Unbundling Linked Fate: How Respondents Interpret Linked Fate Question*

Jae Yeon Kim [†]Alan N. Yan [‡]

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Abstract

Linked fate is a canonical measure of group solidarity in the study of race and ethnic politics. We argue that the standard wording used for this concept is too general to unbundle distinct ways survey respondents might interpret the linked fate question. We conceptualize two ways respondents might think about their ties to a racial group: linked hurt or linked progress. Linked hurt is when a respondent believes that when their group is hurt, they are hurt, while linked progress is when a respondent believes that when their group is helped, they are also helped. We compared the standard linked fate measure to our measures using a representative survey in California (n = 4,435). We found that our alternative measures are valid and more reliable than the standard linked fate measure. We also found that the relative political role of linked fate across racial groups varies depending on how linked fate is measured. We recommend that scholars use our measures over the standard measure of linked fate to understand how linked fate shapes racialized political behavior more precisely and reliably.

[†]Corresponding author. Assistant Research Scholar, SNF Agora Institute, Johns Hopkins University. E-mail: jkim638@jhu.edu.

[‡]Ph.D. student, Department of Political Science, University of California, Berkeley. E-mail: alanyan@berkeley.edu.

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1 Introduction

Scholars of race and ethnic politics have long been interested in what binds racial and ethnic group members together (Omi and Winant, 1986, Tate, 1993, Dawson, 1994, Shelby, 2002, Chong and Rogers, 2005, Rogers, 2006, Kim, 2020b, White and Laird, 2020). One famous example is the Black utility heuristic theory that explains group consciousness among African Americans through the concept of linked fate: African Americans link their individual and group utility because their life chances are determined by race. In practice, this idea is measured in a survey by asking whether a respondent makes a connection between their group’s well-being and their own individual well-being (Dawson, 1994). Since then, according to Google Scholar, Dawson’s work has gained wide popularity. As of October 5, 2021, Dawson’s *Behind the Mule* has been cited more than 2,490 times (see Figure B.1 in Appendix B). The Google Scholar search also shows 125,000 related works, and 6% of them have been produced since 2020. In addition, linked fate has gone far beyond its original context. The framework has been applied to non-Black racial groups, such as Asian Americans, Latinx, and even Whites (Lien, Margaret Conway and Wong, 2003, Lien, Conway and Wong, 2004, Masuoka, 2006, Junn and Masuoka, 2008, Sanchez and Masuoka, 2010, Segura, 2012, Berry, Ebner and Cornelius, 2019). It has been used to analyze the link between one’s membership and group consciousness in non-racial contexts, such as gender, religion, and class (Gay, Hochschild and White, 2016, Donnelly, 2021).

We argue that this vibrant literature has a measurement problem. Previous works have questioned whether the concept, rooted in the African American political experience, can travel to other racial minority groups (McClain et al., 2009, Sanchez and Vargas, 2016). We share these scholars’ concerns about conceptual stretching (Sartori, 1970) but focus on a simpler, more fundamental problem: construct validity. As we shall show later, zeroing in on this narrower component of the problem helps address the issue of scope raised by these scholars by refining the measurement. The problem we identified is that the standard question wording used to measure linked fate is ambiguous to map onto the concept cleanly. Respondents can bring to mind positive (linked progress) or negative (linked hurt) conceptions of linked fate, or they may interpret the question in

ways different from the researchers' intent. Linked hurt is when a respondent believes that when their group is hurt, they are hurt, while linked progress is when a respondent believes that when their group is helped, they are also helped. Respondents, of course, can interpret linked fate in both ways simultaneously, but the standard linked fate measure is ill-equipped to discern how respondents interpret the question.

We solve this critical but understudied problem in the literature by proposing two alternative linked fate measures that disaggregate linked fate into *linked hurt* and *linked progress*. In the rest of the article, we first theorize how survey respondents interpret the linked fate question. Then we test the validity and reliability of our novel measures using a California-wide survey ($n = 4,435$). We show that the respondents expressed linked fate at a substantially lower level when asked about it via alternative measures than when asked using the standard linked fate question. In addition, we demonstrate that our alternative measures—linked hurt and linked progress—are more reliable than the standard linked question. Next, we show that using our measures substantively changes the estimation and interpretation of the relationships between linked fate, voting behavior, and policy preferences. Furthermore, depending on how linked fate is measured, the relative political role of linked fate varies across communities of color. Given these findings, we recommend that scholars use our measures over the standard measure of linked fate to understand how linked fate shapes racialized political behavior more precisely and reliably.

2 Theory and Hypotheses

The standard linked fate question measures a respondent's general belief that what happens to their group will affect their lives. Here, the target property the measure aims to capture is the connection between group and individual utility. However, as Figure 1 illustrates, an accurate picture of how survey respondents interpret this question could be more complex than the theory assumed. When the ambiguous wording meets a multi-dimensional concept, survey responses could be challenging to interpret. First, because the question wording is ambiguous, respondents could interpret this

question in at least two different ways. One can think about the positive connection between the group and individual utility: When my group gets better, I get better (linked progress). Or one can think about the negative connection between the group and individual utility: I get hurt when my group gets hurt (linked hurt). We also indicate that although these two dimensions are conceptually distinct, some respondents might respond positively to both dimensions (the intersection area in Figure 1). The other important possibility is that respondents miss the underlying theoretical notion of the linked fate question and make systematic and random errors.

Figure 1: A diagram of how respondents interpret linked fate question

Below, we propose alternative linked fate questions that make respondents interpret linked fate more easily. We build upon and expand existing works. Our conceptual framework is an adaption and extension of the linked fate measure used in [Junn and Masuoka \(2008\)](#). Whereas their linked fate measure only addresses the positive connection between the group and individual utility, we included another measure that touches on the negative connection. Furthermore, we name these measures to clarify what kind of linked fate dimension each measure is expected to capture.

- Linked progress: Do you agree or disagree—When things **get better** for (Latinos/ Whites/ Blacks and African Americans/ Asians/ Pacific Islanders) in this country, then things will **get**

better for me?

- Linked hurt: Do you agree or disagree—When things **get worse** for (Latinos/ Whites/ Blacks and African Americans/ Asians/ Pacific Islanders) in this country, then things will **get worse** for me?

In addition, this framework is broadly consistent with Dawson's Black utility heuristics theory and other related theories on racial solidarity politics. Although [Dawson](#) emphasized the linked hurt dimension more frequently in his *Behind the Mule* (1994), the linked progress dimension also played an important role in his theorizing of linked fate. For instance, he explained that the Federal Emergency Relief Administration and its successor, Works Project Administration, influenced African Americans' electoral support for Franklin D. Roosevelt (103-104). Similarly, [Gurin, Hatchett and Jackson \(1990\)](#) argued that hope (inclusion in standard politics) and independence (operating outside conventional political institutions) are constant narratives in Black politics. Opposing exclusion and promoting inclusion are both important themes. Outside Black politics, [Nichols \(2017\)](#) showed how coupling threats with opportunities can strengthen mobilization among Latinx voters. [Kim \(2020a\)](#) argued that Asian American and Latinx community organizers were mobilized around their panethnic identity during the War on Poverty to raise their visibility, draw federal bureaucrats' attention, and gain access to state resources. Unpacking how respondents interpret linked fate matters because this broad literature shows that the ways racial minority groups interpret and respond to their discriminatory experiences are not monolithic and vary by context (for a review on the contingent nature of linked fate, see [Rogers and Kim 2021](#)).

Based on the above discussion, we draw the following two hypotheses:

- H1 (validity): Because linked hurt and progress are two distinct dimensions of the linked fate concept, the strength of respondents' expressed linked fate will decrease when estimated by either the linked hurt or the linked progress measure compared to the standard one.
- H2 (reliability): Because linked hurt and linked progress are more concrete measures than the standard linked fate question, the responses to either linked hurt or linked progress measures

would be more reliable than those to the standard question.

3 Data

We tested whether our measures outperformed the standard measure using a California-wide survey carried out by the Institute of Government Studies at the University of California Berkeley in June 2019. A random sample of voters ($n = 4,435$) was drawn from all publicly available email addresses in the voter record.¹ Underrepresented groups were oversampled. Weighting was used to reflect known demographics (i.e., age, race and ethnicity, gender, and party registration).² See Appendix A for more details about the sample. We present all figures and tables with survey weights, except when estimating correlations and regression coefficients, because weighting may increase representativeness at the expense of precision (Lumley, 2010, 104-105). This drawback is magnified for inferences about the characteristics of the small groups in the data (i.e., Asian Americans and African Americans).

4 Research Design

We examine how respondents respond to the standard measure and our measures of linked fate differently using a within-subjects study design. The standard linked fate question asks respondents if what happens to their group affects them individually, following the standard language. The linked progress question explicitly asks respondents to consider whether their group's improvement positively impacts their lives. Similarly, the linked hurt question explicitly asks respondents to consider whether their group's regression negatively impacts their lives. The order in which

¹The percentage of the missing data in the IGS data was 2%. We imputed these missing values using multivariate imputation by chained equations in R (Buuren and Groothuis-Oudshoorn, 2010). We also provided the main data analysis results using the non-imputed data in Appendix E. Although the precise point estimates differ, the ranked relations of these point estimates among racial groups are almost identical.

In addition, because we did not investigate American Indians, we dropped them, which reduced the sample size from 4,435 to 4,414. The 0.5% difference was marginal.

²For more information on the data collection, see Lauter, David, "How the Berkeley IGS Poll Is Done," *LA Times*, June 13, 2019. The article was accessible at <https://www.latimes.com/politics/la-na-pol-2020-how-poll-was-done-20190613-story.html> as of August 20, 2020.

respondents completed the questions was randomized in the survey. This feature is important to avoid question order bias (Boyle, Welsh and Bishop, 1993).

We first conducted measurement tests. We evaluated whether the standard linked fate measure responses are systematically different from our alternative measures responses using difference in means tests. We then estimated the partial correlation coefficients among those three measures and examined which linked fate measures go together.

Next, we shifted our attention to the prediction power of these measures. We investigated whether using our measures provides substantively different findings than the standard measure. Finally, we focused on estimating and interpreting the relationship between linked fate and voting behavior (i.e., preference to reelect Donald Trump in the 2020 US presidential election) and policy preference (i.e., support for the increased role of the federal government in the housing supply in California).

5 Analysis

5.1 Difference-in-means Tests

We first showed that our measures are different from the standard linked fate measure. Table 1 shows the average level of linked fate overall. The level of respondents' linked progress and hurt is lower than that of their linked fate. This outcome is expected (H1) because the standard measure might capture linked fate and additional noise. We discussed this point in the theory section (see Figure 1).

Types	Averages	SEs
Linked fate	2.92	0.02
Linked progress	2.51	0.02
Linked hurt	2.52	0.02

Table 1: Average responses

Figure 2 presents the difference in means tests based on the responses between our alternative

measures (i.e., linked progress and linked hurt) and the standard linked fate measure, and the indexed version of these two variables (i.e., the average) and the standard linked fate measure. The x-axis lists racial groups, and the y-axis shows the estimated mean differences between the two measures. The results show that the difference in the responses to these two measures was the largest among Whites, followed by Blacks and other non-Black minority groups.

Figure 2: Difference in means between responses by racial groups

5.2 Reliability Tests

Using our alternative measures helps understand how respondents interpret the linked fate concept. Here is an additional benefit: These measures are more reliable than the standard linked fate question. In Figure 3, the x-axis is correlation coefficients and the y-axis is two different correlation methods. We use the Pearson correlation coefficient and Spearman's rank correlation coefficient. The dashed lines indicate the minimum acceptable threshold ($r = 0.7$) for test-retest reliability (Nunnally and Bernstein, 1994, Vilagut, 2014). The error bars show the 95 percent confidence intervals. If the standard linked fate measure performs well, it should correlate well with both measures. Logically, if someone agrees with linked progress or hurt, then they should also agree with the more general standard linked fate question. Regardless of racial identification and the correlation method, the two novel measures of linked fate are more closely correlated than the standard linked fate question.

They are also more correlated than either of its two alternatives correlates with the standard linked fate question. Simply put, our measures are more reliable alternatives to the standard linked fate question. This evidence supports our second prediction.

The bivariate relationships, however, can be spurious due to the presence of a third measure. To address this concern, we calculated partial correlation coefficients using the correlation package in R (Makowski et al., 2020). Once again, we see that our measures reliably measure linked fate better than the standard measure (see the bold lines in 2).

Figure 3: Inter-item correlations of responses

Given these results, we argue that the indexed version of our alternative measures (i.e., the average of these two variables) provides more reliable estimates of linked fate than the standard one. Table 3 shows how the average of responses by racial group varies depending on what linked fate measures one uses. Using our measure narrows the gap between the strengths of Black and non-Black minority linked fate—although linked fate expressed by Blacks, regardless of the measure used, is still greater than other groups. Another striking pattern is that Whites expressed linked fate negatively, meaning disagreeing more with group solidarity, when measured by our alternative

Group	Variable 1	Variable 2	Partial Coefficient
Asians	Fate	Progress	0.36
Asians	Fate	Hurt	0.37
Asians	Progress	Hurt	0.50
Blacks	Fate	Progress	0.44
Blacks	Fate	Hurt	0.27
Blacks	Progress	Hurt	0.53
Latinx	Fate	Progress	0.41
Latinx	Fate	Hurt	0.31
Latinx	Progress	Hurt	0.53
Whites	Fate	Progress	0.26
Whites	Fate	Hurt	0.33
Whites	Progress	Hurt	0.55

Table 2: Partial coefficients between nodes

Race	Standard linked fate measure	Alternative measures (indexed)
Blacks	0.71	0.48
Asians	0.44	0.31
Latinx	0.29	0.16
Whites	0.15	-0.22

Table 3: Average of responses by racial groups

measures. This result is consistent with the Black utility heuristic’s broader story. Because Whites have not faced racial discrimination, they are less likely to have linked fate.

5.3 Voting Behavior and Policy Preference

This subsection reports how the predictive power of linked fate measures varies across racial groups over different voting behavior and policy preference outcomes. The following regression results show that how one measures linked fate matters in understanding the political role of linked fate across different communities of color. We include education, income, gender, age, partisanship, evangelical faith, and foreign-born status as covariates in the regression models. In Figure 4, we estimate the effects of linked fate measures on the respondents’ preference for reelecting Donald Trump while controlling for the covariates mentioned above. Initially, the reelection preference

outcome was measured on a scale of 1-5, and the linked fate responses were measured on a scale of 1-4. To ease interpretation, we rescaled these variables in the range of -1 (the most negative response) to 1 (the most positive response). The dotted points represent the coefficients of the ordinary least squares OLS regression model, and the error bars indicate their 95 percent confidence intervals. We used robust standard errors to address heteroskedasticity. Specifically, we used HC2 standard errors based on the “sandwich” package in R ([Zeileis, 2006](#)).

Figure 4: Voting behavior

Using the indexed version of our alternative measures rather than the standard linked fate measure yields different results and interpretations. This change decreased the coefficient of Black linked fate by 31%, but increased that of Asian American linked fate by 700% and Latinx by 72%. In addition, this shift turned the coefficient of White linked fate from the null into the positive one. This output is more credible because it is consistent with the growing literature that emphasizes the role of White identity politics among Trump supporters ([Jardina, 2019](#), [Reny, Valenzuela and Collingwood, 2020](#), [Berry, Ebner and Cornelius, 2019](#)).

Figure 5: Policy preference

We faced a similar issue in estimating the predictive power of linked fate measures on policy preferences. The survey data included a policy preference question that asked about the respondents' preference for the greater state government role in building more housing (yes = 1) or the status quo, which means housing supply should remain in the hands of local officials (no = 0). Scholars have argued that fragmented federalism is one main source of housing inequality in the United States (Self, 2003, Lacey and Soskice, 2015, Rothstein, 2017, Trounstein, 2018, Freemark, Steil and Thelen, 2020). Therefore, changing this status quo has strong redistributive implications. Here, we observe the same pattern. Whereas replacing the standard linked fate measure with the index of our alternatives reduced the coefficient of Black linked fate by 39%, it increased that of Asian American linked fate by 50% and Latinx by 22%. It turned the coefficient of White linked fate from almost 0 into -1. Substantially, this means that White linked fate is negatively associated with support of the redistributive policy. If one assumes that White linked fate is tied to the opposition of the power shift from Whites to racial minority groups (Jardina, 2019), this outcome is more sensible

than seeing the null effect. Because the outcome is a binary variable, we checked whether using a logistic regression model alters these interpretations. We present these outcomes in Appendix D. The results show slightly different point estimates, but they did not change the ranked relations of the coefficients we described earlier.

6 Discussions and Conclusion

This article identifies that linked fate has a construct validity problem. The standard wording used to measure the concept is too general to assess the distinct ways survey respondents interpret the linked fate question. Therefore, we provided a straightforward solution to this long-standing yet understudied problem by disaggregating linked fate into the positive connection between the group and individual utility (linked progress) and the negative connection between them (linked hurt). We have shown that the alternative and standard measures of linked fate produce different responses. In addition, these alternative measures better hang together than any other alternative measures or the standard measure. Our measures measure linked fate more precisely than the standard measure. This strength is crucial for knowledge accumulation because the linked fate measure has been used in various contexts and thus can be interpreted in heterogeneous ways. For instance, linked fate can be measured in a panel study, and respondents in different waves might interpret linked fate in different historical contexts (Smith, Lopez Bunyasi and Smith, 2019). When multiple measures of a particular attitude are combined into an index, the stability of the responses across waves increases (Ansolabehere, Rodden and Snyder, 2008, Cronbach, 1951). Therefore, an indexed version of our measures helps measure the stability and change in linked fate in a population with greater accuracy.

In addition, we show that replacing the standard measure with our alternative influences estimating and interpreting the relationships between linked fate, voting behavior, and policy preference. First, alternative measures narrow the gap between the strength of Black and non-Black minority groups linked fate. Second, from a theoretical perspective, it is also interesting to observe that doing

so makes the coefficient of White linked fate more consistent with White identity politics literature (Jardina, 2019, Hopkins and Washington, 2020, Reny, Valenzuela and Collingwood, 2020, Berry, Ebner and Cornelius, 2019). One of the limitations of the linked fate measure has been that it is not a good measure of White racial consciousness. For instance, Jardina (2019, 86) found that White linked fate has little relationship to political preferences or vote choice. Nevertheless, the evidence shows that the linked fate measure is still applicable to this case if one uses our alternative measures. We need to refine the linked fate measure to expand its generalizability. This article presents one low-cost way to do it.

Finally, we acknowledge the limitations of this study and make recommendations for future research. The evidence presented is mainly descriptive. We did not directly examine the causal link between the context and the ways respondents interpret the linked fate question. To further unpack the black box behind the response process, it would be essential to examine how the responses to our alternative measures vary by context. For instance, suppose Black respondents are exposed to a vignette that describes negative racial experiences (e.g., unarmed Black people killed by police). Would it increase their expressed degree of linked hurt, but not that of linked progress? By contrast, suppose Latinx respondents are exposed to a vignette that describes positive racial experiences (e.g., the appointment of Latinx individuals to high-ranking government positions). Would it increase their expressed degree of linked progress, but not that of linked hurt? Testing these hypotheses using an experiment would deepen the theoretical understanding of the intricate relationship between these alternative measures.

Declarations

Conflict of interest The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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Online Appendix

Appendix A Sample details

Table A.1 summarizes the weighted data. The size of each subordinate group, Asian Americans, African Americans, and Latinx, is smaller compared to that of Whites. These groups were also younger, more inclined to support the Democratic Party, and, on average, had lower incomes but were not less educated.³

Race	N	Age	Democrat	GOP	Income	Education
Asian Americans	457	38	49%	16%	0.53	0.71
African Americans	254	46	57%	5%	0.47	0.69
Latinx	1047	42	55%	13%	0.40	0.53
Whites	2459	54	38%	27%	0.58	0.67

Table A.1: Statistical summary of the weighted IGS data

³Income and education variables were rescaled on a 0 to 1 scale.

Appendix B Citations

Figure B.1: The citation trend of Dawson's *Behind the Mule* (1994)

Figure B.2 shows histograms of each measure for each racial group. Like the previous figure, answers to the standard linked fate measure are concentrated near “strongly agree” for Asian, Latinx, and Black respondents. Responses to the linked progress and linked hurt measures are concentrated around “somewhat agree.” For White respondents, their responses to the standard linked fate measure was concentrated around “somewhat agree,” while their responses to the linked hurt and linked progress measures were concentrated around “somewhat disagree.”

Figure B.2: Histogram of responses

Appendix C Correlates of Linked Fate

Figure C shows the correlates of each measure for each racial group. A few general trends emerge. For Asian, Black, and Latinx respondents, being a Democrat positively correlated agreement while being a Republican reduces agreement across all three measures. For Latinx respondents, income is negatively correlated with agreement with all three linked fate measures. For White respondents, being a Democrat is negatively correlated with agreement while being a Republican is positively correlated with agreement with the linked fate measures. Identifying as female sends different signals where it is positively correlated with agreement with the standard measure, uncorrelated with linked hurt, and negatively correlated with linked progress. Income and education is slightly negatively correlated with the standard linked fate and linked hurt measures, but they are uncorrelated with linked progress.

Figure C.1: Correlates of each measure

Appendix D GLM Result

Here we used a logistic regression model. Logistic regression model coefficients are log odds ratios.

To make interpretation easy, we recalculated these coefficients as relative risk.⁴

Figure D.1: Policy preference

⁴Defined as $\frac{Oddsratio}{1-p_0+(p_0*oddsratio)}$. p_0 is the baseline risk. For more information, see [Grant \(2014\)](#).

Appendix E Non-imputed Data Analysis Results

The following results are all based on the non-imputed data.

Figure E.1: Difference in means between responses by racial groups

Figure E.2: Voting behavior

Figure E.3: Policy preference (OLS model)

Figure E.4: Policy preference (GLM model)

Appendix F Survey consent and compensation

Although we did not field the survey, we have obtained the email invitation and consent form that the survey team used. The email invitation told respondents that the survey would last at most 15 minutes and that the survey focused on “important issues facing the state and the nation.” They were told that their email was acquired from the voter file. They were informed that their answers would be anonymized and used for research. Afterwards, the research team informed the respondent that if they completed the survey, they would be automatically entered to win a \$100 Amazon gift card. People did not have to complete the survey in order to enter the drawing. We do not know how they reached this payment amount or this payment procedure.

The consent form re-stated elements in the email invitation. In addition to using their responses for research, respondents were told that their answers might be reported “in scholarly journals, at academic seminars and at research association meetings.” The consent form closed with a standard message informing respondents how to contact the institution’s Committee for Human Subjects Protection and the principal investigator. Then, in order to begin the survey, respondents had to select “I agree to participate.”