

The University of Chicago

Contemporary Respectability Politics:
How Black Chicagoans Navigate the
Respectability Politics

By

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Introduction: Contemporary Respectability

Jimmy B.: How much of this is actual social behaviors versus conditioned behavior based on being... like a subservient class basically of people right. I don't think white people do this policing as much as other communities do because they didn't have to. So I'm sure that that again ladders up to a sociological like context but I think that it's just interesting. It's like maybe self-policing is like a self-preservation type of thing.

What does it mean to “self-police” as a Black American in a country that continues to view Blackness through the lens of deviance, danger, and deficiency?¹ Jimmy B. is from Oklahoma but moved to Chicago little over a year ago after graduating with a bachelor’s degree in economics. The story he tells in his interview is one of struggling to find acceptance from his peers and expanding his social network outside of “performative code-switching” him and 9 other black Americans in the Chicago area in this research project tell an overarching narrative of navigating respectability politics with the perception of black folks in America under the white gaze.

For over a century, respectability politics has operated as both a shield and a constraint within Black communities, acting as a strategic posture taken up to protect, elevate, or control the image of Black life under the ever-present gaze of white America. Originally coined by Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, the politics of respectability described how Black women, particularly within the Black Baptist church, advocated for moral behavior and traditional values as a form of racial uplift. Respectability politics continues to be studied and is an ongoing conversation today as to what it means and how exactly it manifests within the black community

¹ Entman, Robert M., and Andrew Rojecki. *The black image in the white mind: Media and race in America.* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press), 2007.

in America. Since then, respectability has evolved from a moral guidepost to a contested terrain of intra-group judgment, generational tension, and sociopolitical strategy.²

This project explores how the framework of respectability manifests in contemporary black Americans. It finds that respectability politics manifests even in young college educated black Americans. Of particular interest in studying this group, is the relevance of which respectability politics is still being discussed at the scholarly level at a time when the concept can be seen in the black population.

Through a mixed-methods approach combining surveys and in-depth interviews with Black residents in the Chicago area, this research asks: How do contemporary Black Americans understand respectability in their everyday lives, and how does this understanding influence their perceptions of group identity, behavior, and political engagement? In doing so, this project aims to contribute a fresh qualitative perspective by combining new approaches like quantitative analysis, while also foregrounding the voices and experiences of Black Americans themselves. The results of this project indicate that respectability politics encompasses all demographics of black Americans, particularly those young and educated, despite their self-awareness.

Literature Review

Respectability as a framework for Black American in-group interactions was first described by Evelyn Higginbottom to describe a reaction from black Baptist women throughout the 1900s: who were ostracized by other black women for “negative practices and attitudes among their own people” with these practices including “lower-class idleness and vice” and “high society’s hedonism and materialism”.³ Higginbottom’s identifies perceived stereotypes that

² Tehama Lopez Bunyasi, & Candis Watts Smith. “Do All Black Lives Matter Equally to Black People? Respectability Politics and the Limitations of Linked Fate.” *Journal of Race, Ethnicity and Politics* 4 (1): 180–215. 2019

³ Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent: The Women’s Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880-1920* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press), 187

have continued today. The particular interest in studying respectability is that it describes a unique inter-group interaction; the process of validating demands of equality through proving a level of shared values and morales among two groups. The study of respectability has grown from the 1990s into the present day. Some points focus today include the inclusion of LGBTQ+ voices and black women.⁴

Several fields have extensive research on the interactions of black Americans within their own group, including political science and sociology. The last five decades of respectability research have centered around the notion that black Americans tend to use their heightened political awareness from a result of racial injustices as a resource to inform political decisions and shape their belief systems. This framework, known as “linked fate”, has been expanded upon over several decades but most notably in researcher Michael Dawson’s *Behind the Mule* where he argues that linked fate is a resource that helps black Americans push past the mental and physical costs of political participation and developing a belief system.⁵ This framework has been dominant since Dawson reformed it in the 1990s.⁶

Research in respectability typically falls into one of two categories: quantitative or qualitative, although typically qualitative research is more common. Qualitative research that in some way engages with respectability uses it as a frame in order to understand other topics such as women or gender or the historical context of respectability.⁷ While less common, quantitative

⁴ Nancy D. Wadsworth, “Intersectionality in California’s Same-Sex Marriage Battles: A Complex Proposition,” in *Political Research Quarterly* 64, no. 1 (October 15, 2010): 200–216. & Nikol Gertrude Alexander-Floyd. *Gender, Race and Nationalism in Contemporary Black Politics*. (New York: Springer), 2007.

⁵ Michael C. Dawson. *Behind the mule: Race and class in African-American politics*. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994).

⁶ Laird & White have expanded upon the idea of linked fate while researchers like Wilson have gone to alternative explanations. William Julius Wilson. *The Truly Disadvantaged*. (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1990).

⁷ Katharina M. Fackler, “Ambivalent Frames: Rosa Parks and the Visual Grammar of Respectability,” *Souls* 18, no. 2–4 (October 2016): 271–82. & Nancy D. Wadsworth, “Intersectionality in California’s

approaches are still relatively novel and new to this field of research, particularly new and insightful is Hakeem Jefferson's quantitative research which will be discussed later. This research project adds to the literature by combining the narrative strength of deep qualitative interviews to add color and nuance to quantitative data, in this case, survey data. As will be discussed later, the survey data paints a picture of shared ideas when it comes to the emotions felt with the perception of black Americans and respectability politics which is nuanced with interviews based on the survey pool.

Regardless of theories and frameworks that suggest a collective action among inter-group behavior, black people and their politics are not a monolith. The intricate network of relationships between group members does not serve as a watering down of dynamics. Rather, who and what Black Americans choose to believe is important to their identity can become very complicated as research has shown. Past literature from the nineties⁸ established that black Americans have developed a communal strength in their support in politics, but still operate under the gaze of white power and culture. The black elites balance maintaining their status with supporting the rest of the black community.

Recent literature has further expanded on these ideas and offered new frameworks for understanding how black American social groups and relationships are impacted by their solidarity. Researchers White and Laird popularized the term 'racialized social constraint' to describe black voters' mostly unified support of the democratic party even when it would go against the interests of individuals in the group.⁹ Their research found that black Americans tend

Same-Sex Marriage Battles: A Complex Proposition," *Political Research Quarterly* 64, no. 1 (October 15, 2010): 200–216

⁸ Cohen. *The Boundaries of Blackness: AIDS and the Breakdown of Black Politics* & Dawson. *Behind the mule: Race and class in African-American politics*

⁹ Ismail K. White, and Chryl Nicole Laird. *Steadfast democrats: How social forces shape black political behavior*. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2021).

to have other blacks in their social networks and friend groups. These social networks are influenced by the solidarity of black Americans in that failing to support democratic politics and social policies that would support black Americans end up shunning said individuals. Indeed, in the researchers' interviews, it was found that even just the presence of another black person (the interviewer) was enough to make participants eager to show support of democratic candidates. This lends evidence to the fact that qualitative methods such as interviewing can help in offering a breadth of context to theories and frameworks as well as helping to develop them.

Respectability has continued to be theorized in recent literature and recently has shifted to a quantitative approach. Hakeem Jefferson provides evidence that is overlooked when discussing unified black support for political policies. Jefferson's research includes survey data of black Americans and finds that the majority of black Americans over various spans of age, wealth, and gender support punitive policies that would disproportionately target black Americans such as dress codes and harsher drug laws.¹⁰

Jefferson also found that participants of the surveys who were also closer to other black people (more and closer black friends and relationships) also tended to embrace respectability politics less. Black Americans who supported respectability politics and more punitive social measures tended to think that Black Americans took actions that led to an image perceived by white America. An image associated with Black Americans being more violent, less hard working, and less intelligent.¹¹ Indeed, the idea that white Americans perceive their black counterparts as generally poor and more violent is a phenomenon that has been researched and

¹⁰ Hakeem Jefferson. "The Politics of Respectability and Black Americans' Punitive Attitudes." *American Political Science Review* 117, no. 4 (January 20, 2023): 1448–64.

¹¹ Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent: The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880-1920*

tends to be true.¹² In this way, black Americans support measures that would be seen as negative, but their adoption would discourage negative behaviour as deemed by the white majority.

Jefferson's research offers a solid foundation for further questioning in the field of black social networks when it comes to studying respectability. Particularly, the method of asking Black Americans about their social networks offers a direct avenue of advancing the framework of respectability to contemporary American society. While Jefferson applies this approach quantitatively with survey data ran through regression models (which is typical for quantitative-focused sociology and political science research), there is still room for this approach in the qualitative approach, which this paper focuses on.

Jefferson's research is a pushback against most literature in the linked fate and respectability politics spheres, as it provides evidence of the contrary: black Americans sometimes support negative policies that would harm the in-group. Recent literature, however, shows that the black youth does not necessarily believe in the strength of respectability politics. Researchers conducting qualitative work in Baltimore after a shooting of a black man showed that young black adults did not believe that appearing "presentable" did not make a difference in their interactions with police. They also believed that this idea of "respectability" was something pushed upon them by elders.¹³ Other researchers have also pointed out the importance of culture within the black community and its status as a form of wealth.¹⁴ What remains however is the question of what does and does not have influence over what is considered a part of the culture and collective priorities and who has control over that. The evolution of literature in political

¹² Entmen and Rojecki. *The black image in the white mind: Media and race in America*. (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2007.)

¹³ Erin M. Kerrison, Jennifer Cobbina, and Kimberly Bender. "Your Pants Won't Save You' Why Black Youth Challenge Race-Based Police Surveillance and the Demands of Black Respectability Politics." *Race and Justice* 8 (1): 7–26. 2018.

¹⁴ Tara J Yosso. "Whose Culture Has Capital? A Critical Race Theory Discussion of Community Cultural Wealth." *Critical Race Theory in Education*, July 15, 2020, 114–36.

science and sociology in regard to black unity in politics and the balance of social networks within the white gaze thus requires further research. The nature of black identity is another topic that is particularly answerable with a qualitative approach which will be discussed later on.

Patricia Collins refers to critique as the first step in deconstructing objectified knowledge.¹⁵ This is no different when it comes to understanding how respectability is understood in the Black American context. The work for this has been started by current researchers. Brianne Painia crafts a new framework in order to understand black sociology in her research on black men and their movement between incarceration and the free world: *Africana demography*. Painia identifies three main features of *africana demography*: first, the focus being on Black Americans, centering this field in the United States. Second, acknowledgement of black personhood, putting the “subjects” at the forefront of the narrative. Lastly, a commitment to sharing knowledge with non-academics.¹⁶ This project puts *Africana Demography* to action by employing qualitative methods in order to bring in a wider audience to academic research.

This project is in response to the current research on respectability politics and linked fate. Researchers have identified a trend amongst Black Americans where their voting patterns are democratic, keeping black elites within the group’s voting interests.¹⁷ Despite this, Black Americans tend to vote and support themselves when it comes to supporting punitive social policies because of the need to appear approachable and appease to white counterparts.¹⁸

¹⁵ Patricia Hill Collins. “*Transforming the Inner Circle: Dorothy Smith’s Challenge to Sociological Theory*.” *Sociological Theory* 10, no. 1 (1992): 73–80.

¹⁶ Brianne Painia. “*Carceral Migration: An Africana Demographic Reframing of Post-Release Pathways for Formerly Incarcerated Populations*.” Essay. In *Introduction to Africana Demography*, 25–46. Leiden, (Netherlands: BRILL, 2020).

¹⁷ Ismail K. White, and Chryl Nicole Laird. *Steadfast democrats: How social forces shape black political behavior*. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2021). & Cathy J. Cohen. *The Boundaries of Blackness: AIDS and the Breakdown of Black Politics*

¹⁸ Ismail K. White, and Chryl Nicole Laird. *Steadfast democrats: How social forces shape black political behavior*. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2021).

The research also suggests that Black Americans will in ways police the group in order to maintain an image of parity of values to white Americans.¹⁹ Why is it that black Americans have such a strong system of maintaining their black vote for the democratic party to support the group's needs, and yet also support punitive measures against themselves, and how exactly does the idea of respectability manifest in contemporary Black Americans?

In particular, this project is concerned with respectability politics, which is how individuals in larger groups navigate social and political landscapes by adhering to, and internalizing, values and norms of the dominant culture, in this case, how black Americans adhere to white mores and their perception of them. As is suggested by the frequency of which this concept is discussed today in scholarly work, respectability politics is a contemporary issue that encompasses the lives of all black Americans. This project suggests an answer through a qualitative study that asks contemporary black Americans for their experiences, in a way that allows knowledge to be pooled together by the public and academia while being reinforced with quantitative data and analysis.

Methods

This project uses a mixed-methods approach with two unique sets of data: in-depth interviews and survey responses. As previously discussed, the dominant form of research used in the study of respectability are typically either interviews or survey data. This project incorporates both quantitative and qualitative methods in order to make advancements in both fields and showed a multifaceted perspective into respectability within contemporary Black Americans.

The first portion of this project started with a survey that measured respectability and asked Black American about their social network. Portions of the survey, particularly the section regarding real-world scenarios, were based largely on the surveys developed by Hakeem

¹⁹ Hakeem Jefferson. "*The Politics of Respectability and Black Americans' Punitive Attitudes.*"

Jefferson. The survey was released in the Chicago area due to convenience for the researcher. The survey was made public all throughout Chicago including downtown, Hyde Park, the south side, west side, and suburbs in the north. A number of different establishments were contacted in order to gain more visibility on the project including frequented restaurants, churches, volunteer centers, community centers, and apartment complexes. The survey was also posted to several online forums for Chicago residents such as reddit and various university online forums for Chicago students. In total, there were 146 survey respondents to apply the respectability scale to and contact for interviews.

As previously mentioned, the portions of the survey were based on Hakeem Jefferson's research. A large portion of both the interviews and survey was asking the participants about how they felt about the perception of Black Americans by others. Participants were asked on a scale how they felt in regards to certain emotions when it came to how Black Americans were perceived. The specific question asked was, "When you think about how Black people are viewed by others, how often do you feel each of the following emotions?" The emotions listed were Embarrassment/Shame, Anger Towards Blacks, Frustration, Happiness, and Surprise. Participants were asked to select a categorical term from Never to Always. A sample survey can be found in the appendix. The next step was to run a linear regression model with age, education, and political alignment as the main predictors of interest to determine emotion scores. This analysis repeats the steps taken by Jefferson since his design was unique and thus this research seeks to replicate his analysis in order to provide more literature to this novel approach. Where this project advances the literature is to take the analysis a step further and apply a level of rigorous qualitative approach to the already quantitatively analyzed level of respectability.

After survey data was analyzed, participants were conveniently contacted for in-depth qualitative interviews.

A qualitative coding approach was used in this project for several reasons. First, the research question being asked seeks to understand how respectability manifests in contemporary Black Americans. Through in-depth qualitative interviews, this method can understand this question through participation of Black Americans themselves and allows for a response without the interference of researchers. In essence, this project examines the real world to test the framework of respectability and if it accurately describes the social network of Black Americans. A qualitative method such as coding interviews with Black Americans allows for an in-depth analysis for this research question. Secondly, coding has not typically been used in this fashion before in the research of respectability, giving a new perspective to the field. (the specific method of emotion coding will be expanded upon later in this project) Lastly (and most importantly), it is the most efficient method to conduct research given the budget (non-existent) and time frame of the researcher.

The data gathered for the coding portion of this research project includes transcripts of interviews from participants in the Chicago area. Interview participants were not selected at random after accounting for select demographic information. Participants were chosen from the available survey data and selected to be contacted in order to conduct an interview related to their survey responses. Participants were chosen in order to account for as much of the data as possible. Pseudonyms were provided by each interviewee in order to record as little identifiable information of the participant as possible. Interviewees were allowed to choose their own pseudonym as long as it could reasonably still mask their identity. This was done in order to give the participants a feeling of closeness to the research, these are their stories they are entrusting

into this project, thus, they should maintain a level of trust and closeness to it. As previously mentioned, the survey data slightly skewed towards younger women with some sort of college degree so the interview data reflected this as well. The advantage however of choosing participants is that this allows this project to choose those who were not represented well in the survey data. Some interview participants include individuals who did not fit well represented data in the survey portion of this project such as Black Americans making less than \$10,000 or making \$100,000.

Interview participants were asked basic demographic questions in order to gain context to their responses and to build rapport. Participants were then asked to describe their social networks and the people they interact with every day. Finally, participants were asked to describe their reaction to different hypothetical scenarios involving Black Americans acting in different ways around White Americans and to describe their feelings when thinking about how Black Americans are perceived. These questions were purposefully similar to the survey questions in order to establish some parallels and to give respondents a chance to go more in-depth into their answers. A full list of interview questions can be found at the end of this article.

Coding the different materials was fairly straight forward. For the purposes of this research project, the original data was coded using a grounded theory approach with several cycles of coding. The first cycle was achieved through emotion coding. Key emotional phrases and sentiments were recorded along with an in vivo style record of what was said that invoked the emotion. This style was applied to the entirety of each interview but was particularly important for the emotion perception and scenario-based questions of the interview. Participants were asked to describe how they felt when thinking about how black Americans are perceived by

other racial groups. This approach allowed for emotions to be quantified and develop an analysis based on frequency and unique appearance of specific emotions and sentiments.

The second cycle of coding was in vivo codes. The transcription of each interview was analyzed a second time, focusing again on the exact wording used by the participant to describe their social networks and their closeness to white and black peers as well as how being black played a role in their identity. Using in vivo codes allowed for an analysis based on the direct wording used by the individuals and to keep the analysis true to their stories and perceptions of identity. In total, there were 784 codes, 14 categories, and 3 apparent themes produced from this data set. An example code book can be found at the appendix along with other figures.

Respectability and Emotion-Driven Survey Data & Regression Model

I feel like there's not a lot of cohesion or community in the black community. I feel like everyone's kind of just like pocketed out and we're all kind of unified in our thoughts or our beliefs or our whatever. And so I think that that kind of frustrates me too, because it just feels like It feels like after like slavery and Jim Crow, there was never really an ability for the black community to come together and to build something wholly unique or wholly independent, I guess. And so I feel like that frustrates me. - Jimmy B., Interviewee

There were a total of about 150 black Chicagoans who participated in the survey and made the final N after data cleaning. Participants were skewed towards young women with college degrees and thus the data analysis was controlled for these variables (Of note, Hakeem Jefferson's original dataset also found skews for these same variables.)²⁰ This research project specifically is interested in how the variables of age, education, and political alignment predict emotional reactions to the perception of black americans. In general, Black Americans across these three variables tend to be relatively cohesive in their decisions with notable exceptions.

A linear regression model was used to predict the effect of age, political alignment, and education on emotional reaction. These variables were chosen because they can be discussed

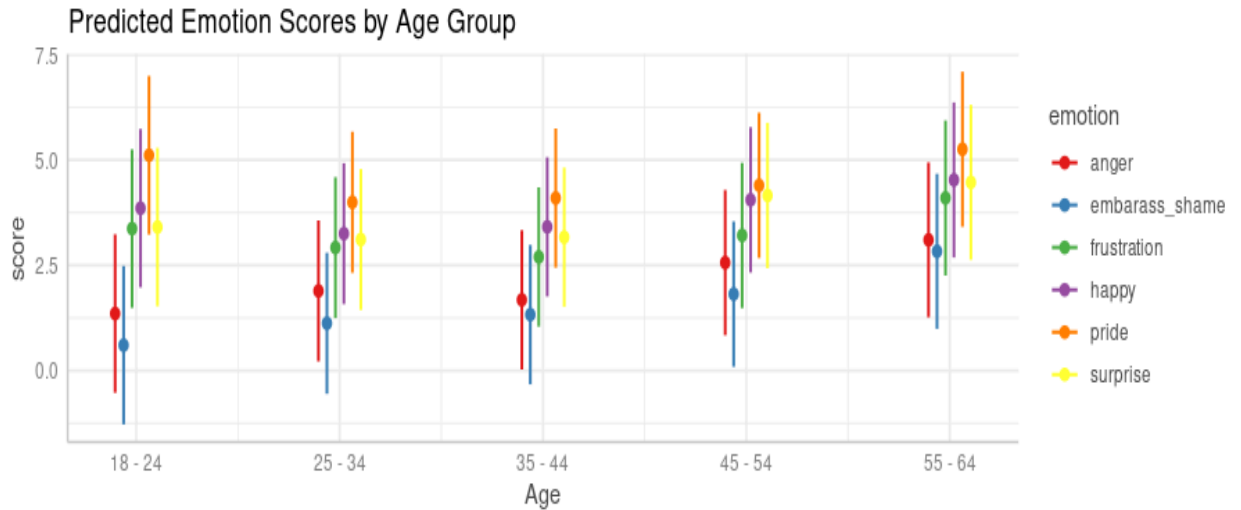
²⁰ Hakeem Jefferson. "The Politics of Respectability and Black Americans' Punitive Attitudes."

particularly well when following up with in-depth interviews as this project does. Survey responses to the emotions question was converted to a 1-5 scale with “never” being at 1 and “always” being 5, “anger towards other blacks” was used as the baseline variable.

The model scored a residual standard error of 0.9726 on 654 degrees of freedom which means it may be off by .97 points which is acceptable for social science survey data on emotions. The adjusted R-Squared value was 0.2781 which means that about 27.8% of the variance is explained which is a solid result, considering human emotion is driven by tons of unmeasured personal, contextual, and situational factors. The overall p-value of the model came out to p-value: $< 2.2e-16$ which is highly statistically significant.

Age & Perception

The first variable to look at is age, a table for which can be seen in figure 1. The regression analysis reveals important age-based differences in the reporting of emotional responses to perception of Black Americans, particularly regarding feelings of pride and happiness. Respondents between the ages of 25 and 34 are significantly less likely to report high levels of pride and happiness compared to the reference group, which is respondents aged 18 to 24 with anger as the reference emotion. This suggests that individuals in the 25 to 34 age category tend to express lower levels of these positive emotions relative to their younger counterparts, even when controlling for sex, income, partisanship, and educational attainment.

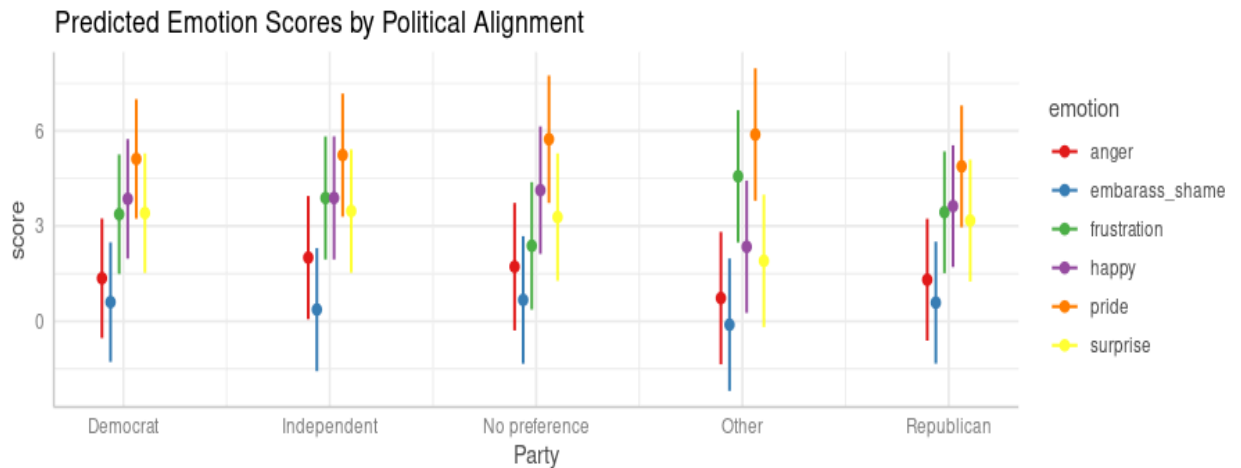


This pattern persists, with some variation, across older age groups. Notably, the interaction terms for pride remain negative and statistically significant for respondents between the ages of 35 and 64. These results indicate a consistent trend in which increasing age is associated with diminished reports of pride relative to the baseline category. By contrast, the results show no statistically significant differences by age group for most other emotions, such as embarrassment or shame and surprise. These findings suggest that while certain positive emotions, particularly pride and happiness, are meaningfully associated with age, other emotional responses appear to remain relatively stable across the life course within this sample.

Political Alignment & Perception

The next variable of interest is political alignment. Figure 2 shows predicted scores of emotional responses with political alignment. The analysis reveals several noteworthy patterns regarding how party affiliation influences emotional responses among respondents. Specifically, individuals identifying as Independents exhibit significantly lower levels of embarrassment/shame compared to the baseline group, indicating a distinctive emotional profile for this demographic. Additionally, while the reduction in happiness among Independents approaches statistical significance, no significant differences are observed for other emotions

such as pride, frustration, or surprise. This suggests that emotional reactions tied to political identity are nuanced, with certain emotions, particularly those related to self-consciousness and more salient for political Independents.

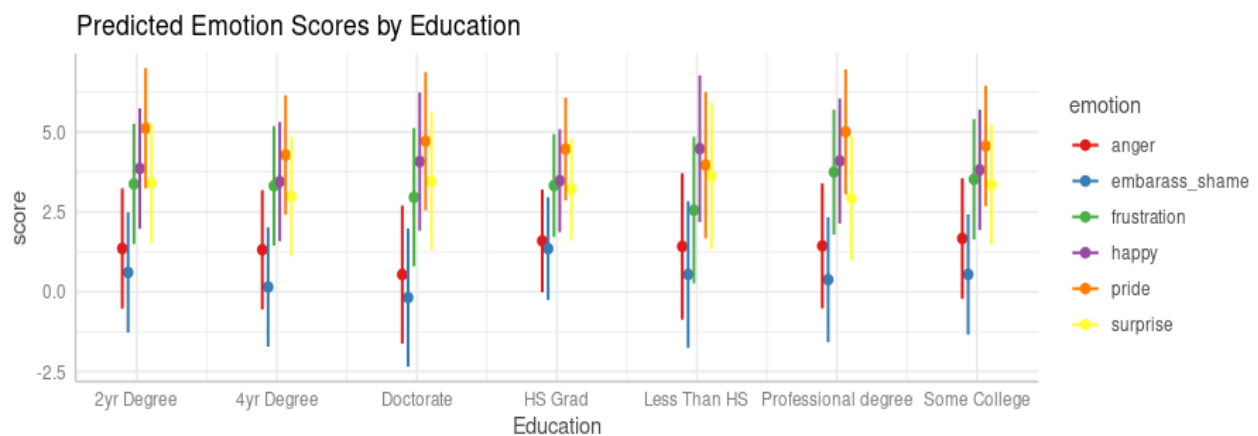


In contrast, respondents who identify with the Other category of political affiliation report significantly higher levels of frustration relative to the reference group. This finding may reflect the unique political and social positioning of individuals who do not align with the dominant political parties, potentially indicating heightened dissatisfaction or disengagement. By contrast, those who identify with no party preference and Republicans do not exhibit significant differences in emotional responses across the examined emotional domains. These results highlight that the emotional experiences of political Independents and individuals in the Other category diverge from those in more traditionally partisan groups, suggesting that party affiliation plays a significant, but complex, role in shaping emotional experiences.

Perception & Education

The final variable of interest is education. The results show that education level does not consistently have a significant impact on the emotions of embarrassment/shame, frustration, happiness, pride, and surprise. The majority of the interactions between education categories and

emotions have high p-values, indicating no statistically significant differences. For example, those with a 4-year degree, Doctorate, or Some College exhibit no major differences in emotional responses when compared to other education groups. The p-values for most emotions across these education categories are well above conventional thresholds for significance (e.g., 0.05), suggesting that education does not strongly influence how individuals in these groups experience emotions.



However, there are a few marginally significant results that warrant attention. For instance, individuals with a 4-year degree show a borderline significant negative coefficient for pride ($p = 0.0597$), implying that they may report lower pride compared to other groups, although this result does not quite reach the typical level of statistical significance. Similarly, individuals with Some College show a marginal effect for pride ($p = 0.0523$), suggesting a slight tendency for this group to report lower levels of pride as well. While some slight trends are observed, education level does not appear to play a significant role in predicting emotional responses in this dataset. The results suggest that other factors, beyond education, are likely more influential in shaping the emotional reactions measured in this analysis. This finding in particular is consistent with Jefferson's finding that respectability is across education levels.²¹

²¹ Hakeem Jefferson. "The Politics of Respectability and Black Americans' Punitive Attitudes."

These findings carry+ onto the interview data, which further suggests that even considering other demographic differences, contemporary black Americans remain unified in their social experiences and levels of respectability.

Interviews and Respectability

Interviewer: Do you think being black is important to your identity?

Carter: I definitely think it's one of my most salient identities, probably the most salient. That's what I think about before. Before the fact that I'm a woman, before the fact that I'm queer, before all of like anything else, I definitely think about being black as well.

Three themes were apparent throughout the ten interviews conducted in the data collection phase of this research project. The first was the closeness participants felt to both white and black people. Perhaps unsurprisingly, black Americans unanimously felt a stronger connection to black people than white people, even among mixed-race black Americans. The second was the way in which participants felt about the way in which Black Americans are perceived by the American public, with anger/frustration and pride being among the most common responses. The last theme is that of the politics of respectability, which came out in the way in which respondents responded to two scenarios where black individuals were part of a larger white audience.

Closeness to Black & White Americans

Closeness to white and black Americans consisted of 4 categories that most related to this theme and made up a total of 109 codes. These codes consist of emotion and in vivo codes. Every single interviewee produced at least one emotion code related to a strong sense of closeness and comfortableness with other black people and made up at least 60% of each other individual emotion codes on the subject of relatability to black people. Jimmy B works as a Bank Consultant in an office environment with a large white majority, he explains how he feels more comfortable around white people by saying, "I feel much more comfortable too, like I feel much

more [comfortable] communicating like grievances and like concerns about like workplace things with black people though or with like minorities at least.” This quote was coded as “Comfort” for reference and codes like this and related emotions like “secure” and “support” made up the majority of the total codes under black relatability.

Jimmy has mixed parents, although he consistently identified with his black identity more than anything. SaraJean felt similarly as a woman of mixed (white and black) when it came to her inability to relate to white:

SaraJean: I think that like when I was a little bit younger, I was a little bit more of the belief of like, wow, like my life would be a little bit easier if I weren't, you know. If I were a white [woman], you know, maybe things would be easier for me. I would have an easier time like making inroads in certain rooms and things like that. And so there have been moments like that where I'm like. I wish I had that advantage, I guess you could say.

SaraJean eventually grew out of this mindset and learned to have pride in her blackness, but it remains ever relevant that the differences between white and black American experiences is so profound that they manifest in this interview set’s inability to relate to white America. Coming back to Jimmy B., he is also familiar with the minority “nod”:

Jimmy B.: I still have those moments where it's like you walk into a room and you're the only black person and then you see another black person and you lock eyes with them and give them a little head nod. So I feel like, you know, it's a limited experience that I have, but it's still one of those things where it's like. Oh, yeah, I can, you know.

The above passage was coded as an in vivo code as well as under the category of black relatability. Relatability was not limited to only black people, Participants were asked in general how closely they related to white people.

There were overall less codes for white relatability but this nonetheless highlights a key commonality among interviewees. There were a total of 18 unique codes for white relatability with negative emotions like “threatened” and “wary” made up around 70% of the total amount of emotion codes. Indeed, 6/10 interviewees overall codes’ made up negative experiences with

white relatability, 2/10 interviewees even reported majority threatened codes when it came to their interactions with white people. Only 2/10 reported a positive or neutral relatability with white people. Carter is student at a prestigious university in Chicago and she detailed how white people on campus make her feel:

Interviewer: How closely do you feel the most white people

Carter: Not at all. I feel threatened by them, actually. A little threatened, especially here. . . they were never really forced to have to interact with black people. Or if they were, you know, maybe a particular set of black people and can be a particular setter. Yeah, they just, yeah. I'm a little bit more wary of the people here just because I know they have not had So I kind of am always on guard as to how they're going to engage with me, if that makes sense

Carter is from a majority white suburb. She has had plenty of experience when it comes to talking to white people, she even describes some of her childhood friends as being white, but she describes a phenomenon common throughout the interviews wherein white people who do not typically interact with other black people can come off as abrasive to black people, to the point where it can make one feel endangered or threatened. This is in contrast to how participants feel around other black people, the difference is exact opposites of each other. The idea of closeness and black & white relatability will come back in later themes and discussions.

Perceptions of Black Americans

Perceptions of Black Americans was an encompassing theme that captured many of the codes in the categories developed for this project, of which examples and relevance will be provided, but the central category around this theme centers around the part of the interview that focused on reiteration of survey questions. As previously mentioned, one of the main efforts behind the interview portion of this project is to get more in-depth answers to the survey originally created by other researchers. A portion of the interview was dedicated to discussing

the Interviewee's answers to the prompt of emotional reaction to the perception of black Americans.

Immediate in vivo & emotional codes related to the emotional reaction to the perception of black Americans totaled 49 codes. 25 of the emotion codes in some way expressed interviewees' anger and frustration from how black Americans are perceived. It is relevant to point out that positive/prideful codes made up a total of 11 codes or only 28%. Returning to Carter, she never feels anger towards black people for how others perceive them:

Interviewer: So when you think about how black people are viewed by others, you generally never feel anger towards black people?

Carter: For the way others feel about them? I don't think... I don't think it's our fault at all. Not at all. It's a societal thing for sure. And even when I do feel like people maybe do things or whatever that may be inclined for it to be a black person's fault. That would be societal pressures. Like, I don't feel like it's never, it's never our fault.

Carter's lack of blame on black people will become more relevant later on when discussing respectability, but for now it suffices to say that there is little blame that interviewees place on Black Americans for how they perceived. This sentiment was shared explicitly by 7/10 interviewees who shared a specific code that indicated they did not blame black Americans. There is however a sense of disappointment, returning to Jimmy, he mentions pride for figures like LeBron or Simon Biles who bring positive press to the black community, but that same positivity is a source of negativity:

Jimmy B.: I think that the perception of black people is maybe okay. I'm not sure if it's like ever truly detangled from like stereotypes or things like that but I do think that there are moments I would have to think a little bit more critically To come up with examples, but I do think that there are moments where I do kind of feel a little bit happy with the way that people think of the community. Generally, though, I would say that I'm disappointed [because] if she [Simon Biles] starts talking about her struggles as a black woman, are people going to listen or are they going to say that she's being dramatic and needs to stop taking herself so seriously . . . It's kind of like

the same thing with like LeBron James, right? People love LeBron James. They idolize him. They think he's great. But then as soon as he has a perspective or an idea about his experience or his community. People were like, shut up and dribble.

Jimmy's disappointment with true acceptance of black struggles and lives in media echoes another interviewee's wariness of white positivity. Alexa is in her mid-twenties and works as a waitress. She has a high school education and has admitted to never "pick[ing] up a sociology textbook" but understands racialized culture appropriation:

Alexa: when I think about like maybe positive aspects of I have to think about is it coming from a genuine appreciation or from like an appropriation standpoint? Because, I mean, people definitely say that there's positive things about black people, but they don't get the things that they want to take part in, things that they want to, you know Be associated with. It's like the way we dress and these are things like that like you know Yeah, rather than... Rather than like an actual appreciation for black people. Yeah, the histories or sacrifices.

Jimmy and Alexa were the only two of the ten interviewees to mention a specific wariness in white positivity or support of black culture, but they nonetheless highlight the overall negative sentiments these interviewees have when it comes to the state of the perception of black Americans.

Respectability

The final theme of interest and what encompassed every interview was respectability. The original survey contained two scenario questions in which respondents were asked multiple to describe their reaction to a black American acting stereotypical or overall negative in front of a white audience. Below is an example of the first scenario:

Imagine that you are dining at a fancy restaurant where you are one of few Black customers. You look over and see that two other Black people are dining near you. Throughout dinner, you hear them cursing at each other, using the N word, and repeatedly complaining loudly about their food to the server.

Survey respondents were then asked to describe how bothered they were by the behavior, how important it was to them that the individual(s) change their behavior, and if it was appropriate that they change their behavior. Below are figures 4-5 which are charts showing how participants responded to the first two questions of scenario 1. Over 50% of participants were at least moderately bothered by the behavior of these individuals.

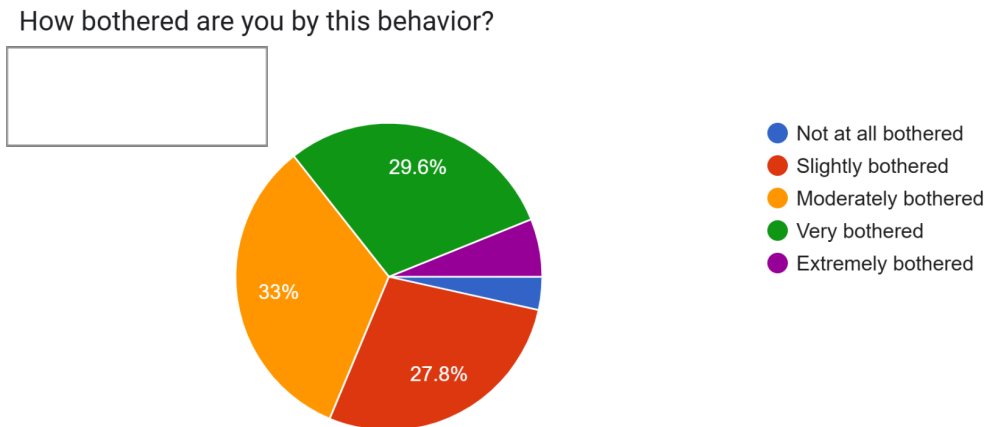


Figure 4: Percentages of responses to Scenario 1: How Bothered are you by this behavior?

Edith was born in southern California and graduated from CSU with a degree in business. She was particularly concerned with the perception of black people this upset would cause:

Edith:

Edith: We are in a fancy restaurant which makes it even more jarring. What's even more frustrating is that it's perpetuating all the negative stereotypes around about black people I'll be worried about. I'll be worried a bit other diners might assume how all black people behave and this you know is just not true. It's embarrassing, you know. So people may get the wrong idea that, oh, this is what other black people are like. Yeah, kind of an assumption. Yeah.

Edith does not outright use the word respectability, but she essentially captures what it means to be focused on appearance of respectability in order to project a good image of a minority group

in order to gain respect from the majority. Edith was not alone in her worries, every single interview had at least 4 emotion codes that indicated a positive measure of respectability.

Carter was the most aware of respectability, being a black women from the south, young, and pursuing a socially conscious degree, and still grappled with what the politics of respectability meant for her:

Carter: now because you've done that out in public where other people can see us, you're giving them You're giving them the wrong perception. But that's something that I feel like as I've gotten older, I'm kind of grappling with. The idea of giving outsiders the wrong perception. If they were to do something like that, you know, like at a private, not in a private space, but maybe in an all black space, sure, maybe some black people won't be covered, but I feel like that's more... That's more of a safe space than I feel like being out in public like that in front of like a mixed group of people and responding in that way.

These findings are consistent with the survey data that indicates across age and education, emotions on perception do not typically change within black Americans. This means that if older black Americans are typically likely to exhibit levels of respectability, there is no difference for younger black Americans, and this can be seen in this interview data with the majority of interviewees being college-age black chicagoans and all interviewees still exhibiting levels of respectability at a moderate level. This trend continues into the next question of the scenario.

How appropriate would it be for someone to say something to them about their behavior?

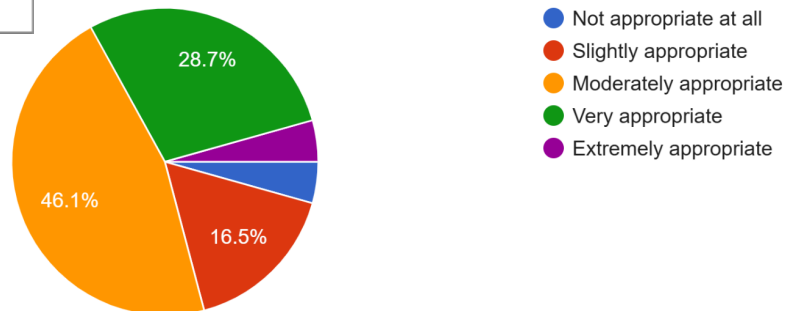


Figure 5: Percentages of responses to Scenario 1: How appropriate would it be for someone to say something to them about their behavior?

At Least 46% of survey respondents found it moderately appropriate for someone to say something to the black individual(s) regarding their behavior and another 29% found it very appropriate. Again we can see the benefit of incorporating interview data here where some nuance on this question can be discovered. There were 14 unique in vivo codes for answers that found it appropriate to say something versus 11 unique in vivo codes that found it inappropriate to say something. Carter found it inappropriate for a white person to say something, “If it's a white person, I almost feel like it's coming from a place of some subtle racism in there.” Overall, four out of ten respondents were specifically more comfortable if a black person confronted them about their behavior.

Conclusion

Edith: Well, for me, when I see one black person experience something, whether it's joy or pain. I think it's kind of... it can resonate with the rest of us on the same level So yeah, definitely. I think that as a black person in this country I feel like my life is connected to [other black Americans]

Interview data is very common in researching the politics of respectability. It is further improved and can be analyzed deeper when incorporating a level of quantitative study. This project focuses on the way in which contemporary black Americans describe their own levels of respectability. What was found between the two methods were parallel, black Americans across age, education, and political alignment felt similar levels of respectability. For Edith, Carter, Jimmy B., and everyone else interviewed, they do not see the over 100 survey responses, but they understand and feel the connection amongst black Americans that is respectability politics to maintain an image for the greater good. By applying a quantitative veil to these voices, it opens up an interpretation that is nuanced and telling of the state of contemporary respectability.

This project began with a simple, but urgent, question: How do contemporary Black Americans understand respectability in their everyday lives, and how does this understanding influence their perceptions of group identity, behavior, and political engagement? What surfaced through surveys and conversations was a layered truth. Respectability politics is not a relic of the past, nor is it reserved for older generations or conservative circles. It remains a quiet, persistent presence, shaping choices, informing self-perception, and guiding interactions in ways both spoken and unspoken.

What makes contemporary respectability striking is the clarity with which so many young, college-educated Black Americans now see it. They name it, critique it, and yet often find themselves moving within its boundaries, a delicate, difficult balancing act at play: the desire to reject respectability's constraints while recognizing the protection, validation, and access it can sometimes offer in a world where Blackness is still met with suspicion, surveillance, and scrutiny. This research underscores that respectability politics isn't just about behavior or appearance. It is about survival, belonging, and the complicated ways people navigate a society that insists on measuring their worth. The findings remind us that even in spaces presumed to be progressive or resistant, the legacies of respectability endure, reshaped but intact.

By listening closely to these voices, this project moves beyond familiar debates and gestures toward the quieter, messier realities of everyday Black life. It reveals how identity is constantly negotiated, how dignity is asserted in countless forms, and how the struggle to define oneself on one's own terms continues. Acknowledging the presence of respectability politics is not a concession to its power, but an invitation to imagine freer, more expansive ways of being.

AppendixCodebook

Theme	Category	Code Examples
Closeness to White and Black Americans	Biographic Information	Day Care, Business Owner, Hair Stylist - Parent Career, Hope - Parent's Expectations, Stress - Better Opportunities
Perceptions of Black Americans	Black Identity	Black: Salient Identity - Black Identity, Great Pride - Black Identity, I Don't Think About it Alone - Black identity
Politics of Respectability	Black Relatability	Small-Knit Black Community @ university - Black Closeness, Supportive - Peers, Comfort in communication- Workplace
	Black Scenario Reactions	(Scenario) Microaggression Feedback - Behavior, (Scenario) Bothered - Behavior, (Scenario) Embarrassment - Behavior
	Gender	(Scenario) Black and a Woman - gender, (Scenario) Sister to sister - behavior gender, (Scenario) Women being talked down - appropriate
	How Others Perceive Black People	(Survey Emotions) Anger/Not at fault, (Survey Emotions) Frustration/ignorance, (Survey Emotions) Pride - Very Positive
	Linked Fate	Linked Fate - Positive, Linked fate - Negative

	Political Alignment	50/50 Political Alignment closeness - Political Alignment, Progressive Liberal - Current Political Alignment, Same Core Ideals - Political alignment
	Race	Other Languages You Speak? - Race, Divide Among Black Diaspora jarring - race, Positive Black Role Models
	Religion	Religion Not Important, Parents Used to be intense christians - Religions, Story of Exodus popularity - Religion
	Respectability	Respectability Politics - nature vs. nurture, Self-Preservation - Respectability, (Scenario) Not bothered in Black space - respectability
	School Life	Predominantly a Black Audience - BSO Events, OBS Community Service Chair - Campus Involvement, Predominantly a Black Audience - BSO Events
	Social Network Demographics	Far-less Black than white - W/B Daily basis, Intentional meeting of black people - BSN, Friends vs Friendly
	White Relatability	Threatened because native chicagoans, Wary of White people - Negative Closeness, Code Switching - Negative Closeness

Interview Guide

I have begun recording using Zoom. To assist with accurate recording of your responses, this interview will be recorded through Zoom and transcribed. You have the right to refuse to allow such recording without penalty. Please respond that you do or do not consent to audio recording.

NOTE TO INTERVIEWER: Should the participant not consent to audio recording of the interview, please turn off the recording function and thank them for their time.

The Following is information which compliant with the University of Chicago's Institutional Review Board, which is the agency which oversees the protection of study participants, requires you to have before deciding whether to participate in this study.

You are being asked to volunteer for this research study. This study is being conducted at the University of Chicago. You were selected at convenience and representation from a pool of survey respondents who indicated that they would like to be contacted for an interview.

I am going to give you some information about the study and please ask if you have any questions or do not understand any part of this information.

The purpose of this study is to examine and understand black social networks. There is extensive survey and other quantitative data that suggest that Black Americans often exhibit a term dubbed by the academic community as 'Respectability' or the idea that one must present themselves in a way that is in line with the values of the greater community in order to be viewed as equals. We are surveying black Americans in Chicago in order to replicate the quantitative data which has been previously been conducted by the academic world. The part you are

currently participating in is the qualitative side or more in-depth in person interviews to understand how black social networks are described by black Americans themselves.

This interview should take about an hour to complete, though that may vary with the length of your response.

Participation in this study has no known significant risks, though addressing your social network and racial/ethnic relations may be uncomfortable for some participants. There are no direct benefits to you from participating in this study. In published reports, there will be no information included that will make it possible to identify you without your permission. Research records will be stored securely, and only approved researchers will have access to the records.

You will not be reimbursed for your time and participation in this study. Participation in this study is voluntary. If you withdraw or decline participation, you will not be penalized or lose benefits or services unrelated to the study. If you decide to participate, you may decline to answer any question and may choose to withdraw at any time. If you have concerns or complaints about the research, the researcher conducting this study, David Sanchez can be contacted at [REDACTED]. If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant, concerns, or complaints about the research and wish to talk to someone other than individuals on the research team or if you cannot reach the research team, you may contact the University of Chicago Institutional Review Board (IRB25-0165) at [REDACTED].

Again, I will remind you that this interview is strictly voluntary and that you may refuse to answer any question at any time and furthermore, that you may stop this interview at any time. We are not making a written record of this consent, as it would be the only way to link you to

participation in this study. For that reason, I will ask for a verbal confirmation that you understand the information presented to you. Do you agree to participate in this study?

NOTE TO INTERVIEWER: Should the participant not consent to participate in the study, please turn off the recorder immediately and thank them for their time.

Then we will begin. I will ask you scripted questions, though I may deviate from the script to pursue relevant information. I encourage you to give detailed answers rather than a simple yes or no answer. There will be two main sections to this interview. First, I will ask some background questions about you. Next, we will cover some questions about your survey responses and general social network questions.

Background Questions

- What is your racial identity?
- How old are you?
- What is your gender identity?
- Describe your family's socioeconomic standing, when you were growing

up. Were you poor, lower middle class, middle class, upper middle class, professional class such as doctors and lawyers or were [sic]wealthy?

- What did/ does your father do for a living?
- What did/ does your mother do for a living?
- What was your childhood neighborhood like? If you had more than one,

please describe the one you most identify with?

- Did you live in the city, suburb, or country? Did the neighbors all know each other and how often did they interact with one another? In other

words, describe the character of your childhood neighborhood.

- What was the racial and ethnic makeup of your neighborhood?
- What were the socioeconomic characteristics of your neighborhood like?
- Did most of your neighbors seem to have similar incomes as your family?
- Think back to things like the size of the houses, add-ons like pools, types

and number of cars owned, etc

General Social Network Questions

- How Close do you feel to most black people?
- What is your political alignment?
- If you were to assume, how do you think most other black people would align?
 - Does your beliefs align with other black people?
- Consider your friend group, does it consist of mostly white or black people? Or something else?
- Consider the people you see on a daily basis (on your daily commute, at work/school, in your apartment, etc.), do you see more white or black people on a daily basis?
- How close do you feel to most White people?
- How important is religion to your life?
- How important is being Black to your identity?
- Do you think what happens generally to Black people in this country will have something to do with what happens in your life?
- Imagine that you are dining at a fancy restaurant where you are one of few Black customers. You look over and see that two other Black people are dining near you.

Throughout dinner, you hear them cursing at each other, using the N word, and repeatedly complaining loudly about their food to the server.

- How bothered are you by this behavior?
- How important is it to you, personally, that these individuals change their behavior?
- How appropriate would it be for someone to say something to them about their behavior?
- When you think about how Black people are viewed by others, what do you typically feel?
 - *NOTE TO INTERVIEWER: Pull up Interviewee's survey responses*
- Is there anything else you want to discuss or talk about?

R Files & Regression Model

Google Drive Link

<https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1YJj0RIEpll6TMsvjKQaVKhIQxAtDGD4?usp=sharing>

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