



# Educational Differences among Members of U.S. Catholic Religious Institutes: Evidence for Assessing Racial-Ethnic Perspectives on Racism

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## Abstract

A growing body of theological and social science research is examining basic problems of racism within the Catholic Church. The author investigates whether educational differences among new members of Catholic religious institutes vary by race or ethnicity and whether this is indicative of racial or ethnic discrimination. The literature review examines the belief systems that underpin what people believe about the causes of inequality. Blacks and Hispanics are more likely to believe that social structures cause inequality. Whites are more likely to believe that individual efforts cause inequality. The author's data come from a U.S. national survey of new members of Catholic religious institutes. Blacks and Hispanics had lower levels of education than Whites or Asians when they entered their institute (time one). They also had lower levels of education when they took the survey (time two). However, there are no significant differences between Blacks and Hispanics in educational level acquired as a member of their institute compared to Whites. This article explains the subtlety of racism in religious institutes and suggests that religious institutes recruit more people of color.

**Keywords** Religion · Race/ethnicity · Education · Individual merit · Inequality · Racism · Catholicism

Only a few Black men had access to the Catholic priesthood in the nineteenth century, and because Black women were excluded from Catholic religious institutes,<sup>1</sup> they began their own (Phelps 2000). This type of exclusion in the Catholic Church exemplified the exclusion of Blacks and people of color in American society in general at the time.

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<sup>1</sup>Groups of vowed, Catholic religious men and women have been variously referred to as “orders” (which properly applies only to orders that are cloistered), “communities” (which may also apply to local monasteries, convents, or houses within a larger entity), and “congregations” (which may be confused with a local parish). To avoid this confusion, I usually use the term “institute” to refer to all autonomously governed orders/congregations/societies of religious men and women who profess canonical vows (Johnson et al. 2014, p 7).

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Though the disparities are different today, “inequality is pervasive and persistent in the United States,” including lower educational attainment and experiences of poorer health (Edgell and Tranby 2007, p. 263).

This article investigates the question whether educational differences among members of Catholic religious institutes in the United States vary by race or ethnicity and whether this is significant and indicative of racial or ethnic discrimination. In the 1930s, about 6 of 162 Catholic institutions of higher education accepted Blacks, and about 8 of 368 Catholic nursing schools accepted blacks (Connelly 2007, p. 817). Well into the 1960s, individual “white, Catholic racists” actively sought support from Catholic bishops for segregation in cities throughout the north and south (Pasquier 2016, p. 24). “Ecclesial institutions themselves adopted the White supremacist ideology” and only with “the emergence of formal Black liberation theology, within the context of the Civil Rights Movement, provided a theological interpretation of Black people’s quest for liberation” (Phelps 2000, p. 673). There were false starts. For example, after five National Black Catholic Congresses were held in the nineteenth century, it took nearly one hundred years for the next one to meet in 1987 (McClory 2002).

This article answers the research question by using a nationwide survey of new members of Catholic religious institutes. The literature review examines basic problems of racism within the Catholic Church and its struggle to confront it. Christian theologians have done considerable work on this topic, but this is less true for social scientists. Therefore, to help explain the social context of racism in religious institutes, I incorporate articles from reputable national periodicals in the literature review. Then, I present the methods, results, and discussion. Critical race theory helps me frame the wider problem of racism, and the theory of meaning generation in social psychology helps me interpret the findings.

## Critical race theory

Critical race scholars point out that there is only one race, the human race, although we have divided humanity into different categories of skin color, which impacts society in negative ways (Bonilla-Silva 2006). Furthermore, theologians have defined racism as the “attitude, action, or institutional structure or any social policy that subordinates persons or groups because of their color” (Hearn 2009, p. 275). Applied in the context of understanding racism in Catholic schools, scholars write about the dimension of White privilege found there: “European American social values, beliefs, and norms. . . work to perpetuate and sustain the power and privilege of a white society through the marginalization of other non-white groups” (Burke and Gilbert 2016, p. 531).

Institutions, however, need a convincing rationale to explain away racism. This is accomplished through the logic of individual merit and achievement, i.e., individualism, which forms a structural understanding of racial inequality that does not see “structures” as a cause of racial inequality (Edgell and Tranby 2007; Hearn 2009; Massingale 2000). This belief is pervasive in religious denominations, evangelical theology, and American society in general (Emerson 2000; Hearn 2009). Catholic bishops express the logic of individual merit and achievement when they write about *personal* racial prejudice, an idea that masks or, worse, denies endemic cultural and structural patterns of racism (Massingale 2000). One study showed that courses dealing with racism taken by White Catholic university students may actually reinforce racism if these beliefs are not dealt with (Reed-Bouley and Kyle 2015).

## Black theologians and racism

In the early twentieth century, influential Catholic writers did not write theology in a way that diminished the fear that White Catholics had toward Blacks but rather justified racially prejudiced ideas and actions that maintained social inequality (Moore 2008). During the Civil Rights Movement, White Catholics “were blinded by their fear and their desire for security and economic stability,” ignoring Catholic social teachings to end segregation and racism (Phelps 2000, p. 684). Today, Black theologians view White superiority ideologies as perspectives that are against God’s will and that must be uprooted from cultural and socioeconomic structures (Massingale 2000; Phelps 2000).

These superiority complexes have real negative effects in the Black community. Describing the social-psychological effects of racism on Blacks, Cone wrote, “Blacks kill each other daily at the slightest provocation because we have internalized the hate Whites have toward us” (2000, p. 742). The accumulation of these experiences influenced leaders like Malcolm X to conclude, “All of us are black first and everything else second” (Cone 2000, p. 745). This is the struggle of African Americans who are bombarded by the message of America’s dominant race that they are unwanted, unappreciated, and unloved (Brown 2003).

## The Catholic Church and racism

Militant Black Catholics in the 1960s were more likely than their Protestant counterparts to transform their energy for social change into individual social mobility in the 1970s (Hunt and Hunt 1977). Similarly, lower-income Black Catholics who affiliated with primarily White congregations held more to personal action rather than collectivist action to change the conditions of poverty and inequality (Hunt and Hunt 1977). This emphasis on solving problems individually has helped some Black Americans to reduce the effects of discrimination in their own lives through higher education, but it is unlikely to reduce the macro-level poverty rate among all races in the lower classes (Sakamoto and Wang 2015).

The Catholic Church’s response to internal racism has been primarily segregationist. For example, the Church opened offices of Black Catholic Ministry in dioceses across America. But there was little intra-agency cooperation, demonstrating that “racism was not a priority in the diocese” (McClory 2002, p. 13). This sentiment was echoed by Black clergy who saw the Church as being driven by social change rather than the institution taking charge to cause social change (Allen Jr. 1997).

In the field of higher education, Black theologians wrote that U.S. bishops did not want to offend Whites in their documents on racism, so they described U.S. culture and society as “mainstream” or “prevailing” rather than “dominated” by Whites (Massingale 2000). Because Black theologians observe and write about White “domination” of U.S. culture and society, White theologians have “legitimately” criticized Black theologians on this issue by quoting the episcopal documents, taking an attitude of intellectual or moral superiority (Phelps 2000).

## Asian Americans in the Catholic Church

Studies describe Asian Catholics, whatever their level of sociocultural assimilation and participation, as longing for full acceptance by White Catholics but not receiving it (Hoang

2008). Asians' experience of racism is different than that of Black Americans because it is rooted in U.S. wars and exclusionary, restrictive immigration laws (Goto 2017). They are exposed to the White superiority complex when on occasion they are told that at least they are not Black (Goto 2017, p. 41). Rather than reacting negatively to these experiences, many Asian Americans develop a strong ethnic identity in their youth that emphasizes academic achievement (Owens 2014). This is reflected in the increasing number of vocations among Asian Americans to priestly and religious life, which gives Asian Americans opportunities to own their place in the Church and to be a bridge for Asian American Catholics (Hoang 2008, p. 27).

## Hispanic Americans in the Catholic Church

Hispanic/Latino Americans have a long and divergent history in the United States, including during colonial and post-colonial times when Florida was under Spanish rule or when nearly one-third of the current boundary of the United States was Mexican land on both sides. Moreover, Hispanic immigrants have worked alongside African Americans in the Deep South since the turn of the twentieth century (Rodríguez 2012). The bracero program from 1942 to 1964 legalized hundreds of thousands of undocumented workers from Mexico, and businesses drew on their labor as a new kind of exploitation similar to slavery (Rodríguez 2004). Latino scholar Marti (2015) writes, "The Latino community in the United States is astonishingly diverse in terms of race, ethnicity, age dynamics, social class, level of acculturation, citizenship or legal status, and country of origin" (p. 149). In the Catholic Church, Hispanic vocations are minimal, which has been attributed to the effects of the second-class citizenship that they experience in the Church (Jones 2000). This second-class social position has been reinforced in U.S. politics since the presidential campaign of 2016, with White and Hispanic Catholics largely voting for the opposite candidates (Edgell 2017).

## The struggle today

After the Second Vatican Council, a "comprehensive plan to address racism never materialized in the church" (Pasquier 2016, p. 24). From the 1960s until today, Whites in the Catholic Church have generally responded to racism with silence (Largen 2015). Silence is a passive-aggressive tool, and it has contributed to the muting of collective action within Black and Hispanic congregations (Phelps 2000). The U.S. bishops' 2018 document on racism, *Open Wide Our Hearts*, defines racism as a *personal* problem that requires conversion of the individual so that institutional reforms can be carried out on the local or national level (United States Conference of Catholic Bishops 2018). Their document describes experiences of racism, which is admirable, but avoids writing about a "dominant" culture or offering solutions that go beyond calls for personal or individual conversion. Furthermore, they do not advocate national policies to confront racism such as affirmative action.

Catholic leadership that acquiesces to racist ideology affects vocations in the Church. Most individuals in Catholic religious institutes have had some Catholic school education, an indication of the importance of this experience for vocations (Bendyna and Gautier 2009). Henrie Monteith Treadwell, the first Black woman to enroll at the University of South Carolina, credits her Catholic education as giving her the discipline and confidence

to stay focused on injustice (Braden 2003). Her experience shows that Catholic education can impart a social-structural view of racism, though this cannot be generalized to wider Catholic education and even less so to the cultures within Catholic religious institutes. The potential for change is there, however. Sociologists conclude that “religious institutions and religious subcultures have a formative effect on how Americans understand racial inequality” (Edgell and Tranby 2007, p. 284).

## Data and research method

The data used for this study came from the 2009 “New Members Vocation Study” by the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA). The study asked questions about educational levels that allow me to explore my research question regarding whether differences in educational levels is indicative of racism within religious institutes. The National Religious Vocations Conference (NRVC) commissioned CARA to conduct a survey of all major religious institutes of the Catholic faith in the United States (Bendyna and Gautier 2009). The survey was conducted in 2008 and 2009. The study’s general goal was to gain an understanding of religious life and religious vocations in the United States (Bendyna and Gautier 2009). The NRVC desired to “identify and understand the characteristics, attitudes, and experiences” of those coming into religious life today and to highlight “characteristics and practices of the religious institutes that are successfully attracting new candidates and retaining new members” (Bednarczyk 2009).

Through CARA, I obtained permission from the NRVC to use the data for this study. Researchers conducted two surveys by mail. The first survey was sent to the superiors of religious institutes in 2008; this single-informant survey contained 145 items. The survey asked religious superiors to provide names of individuals in initial formation (including candidates/postulants, novices, temporarily professed) and those in final or perpetual vows since 1993. A total of 3965 names were collected. These individuals were then sent a survey of 190 items by mail in the fall of 2008 and winter of 2009. Numerous completed surveys had to be excluded for various reasons, including individuals who were based outside the United States or who had transferred from a religious institute that was not one of those identified in the first survey (Johnson et al. 2014, pp. 145–146). The final data set that I received had 1557 respondents. The survey asked both demographic and attitudinal questions.

## Measures

### Educational levels at time one and time two

Education and income are strongly correlated, but there is no data on income levels for individuals in this survey. Because of the respondent’s vow of poverty, this survey did not ask about individual income level, but the survey did ask two questions about their educational level. The survey asked the respondents for (1) their educational level when they entered their religious institute and (2) their current, actual level of education. These two variables provided the information that I needed to construct two new variables, educational level at “time one” (entrance) and “time two” (actual time of survey). The possible answers to both questions were “high school or less” (1), “some college” (2), “bachelor’s degree” (3), “master’s degree” (4),

“doctoral degree” (5), and “other” (6). Some respondents wrote in “other” at time one (less than 1.5%), and some answered “other” at time two (less than 1%). Those who answered “other” at time two were given the same level of education that they answered at time one. If nothing was written in time two, they were assigned the same level they wrote in time one. If respondents wrote “other” at both times, they were dropped from this study.<sup>2</sup>

### Change in educational levels

Change in the level of education is measured by subtracting the time one educational level from the time two educational level. A new variable is created, “educational change,” which measures the additional level that the respondent earned once he or she entered his or her institute. A majority of respondents had no educational change. Thirty-nine respondents earned an additional degree at or below their time one educational level. For example, some members entered their religious institute with a doctorate and then earned an additional master’s degree to be appointed as an administrator of a high school, university, or hospital. These respondents were assigned one number higher in time two than the degree that they had in time one in order to take into account the additional degree that they earned after joining the institute.

### Race-ethnicity

The race-ethnicity variable was constructed from the survey question “What best describes your racial or ethnic background?” Possible answers were “African American/Black/African” (1), “Asian/Pacific Islander” (2), “Caucasian/White/Anglo” (3), “Hispanic/Latino(a)” (4), “Native American/American Indian” (5), and “other” (6). A fairly large number of individuals (about 2.8%) identified as “other.” The characteristics of “other” may influence the model, so I kept this race-ethnic category. Additionally, I combined “other” with the category of Native Americans (5) because only four members self-identified as Native American and I did not want to exclude these observations in the overall analysis.

### Control variables: Gender, final vows, foreign-born, and age

**Gender** Males were coded (1) and females (0). Current CARA statistics show that women make up 75% of all religious individuals and men 25% (CARA 2015).

**Final vows** The survey asked “What is your current status in your religious institute?” The possible answers were “candidate/postulate” (1), “novice” (2), “temporary vows/commitment” (3), and “final/perpetual vows/commitment” (4). The first three answers were coded “0” and the fourth answer was coded “1.” The first three statuses within religious orders are temporary; these represent a period of formation and “probation.” It lasts an average of eight years, depending on the institute (Bendyna and Gautier 2009, p. 42).

**Foreign-born** The survey asked, “Where you born in the U.S.?” Those born in the United States were coded (0) and those born elsewhere were coded (1). The greater percentage of foreign-born members are among the racial-ethnic minorities (see below).

<sup>2</sup> Readers may contact the author for further details about how the author constructed these variables or if they have any questions or comments.

**Age** The survey asked the respondent's year of birth, which I then subtracted from the year of the survey to form a continuous variable for age. Because some of the cells would be too small if age were subdivided into categories, age was a continuous variable.

## Sample size and statistical method

Of the 1557 respondents in the data set, 55 were deleted because the change in educational level could not be determined. Other observations had to be dropped because of no response in any of the following categories: gender (7), status as temporary or final vowed (13), birth in the United States (8), and age (7). This left a total sample of 1467 respondents. See Table 1 for a description of the statistics.

Tables 2 and 3 use multinomial logistic regression to analyze the associations. This regression model allows for different cell sizes, producing a coefficient that can be transformed into a relative risk ratio. Relative risk ratios are read similarly to odds ratios. This statistical procedure is particularly helpful because of the wide variation in cell numbers in these data.

Table 2 analyzes the associations between respondents' educational levels at time two and the independent variables. The dependent variable has four categories. I combined the two lower categories, high school or less and some college. The largest group, those with master's degrees, is the reference category in the dependent variable.

Table 3 analyzes the associations between respondents' change in educational levels and the independent variables. There are four levels, and the largest group, no change in educational level, is the reference category in the dependent variable.

## Results

The U.S. population in 2010, after the CARA survey was completed, was 63.7% White Americans, 16.3% Hispanic or Latino Americans, 12.2% Black Americans, and 4.7% Asian

**Table 1** Descriptive characteristics, CARA new vocations survey 2009 (N = 1467)

Variables	Mean	Minimum	Maximum	SD
Educational Level at Entrance	2.881	1	5	.998
Educational Level at Time of Survey	3.470	1	5	.917
Educational Level at Time of Survey (used in Table 2)	2.507	1	4	.833
Change in Educational Level (calculated using 5 levels)	.597	0	3	.803
Gender: Male	.363	0	1	
Vows: Final	.637	0	1	
Race-Ethnicity				
African American/Black/African	.028	0	1	
Asian/Pacific Islander	.092	0	1	
Caucasian/White/Anglo	.766	0	(reference)	
Hispanic/Latino(a)	.085	0	1	
Other/Native American	.029	0	1	
Foreign-Born	.192	0	1	
Age	41.825	19	81	12.488

SD standard deviation

**Table 2** Relative risk ratios at time two, multinomial logistic regression educational differences among members of Catholic Religious Institutes ( $N = 1467$ )

(Reference: MA Degree)	Some College or Less	BA Degree	PhD Degree or More
Gender male	0.178***	0.362***	1.332
Status of Vows final	0.401***	0.333***	0.691
Race-Ethnicity (White American)			
African American	3.097*	2.003+	0.000
Asian American	1.412	1.613+	1.317
Hispanic American	3.155***	1.271	0.455
Other Ethnicity	2.115+	0.972	1.579
Place of Birth foreign	1.251	0.792	1.000
Age in 2008 (continuous)	0.974***	0.965***	1.018*
Constant	2.027*	7.521***	0.093***
Log-Likelihood	-1584.8		
Adjusted $R^2 = 0.095$			

\*\*\*  $p < 0.001$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*  $p < 0.05$ , +  $p < 0.1$

Source: CARA New Members Survey 2009

Americans (U.S. Census Bureau 2010). Current population estimates put White Americans at 61.3% and estimate an additional 1% for each of the other groups (U.S. Census Bureau 2018). Comparing this racial-ethnic demographics with the survey, Catholic religious institutes in the United States have greater numbers of Whites and Asians, at 76.6% and 9.2% respectively, with much lower levels of Blacks and Hispanics, at 2.8% and 8.5% respectively. While it was widely reported when the study came out that 70% of new vocations had a bachelor's degree

**Table 3** Relative risk ratios from multinomial logistic regression change in educational level of members ( $N = 1467$ )

(Reference: No Change in Educational Level)	One Level	Two Levels	Three Levels
Gender male	1.901***	1.473*	1.934*
Status of Vows final	4.370***	7.580***	17.810***
Race-Ethnicity (White American)			
African American	0.741	2.649+	2.148
Asian American	1.753*	1.882	1.406
Hispanic American	1.475	1.953+	1.354
Other Ethnicity	2.578*	4.016**	1.408
Place of Birth foreign	0.623*	0.719	1.239
Age in 2008 (continuous)	0.975***	0.957***	0.966*
Constant	0.444***	0.198***	0.020***
Log-Likelihood	-1387.2		
Adjusted $R^2 = 0.077$			

\*\*\*  $p < 0.001$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*  $p < 0.05$ , +  $p < 0.1$

Source: CARA New Members Survey 2009

or higher (Bendyna and Gautier 2009; Smith 2016), the media did not mention that over 50% of Blacks and Hispanics had less than a bachelor's degree and that about 30% of Blacks entered the institute with a high school education or less.

It is also disconcerting that no Black respondent to the survey had earned a doctoral degree. However, after entering, about 20% more Blacks earned a master's degree, as did 25% more Hispanics. However, 30% more Whites and Asians earned a master's degree. At time two, it is encouraging that the percentage of Blacks with a high school education or less was reduced by half to about 15%. Nevertheless, this percentage was in the single digits for every other race-ethnicity at time two.

The relative risk ratios in Table 2 describe the associations between the level of education at time two and race-ethnicity, controlling for demographic characteristics. Blacks are about 210% (and Hispanics 216%) less likely to have completed college than Whites, which is to say that Whites are 210% more likely to have a master's degree than Blacks (and 216% for Hispanics). Asians have no statistical difference compared to Whites in these categories. Though marginally significant, Blacks (100%) and Asians (61%) are more likely to have a bachelor's degree than Whites, which is to say that Whites are 100% more likely to have a master's degree than Blacks (or 61% for Asians). Again, Whites are more likely to have a master's degree. Additionally, the model in Table 2 explains 9.5% of the variation in educational levels at time two.

An unexpected finding is the educational differences between men and women. Women, net of all controls, have lower educational levels than men at time two. For example, men are 82.2% less likely to have some college or less than a master's degree compared to women in these same educational categories. Likewise, men are 63.8% less likely to have a bachelor's degree than a master's degree compared to women in these educational categories. In other words, men are significantly more likely to hold higher degrees than women at time two.<sup>3</sup>

The other important detail in the survey is the number of foreign-born individuals. Nearly 60% of the African Americans in the survey, 82% of the Asians, 54% of the Hispanics, and about 6% of the Whites were foreign-born. Demographically, this means that people of color from foreign countries have helped raise the percentage of minorities in American Catholic religious institutes. The wider question is why Catholic religious institutes have failed to recruit more people of color from within the United States.

### Change in educational level

Table 3 describes the associations between changes in educational levels and race-ethnicity, controlling for demographic characteristics. The relative risk ratios describe the differences between no level of change in education and one, two, and three levels of change. Black respondents are no more likely to have one, two (marginally significant), or three levels of change than those with no level of change compared to Whites. It is possible that if there were more Blacks in the survey, the two-level change of Blacks that is marginally significant would become significant. Hispanic respondents have similar results.

Asian respondents differ in one category. They are 75% more likely than Whites to have one level of degree change than no degree level change. This could be because of the slightly greater number of Asians who entered with a lower level of education and then pursued higher education.

<sup>3</sup> In a separate analysis, this gender disparity existed at time one as well.

Although gender disparities were not part of my research question, Tables 2 and 3 identify an important area of concern for gender research. The results point to a potential problem of inequity between male and female religious institutes. In Table 3 at all levels of educational change compared to no level of change, men are more likely to have achieved higher levels of education than women. For example, men are 93.4% more likely to have three levels of change than no level of change compared to women. I will briefly discuss this finding in the section on future research since this may indicate significant structural socioeconomic differences and thus discrimination between male and female institutes. The model explains 7.7% of the total variation in the dependent variable.

## Discussion

Catholic religious institutes are part of American culture and society, so it is not surprising that Blacks and Hispanics have lower levels of education than Whites or Asians when they enter their institute and as they go through formation. Racism exists in the organizations that make up American society, including religious institutes. The purpose of this study was to examine whether educational differences between members of Catholic religious institutes indicated racial-ethnic discrimination. My research used the results of the 2009 New Members Survey (2009) conducted by CARA, a Catholic research organization that has a long history of conducting research on the Catholic Church. The survey was commissioned by the NRVC and was designed to better understand the kinds of men and women joining Catholic religious institutes. Members of these institutes take a vow of poverty, and so I used education to assess socio-economic differences among members. The questionnaire asked about the educational level of the respondents when they entered their institute (time one) and their actual level of education (time two) when the survey was taken. With these two answers, I was able to determine the change in the level of education for 1467 respondents.

The data showed that Blacks and Hispanics had lower levels of education at time one and time two compared to Whites or Asians. Could these disparities be evidence of structural problems related to racial disparities in Catholic religious institutes? First, the low number of minority vocations to religious institutes is a sign of a problem. For example, a separate study of Catholic Black and Hispanic youth described these youth as having a greater likelihood of seriously considering a religious vocation rather than White and Asian youths (Malcolm 1997). This does not show up in the racial demographics of religious institutes. Second, this suggests that religious institutes have not invested sufficient resources to fostering better relationships with American Black and Hispanic youth. Moreover, it is possible that religious institutes have failed to provide the types of mission, work, and lifestyle that Blacks and Hispanics aspire to.

Table 2 describes the associations between individuals at educational level time two (with master's degree as the reference category in the dependent variable), including control variables. The disparities continued to persist at time two except among Asian Americans. Table 3, analyzing change in individual educational levels, provides evidence that there were few differences between the races-ethnicities as to the amount of education that they received. These results are mixed. On the one hand, Blacks and Hispanics are given similar educational opportunities as measured by the levels of education achieved, which is positive. On the other hand, even though U.S. society already disadvantages these two groups, religious institutes appear not to make any extra effort to help them reach similar levels of education to Whites or

Asians. In other words, although Blacks and Hispanics advance at a similar pace as Whites, they still have less education than Whites overall. The evidence does not rule out problems of racism.

### Theory in social psychology

A helpful tool for explaining these problems comes from a social psychology theory that describes how people construct their perspectives of the world by attaching some kind of meaning to their experiences of people, things, and events (Hood et al. 2009). These attachments form a perspective. “In essence, people need to make sense out of the world in order to live; it must be made meaningful. When we turn to religion, we focus on higher-level cognitions and some understanding of ourselves and our relationship to others and the world” (Hood et al. 2009, p. 84).

Religious institutes are meaning-generating organizations. Each institute has a specific mission and charism—which is a perspective on the world that gives meaning to its members, who also share in its creation. What happens when an unaffiliated individual approaches an institute to become a member? Initially, candidates are psychologically evaluated to determine whether they are sufficiently compatible with the institute’s way of life (Malony 2000). When Blacks and Hispanics apply for admission to an institute, they come from a lower social position than Whites or Asians. This means that it is likely that Blacks and Hispanics have different perspectives on racial inequality than Whites and Asians. As mentioned earlier, African Americans and Hispanics are “more likely than others to believe that prejudice and discrimination is an important explanation for African American inequality” (Edgell and Tranby 2007, p. 283). For example, if Blacks and Hispanics perceive inequality, poverty, and race from a structural point of view and the leaders of religious institutes view these problems from a personalist or nonstructural point of view, how long does it take before one or the other changes their perspective or the religious institute expels nonconforming individuals?

One question on the survey provides evidence of monitoring for potential racial discord. The survey asked, “How much did these influence your decision to enter your religious institute?” and one possible answer was “The racial/ethnic background of members.” Whites selected “very much” at a rate of less than 3%, but 20% of Blacks selected “very much.” This may indicate that some Black applicants are more aware than White applicants of the potential problem of differing perspectives toward social problems such as inequality within religious institutes.

### Perspectives on racial inequality

The Catholic Church has advanced considerably in regard to race relations since the civil rights struggles of the 1960s, as demonstrated by the U.S. bishops’ 2018 letter on racism (United States Conference of Catholic Bishops 2018). Nevertheless, even this recent document demonstrates an enduring division concerning how individuals and institutions view social problems and racial inequality in particular. One of the struggles confronting the Catholic Church as much as U.S. society is the perspective of the dominant culture toward social problems. Whites downplay the role of socioeconomic structures in racial inequality, and this plays out in the perspective of Whites as to the meaning of their vocation and vocations in general. For example, young Catholics entering a religious institute look for “a church filled with the mystery of Christ, a Church of sacraments and grace that has a message of a salvation

beyond the obtaining of rights and peace in this world” (Dilanni 1998, p. 10). This perspective that splits the mystery of Christ from social justice is a spiritual way of stating one’s support for personal efforts to overcome and resolve social problems rather than communal efforts to change social structures.

Both Black theologians and social scientists challenge this point of view within the Catholic Church. Racism is a problem that needs to be resolved through efforts to change social structures as much as through individuals changing their thinking. There is sparse evidence that non-Black theologians and religious institutes have begun to incorporate the sociological and theological perspective of structural racism into their work (Massingale 2000). Indeed, the ideals of peace and salvation within the Catholic Church are challenged by the U.S. social class structure that foments injustice, oppression, and exploitation. Young people of color could be inspired to join religious institutes when it means that they will be working to alleviate their family members from grinding poverty and racial inequality while at the same time living out a spiritual life focused on the mystery of Christ and the sacraments in the Church.

### Limitations of this study

One of the quantitative limitations of this study is the actual number of new members who completed the survey. As a mail-in survey that relied on the information provided by the heads of the religious institutes, a number of religious institutes may not be represented if they did not send in the survey or provide names of new members. This may have affected the number of people of color in the survey. Even with the low numbers, however, there was sufficient power to find significant associations.

Because the survey is a self-report survey, it could be that the responses are actually different from what the participants actually have done. Respondents were asked to give their best initial response on the survey. Educational levels, for example, depend upon truthful answers. Another example is that several respondents did not identify with a particular race-ethnicity, and the category of “other” weakened the power of the other categories.

Another limitation is that this survey was commissioned by a religious organization representing religious institutes. The survey had other aims that did not include my research question on racism. Even with this limitation, it is well known that religious institutes have suffered racial tensions, and in light of the current turmoil in race relations in the United States, these problems are unlikely to go away. By looking at educational levels and their changes over time, the survey provided a way to write about these problems and to provoke further discussion.

### Future directions in research

An unexpected finding that I could not develop in this article but that would be of great interest if it were examined is that women were more likely to have significantly lower levels of education at time two (and time one) and to have significantly less increases in the levels of education compared to men. There is an impression within the Catholic world that religious sisters receive advanced degrees at a similar rate to religious brothers and priests, and academic and popular articles on women’s achievements support this idea (Black et al. 2016; Stango 2009). The evidence in this survey suggests a story of structural inequality, i.e., unequal

resources, between male and female religious institutes. Further research could determine whether this is a particular problem of women's religious institutes, a wider problem within the Church, a deeper U.S. societal problem of gender inequality, or a combination of these factors.

Another area for future research is to examine how religious institutes can increase the numbers of Blacks and Hispanics. Although many religious institutes may believe that they have looked at all the known strategies to attract new members, I conclude that there are more avenues to examine. For example, future research could provide valuable information for religious institutes about how to listen to sociological perspectives on racism and racial inequality from their members. Understanding racism and diminishing its influence within religious institutes may increase the numbers of Black and Hispanic members. Finally, healthier religious institutes may contribute to better race relations in towns and cities across America.

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