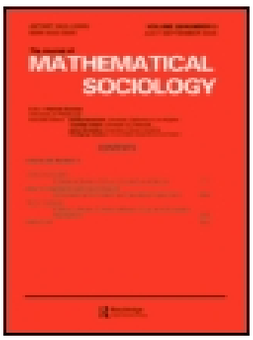

Journal of Mathematical Sociology

ISSN: 0022-250X (Print) 1545-5874 (Online) Journal homepage: https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/gmas20

Comment on Mark Fossett's Manuscript: Ethnic Preferences, Social Distance Dynamics, and Residential Segregation: Theoretical Explorations Using Simulation Analysis

CRAIG ST. JOHN

To cite this article: CRAIG ST. JOHN (2006) Comment on Mark Fossett's Manuscript: Ethnic Preferences, Social Distance Dynamics, and Residential Segregation: Theoretical Explorations Using Simulation Analysis, Journal of Mathematical Sociology, 30:3-4, 327-332, DOI: 10.1080/00222500500544060

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/00222500500544060

Published online: 21 Sep 2006.

Journal of Mathematical Sociology, 30:327–332, 2006

ISSN: 0022-250X print/1545-5874 online
DOI: 10.1080/00222500500544060

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Comment on Mark Fossett's Manuscript: Ethnic Preferences, Social Distance Dynamics, and Residential Segregation: Theoretical Explorations Using Simulation Analysis

Craig St. John
Department of Sociology, University of Oklahoma, Norman, OK, USA

I found "Ethnic Preferences, Social Distance Dynamics, and Residential Segregation: Theoretical Explorations Using Simulation Analysis" by Mark Fossett interesting for three reasons. One, it made me think about some research I did several years ago on the very issue Fossett tackles. Two, it made me think about how we measure ethnic preferences and provide explanations for them. Three, it made me think about how we conceptualize residential segregation. If one of Fossett's goals with this paper was to generate thinking about the role of ethnic preferences in residential segregation, then I guess, in my case, he was spectacularly successful.

In 1996 I presented a paper entitled "Would Eliminating Housing Market Discrimination and White Intolerance of Black Neighbors Substantially Reduce Racial Residential Segregation?" at the Population Association of America annual meeting. I became interested in this topic after reading *American Apartheid* (Massey & Denton, 1993) and other work more or less claiming that white intolerance of blacks buttressed by discrimination in the housing market was primarily, if not totally, responsible for black-white residential segregation (and, indirectly, to a host of social ills). This contention seemed to deny something that everyone outside academia "knows;" that is, people prefer to live in proximity to people with whom they share similarities. If blacks have an affinity for living with other blacks, could this not be at least partially responsible for black-white segregation? So I posed the question, if whites were totally indifferent to the ethnicity of their neighbors and, hence, did nothing to influence the ethnic composition of their neighborhoods, how segregated would whites and blacks be if blacks

Address correspondence to Craig St. John, Department of Sociology, University of Oklahoma, Norman, OK 73019, 405-325-1751. E-mail: cstjohn@ou.edu

preferred to live in neighborhoods with at least some other blacks? To make a long story short, I borrowed from the preference literature to derive the assumption that blacks, on average, preferred to live in neighborhoods that were 50% black and 50% white (ignoring other groups). Then I calculated the index of dissimilarity (D) for black-white segregation for U.S. metropolitan areas in 1990 assuming blacks were able to achieve this preference. What I found was that the resulting hypothetical values of D were little different from the actual values, suggesting that a black preference for 50/50 mixed-race neighborhoods could nearly, by itself, produce existing levels of segregation, even if there was no housing market discrimination. The reason for this result is that in nearly all metropolitan areas there are so many more whites than blacks that the 50/50 ratio required to achieve the black preference is a severe departure from the criterion of evenness on which D is based. That is, in most metropolitan areas, if all blacks lived in neighborhoods that were 50/50 black and white, most whites would be left living in neighborhoods that were totally white.

Basically, this is the issue Fossett tackles in his paper, but he does so with far greater sophistication and with far more compelling evidence than I hoped. His simulation model looks like the Starship Enterprise in comparison to my Model T attempt, taking into account such factors as blacks' out-group preferences in addition to their in-group preferences, the in-group and out-group preferences of whites, inter- and intra-group socioeconomic inequality, the distribution of neighborhoods and housing of varying status levels, and adding a third group (Hispanics), to name a few. Further, his simulation's treatment of these factors includes a host of complexities and nuances that make it more closely reflect the realities of urban structure and the housing search. As a consequence, I think Fossett makes a compelling case that it is possible for preferences to maintain the high levels of segregation we find in most major metropolitan areas today, in the absence of discrimination to purposefully keep blacks out of white neighborhoods. I think this paper more than adequately justifies that serious attention continue to be given to the role of preferences in maintaining residential segregation.

I have one simulation question I would like Fossett to answer. As I understand them, simulations 1 and 2 do not include any form of in-group or out-group preferences. Simulations 3–9 include not only such preferences held by the two minority groups but also such preferences held by whites. I would like to see a simulation (or set of simulations, if need be) in which blacks continue to have the preferences Fossett has proposed in simulations 3–9, but whites are totally indifferent to the ethnicity of their neighbors (this is what I was after in

my crude attempt). I think it would be fascinating to see if minority preferences by themselves could drive a simulation to a high level of segregation.

The thing I remember best about the session in which I presented my PAA paper is the discussion that followed the presentations. I do not remember the other presenters, but I do remember there was a very interesting mix in the audience. I will not mention them by name, but in the audience were a fair number of people I consider luminaries in the segregation field, representing diverse perspectives on the causes of segregation. At one point, the discussion turned to the question, where did the preference held by blacks for mixed-race neighborhoods approaching a 50/50 split come from and what did it mean? The lines separating points of view were clearly drawn. On one side were those who argued that blacks' preference for balanced mixed-race neighborhoods reflected a desire to live in neighborhoods with whites but to remain in close contact with a substantial number of blacks for cultural reasons. Proponents of this point of view reasoned that we have no trouble accepting that people congregate voluntarily for positive reasons on the basis of such characteristics as stage in the life cycle, socioeconomic status, and life style. Why is it so hard to accept that people also want to congregate voluntarily for positive reasons associated with ethnicity? On the other side were those who maintained that blacks' preference for balanced mixed-race neighborhoods reflected a fear of living in neighborhoods where they were in the minority. Blacks really wouldn't mind living in neighborhoods where they were in the minority (probably for reasons not associated with ethnicity). In fact, they might prefer them but are reluctant to move into such neighborhoods because they are concerned they would be mistreated.

This contentious debate has stayed in the back of my mind over the years as I have read papers exploring the preference issue. Fossett does an excellent job of summarizing this debate in his paper and, in my opinion, correctly criticizes the studies that purport to show there is little support for the positive side of group affinity argument and considerable support for the fear of white hostility argument. I have always thought these studies were stacked against the former and in favor of the latter. I am glad to see in Fossett's discussion of this work that I am not alone. However, I would like to add a brief critique not considered by Fossett. I am curious to see what he has to say about it.

In short, it seems to me that research on black preferences follows an unnecessarily convoluted approach to learning about black preferences and, in the process, might be missing out on important

information. I focus on the Krysan and Farley (2002) article to which Fossett gives so much attention. This article appears to be the latest in a substantial and important line of research. Essentially, this article attempts to get at blacks' preferences for the racial composition of neighborhoods by (1) asking them why they do not want to live in neighborhoods that are predominantly white and by (2) asking them why they prefer neighborhoods that are racially balanced. In (1), this is asking blacks to explain what they do not like about places in which they do not live. It does not tell us anything about why blacks live where they do. Fearing hostility in predominantly white neighborhoods could be irrelevant to blacks' housing locations if they are happy about where they do live, including because they have positive reasons for wanting to live with other blacks. Thus, I believe this approach is inclined to elicit preferences based on out-group fear rather than in-group affinity, even if in-group affinity is operating in blacks choosing to live in neighborhoods with a substantial number of blacks. In (2), blacks are asked to make an ideal world choice for a place to live. When asked why they made this choice, they tend to give ideal world responses reflecting the importance of integration. I suspect this approach works against blacks expressing less idealistic responses reflecting the importance of in-group affinity. Further, in a quantitative attempt to explain blacks' preferences, Krysan and Farley use this item to measure in-group affinity (they call it neutral ethnocentrism): "Do you think what happens generally to black people in this country will have something to do with what happens in your life?" It seems to me that an answer to this question could be pretty loosely associated with a desire to live with black in order to maintain close contact with black culture.

What is missing from the preference research I have read is a straightforward attempt to learn about blacks' preferences. Why not ask blacks why they live where they live? What things, if any, do they like about living there, and why? Is living around other blacks for positive reasons something they list? If researchers want to continue to explore preferences for hypothetical neighborhoods, which is a good idea if we want to know what blacks think of neighborhoods with a range of ethnic compositions, then let's use an item like, "How important is it to you to live in neighborhoods with enough blacks to maintain contact with a critical mass of black culture?" I leave it to the questionnaire designers to come up with the best way of posing this question. But the point is the issue at hand could be examined more directly than it has been, leading, hopefully, to a more definitive conclusion.

The last issue I want to consider is, what really is segregation (conversely, what is integration)? I think we have come to conceptualize

segregation in terms of the statistics we use to measure it, losing sight of the concept we are attempting to measure. Fossett's paper illustrates this point. Although Fossett considers more than one measure of segregation, much of his paper is concerned with discussing and then demonstrating that blacks' in-group preferences are segregation-producing because if they were realized, the resulting residential distribution would depart from evenness. Essentially, this is equating segregation with the index of dissimilarity, making D more than just a method for measuring the residential distribution of two groups of people; it has become the concept itself. So, what is segregation? I'm pretty sure I don't have a definitive answer. But, Fossett's paper has given me the impetus to give this some thought.

Let me discuss this issue in terms of integration instead. When I cover segregation in my undergraduate courses, I always start by asking the students what the residential distribution of ethnic groups in an integrated city would be like. Invariably, they say in such a city members of minority groups would live together with whites in their neighborhoods. They never say anything that even remotely refers to an even distribution. When I ask them what they mean by "live together with whites," they always come up with something about minority group members living in neighborhoods with approximately equal numbers of whites. They are totally unperturbed by the fact that in most cities this would leave most whites in all-white neighborhoods. They are more concerned with minority groups sharing space with whites than with whites sharing space with minority groups. This is true no matter the ethnicity of the students. While this example might set serious scholars of segregation to rolling their eyes, on reflection, I think this really is how our society views integration (and, hence, segregation). For instance, I think the goal of the Civil Rights movement was to provide blacks with access to largely white institutions, not to guarantee that whites had increased opportunity to interact with blacks.

This line of thinking has given me cause to wonder, just how much residential mixing between whites and minority groups is required to produce an optimal (or even sufficient) level of integration? I doubt that evenness is a defensible answer, particularly since it produces a different mix in every city. As I think about it, it is important for whites and members of other ethnic groups to have enough contact with each other that there is some understanding among them and there is a modicum of allegiance to the collectivity. But I see no reason why evenness is required to produce this. Further, I can imagine at least one instance where the condition of evenness might be detrimental to minority group interests: in most cities, an even distribution of

all ethnic groups would effectively diminish minority groups' local political power and their ability to influence the public institutions in which they participate.

So, what I'm suggesting is that evenness is not necessarily an appropriate standard for measuring segregation. The common sense concept of integration and, perhaps, a practical concept as well do not necessarily imply evenness. Exactly what degree of residential mixing would be required to produce this level of integration, I don't know. But by choosing evenness as the main criterion for judging the segregation-promoting effects of ethnic group preferences for the ethnic composition of their neighborhoods, Fossett's simulations guarantee these preferences will lead to the conclusion that they are sufficient to produce and maintain segregation. Perhaps if a more practical concept of segregation was employed, his simulations would find that preferences don't lead so invariably to an undesirable state.

REFERENCES

Krysan, M. & Reynolds, F. (2002). "The residential preferences of blacks: Do they explain persistent segregation?" *Social Forces*, *80*, 937–980.

Massey, D. S. & Denton, N. A. (1993). *American Apartheid: Segregation and the Making of the Underclass*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.