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The Illinois Institute for Rural Affairs (IIRA) works to improve the quality of life for rural residents by partnering with public and private agencies on local development and enhancement efforts.



**Western Illinois
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Differing Perceptions of External Environment: The Case of Ethnic Groups in the Midwest, Metro versus Nonmetro Region

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Introduction

This paper analyzes differences in beliefs among ethnic groups on issues such as healthcare, gun violence, and climate change. From an observer's standpoint, the environment facing everyone is the same. Is it possible, then, that people from different ethnic backgrounds could experience events differently?

We address this question, theoretically, using concepts from both cognitive and cultural psychology. Then, using survey data from Ipsos knowledge panel², we explore the question empirically. The empirical analysis is limited to the Midwest region³; differences in beliefs between metro and nonmetro residents are explored.

Theory

Cognitive psychology is concerned with how we gain knowledge about our world and use it to guide actions. The basic building blocks of cognitive psychology are: sensory receptors – receive inputs from the environment; effector units – produce responses; memory store – holds data, and central processor where mental activities like thinking occurs.

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² See,

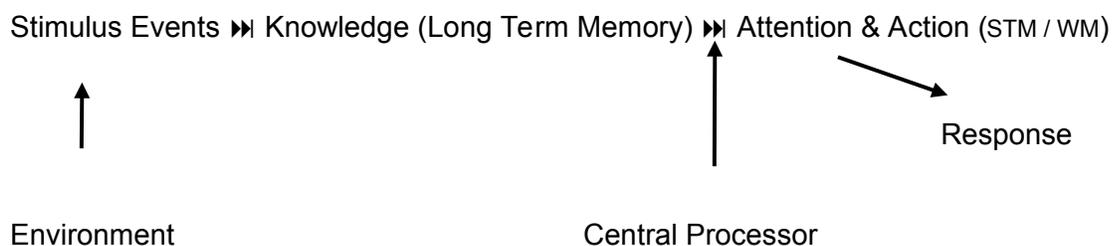
<https://www.ipsos.com/en-us/solutions/public-affairs/knowledgepanel>

³ The region includes 12 states: Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, Nebraska, North Dakota, Ohio, South Dakota, and Wisconsin.

Consider Figure 1, a simplified schematic of the human cognitive system⁴. An environmental-stimulus event is registered in the sensory buffers and undergoes recognition; recognition is the result of matching input to known patterns in memory, for example, here comes the (USPS) mail truck.

If we are motivated to pay attention to the mail truck, then its internal description is kept active, briefly, in short term memory (STM). The working memory (WM) maintains a model of the happenings in the immediate environment and updates the model as the environment changes; working memory guides the actions taken in response to the active contents of STM.

Figure 1: Principal Concepts of Perception and Memory



The cognitive system develops within a person’s life and this leads to the discussion about ethnicity⁵, the study area of cultural psychology. It is now well established in the literature that ethnicity⁶ shapes individual experience⁷. The answer to the question, “who are we”, (ethnicity) provides the blueprint of our world in working memory. Thus, our empirical analysis below is premised on the idea that

ethnic groups differ in their beliefs about happenings in the environment.

Methodology

To examine differences in beliefs about environmental events among ethnic groups, data were sourced from the “Axios-Ipsos Hard Truth Civil Rights Poll”, a telephone survey that was conducted among a random sample of the nation’s population, aged 18+⁸. The focus for this study was the data from the Midwest region. Table 1 shows the population numbers of the ethnic groups represented in the study, for both the metro and the nonmetro regions of the Midwest region; Appendix 1 is a listing of questions (measures) used in this paper.

⁴ See, Reisberg, D. (Ed.). (2013). The Oxford handbook of cognitive psychology. Oxford University Press.

⁵ In this paper, the terms race and ethnicity are used interchangeably.

⁶ Ethnicity is often labeled ‘culture’; it is defined as patterns of ideas and practices associated with social groupings such as nation of origin and religion.

⁷ See, for example, Heine, S.J. (2008). Cultural Psychology. New York: Norton.

⁸ Axios/Ipsos Hard Truths Civil Rights Poll: May 2021, Ipsos. Cornell University, Ithaca, NY: Roper Center for Public Opinion Research.

The theoretical discussion above suggests that there will be differences among the ethnic groups' responses, beliefs about environmental events. To decide whether the observed differences among the groups' responses are statistically significant, the chi-square statistic was computed. Formally, the null hypothesis,

$H_0: \theta_1 = \theta_2 = \dots = \theta_4$; was tested against the alternative:

$H_1: \theta_1, \theta_2, \dots, \theta_4$ are not equal; where θ_i is the proportion of responses from group i .

Since it is an exploratory research, the type 1 error (alpha) was set at 10%.

Table 1: Respondents' Ethnic Groups

Racial-Ethnic Group	Population Numbers in the Midwest, 18+ (Mil)	
	Metro	Nonmetro
Whites	26.6	9.9
Blacks	7.6	0.063
Hispanics	1.7	0.074
Asians	4.4	0.56

Findings

Topics that are of Most Concern

The respondents were asked to indicate from a list of 16 topics. As shown in Table 2, the most worrisome topic for metro Whites and Hispanics was “political extremism or polarization”; for Blacks and Asians in the metro regions, “racial injustice or discrimination” was the most worrying topic.

Asians and Blacks worry more about Covid-19 than any other ethnic group; this could be explained by the fact that more Asians

and Blacks die of Covid-19⁹. In contrast, Whites worry more about government budget and debt.

Perceptions about salience of topics also differ between the metro and the nonmetro populations; for example, rural residents rank “political polarization” as the most worrying of all the 16 topics whereas the metro population believes that “racial injustice and discrimination” is the most worrisome topic.

⁹ See the special report on Covid-19 in the Washington Post, November 20, 2020; available online <https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/2020/health/covid-race-mortality-rate/>.

Table 2. Most Worrying Topics (%)

(i) Metro Residents

Topic	White	Black	Hispanic	Asian	All Ethnicity
Covid-19	29	34	20	43	35
Healthcare	27	24	38	13	25
Crime or gun violence	26	38	28	23	28
Racial injustice	28	51	33	70	39
Political polarization	37	8	46	14	30
Government debt	32	5	-	4	23
Immigration	16	7	-	42	16
Education	8	11	42	21	13

(ii) Nonmetro Residents

Topic	White	Black	Hispanic	Asian	All Ethnicity
Covid-19	23	-	-	49	24
Healthcare	21	56	-	-	20
Crime or gun violence	26	100	-	55	28
Climate change	17	-	-	41	18
Political polarization	47	-	100	-	45
Government debt	28	-	100	12	28

Note: The sum of row and column percentages will not equal 100% since respondents were allowed to choose multiple topics; see Table 1 for group population numbers.

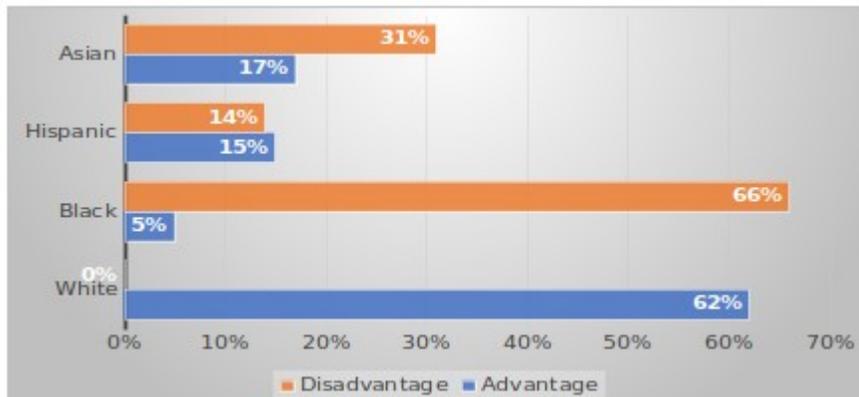
Beliefs about the status of one’s Race

Although we did not differentiate between race and ethnicity, extant literature on the topic¹⁰ suggests that categorizing a person as a racial group draws

attention to the difference in the power positions among her group and other groups. Thus, asking a minority, nonwhite, whether her race gives an advantage or disadvantage in America should elicit mostly a “disadvantage” response. Figure 2 confirms this assertion; none of the whites mentioned their race as a disadvantage. The views were similar across both the metro and the nonmetro regions.

¹⁰ See for example, Fredrickson, G. M. (2002). *Racism: A short history*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Figure 2: Race: Advantage or Disadvantage?



Note: Chi-square test results: critical value = 6.251

Beliefs about the News Media

Table 3 shows that there is a general perception among the ethnic groups that

the news media do not look out for people like them; the belief is much stronger in the nonmetro.

Table 3: How well does the news media look out for people like you? (unit %)

(i) Metro

	White	Black	Hispanic	Asian	All
Very well	0	2	0	13	2
Somewhat well	34	38	35	36	34
Not very well	30	26	65	28	33
Not well at all	36	31	0	24	31

(ii) Nonmetro

	White	Black	Hispanic	Asian	All
Very well	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%
Somewhat well	31%	0%	0%	40%	31%
Not very well	21%	100%	0%	40%	23%
Not well at all	48%	0%	100%	20%	46%

Beliefs about the Police

Plenty of news stories suggest that the police are viewed negatively by

minorities.¹¹ This is true for this study; the nonwhite minority does not believe that the police look out for people like them (Table 4).

Table 4: How well does the police look out for people like you? (unit %)

(i) Metro

	White	Black	Hispanic	Asian	All
Very well	35	3	0	10	25
Somewhat well	62	20	82	44	54
Not very well	0	35	18	40	11
Not well at all	3	35	0	6	9

(ii) Nonmetro

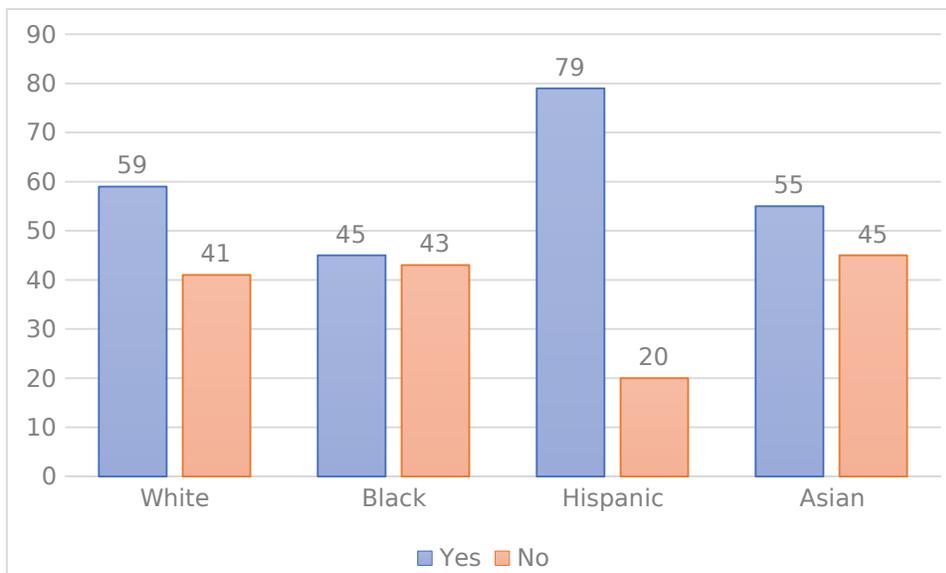
	White	Black	Hispanic	Asian	All
Very well	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%
Somewhat well	33%	42%	40%	40%	36%
Not very well	31%	26%	60%	30%	31%
Not well at all	36%	32%	0%	30%	33%

¹¹ See, for example, <https://apnews.com/article/politics-violence-race-and-ethnicity-racial-injustice-death-of-george-floyd-b74d3005500397c850ab3c116cf69ea0>

Finally, when asked whether the respondent has personally taken any actions to better understand racial

perceptions in the nation, most of the groups stated “yes”; the exception was the Black ethnic group (Figure 3).

Figure 3: In the past year, have you personally taken any actions to better understand racial issues ...



Summary and Conclusion

This paper is about people living geographically side by side, yet socially and politically dwelling in different spheres. This paper has highlighted some ideas and practices of the four prominent ethnic groups in the nation: White, Black, Hispanic, and Asian.

In general, the nonwhite minority population in the nation believes that they are disadvantaged in life; they rank racial injustice and discrimination as the most worrying topic. Furthermore, the nonwhite minority groups harbor negative attitude towards the police.

Research has shown that ethnicity is salient in the society and will influence psychological experience – thoughts, feelings, and actions (see our theoretical discussion above). Therefore, it is suggested that community leaders highlight race / ethnicity as a source of pride and motivation; not as a source of prejudice and discrimination.

Appendix I

Q1. Which three of the following topics do you find the most worrying?

- COVID-19/coronavirus
- Healthcare
- Crime or gun violence
- Climate change
- Unemployment
- Racial injustice and discrimination
- Political extremism or polarization
- Government budget and debt
- Domestic terrorism
- Social inequality
- Immigration
- Taxes
- Education
- Opioid or drug addiction
- Natural disasters
- Foreign conflicts
- Other
- None of these
- Skipped

Q2. Do you think your race gives you an advantage or disadvantage in America?

- Advantage
- Disadvantage
- Neither an advantage nor disadvantage
- Don't know
- Skipped

Q3. How well, if at all, do the following look out for people like you?

The police

The news media

- Very well
- Somewhat well
- Not very well
- Not well at all
- Skipped

Q23. In the past year, have you personally taken any actions to better understand racial issues in America?

- Yes
- No
- Skipped