking for housing.

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15. It is important to note that the methodological problems involved in such an endeavor are substantial. For example, (1) respondent patience would be worn thin if they were asked to rate all possible communities; and (2) a random selection of communities would generate high rates of item non-response, since many respondents may be unfamiliar with many of the communities.
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