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Religious Organizations as Racialized Organizations: Loose Coupling and Symbolic Allyship Between Denominational Racial Justice Statements and Congregational Practice

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Abstract

In the post-Civil Rights era, many predominantly white religious denominations issued statements denouncing racism and challenging their congregations to take organizational action to undo racism, but do these statements translate into actions? New institutionalism theorizes that loose coupling between statements and actions is normative for organizations as they balance signaling support to their external environment while simultaneously maintaining the good faith of internal membership, but Ray contends that because organizations are racialized, this disconnect maintains racial inequality. Building on new institutionalism, I develop the concept of symbolic allyship: symbolic actions that mark the organization as an ally, but these symbolic actions vary in the degree to which they pose organizational risk in maintaining member confidence. Using a nationally representative sample of American congregations within predominantly white denominations that have implored their congregations to act to address racism, I employ latent class analysis to test the prevalence and shape of congregational loose coupling between symbolic statements and symbolic actions. Results suggest that loose coupling between statements and actions is the norm. Further, results provide some evidence that congregations trend toward engaging in symbolic actions that have lower potential costs to the good faith of members. Because these forms of symbolic allyship signal support to the outside world, they may also mask lower levels of organizational change and reinforce racial inequality. Finally, regression analysis illustrates that the ideological mismatch between more progressive denominational statements and more conservative local political and theological cultures helps in understanding this pervasive loose coupling.

Keywords

symbolic allyship, organizations, religion, loose coupling, racism, Whiteness

INTRODUCTION

In response to the murders of Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, and George Floyd in the summer of 2020, many predominantly white religious denominational structures in the United States issued a formal statement denouncing racism.[1] Although only 40 percent of white Americans were

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supportive of BLM in 2016, that number jumped to 60 percent in June 2020 (Horowitz and Livingston 2016; Parker, Horowitz, and Anderson 2020). As public opinion grows more supportive, predominantly white denominations face external societal pressure to denounce racism by publicly releasing a statement. While these statements vary by denomination in terms of their framing of what racism is and what the solutions to racial injustice are, theories of new institutionalism anticipate this very pattern of issuing a statement as organizations seek to remain legitimate within their institutional field, within their subculture, and/or within larger cultural trends. However, releasing formal statements denouncing racism is not a new phenomenon for predominantly white denominations. In the post-Civil Rights era, many predominantly white denominational structures in the United States issued multiple formal statements denouncing racism, both pre- and post-2020. With the commonness of these statements, it is important to ask if such public statements made in response to this pressure generally lead to organizational engagement at the congregational level, or are they primarily detached from practice? Employing sociological language, are the institutional rules set forth in these denominational statements loosely or tightly coupled with actual congregational practice and outcomes (Chaves 1996; Meyer and Rowan 1977; Weick 1976)?

This research considers the connection, or lack thereof, between organizational statements and outcomes in the context of religious organizations. New institutionalism theorizes that organizations often develop institutional rules to seek legitimacy within their organizational field or even greater societal expectations, but because these rules can be a result of normative pressure, they are often decoupled, or loosely coupled, from the actual practices of the organization. From a critical perspective, Victor Ray's (2019:26) theory of racialized organizations contends that "the decoupling of formal rules from organizational practice is often racialized," meaning that race matters and is constitutive in this decoupling process.

Applying Ray's (2019) theory of racialized decoupling, this research seeks to uncover the impact of denominational statements regarding racism on the actual practices of their partner congregations within the United States. Using the National Congregation Study (NCS), the only nationally representative sample of American congregations, I performed LCA on a variety of congregational practices intended to address racism to better understand both the extent of this type of loose coupling as well as explore patterns in how congregations address racism within predominantly white denominations who issue a statement that (a) denounces racism and (b) challenges congregations to organizational action. Further, regression analysis on each class provides understanding of which internal and external environmental factors at the congregational level are associated with congregational loose coupling and tight coupling in the relationship between the discursive claims of their denominations and the actions of the congregation in addressing racism.

Results suggest that there are two substantive classes: the loosely coupled and the more tightly coupled. The largest group is the more loosely coupled, where congregations are highly unlikely to engage in organizational actions meant to address racism, and when they do, they are most likely to participate in forms of symbolic allyship that pose the least risk to maintaining membership. The smaller groups are the more tightly coupled, and this group is much more likely to engage in a greater variety of symbolic allyship actions to address racism in America. In terms of environmental predictors, the local political and theological culture, age of the congregation, region, and being situated in a rural area predict loose coupling for congregations.

Andrew L. Whitehead (2017) notes that religious organizations are a particularly useful unit of analysis to measure loose coupling because, as a largely voluntary entity, particularly among whites, they must balance success through navigating simultaneous pressure to signal legitimacy with larger cultural trends while also engaging in practices that minimize conflict with their current constituency. While this research focuses on religious organizations, the implications are relevant for any predominantly white organization that claims a commitment to racial justice and racial equality.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Loose Coupling

In organizational research, new institutionalism provides insight into the connection between institutional rules and the need to be perceived as legitimate by the external environment, which in turn puts pressure on organizations to be similar, or isomorphic, to other organizations within a given institutional field. John W. Meyer and Brian Rowan (1977) note that institutional rules serve as myths

in the sense that they are about maintaining legitimacy within the greater institutional field or larger cultural environment while these rules may or may not actually improve the efficiency of the organization. DiMaggio and Powell (1983) contend that the field or cultural environment can put normative pressure on an organization to become more like the external environment to maintain legitimacy to survive.

Thus, there is the possibility of a disconnect between institutional myths focused on legitimacy and actual practices focused on efficiency or maintenance of the status quo. Meyer and Rowan (1977) theorize that organizations often minimize any conflict between rules and their day-to-day core activity by creating distance between the two, which is known as loose coupling (Hallett 2010). Meyer and Rowan (1977) further suggest this distance between rules and core activity serves to maintain confidence and good faith in the organization simultaneously among internal members and external constituents.

Research on religious organizations provides illustrative examples of loose coupling between statements and practices. Mark Chaves (1996) notes that denominations began to support the ordination of women due to external pressure to remain legitimate with growing societal support for feminism. Building on Chaves (1996), Katie Lauve-Moon (2021) studies the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship (CBF), which left the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) over issues of biblical interpretation, including women's ability to be a minister, yet the CBF only has 5 percent women senior ministers serving congregations despite the CBF's public pronouncements of support for women as ministers. Thus, loose coupling can provide denominations with external legitimacy while masking internal factors that may inhibit or purposely resist organizational change.

Using Joan Acker's (1990) theory of gendered organizations, Lauve-Moon (2021) demonstrates that gender functions as a fundamental form of hierarchy at the individual, interactional, and organizational level within religious organizations, and loose coupling is not a neutral process, even when actors have good intentions. From this literature, there are two key insights that guide this current analysis. First, gender is a foundational element in creating hierarchy within organizations, and as a result, loose coupling is often not neutral. Second, notably missing, is a study of the loose coupling between rules and practices of religious organizations in terms of addressing racism.

Racialized Organizations

Building on her theory of gendered organizations, Joan Acker (2006) develops the theory of inequality regimes, which recognizes that organizations are also hierarchical based on race, class, gender, sexuality, etc., and various forms of hierarchy are intersectional and overlapping in their effects. Focusing particularly on the processes of racialization, Ray (2019) argues in the theory of racialized organizations that the organizational loose coupling between rules and practices is commonly racialized. To illustrate this tenet, Ray (2019) points to David G. Embrick's (2011) finding that while upper-level managers in Fortune 1000 companies are quick to support diversity symbolically, they often fail to articulate policies or put processes in place that promote diversity.

From a racialized organization perspective, the decoupling is not neutral because it serves to maintain the existing racial hierarchy within the organization. Thus, whiteness is often an unseen and unmarked part of organizational processes, and loose coupling can serve as an organizational form of white ignorance where the disconnect between claims and action itself produces a form of not knowing that obscures the absence of tangible action (Mills 1997). While protection of the racial hierarchy in an organization may be intentional, whiteness is so taken for granted that this hierarchy may continue despite white actors' desire to support diversity, yet Mueller (2020) contends that even these taken-for-granted, unintentional forms of white ignorance have been socially constructed and still function to maintain white supremacy.

A similar logic to Embrick's (2011) findings can be applied to loose coupling in religious organizations, as Ray (2019) maintains that all organizations are formed and shaped by the larger institutional field of race. Therefore, organizational research maintains that loose coupling, in general, is common, and critical scholarship notes that this loose coupling is racialized and serves as a mechanism to maintain racial domination. In a religious context, I expect predominantly white denominational claims to address racism organizationally to be decoupled from congregational action, regardless of intent.

Race and Religion

In the post-Civil Rights era, many predominantly white denominations have issued formal statements denouncing racism. However, these statements on

racism differ in how these groups define racism and the solutions to overcome racial division and inequality often on an individualist to structuralist spectrum. On the individualist end of the spectrum, Michael O. Emerson and Christian Smith (2001) find that white Evangelical individuals and congregations often frame the problem of racism as an interactional sin causing division, and thus the solution is unity between individuals and among congregations. Emerson and Smith (2001) also find that white Evangelicals often dismiss structural causes and solutions, which Eric Tranby and Douglas Hartmann (2008) note is a non-neutral phenomena that perpetuates inequality. Nonetheless, some white Evangelicals prioritize the structural solution of congregational integration as it is still primarily interactional, and as a result, a number of research studies examine the organizational possibilities and roadblocks of multiracial congregations (Christerson, Edwards, and Emerson 2005; Edwards 2008; Marti 2009).

At the denominational level, new institutionalism suggests that even the more interactional justice-minded white Evangelical denominations face pressure from the religious field as well as greater society to address racism through formal statements. For example, the SBC, the largest historically white Evangelical denomination, issued statements apologizing for participating in the institution of slavery as well as "individual and systemic racism in our lifetime" (SBC 1995). Further, the SBC challenged its membership to increase racial and ethnic diversity in terms of its clergy, leadership, and membership both in its denominational structure and within its congregations (SBC 2015). The SBC has produced statements that decry racism, acknowledge individual and even systemic racism, and call for organizational action in the form of integration. Of course, white Evangelical congregations and their denominations are not a monolith, and therefore, white Evangelical denominations may vary from no formal statement, to making a statement requesting organizational efforts at integration, to what Harvey (2020) calls prophetic Evangelicals that may make a statement and request more broad-based structural changes. As the statement of the SBC illustrates, the stated claims of the more interactional justice frame may demand congregational action to intentionally foster diverse leadership and membership, and thus if their congregations do not make any organizational efforts or invest minimal effort to achieve these stated goals, they would be loosely coupled from denominational claims.

On the other hand, white Mainline denominations and white Catholics may trend more toward the structural end of the racial justice spectrum. As Victor J. Hinojosa and Jerry Z. Park (2004) note, white Mainline denominations are the most involved in the Civil Rights movement among white religious groups and both white Mainline and white Catholics have progressive strains of theology that are organizationally established. Whereas white Evangelical denominations focus any structural efforts primarily on overcoming racial division and inequality through efforts to achieve diversity, inclusion, and unity, the statements of white Mainline and white Catholic denominations are inclusive of these efforts while also broadening the scope of structural causes of racial inequality and structural solutions.

For example, the statement of the United Methodist Church (UMC), the largest white Mainline denomination, outlines its goals to

> "eliminate all forms of institutional racism in the total ministry of the Church. . .increase efforts to recruit people of all races into the membership of The United Methodist Church and provide leadership-development opportunities without discrimination. . .work for the development and implementation of national and international policies to protect the civil, political, economic, social, and cultural rights of all people" (UMC 1980).

Similarly, the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) issued a statement challenging Catholic individuals to address racism in their own lives, Catholic institutions to address racism internally, and Catholic individuals and institutions to address racism societally both domestically and globally (USCCB 1979). Not only does this normative pressure to appear legitimate manifest in the statements of the UMC and USCCB, but each of the white Mainline traditions also produce similarly more structural racial justice statements that all implore congregations to organizational action. Based on the greater focus on addressing structural racism in these statements, one may expect that denominations with more structural justice statements may fare better than those with more individual and interactional ones in terms of congregational-level actions meant to address racial division and/or injustice.

In previous research at the intersection of race and religion, white Evangelical denominations, congregations, and individuals are often treated as

distinctive from white Mainline and white Catholics due to this more individualist framing, but does a focus on heterogeneity potentially conceal the presence of homogeneity in organizational outcomes? Recentering Du Bois' theoretical contributions to religion, Damon Mayrl (2022) notes that Du Bois utilizes terms such as "white church" to describe all Christian denominations where whites maintain disproportionate power. Thus, the "white church" represents "the ways that white Christian denominations-despite their theological and social differences-have been collectively marked by their encounter with white supremacy in ways that have produced overarching similarities" (Mayrl 2022:17). What remains as a shared trait of each denomination is the historical and current impact of deep structures of white supremacy on the formation and development of predominantly white denominations and their congregations. From this perspective, it is important not only to understand distinctiveness but also the similarity resulting from structures of white supremacy.

Previous research finds indicators of a persistent dissonance between these larger discourses of support for racial justice and actual outcomes among the white church. In terms of individual racial attitudes, Robert P. Jones (2020) shows that white Evangelicals have high rates of racial resentment, yet whites in Mainline and Catholic traditions are not far behind. In line with new institutionalism, the pressure among religious elites to remain legitimate may not match the local congregational cultures or individual preferences regarding addressing racism.

In terms of congregational loose coupling, Kevin D. Dougherty, Mark Chaves, and Michael O. Emerson (2020) find that approximately 10 percent of Mainline congregations are multiracial (no more than 80 percent of one racial group) compared to 23 percent of Catholic congregations and 22 percent of Evangelicals. Dougherty et al.'s (2020) findings suggest loose coupling in terms of integration for all of the white church, with Mainline Protestants being the least likely. Because integration is a common solution to racism among many religious organizations, most previous research has prioritized integration as the primary measurement of a congregation addressing racism. However, there is a dearth of research systematically uncovering the extent of loose coupling between denominational claims to address racism and additional outcomes beyond integration at the congregational level.

From a racialized organizations standpoint, this decoupling is a non-neutral phenomena that perpetuates the status quo and racial inequality. Because denominations across the individual to structural spectrum face external pressure to make statements denouncing racism and requesting organizational action, these denominational statements may often be decoupled from their congregations implementing organizational action. Employing the Du Boisian perspective of the white church, I expect loose coupling will be remarkably similar among the white church despite theological and social differences between denominations. Mayrl (2022) further contends that silence and inaction are key mechanisms that allow white religious organizations to legitimate the status quo. If whiteness is a key structure shaping the white church, then I expect patterned inaction or minimal action in white organizations to be normative. Loose coupling is particularly powerful as it elucidates that inaction may be masked by symbolic statements claiming a desire to participate in action.

Symbolic Allyship

A key insight of new institutionalism is that organizations make symbolic statements to show their relevance to the outside world. While research on loose coupling focuses on the dissonance between symbolic statements and the actions of the organization (Chaves 1996; Lauve-Moon 2021; Meyer and Rowan 1977), the logic of new institutionalism suggests that organizations may also engage in symbolic actions to maintain their legitimacy with their external environment. Religious organizations often utilize symbolic action to reenact norms as well as enact change, and therefore predominantly white religious organizations may show solidarity by providing external signs and symbols to signal their support. Building on new institutionalism, I define this symbolic allyship as any action that an organization composed of a predominantly advantaged group enacts as a symbolic marker of support for greater justice, inclusion, and equity for a historically oppressed group. Thus, the statements of predominantly white denominations condemning racism and encouraging racial equality and inclusion are in and of themselves a symbolic action that functions as a marker of symbolic allyship to the external environment. As acts of symbolic allyship are a symbolic marker, they are often initial forms of solidarity and require minimal internal change to the organization, yet they can be

an impetus for further action and change. For example, the symbolic statements of predominantly white denominations require low levels of organizational change initially, yet these statements may lead to more tangible changes in policies, budgeting, and initiatives both at the denominational and congregational levels.

Another key insight of new institutionalism is that the decoupling of symbolic statements from actions provides a way for organizations to balance signaling allyship to the external environment and internal supporters while simultaneously maintaining the confidence and good faith of a majority of members. Therefore, symbolic actions may serve as a centrist approach between symbolic statements and more concrete actions. Due to increased external pressure to appear antiracist, particularly since the emergence of BLM in 2013, organizations face pressure to move beyond the lowest-risk symbolic actions, such as symbolic statements. Instead, these organizations may opt to adopt symbolic actions that exhibit increased solidarity while still posing limited risk of losing organizational members and their support. Due to this possibility, I contend it is instructive to consider the symbolic actions of an organization on a symbolic allyship continuum. While acts of symbolic allyship function to mark legitimacy with external norms of antiracism, these actions differ in the degree to which they may impact the good faith and confidence of internal members. As congregations are voluntary organizations trying to keep members invested, I argue that organizations will be most likely to engage in symbolic allyship that has lower potential cost to the good faith and confidence of internal members. For example, a symbolic statement from the denomination requires very little organizational change and is the most likely initial action. As external pressure remains or even heightens, a predominantly white congregation may be more likely to engage in other symbolic actions that require an increasing potential for organizational change and pose a slightly increased perceived threat to the good faith of members such as an annual joint worship service with a racial or ethnic minority congregation, a discussion group on topics regarding race and racism in the United States, or a designated internal diversity team. At the further end of the symbolic allyship continuum are symbolic markers that have a higher potential cost to the good faith and confidence of some members. This could be actions such as engaging in social activism, which is highly symbolic but often involves concrete action to change policies and structures. As members attend congregations for differing reasons such as community, comfort, motivation, social justice, or any amalgamation of reasons, research suggests that members often question if these actions, particularly politicized actions like lobbying or protesting, are actually the role of a congregation (Ammerman 2005; Marti 2009, 2024). To maintain a middle ground of marking solidarity with the external environment while also aiming to retain the good faith of internal membership, I expect that these organizations are more likely to engage in symbolic actions that pose the least risk to the loss of members.

For religious organizations, symbolic actions are common and can often be well-intended work aimed at changing the organization and its membership. For instance, Penny Edgell Becker (1998) finds congregations may signal a value for racial inclusion through liturgy, music, and a diversity of voices participating in worship services, and these symbolic acts can be enacted in an effort to become more diverse and inclusive. Research shows that even among well-intended congregations, their symbolic actions and attempts at more concrete organizational change face barriers from both white members' preference not to change and the embeddedness of white normativity in organizational practices (Edwards 2008). Even among progressive white congregations, recent research finds these congregations often have a small group of members highly devoted to racial justice, and these dedicated members often face resistance to enacting concrete organizational change (Marti 2024). Because organizations are racialized (Ray 2019), I expect loose coupling between symbolic statements and actions of any kind will remain commonplace due to the impact of whiteness, yet due to the need to balance showing external solidarity with internal good faith, I also expect that predominantly white congregations will be more likely to engage in actions of symbolic allyship that pose minimal risk to losses in membership and membership support.

But what are the internal pressures that shed light on why congregations do or do not act in accordance with the stated goals of the larger religious authority structure? As largely voluntary organizations, predominantly white congregations face pressure to uphold the norms, expectations, and preferences of their members because members can opt out of the organization. Whitehead (2017) finds that congregations with liberal political cultures are more likely to be tightly coupled

between congregational welcoming statements supporting LGBTQ+ persons and a congregation's willingness to have LGBTQ+ members or clergy. Therefore, it seems reasonable that local conservative political and even theological cultures may influence loose coupling between denominational statements and symbolic action as the local culture may exhibit an ideological mismatch with the relatively more progressive denomination.

To recap, the primary aims of the present study are to (a) investigate the higher prevalence of loose coupling between the statements of predominantly white denominations committed to organizational action and symbolic actions at the congregational level compared to tight coupling, (b) examine the shape of symbolic allyship between the loosely and tightly coupled congregations, and (c) examine other environmental factors that predict loose coupling for a congregation with particular focus on political and theological local cultures. Based on the literature, I propose the following hypotheses to address the study's aims.

Hypothesis 1: Among denominations that make statements challenging member congregations to organizationally address racism, there will be two latent classes, a loosely coupled (participation in no or minimal action) and a more tightly coupled class (participation in a moderate to high number of actions).

Hypothesis 2: The loosely coupled class will be larger than the more tightly coupled class.

Hypothesis 3: While relatively unlikely to participate in actions, the loosely coupled congregations will be most likely to participate in forms of symbolic allyship that pose the least risk to the good faith of membership.

Hypothesis 4: Moderate and liberal political congregational cultures will predict membership in the more tightly coupled class compared to conservative cultures.

Hypothesis 5: Moderate and liberal theological congregational cultures will predict membership in the more tightly coupled class compared to conservative culture.

Data, Methodology, and Measures

I utilize the 2018–2019 wave of the NCS, which is the most current wave of the only nationally representative survey of congregations (Chaves et al. 2020). Congregational data are gathered in conjunction with the General Social Survey (GSS). As respondents are interviewed for the GSS, they are asked to report the name and location where they attend religious services. Based on this nationally representative cross-section of U.S. congregations, a key informant is interviewed at each congregation to gather congregational-level data. The fourth wave of the NCS was collected from July 2018 to September 2019. Because the key interest of this study is loose and tight coupling between denominational statements and congregational action in predominantly white denominations, the sample will be limited to congregations within predominantly white denominations that made a statement imploring their member congregations to take action to address racism.[2] After removing missing cases via listwise deletion, 89.4 percent of this subsample is included in the analysis for a total of 655 cases. With this type of sampling method, congregations with more attendees are more likely to be represented in the sample. As a result, I utilize a weight variable (WT_ALL4_CONG_DUP) that allows the data to be representative of the average congregation, regardless of size.

Latent Class Analysis

This research employs LCA to identify shared latent patterns in the way congregations participate in actions intended to address racism. LCA is a statistical tool that uncovers unobserved, latent classes where respondents answer a set of categorical variables in similar patterns, and based on theoretical insights, the researcher must identify the meaning of each latent class (Hagenaars and McCutcheon 2002). The theory of loose coupling (Meyer and Rowan 1977) informs the interpretation of classes to center around loose coupling and tight coupling. The theory of racialized organizations maintains that loose coupling is often racialized (Ray 2019), and due to the historical and current influence of whiteness in the white church, I expect loose coupling to be the larger class in congregations within predominantly white denominations. However, regardless of the final number of classes, I expect the minimal to no action loosely coupled class to be distinct and prevalent.

Although this research could employ binary logistic regression, I contend that LCA is preferable as it (a) utilizes patterns in the data to uncover unobserved classes, (b) allows for understanding probabilities of membership in each class, (c) offers the ability to explore the nuance and interplay of actions of symbolic allyship intended to address racism wholistically rather than considering them individually or in specific combinations,

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics ($n = 655$).

Variables	Mean/percent	SD	Minimum	Maximum
Indicator Variables				
Joint Worship Service	27.4	-	0	1
Race Relations	24.9	-	0	1
Race and Policing	12.6	-	0	1
Diversity	11.8	-	0	1
Lobby/Protest	1.8	-	0	1
Environmental Covariates		-		
White Evangelical Protestant	39.6	-	1	3
White Mainline Protestant	47.2	-	1	3
White Catholic	12.2	-	1	3
Political Conservative	46.7	-	0	2
Political Moderate	38.2	-	0	2
Political Liberal	15.1	-	0	2
Theological Conservative	52.3	-	0	2
Theological Moderate	31.1	-	0	2
Theological Liberal	16.6	-	0	2
Percent white	79.1	31.3	0	100
Percent female	60.3	11.0	0	100
Percent Under 35	19.9	17.1	0	100
Congregation size	156.5	384.2	10	15,000
Founding year	1926.1	63.7	1,588	2,018
Northeast	16.7	-	1	4
Midwest	24.9	-	1	4
South	44.8	-	1	4
West	13.6	-	1	4
Urban	56.3	-	1	3
Suburban	18.6	-	1	3
Rural	25.1	-	1	3

Note. Weighted data from Wave IV of the National Congregation Study.

and (d) provides the ability to perform binary logistic regression on class membership to understand what congregational factors are associated with the latent class membership.

Indicator Variables

To build the latent class model, I utilize questions in the NCS that measure whether or not congregations participate in a variety of activities aimed to address racial division and inequality. In LCA terminology, the variables used to construct the classes are referred to as indicator variables and additional variables used as predictors or control variables in subsequent regression analysis are called covariates, and I will follow this terminology. Table 1 includes descriptive statistics for all indicators and covariate variables. I conceptualize symbolic allyship as actions that signal a value for addressing racism and racial inequality in the external environment, and I operationalize this using five measures. The first question asks that if the congregation participated in any joint worship services in the past 12 months, "were any of these services with congregations whose racial or ethnic make-up is different than your congregation's," with 27.4 percent of congregations having intentionally worshipped with another racial or ethnic congregation in the past year. The second question assesses whether a group meets "to discuss issues related to race and race relations," with answers 1= "yes" and 0= "no." 24.9 percent of congregations have met in the last year to discuss issues related to race relations. The third question assesses whether a group meets "to discuss issues related to race and the police," with answers 1= "yes" and 0= "no,"

and 12.6 percent of congregations participated in these discussions in the last year. The fourth indicator variable asks about congregational diversity efforts. The question asks, "Does your congregation have any organized effort, designated person, or committee whose purpose is to increase racial or ethnic diversity in your congregations," and answers include 1= "yes" and 0= "no," with 11.8 percent of congregations making an institutionalized effort to increase racial or ethnic diversity. The final indicator variable is a combination of two questions regarding congregational participation in lobbying or marching in either "issues or policies concerning race" or "issues addressing poverty as it relates to race," with responses including 1= "yes" and 0= "no." Because there is no overlap in positive responses, this variable measures whether or not a congregation participated in lobbying or marching regarding racial issues in any capacity. This subset of questions was only asked if the key informant answered yes to the congregation's participation in lobbying or marching efforts generally. As a result, missing cases are recoded as a response of "no." Only 1.8 percent of congregations participated in marching or lobbying for issues regarding race. On the symbolic allyship continuum, I conceptualize joint worship services as the lowest risk to members' confidence in the organization, having discussions regarding race relations or policing as well as designating a team to increase diversity as increasingly likely to cost member confidence, and marching and lobbying as the most likely among the included measures to cost members or member confidence. While these measures are not exhaustive, they are representative of a baseline of symbolic forms of allyship a congregation may engage. Since the sample includes only denominations that have made statements denouncing racism and committing to taking organizational steps to eradicate racial inequality and/or racial division, any latent class where there is low likelihood of participating in the indicator variables is an example of loose coupling and any latent class where there is a higher likelihood will be an example of tight coupling.

Class Selection and Analytic Strategy

The next step in LCA is determining the number of classes, and the final selection of the number of classes to include involves theoretical considerations as well as statistical diagnostics for model selection (Delehanty, Edgell, and Stewart 2019; Nylund, Asparouhov, and Muthén 2007). While a number of fit statistics are available, Bayesian information criterion (BIC) is a reliable option that values parsimony, and thus, it will be utilized to assess model fit with lower numbers suggesting better model fit (Bonikowski and DiMaggio 2016; Weller, Bowen, and Faubert 2020). To assess how well the model defines classes, I also calculate an entropy statistic with values at and above 0.80, an indication of clear class identification (Wang et al. 2017). Using Stata 17 and the *gsem* command, I begin with a one-class model and increase to a five-class model. I selected the two-class model based on it exhibiting the lowest BIC and the highest entropy at 0.86. Also, the two-class model fits with the theory of loose coupling, indicating that there will be latent constructs of loosely and more tightly coupled congregations (Meyer and Rowan 1977).

While comparable methods such as cluster analysis assign each case to a distinct cluster, LCA is a probabilistic method that provides latent class prevalence, item response probability, and regression analysis with predictor covariates. First, latent class prevalence confirms the likelihood of each congregation being in a given class. In terms of this analysis, this provides information on the likely size of the loosely coupled and tightly coupled classes among congregations within the white church. Second, item response probabilities show how likely a congregation is to answer yes or no on each given indicator variable within each class. This uncovers the shape of each class in terms of the probability that congregations will participate in symbolic actions meant to heal racial division or eradicate racial inequality. Finally, regression analysis allows for the inclusion of covariates to see which factors predict class membership.[3] With two latent classes, the next step in the analysis will be a bivariate logistic regression where the latent classes will function as the dependent variable, and the regressions uncover which covariates predict membership in the loosely or tightly coupled classes. For all regression analysis, tightly coupled will serve as the reference group, and thus, results represent the likelihood that a congregation will be loosely coupled.

Independent Covariates

As environmental considerations are key to organizational research, a number of internal and external environmental variables are included. To understand which variables predict loose coupling, I consider the theological and political leanings of the

congregation. In an analysis of loose coupling in regards to inclusivity for gay and lesbian members and clergy, Whitehead (2017) finds that local political culture is predictive of loose and tight coupling, and as discourse around racism and solutions to racial inequality is highly politicized, I anticipate that local political and possibly theological cultures will be similarly predictive of a congregation's likelihood of acting or not acting on the statements of their denomination. The political question asks, "politically speaking, would your congregation be considered more on the conservative side, more on the liberal side, or right in the middle?" Descriptive results suggest 46.7 percent of congregations are conservative, 38.2 percent moderate, and 15.1 percent liberal. The theological question asks, "theologically speaking, would your congregation be considered more on the conservative side, more on the liberal side, or right in the middle?" Results suggest that 52.3 percent are conservative, 31.1 percent moderate, and 16.6 percent of congregations are theologically liberal. While these variables do not capture the full theological and political heterogeneity of the congregation, they are suggestive of the dominant political or theological culture. Political and theological conservative will serve as the reference category for these variables.

Control Covariates

I control for a variety of other environmental variables. In terms of external factors, I account for geographical region with a categorical variable. This variable includes "Northeast," "Midwest," "South," and "West," with South serving as the reference category. Results reveal that 16.7 percent of congregations are from the Northeast, 24.9 percent from the Midwest, 44.8 percent from the South, and 13.6 percent from the West. I include a categorical variable that captures whether a congregation is in an "urban," "suburban," or "rural" area, with urban being the reference category, and results reveal that 56.3 percent of congregations are in urban areas, 18.6 percent in suburban, and 25.1 percent in rural areas. Finally, I utilize a measure of religious traditions of the white church with 39.6 percent "Evangelical Protestant," 47.2 percent "Mainline Protestant," and 12.2 percent "Catholic," with Evangelical Protestant serving as the reference category. To consider additional internal factors, I include the percentage of members who are white, with a mean of 79.1, percent of members who are female, with a mean of 60.3, as well as percent of members who are under the age of 35 in a congregation, with a mean of 19.9. I also include a control variable that captures the founding date of the congregation and is a continuous variable with values ranging from 1588 to 2018 and a mean of 1926.1. Finally, I control for congregation size with values ranging from 10 to 15,000 with a mean of 156.5.

RESULTS

After selecting the two-class model, the results of the item response probability found in Figure 1 illustrate that the classes do fall as predicted, into a loosely coupled (78.8 percent) and a more tightly coupled class (21.2 percent). These class prevalence results suggest that loose coupling will be the dominant norm within predominantly white denominations as the actions of their congregations are not likely to match their denominational statements denouncing racism and demanding action. The results provide strong support for H1 and H2.

But what are the shape of these classes? For the loosely coupled class, approximately 5.3 percent of these congregations have a diversity initiative, 20.4 percent worship with a congregation of a different racial or ethnic group, 4.7 percent have a group meeting to discuss race relations, 1.4 percent have a group meeting to discuss issues around race and policing, and 0.0 percent participate in lobbying or marching about issues surrounding race. Congregations in the loosely coupled class are highly unlikely to participate in any of the actions, but if they do, they are most likely to have worshipped with a congregation of a different race or ethnicity in the past 12 months. The results also provide some evidence of H3 that the loosely coupled congregations are the most likely to engage in forms of symbolic allyship that pose lower levels of threat to the membership, such as participation in a yearly combined worship service.

Among the more tightly coupled class, approximately 36.1 percent of these congregations have a diversity initiative, 53.5 percent worship with a congregation of a different racial or ethnic group, 99.9 percent have a group meeting to discuss race relations, 54.1 percent have a group meeting to discuss issues around race and policing, and 8.3 percent participate in lobbying or marching about issues surrounding race. Congregations in the more tightly coupled class are far more likely to participate in efforts to overcome racial division and injustice on every measurement. However, the tightly coupled congregations also tend to gravitate

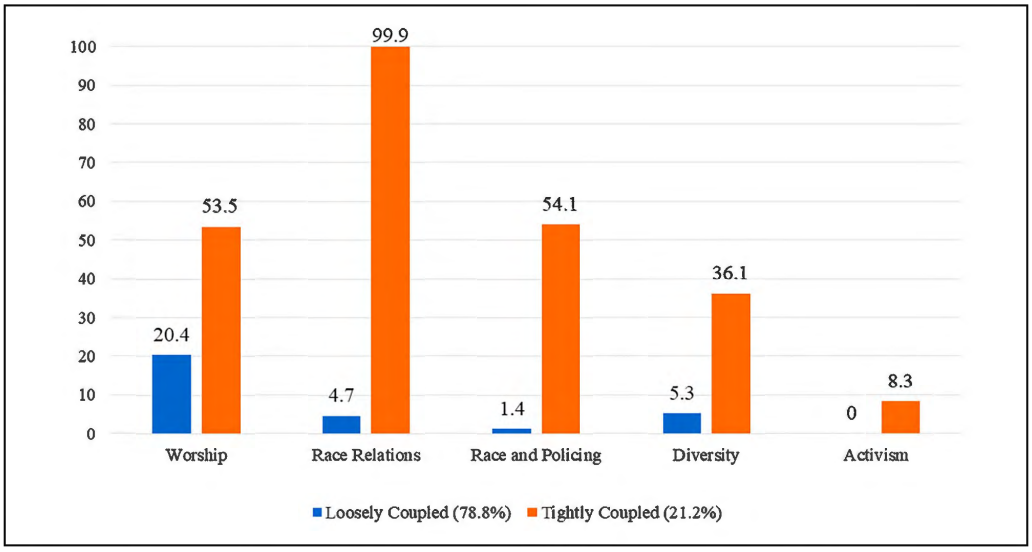

Figure 1. Probability of item response by class.

Table 2. Logistic Regression on Loosely Coupled Class Membership.

	Model 1	
Variables	Beta	*SE*
Environmental Covariates		
Political Moderate	−2.23**	0.72
Political Liberal	−3.53***	0.98
Theological Moderate	−0.05	0.62
Theological Liberal	−2.19**	0.77
Percent Under 35	−0.05*	0.02
Northeast	−1.84*	0.79
Midwest	−1.16*	0.57
West	−1.75*	0.74
Rural	1.90*	0.93
Observations	655	

Note. Reference categories are Evangelical, Political Conservative, Theological Conservative, and Urban, in the South. Weighted.
*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$. ***$p < .001$.

toward forms of symbolic allyship that are less costly to the good faith of membership than those of higher cost.

Finally, I include covariates to assess the environmental factors that are associated with loosely coupled class membership. In Table 2, Model 1 conveys the results of logistic regression, and coefficients represent the effect that each covariate has on membership in the loosely coupled class compared to the more tightly coupled class in terms of logged odds. Compared to politically conservative congregations, liberal ($b = -3.53$, $p < .001$) and moderate ($b = -2.23$, $p < .01$) congregations are less likely to be in the loosely coupled class net other factors. In terms of theological orientation, liberal ($b = -2.19$, $p < .01$) congregations are less likely to be loosely coupled compared to the theologically conservative. It is noteworthy that moderate theological congregations do not differ significantly from conservative ones. For every

one percent increase in congregants under the age of 35, congregations are ($b = -0.05$, $p < 0.05$) less likely to be loosely coupled. Compared to congregations in the South, congregations in the Northeast ($b = -1.84$, $p < .05$), Midwest ($b = -1.16$, $p < .05$), West ($b = -1.75$, $p < .05$) are less likely to be loosely coupled. Finally, compared to congregations in urban areas, those in rural areas are ($b = 1.90$, $p < .05$) more likely to be loosely coupled net of other factors. It is political conservatives (compared to liberals and moderates), theological conservatives (compared to liberals), living in the South compared to the Northeast, Midwest, and West, having a higher percentage of members over the age of 35, and residing in rural areas compared to urban ones that are associated with loose coupling. These results provide support for H4, but because moderate theological cultures are not distinct from conservative cultures, these results provide partial support for H5.

DISCUSSION

The act of issuing formal statements that simultaneously denounce racism and prescribe solutions to end racism has become common among predominantly white denominations in the post-Civil Rights era, but do congregations within these denominations take organizational action to combat racial division and inequality? And if so, what type of actions do they take? Using the theory of loose coupling (Chaves 1996; Meyer and Rowan 1977; Weick 1976) and situating it as a key aspect of racialized organizations (Ray 2019), I perform analysis on a nationally representative survey of congregations within predominantly white denominations that have requested organizational changes to address racism, and I examine the prevalence and explore the shape of congregational actions aimed at decreasing racial division and inequality.

My first research objective is to assess the level of loose coupling between the statements of predominantly white denominations and their congregational actions regarding addressing racial division and inequality. Based on the measures included, results from the class prevalence analysis suggest that loose coupling is pervasive in predominantly white denominations. While results may be less startling for historically more individualist Evangelical denominations, it may be more surprising for Mainline Protestants and Catholics whose denominational entities employ a more structural frame, yet these findings comport with Ray's (2019) expectations as well as with insights from broader sociological research on race suggesting that white individuals and predominantly white organizations, conservative and progressive, all present barriers to racial justice and equality (Burke 2017; Hughey 2012). By applying Du Bois' theory of the white church, the findings illustrate the stark sameness of outcomes in predominantly white denominations across the political spectrum because of the deep structures of white supremacy. As sociology of religion research has largely examined distinctiveness, particularly among white Evangelicals, my findings imply that this subfield will benefit from simultaneously considering the similarity in outcomes to more fully understand the persistence of racial inequality produced through the white church.

Although the sameness of the white church in terms of loose coupling is prevalent, white Evangelicals, white Mainliners, and white Catholics are not politically and theologically monolithic, and this in part helps in understanding the loose coupling between the statements of the larger umbrella organization and the actions of the local congregation. While white Evangelicals lean more conservative, Mainline and Catholic individuals are much more diverse in their political orientations (Lipka 2016). As denominations are national-level umbrella organizations, it is plausible they face more external pressure to remain legitimate within society compared to their local congregations, and as a result, they may issue statements that are more progressive relative to their local congregations. While sociology of race research provides a critical examination of how progressive individuals (Burke 2017) and their local antiracist organizations (Hughey 2012) still reinforce white supremacy, the present study additionally finds that the ideological mismatch and ensuing conflict between local ideological (political and theological) cultures within the larger relatively more progressive ideological culture of the denomination also masks pervasive inaction that perpetuates white dominance and inequality. Future research in sociology more broadly can employ the concept of ideological mismatch between micro, meso, and macro levels of analysis to more fully understand the dissonance between claims and actions.

My second research objective is to build theoretical knowledge of new institutionalism and organizational loose coupling through developing the concept of symbolic allyship, and further, I examine how symbolic allyship operates in congregations in predominantly white Christian denominations. Organizations constantly balance signaling legitimacy to their external environment while also maintaining the good faith of their internal membership. By conceptualizing the measures in this

study as actions on a symbolic allyship continuum (joint worship, discussion groups on race relations or policing, creating an organizational diversity, social activism), results illustrate that congregations gravitate toward actions that pose lower threat to the confidence of membership, especially among the loosely coupled congregations.

This study provides evidence that engagement in forms of symbolic allyship differs for loosely and more tightly coupled congregations. Among the more tightly coupled, they almost certainly have a group to discuss race relations. Beyond the ubiquity of discussing race relations, the more tightly coupled congregations are heterogenous in their engagement of worship with congregations of a different race/ethnicity, their discussions of race and policing, and having a dedicated diversity initiative. These congregations are more homogenous in their hesitance to engage in the costliest form of symbolic allyship included in this study: lobbying or marching about issues related to race.

Considering all the outcomes together, discussing race relations, an action of lower cost to member confidence, can represent an entry point as many congregations engage in discussing race relations and at least one other form of action. However, cleavages remain on how to engage beyond this discussion around race relations as these congregations choose different pathways. These congregations are split on their willingness to leverage these larger conversations on race relations toward engaging in worshipping together with a congregation of another race or ethnicity. As I suggested, joint worship services are the lowest cost to the good faith of members, and it is noteworthy that the more tightly coupled congregations are more likely to engage in discussions on race relations compared to an annual joint worship service. For these congregations, these discussions on race relations are significantly more common. Even with the relevance of more specific issues of racism such as police brutality highlighted by groups, such as BLM, the more tightly coupled congregations are split on their willingness to specifically discuss race and policing, but it seems clear that these discussions on race and policing do not often pair with congregational protesting or lobbying. Using the NCS, Kraig Beyerlein and Mark Chaves (2020) find that 17 percent of all U.S. congregations protest and 10 percent lobby for any cause. While collective activism is not a pervasive action in congregations generally, the likelihood that even tightly coupled congregations will engage this form of symbolic allyship regarding issues of race is less likely than their likelihood to engage collective activism in general. Although beyond the scope of this research, it is possible that members of these congregations may opt to participate in direct activism individually, but this remains an uncommon collective practice.

Further, about one in three of the more tightly coupled congregations, these broader discussions on race relations are correlated with more focused efforts at diversity. While these congregations are more tightly coupled and more likely to engage in all forms of symbolic allyship included in this study, there still appear to be barriers to connecting discussions about race relations with designating a diversity team. While it is beyond the scope of this research to assess whether discussions on race relations lead to these other actions, evidence suggests they are correlated. These results provide some evidence that even the more tightly coupled congregations gravitate toward forms of symbolic allyship that are lower threat and simultaneously are less likely to engage in actions of symbolic allyship that are of an increased threat to member confidence.

Among the loosely coupled congregations, they are unlikely to engage in any actions included in this study, but they are most likely to worship with a congregation of a different racial or ethnic group each year, at 20.4 percent. These results offer support that joint worship services may provide a form of symbolic allyship that poses minimal threat to the good faith of members at least among loosely coupled congregations. It is worth noting that many of these white congregations that engage in joint worship services may conceive of joint worship services as a transformative symbolic act in and of itself. However, this study centers on function rather than intent. Although denominational statements and symbolic actions such as joint worship services may be enacted with positive intent, they still serve to mystify the normativity of inaction or minimal action.

Extending the insights of Mayrl's (2022) inaction or silence and Ray's (2019) racialized loose coupling, the low probability for loosely coupled congregations to engage in the forms of symbolic allyship included in the study may function to mask minimal organizational change. In fact, symbolic allyship may be a more effective mechanism as an organization can signal allyship with minimal risk of losing the confidence of members and without making substantive changes to the structure of the organization itself or the distribution of its resources. Future research can further assess additional forms of symbolic allyship and how they connect or are loosely coupled from more concrete outcomes.

Beyond the implications for research previously discussed, this study has practical importance for organizations. Although these results are critical and disheartening, this research is intended to be challenging yet constructive for organizations interested in change. While this research centers religious organizations, the practical application of this study can extend beyond religious organizations to any well-intentioned organization that faces external pressure to make statements regarding justice and equality, which has grown exponentially in the post-2020 United States.

Since loose coupling is so common, most organizations will be tasked with developing better forms of accountability to help their organizations and members move beyond symbolic statements and leveraging symbolic allyship into meaningful organizational and structural change. This research also finds that tightly coupled congregations exist, and future research can provide more depth into how these organizations succeed in acting on their claims. Additionally, the finding that political and theological cultures impact loose coupling comports with Schade's (2018) study on preaching in the purple zone. As congregations are voluntary organizations that individuals can opt out, clergy and congregational leadership face tremendous pressure to avoid politicized issues, particularly in moderate contexts where a variety of ideological views exist. Schade (2018) recommends deliberative dialogue that attempts to find common values that can be agreed upon regarding issues such as race, gender, sexuality, etc. Results of the present study reveal that current efforts to involve congregations in actions, particularly in conservative and moderate contexts have not been effective, and it may require creative work like Schade's (2018) to enact change.

In addition to political and theological cultures, logistic regression results uncover other key localized environmental predictors of loose coupling. Congregations in rural areas are more likely than those from urban to be loosely coupled. Congregations in rural areas may face even less external pressure to appear legitimate with claims of their denomination due to isolation from the areas where these conversations are occurring. It is also possible that for some rural congregations there is less racial diversity in the area and thus less perceived need to address the issue. Additionally, congregations in the South are more likely to be loosely coupled than other regions. It is possible that pressure to appear legitimate is stronger in these other regions than in the South. Finally, younger congregations tend to be more tightly coupled. This suggests that younger members may be creating internal pressure for their congregations to engage in more symbolic allyship.

As businesses, universities, and organizations of all types are making racial justice statements post-2020, these organizations will also have to develop plans to address the inevitable political differences that may exist between the umbrella organization (corporate headquarters, universities, etc.) and the localized organizations (regional stores, colleges and departments in a university, etc.) where there may be an ideological mismatch as a result of the culture of the localized organization or the views of their leadership. Additionally, organizations of all types should consider the impact of rural areas, geographic regions, and age in developing contextual efforts to engage their varied organizations.

This research faces some limitations. To assess ideological mismatch, this study focused on denominational statements, and whether this translates into action among its member congregations. However, future research would benefit from finding data that allowed the examination of local congregational statements as well. Second, this study is built on all NCS measures that directly address race, yet there are certainly other forms of symbolic allyship that have not been captured. However, I contend that the battery of indicators used to build the latent classes provides a baseline understanding of congregational symbolic allyship. Future research would benefit from even more questions ranging from symbolic actions (changes in liturgy or telling a more honest story of their congregation's history in relationship to race and racism) to concrete outcomes (budget allocations, providing reparations, diversity policies, and hiring outcomes).

CONCLUSION

Robert Wuthnow (1990) noted that there is a declining significance of denominationalism as these boundaries become less salient. At an abstract level, these findings of loose coupling support this claim that denominations may not be that influential in terms of congregational practices, but from a practical standpoint, Ray's (2019) racialized organizations perspective highlights that the loose coupling between denominational rules and congregational practices is a non-neutral process that reinforces racial inequality and white supremacy. In this sense, the declining significance of denominational authority is highly significant.

With the murder of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and Ahmaud Arbery in 2020, organizational

statements denouncing racism are nearly ubiquitous not only in denominations but in organizations of all types. This current research affirms Ray's (2019) claim that loose coupling is normative and perpetuates racial inequality, and it extends it through exploring forms of symbolic allyship and how organizations balance signaling solidarity to the outside world with simultaneously weighing the cost of actions in terms of maintaining the support of members. The continued interrogation of when loose coupling and symbolic allyship serve as organizational forms of white ignorance that produce not knowing about pervasive inaction toward racial equality is necessary to both unmask organizations with ill intent as well as challenge those with positive intent to better align their claims with their actions.

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NOTES

1. Among all predominantly white Christian denominations within the 2018–2019 National Congregation Study (NCS), 78 percent of denominations issued a statement from a representative religious leader, a committee of religious leader, or at a national convention, and 74 percent implored congregations to organizational change.
2. For the analytic sample, I analyze the denominational statements on the website of every religious authority structure included in the NCS. Because I am interested in the impact of white racialization on loose coupling, I only analyze historically white denominations as detailed in Brian Steensland et al. (2000).
3. When introducing covariates into the model, this can cause bias in the estimates of the relationship between covariates and class membership. I opted for a three-step approach as it makes logical sense to model classes, model class membership probability, and then introduce covariates (Bakk et al. 2013).

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