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Social Forces, Vol. 67, No. 3 (Mar., 1989), 605-623.

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Black Lynchings: The Power Threat Hypothesis Revisited*

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Abstract

Between 1889 and 1931 nearly 3,000 blacks were lynched in the American South. One of the few "theory driven" efforts to explain the lynching phenomenon has employed Blalock's "power threat hypothesis" as a framework, arguing that southern whites lynched blacks to retain political hegemony. This paper reexamines the empirical support for a power threat interpretation of southern lynchings and finds it wanting. It is shown that previous analyses have been plagued by a variety of conceptual and methodological weaknesses including: sensitivity to extremely influential cases; sample selection truncation; an inappropriate measure of lynching; and possible model misspecification. Our alternative analyses, including corrections for these problems, reveal no support for the power threat explanation for lynching.

Historically, southern whites have exploited an impressive arsenal of discriminatory tactics to subordinate the black minority. Lynching was one of the most brutal of these tactics. According to an inventory compiled by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), 3,290 people were lynched in the South between 1889 and 1931 (NAACP

*An earlier version of this paper was presented at the 1987 meetings of the American Sociological Association. This research was partially funded by grants from the National Science Foundation (SES-8618123), and the University of Georgia Research Foundation. We thank Patty Glynn, Cynthia Holiny, and anonymous referees for valuable advice and assistance as our work progressed. Direct correspondence to Stewart Tolnay, Department of Sociology, State University of New York-Albany, Albany, NY 12222.

Editor's Note: After we accepted this article by Tolnay, Beck, and Massey for publication, we solicited comments from Reed; Creech, Corzine, and Huff-Corzine; and Blalock. These appear following the article. A rejoinder by Tolnay, Beck, and Massey concludes the exchange of views.

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1919, 1920–32). Of these victims, 2,789 (or 85%) were black. Southern blacks were lynched for nearly every conceivable reason, and death was by almost any means imaginable: hanging, drowning, shooting, burning, beating.

These killings were not random but rather had an instrumental role in southern society. As Dollard (1937, p. 314) observed, “. . . whites do not fight for social superiority just for fun; on the contrary, they are attempting to minimize or eliminate Negro competition in the spheres of economics, sex, and prestige.” That lynchings were a mechanism for maintaining white supremacy in the social and economic institutions of southern society is clear, but what is much less certain is under what circumstances this violent mechanism was most likely to have been invoked.

Several attempts have been made to relate variation in the frequency of lynchings to disparate social and economic forces, including: population size (Young 1927–28); degree of rurality (Raper 1933; White [1929] 1969); religious composition of the population (Raper 1933; White [1929] 1969); swings in the price of cotton (Hovland & Sears 1940; Mintz 1946; Reed, Doss & Hurlbert 1987), and “boundary crises” (Inverarity 1976). One of the very few theory-driven attempts to explain areal variation in the intensity of lynching was made by Reed (1972), and later by Corzine and colleagues (1983), using Blalock’s “power threat hypothesis” as a framework.

Blalock (1967) hypothesizes two general types of perceived threats which can motivate a majority group to discriminate against a minority: those arising from competition over economic resources, and those from competition for political power. While recognizing that these two threats are likely to occur in tandem, and therefore may be difficult to disentangle, Blalock argues that they should produce distinct relations between the level of discriminatory behavior and the concentration of the minority population. In brief, Blalock claims that when discrimination results from perceived economic competition, the level of discrimination should be positively related to minority concentration but with a *decreasing slope* (see Figure 1). On the other hand, where perceived power threats are more salient, Blalock contends that discriminatory behavior should also vary positively with minority concentration but with an *increasing slope*, (see Figure 1).¹

Blalock (1967) identifies three types of discrimination which he believes should be due disproportionately to power, rather than economic, threats: (1) restriction of a minority group’s political rights; (2) symbolic forms of segregation; and (3) a threat-oriented ideological system. In addition, he notes:

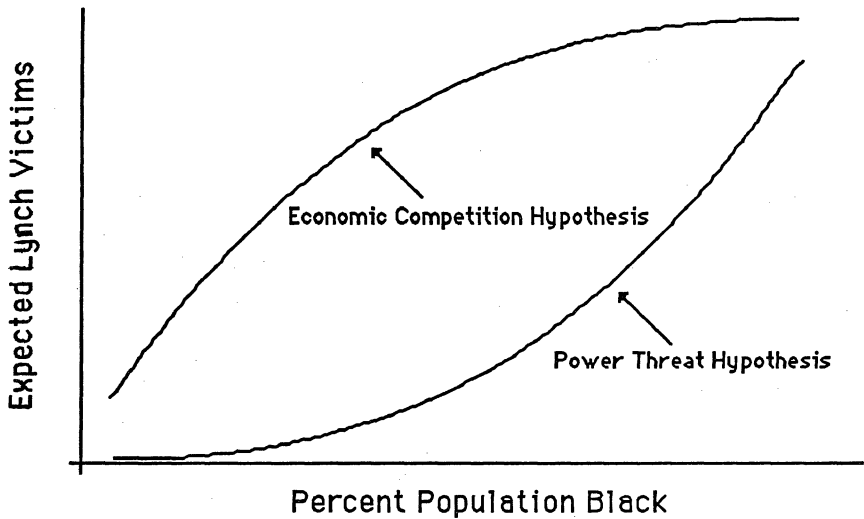


Figure 1. RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN PERCENT BLACK AND EXPECTED BLACK LYNCHINGS UNDER TWO HYPOTHESES

A fourth possible area or type of discrimination is that of symbolic or ritualistic forms of violence such as lynching. I have attempted to test the theory using lynching rates, but inadequate data, the infrequency of lynchings, and certain methodological difficulties have prevented me from obtaining definitive results (p. 159).

Subsequently, John Shelton Reed tread where Blalock feared to go. Reed (1972) demonstrated the propriety of Blalock's power threat hypothesis for interpreting cross-country variation in lynchings within Mississippi between 1889 and 1930. Among counties with populations less than 80 percent black, the intensity of lynching increased linearly with black concentration, but for counties that were more than 80 percent black, the intensity of lynching rose dramatically. Reed interprets this as confirming Blalock's expectation of an increasingly steep slope, and thus providing empirical support for the power threat hypothesis. A more recent investigation by Corzine, Creech, and Corzine (1983) suggested that Reed's conclusions could be generalized to lynchings between 1889 and 1931 throughout the South, and could withstand the imposition of statistical controls for a variety of socioeconomic factors.²

Though the empirical evidence emanating from the work by Reed and Corzine et al. is definitely consistent with the expectations of Blalock's power threat model, we do not find the evidence very convincing for a number of reasons. First, it will be shown that the results presented by Corzine et al. and Reed are heavily dependent on a minuscule number of

counties. Second, the Corzine et al. elimination of counties with low concentrations of black population is questionable, and has a significant impact on their findings. Third, there are serious problems with the index of black lynching intensity used by Reed and Corzine et al. (henceforth referred to as the "Reed index").³ And fourth, alternative analyses examining cross-county variation in southern lynchings, and using the same data employed by previous investigators, fail to support the power threat hypothesis.

Previous Analyses

In this section we demonstrate the sensitivity of the Corzine et al. analysis to: (1) the influence of just three counties along the Mississippi River, counties which constitute less than 0.4 percent of the total available data; and (2) to their elimination of counties with less than 5 percent black population. In the following replication we have adopted their use of the NAACP lynching inventory, and Reed's lynching index for the 42-year period between 1889 and 1931.⁴ The independent variables describe county characteristics in 1910, and have been drawn from the Inter-University Consortium for Political and Social Research Longitudinal County-Level Data Base (ICPSR 1987). Despite the potential relevance of other explanatory variables, our present analyses include only those used by Corzine et al.: (1) percent of population that is black,⁵ (2) total population size, (3) percent of whites who are illiterate, (4) percent of population that is urban, and (5) percent of the state population that is black. Counties in all eleven former confederate states are included in the analyses. Because of slight differences between our data base and the one used by Corzine et al.,⁶ our approximations to their original results are reported, along with the findings from our further analyses.

REPLICATING CORZINE ET AL.

Support for the power threat hypothesis offered by Corzine et al. rests on a series of regression equations describing various forms of association between county-level percent black and the Reed lynching index. The most empirically powerful functional form reported by Corzine et al. uses percent black cubed as a predictor of the Reed index. This equation and the implied graphic representation of the relation between percent black and lynchings are reproduced in Table 1 (Model 1) and Figure 2.⁷ Our replication of this equation and the associated curve are also reported (Table 1, Model 2 and Figure 2). Clearly, both the Corzine et al. original equation and our replication reveal a significant positive slope which becomes increasingly steep as percent black rises. This would seem to be strong support for the power threat hypothesis (compare Figures 1 and 2).

Table 1. METRIC REGRESSION OF REED'S LYNCHING RATE ON PERCENT BLACK (CUBIC) AND CONTROL VARIABLES

Term in Model	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
	As Reported by Corzine et al.	Our Replication of Corzine et al.	Replication w/o Outliers	Replication With Full Data
% black ³ /100	1.5294*	1.6063*	0.8773*	3.0296
Population size/1000	-0.0058*	-0.0046*	-0.0040*	-0.0299
White illiteracy rate	-0.0092	-0.0144*	-0.0179*	0.1625
% urban/100	-0.0006	-0.3845	-0.4241*	-0.3420
% black in state/100	0.0000	0.2018	0.3187	-9.4303
Intercept	0.7540	0.7424*	0.7826*	3.9201
R ²	0.067	0.0877	0.0578	0.0072
Adjusted R ²	0.062	0.0820	0.0519	0.0023
S.E.E.	---	1.068	1.005	19.991
F-ratio	11.82	15.44	9.81	1.46
Degrees of freedom	5,816	5,803	5,800	5,1004
Observations	822	809	806	1,010

* Coefficient twice its standard error.

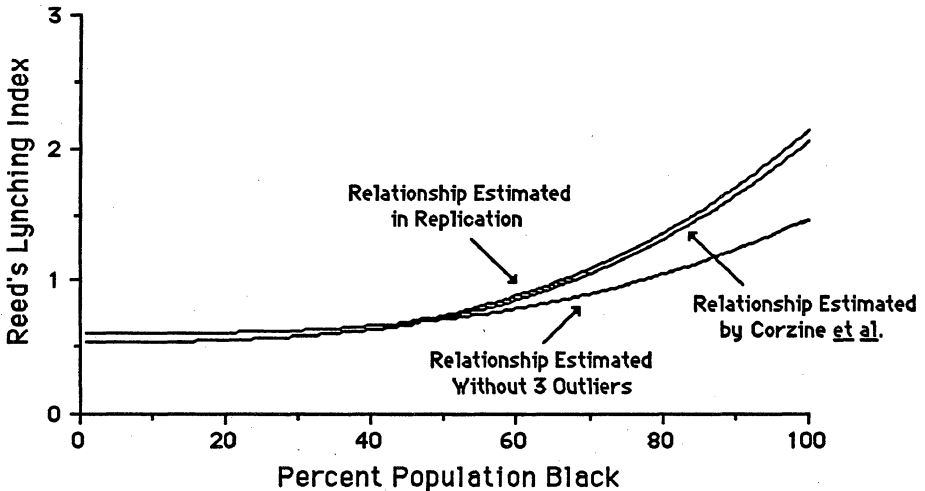


Figure 2. EMPIRICAL RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN REED'S LYNCHING INDEX AND PERCENT BLACK

However, closer examination of the contribution by individual counties to this overall relationship reveals a disturbing and disproportionate influence of three heavily black counties along the Mississippi River: Tunica and Issaquena counties, Mississippi, and Madison Parish, Louisiana. The critically important metric regression coefficient ($b=1.6063$ from Model 2) for percent black (cubed) would be substantively attenuated

if *any* of these influential counties were omitted from the analyses. For example, individually removing these counties from the regression produces the following changes in the metric coefficient ($b = 1.6063$):

County Omitted	Revised Coefficient	Percent Black In County
Tunica County, Miss.	1.4269	90.7
Issaquena County, Miss.	1.3235	94.2
Madison Parish, La.	1.3758	88.6

These nontrivial adjustments to the original coefficient indicate substantial dependence of the Corzine et al. support for the power threat hypothesis on a small number of influential cases.

The *combined* influence of these counties on the original results can be discerned by estimating the regression equation with all three counties deleted. These results are reported in Table 1 (Model 3), and shown graphically in Figure 2. Without the three counties, the metric coefficient for percent black (cubed) falls by almost 50 percent, from 1.6063 to 0.8773. And, although the revised association between percent black and Reed's lynching index still exhibits a positive and increasing slope, the dramatic upswing at the highest percentages black is absent. This shows that much of the empirical evidence for the power threat hypothesis rests critically on *just three* influential counties, and when those counties are excluded from analysis, the case for the power threat hypothesis begins to unravel.

REPLICATING REED'S ANALYSIS

It is noteworthy that two of these influential counties are in Mississippi, because Reed's (1972) original application of the power threat hypothesis to lynchings focused on that state. Were his findings equally dependent on these influential cases? In Figure 3 we have reproduced Reed's findings (and our approximations of his findings) which he interpreted as support for the power threat hypothesis. Again, the strong nonlinear, positive association between percent black and his lynching index is evident in his original findings as well as in our replication. However, when Tunica and Issaquena counties are omitted from the analysis, the picture changes considerably. As was found for the South as a whole, the nonlinear relation approaches linearity—severely weakening the evidence supporting the power threat hypothesis.

Given that these three counties have such an overwhelming influence on previous support for the power threat hypothesis, it is appropriate to consider more closely the *specific* lynching incidents that occurred within them. At issue is whether these incidents seem to be consistent with the expectations of the power threat hypothesis.

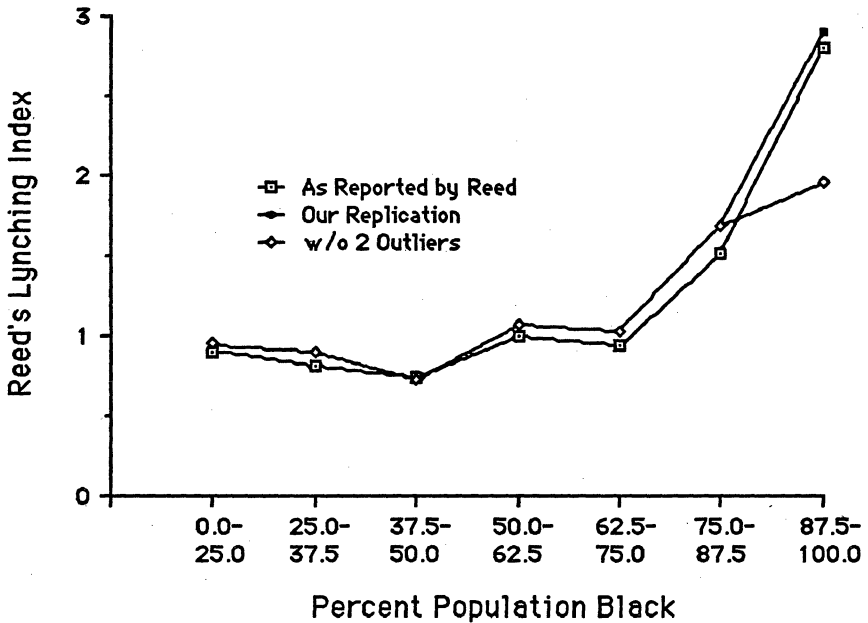


Figure 3. REPLICATION OF REED'S ANALYSIS WITH AND WITHOUT TUNICA AND ISSAQUENA COUNTIES

LYNCHINGS IN THE STATISTICALLY INFLUENTIAL COUNTIES

Examination of details provided in contemporary newspaper accounts, and information available from the Tuskegee University archives, suggests that several of the lynchings attributed to these three counties were unrelated to interracial conflict over political power. Aside from the clearly nonpolitical motives behind most of the incidents, at least one incident (with two black victims) was carried out by a *black mob*; others were the work of mobs originating in *other* counties; and, in one case, the NAACP appears to have placed the event in the wrong state, and in another to have listed the race of the victim incorrectly. A county-by-county summary of some of these incidents highlights the problem.

Between 1889 and 1931 thirteen people were lynched in Madison Parish, Louisiana, of whom five victims were white (NAACP 1919, 1920-1932). Of course, the power threat hypothesis is relevant only to the eight black lynchings. Seven of the eight black victims were killed after a single precipitating incident. Three plantation hands were lynched on April 23rd, 1894 for allegedly conspiring to kill a white plantation manager (*New Orleans Times-Picayune* 1894a). Four more "conspirators" were lynched four days later (*New Orleans Times-Picayune* 1894b). Thus, of the eight blacks lynched in Madison Parish during this 42-year period, seven met their

demise within a span of four days. Can such a concentration of lynchings really suggest "symbolic" or "ritualistic" violence to intimidate the black electorate? We suspect not.⁸

The other "black" lynching in Madison Parish is equally dubious evidence of politically motivated inter-racial violence. The victim, Robert T. Rodgers, was listed as black by the NAACP inventory, but both the *Memphis Commercial Appeal* (1906) and the *New Orleans Times-Picayune* (1906) describe him as a "white man." Even without the ambiguity of race, the circumstances of Rodgers' lynching are not supportive of the power threat hypothesis. He was being held in the Madison Parish jail awaiting retrial for a murder committed in *another parish*. A mob originating in that other parish chartered a train car to take them to Tallulah, the Madison Parish seat. Once there, the mob took Rodgers from the jail and killed him. In sum, an alien to Madison Parish, was lynched by a mob also alien to Madison Parish, for a crime committed outside of Madison Parish. This event is clearly not a case of politically insecure whites attempting to make an example of a member of a politically threatening minority group.

Tunica County, Mississippi was the site of eleven lynchings between 1889 and 1931 (NAACP 1919, 1920-1932). All victims were black. Again, some of the Tunica County incidents seem unrelated to power threats. For example, two young black males were lynched on January 1, 1908 for the murder of their father. However, the mob that carried out the lynching was *black, not white*. As the *Memphis Commercial Appeal* (1908) noted, "there was not a white man in the crowd." An earlier black victim, killed on April 6, 1900, was lynched by another *invading mob* (*New York Times* 1900). This time it was an Arkansas mob that went to Tunica County, Mississippi to seek out Moses York for allegedly murdering an Italian fruit peddler in Arkansas. Finally, according to the *Atlanta Constitution* (1900), a lynching reported by the NAACP inventory as having occurred on September 9, 1900 in Tunica County, Mississippi actually took place in Wetumpka, *Alabama*. Thus, four of the eleven blacks reportedly lynched in Tunica County, were victims of events clearly unrelated to maneuvering by whites to retain political power within the county.

According to the NAACP inventory (1919, 1920-1932), only five lynchings occurred in Issaquena County, Mississippi between 1889 and 1931. All victims were black. Of these five, two are surrounded by a good deal of uncertainty. According to the NAACP, Bush (Butch) Riley was lynched on January 14, 1904. However, the *Memphis Commercial Appeal* (1904) reports that Riley was seriously wounded by the store owner he had murdered, and was found near death at his home. The NAACP inventory also includes the lynching of Wes Young on December 5, 1906. Although the *Chicago Tribune* (1906) reported Young as having been lynched, the *New Orleans Times-Picayune* was still unable to confirm the lynching by December 7, 1906.

This close scrutiny of the lynchings in these three counties is provided only because of their very critical influence on the original support for the power threat hypothesis offered by Reed and by Corzine and colleagues. Obviously, contradictory cases could be found for any theoretical explanation proposed for southern lynchings. And it might be demonstrated that other lynchings in these counties were compatible with the power threat hypothesis. What makes these contradictions especially troubling, however, is that the evidence for the power threat hypothesis rests so fundamentally on the events that transpired in these counties—only 3 out of more than 800 cases.

EXCLUSION OF RELEVANT COUNTIES

The analysis conducted by Corzine et al. and our replication of their work thus far are based only on those counties that were at least 5 percent black in 1910. Corzine et al. (1983, p. 793) offer the following justification for their exclusion of the remaining counties in the South:

Although lynchings of blacks occurred in some counties with a population of less than five percent black, it is unlikely that whites would have feared blacks obtaining political power, either directly by voting black candidates into office or indirectly by holding the balance of power between competing white factions.

While this assertion is probably true, it is probably also true for counties with populations which are 6, 7, or 8 percent black. And, if it is true, and the power threat hypothesis is also true, then we would simply expect such counties to have low levels of lynching activity. There is no conceptual or methodological justification for excluding counties with very low levels of black population. Indeed, such truncation would seem to be an important source of selection bias, which threatens the internal validity of the Corzine et al. analysis.

In fact, when the omitted counties are included in the analysis, the Corzine et al. cubic model no longer supports the power threat hypothesis in any way (see Table 1, Model 4). None of the regression coefficients are twice their standard errors, and the model provides an extremely poor fit to the data. The already modest adjusted R^2 of 0.0820 from Model 2 (Table 1) is reduced to a minuscule 0.0023 in Model 4.

Closer examination of the lynching data reveals the explanation behind this deterioration of the Corzine et al. cubic model. Among those counties with populations less than 5 percent black, the mean Reed lynching index is 5.998, with a standard deviation of 44.65, which stands in marked contrast to the mean Reed lynching index of 0.723, and standard deviation of 1.12, for those counties with 5 percent or more blacks. The large mean and variance for counties with few blacks is due to a small number of counties with extraordinarily high values on Reed's lynching

index. For example, Terrell County, Texas has an index value of 501.40, and Baylor County, Texas has a value of 333.45. These counties had two and one lynch victims respectively, between 1889 and 1931. Their astronomical lynching values are due entirely to their very small black populations, 0.28 percent and 0.04 percent, respectively. In contrast, for counties with the highest concentrations of blacks (85%) the mean lynching index is only 2.786, with a standard deviation of 3.06. And, the two highest lynching index values in that group are 7.40 for Madison Parish, Louisiana and 8.65 for Issaquena County, Mississippi, two counties where the lynching record is problematic as we discussed above.

In sum, the existing evidence in support of the power threat hypothesis of southern lynchings is highly dependent upon: (1) the dubious history of lynchings in three counties bordering the Mississippi River, and (2) the exclusion of all southern counties with very small black concentrations. These two conditions are further complicated by the empirical misbehavior of the Reed lynching index which we will explicate below.

Weaknesses in the Reed Lynching Index

Corzine and colleagues (1983) employed as their dependent variable Reed's (1972) lynching "rate,"

$$\text{Reed's Rate} = 1000L/N P_b P_w \quad (1)$$

where L is the number of blacks lynched between 1889 and 1931, N is county total population size in 1910, and P_b and P_w are the proportion black and white in the 1910 county population respectively.⁹ This measure of the intensity of lynching has a variety of conceptual and empirical weaknesses.

First, it is not intuitively obvious what kind of rate it is. Equation 1 can be rewritten as the product of the per capita lynching rate (L/N) and a deflating factor supposedly measuring the likelihood for interracial interaction (Reed 1972, p. 357):

$$\text{Lynching Rate} = (L/N) \times [P_b(1 - P_b)]^{-1} \quad (2)$$

The problem is that once $[P_b(1 - P_b)]^{-1}$ is thrown into the definition, the interpretation of Reed's measure as some kind of "rate" becomes nonintuitive. It is "the number of lynchings per _____", what? Reed (1972) contends that it is a measure of the *observed* number of lynchings in relation to the number of lynchings *expected*, given: (1) the probability of interracial interaction, and (2) the probability that any given interracial interaction leads to a lynching. The latter, of course, is unknown, and probably un-

knowable. And, the former is somewhat ambiguous in a segregated caste society.

In defense of these assumptions, Corzine et al. (1983, p. 793) have observed that, ". . . the political thrust of southern segregation was to ensure that interracial contacts adhered to the rules of public demeanor expressive of the caste system, not to preclude interaction between blacks and whites." While this is true, it is not terribly persuasive since there is no reason to believe that the propensity to lynch was, in any way, associated with the extent of interracial interactions transacted according to the rules of the caste system.

An even more troubling problem is that the Reed index will exhibit a nonlinear relation with the percent of the population that is black, even when the likelihood of being lynched is *invariant* across settings. For example, if the per capita lynching rate (L/N) is constant across counties, there will be a U-shaped relation between Reed's index and the percent black, because it is an *exact function* of $[P_b(1 - P_b)]^{-1}$. This definitional dependency is illustrated in Figure 4. Reed (1972) recognized this handicap, but observed that the expected sharp rise in the lynching index at low percentages black does not appear in his data. Corzine et al. (1983) note the same potential for artifactual nonlinearity, but also point out that such a pattern does not emerge from their analysis. However, as noted earlier, Corzine et al. limited their investigation to southern counties with at least a 5 percent black population. And, in Mississippi, even the "whitest" county was over 8 percent black. Thus, the analyses of both Reed and Corzine et al. involved data truncated at the low end of the percent black continuum.

More germane to the evidence presented by Reed and Corzine et al. in support of the power threat hypothesis is the index's performance when the *black per capita* lynching rate is constant across settings. To illustrate the problem, the Reed index can be rewritten as:

$$\text{Lynching Index} = (L/N_b) \times (P_w)^{-1} = (L/N_b) \times (1 - P_b)^{-1} \quad (3)$$

where N_b is the number of blacks in the county. Expressed in this form we see that the index is the result of deflating the *black per capita lynching rate* (L/N_b) by the proportion of the population which is white (P_w). Noting that $P_w = (1 - P_b)$, we find that if the black per capita lynching rate is held constant, there will be an exact nonlinear relationship between Reed's index and the percent black. The form of this relationship is illustrated in Figure 5.

This dependency is significant because it is precisely the same general shape that would be expected if the power threat hypothesis is true (see Figure 1). And it is the type of curve found by both Reed and Corzine et al. (see Figures 2 and 3) from which they inferred support for the power

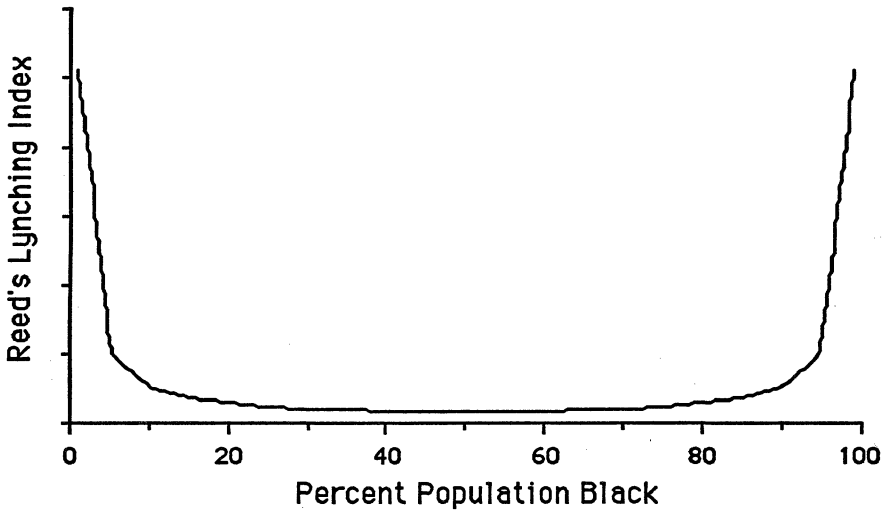


Figure 4. REED'S LYNCHING INDEX AS A FUNCTION OF PERCENT BLACK WHEN THE PER CAPITA LYNCHING RATE (L/N) IS CONSTANT

threat hypothesis. In other words, Reed's index is incapable of differentiating two vastly different conditions: (1) when the black per capita lynching rate is constant, and (2) when the power threat hypothesis is true. Thus, previous empirical evidence for the power threat hypothesis is inadequate, and acceptance of its suitability for explaining southern lynchings may be premature and untenable.

An Alternative Model Specification

What, then, is a better way of measuring the intensity of lynching while also avoiding the definitional dependency with the predictor variable of primary interest (racial composition of the county)? Reed (1972, p. 356) rejects a simple *per capita* (L/N) measure, arguing that ". . . it does unacceptable violence to the commonsense understanding that lynchings were carried out by one identifiable and enumerable subgroup upon another." He also dismisses a *per capita black* measure (L/N_b) by pointing out that it is predisposed toward a *negative* relation with percent black. We agree, and contend that the simple *number* of black lynchings is the best dependent variable to test the power threat hypothesis (or any hypothesis), with appropriate independent and control variables on the right-hand side of the regression equation. This approach can be seen as a direct extension of the approach used by Corzine et al., but without the definitional dependency of their dependent variable on percent black, the independent variable of primary interest.

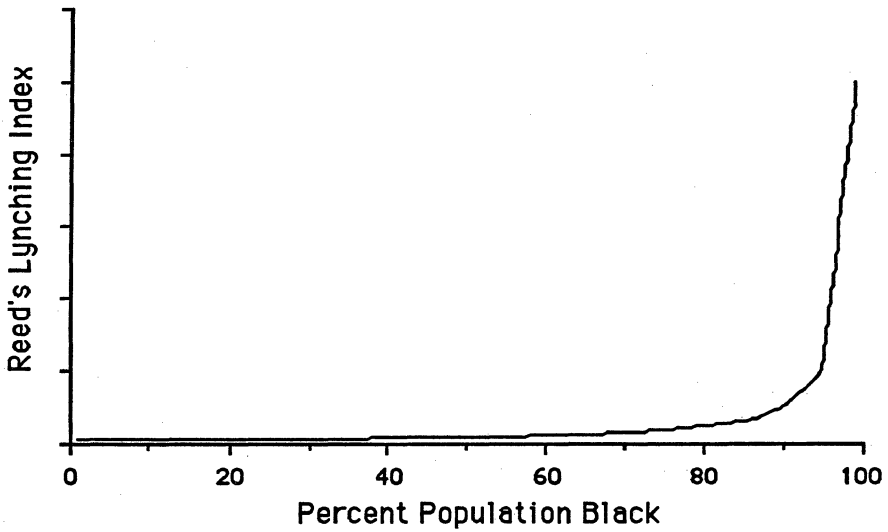


Figure 5. REED'S LYNCHING INDEX AS A FUNCTION OF PERCENT BLACK WHEN THE BLACK PER CAPITA LYNCHING RATE (L/N_b) IS CONSTANT

Corzine et al.'s most powerful model used percent black cubed as a predictor of the Reed index, thus (neglecting the control variables and disturbance term):

$$L/(NP_bP_w) = B_0 + B_1P_b^3. \quad (4)$$

Equation 4 can be rewritten to isolate the simple number of lynchings on the left-hand side of the equation by multiplying both sides by (NP_bP_w) and noting $NP_b = N_b$:

$$L = B_0(N_bP_w) + B_1P_b^3 (N_bP_w). \quad (5)$$

Equation 5 shows that the Corzine et al. model posits that the frequency of black lynchings is a function of the interaction between the number of blacks (N_b) and the racial composition of an area, specifically the proportion white. One possible advantage of this model is that it implies that there will be no lynchings if *either* there are no blacks or no whites in an area. However, this advantage is of limited value in the present case, given that lynchings are measured over a 42-year period, 1889 to 1931, while racial composition is measured at a single point in time, 1910. The absence of blacks or whites in a county in 1910 does not necessarily mean no blacks or whites ever lived there.

Any potential advantage of the model reported in Equation 5 is outweighed by a serious methodological disadvantage. To illustrate this,

Equation 5 may be considered a degenerate version of the following more general model:

$$L = B_0 + B_1(N_b P_w) + B_2(P_b)(N_b P_w) + B_3(P_b^2)(N_b P_w) + B_4(P_b^3)(N_b P_w) \quad (6)$$

The restricted version employed by Corzine et al. (Equation 5) arbitrarily sets three of the coefficients in Equation 6 to zero, $B_0 = B_2 = B_3 = 0$. If B_2 and B_3 are not, in fact, zero then their influence will be picked up by B_4 because the variables $[P_b(N_b P_w)]$, $[P_b^2(N_b P_w)]$, and $[P_b^3(N_b P_w)]$ are correlated. This means that the coefficient for percent black cubed in Equation 5, as estimated by Corzine et al., may reflect both the linear and quadratic effects of percent black because their model forces these coefficients to zero. A more appropriate approach is to estimate an unrestricted model (Equation 6), letting all coefficients set themselves to provide the best possible least squares fit to the data, then seeing if the results support the power threat hypothesis. That is the strategy pursued in the following analyses.

One problem presented by Equation 6 is that the coefficients defy easy interpretation due to the complex interactive component of each variable ($N_b P_w$). Preliminary analysis revealed that only a trivial amount of explanatory power was lost, and no substantive differences were encountered, when ($N_b P_w$) was deleted from each term and total population size (N) was included as an explanatory variable; that is, the model below proved to be empirically adequate, and conceptually cleaner than the complex formulation in Equation 6.¹⁰

$$L = B_0 + B_1 P_b + B_2 P_b^2 + B_3 P_b^3 + B_4 N \quad (7)$$

In fact, further preliminary analyses indicated that the cubic term was insignificant and the model could be further simplified to a straightforward second-degree polynomial in percent black with population size included as a control:

$$L = B_0 + B_1 P_b + B_2 P_b^2 + B_3 N \quad (8)$$

In this form, the power threat hypothesis requires that $B_1 \geq 0$ and $B_2 > 0$.

We have conducted alternative analyses employing the model specification represented by Equation 8. To maintain comparability with Corzine et al., we have, again, used the same data. In addition, like Corzine et al., we have conducted separate analyses for the whole South, the 683 counties of the Deep South, and the 357 counties of the Border South. However, because of problems associated with the NAACP lynching inventory mentioned earlier, and other possible data weaknesses,¹¹ we stress that the following results are not intended to be the definitive test of

Table 2. REGRESSION OF NUMBER OF BLACK LYNCH VICTIMS ON PERCENT BLACK AND CONTROL VARIABLES BY REGION

Term in Model	South		Deep South		Border South	
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 1	Model 2	Model 1	Model 2
% black/100	5.7384*	4.7664*	9.9010*	10.2340*	3.8065	-0.1256
% black ² /100	-0.0718	-0.1636	-4.5373*	-5.0305*	-2.6333	0.0780
Population size/1000	0.0369*	0.0375*	0.0311*	0.0243*	0.0397*	0.0499*
White Literacy rate	---	-0.0446*	---	-0.0337*	---	-0.1140*
% urban/100	---	-0.3376	---	1.3761	---	-1.8333*
% black in state/100	---	2.5036*	---	-0.1015	---	6.2228*
Intercept	-0.3469	-0.4590	-0.4182	-0.1199	-0.2423	-0.2162
R ²	0.2633	0.2744	0.3265	0.3347	0.1176	0.1725
Adjusted R ²	0.2612	0.2702	0.3236	0.3288	0.1101	0.1584
S.E.E.	2.885	2.868	2.975	2.964	2.442	2.375
F-ratio	123.44	65.11	109.75	56.69	15.68	12.16
Degrees of freedom	3,1036	6,1033	3,679	6,676	3,353	6,350
Observations	1,040	1,040	683	683	357	357

*Coefficient twice its standard error.

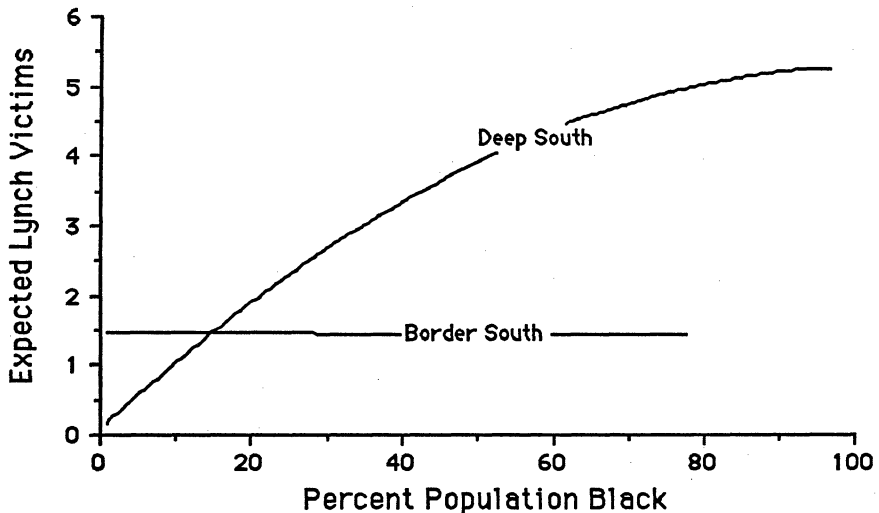


Figure 6. NET EFFECT OF PERCENT BLACK ON FREQUENCY OF BLACK LYNCH VICTIMS

the power threat hypothesis of lynchings. Rather, they provide further evidence that *existing* empirical support for the hypothesis is suspect.

In Table 2 we report the results of estimating Equation 8, with and without controls for white illiteracy, percent urban, and racial composition of the state. The results seem clear: after controlling on population size, the frequency of black lynchings is a positive linear function of the percent

black in the South as a whole. Yet, when this region is decomposed into the Deep South and Border areas, we find that this overall linear relationship is the result of mixing two very different sets of patterns within each subregion. Within the Border South, percent black has no effect on black lynchings, in either its linear or quadratic forms. Within the Deep South both the linear and quadratic terms are twice their standard errors. And critically, the sign of the linear term is positive while the quadratic is negative, which is consistent with the economic competition model, but not the power threat hypothesis.¹² To illustrate this more clearly, in Figure 6 we have plotted the expected relationship between black lynchings and percent black for each subregion.¹³ If Figure 6 is compared with Figure 1, it is obvious that neither curve offers any support for the power threat hypothesis.¹⁴

Conclusions

Previous research has suggested the appropriateness of Blalock's power threat hypothesis for explaining cross-county variation in southern black lynchings. The empirical basis for the power threat interpretation of lynching has rested on the curvilinear relation between black concentration and Reed's lynching index inferred by Reed (1972), and later by Corzine et al. (1983). Specifically, as percent black increases, black lynchings become more common, and they do so at an accelerating pace. Using the same data, for the same states, we have shown that the existing evidence for the power threat hypothesis can be attributed, largely, to several problems that plagued previous research, including: extremely influential cases; sample selection truncation; a suspect lynching "rate"; and possible model misspecification. Our reanalysis, which remedies some of these problems, reveals no support for the power threat hypothesis in the entire South, the Deep South, or the Border South.

Even in light of the shortcomings of prior research described here, it would be premature to abandon the power threat hypothesis as a possible explanation for black lynchings. Until more convincing evidence is provided, however, the power threat hypothesis must remain only one of many potential theoretical perspectives for understanding the history of black lynchings—but one still in search of convincing empirical support. An eventual *definitive* test of the power threat hypothesis will need to consider the conceptual and methodological issues examined in this paper, while also demonstrating sensitivity to the weaknesses in existing inventories of southern black lynchings.¹⁵

Notes

1. See Blalock (1967, pp. 143–54) for a discussion of the reasons for this distinction. In both models, the first derivative of lynchings with respect to percent black is positive. According to the economic competition hypothesis the second derivative should be *negative*, while the power threat hypothesis predicts a *positive* second derivative.
2. However, Corzine et al., added important qualifications by demonstrating that the power threat hypothesis was really supported only for lynchings within the Deep South, and only for lynchings that occurred before the widespread implementation of Jim Crow legislation.
3. Reed and Corzine et al. refer to this as a lynching “rate,” but for reasons which will be presented later, we prefer to call it an “index.”
4. As in Corzine et al. (1983) only lynchings of blacks are included in computing Reed’s lynching index. And, throughout the text, “lynchings” refers only to those with black victims.
5. Although Corzine et al. really used the *proportion* of the county population that was black, they referred to *percent black*. We have also used proportion black in our analysis, but will generally refer to “percent black” for ease of presentation.
6. Our analyses are based on the same eleven states used by Corzine et al.: Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, and Virginia. However, we were able to obtain only 809 counties with valid data for all variables in the analysis. Corzine et al., reported an *N* of 822. We have carefully checked the ICPSR county-level data set for 1910 against the counties in our analyses, but cannot account for the discrepancy of 13 counties. Fortunately, the difference of *N*s has no effect on our ability to replicate very closely the findings of Corzine et al.
7. Corzine et al. report only standardized regression coefficients, but since they also report the means and standard deviations of their variables, we are able to reconstruct the metric coefficients and intercept.
8. This lynching demonstrates a potentially useful distinction between the number of lynching *victims* and the number of lynching *incidents*. For example, should a county that had a single lynching with seven victims between 1889 and 1931 be considered a more “lynch prone” county than one that had five separate lynchings, each with a single victim, during the same period? The difference between victims and incidents is not pursued in this paper, given space constraints.
9. To simplify presentation we will be ignoring the constant in the numerator. This does not in any way alter our conclusions.
10. Adjusted *R*²s for various models with number of black lynching victims as dependent variable:

<i>Model</i>	<i>South</i>	<i>Deep South</i>	<i>Border South</i>
Equation 6	0.2861	0.3201	0.1426
Equation 7	0.2606	0.3246	0.1086
Equation 8	0.2612	0.3236	0.1101

11. For instance, one reader has noted that a definitive test of the power threat hypothesis of black lynchings between 1889 and 1931 should not be based only on the population characteristics of counties in 1910. Indeed, the use of any county characteristic at only one point in time between 1889 and 1931 does impose an assumption of stability during the period. While a fairly strong correlation exists between county characteristics over time, this was a period of extensive, but not consistent, migration by southern blacks. One alternative is to use a measure of *change* in a county’s black population to predict frequency of lynching. However, for purposes of comparability, we retain the variables used by Corzine et al. Also to maintain comparability, we have continued to use the existing NAACP inventory of lynchings despite problems associated with it. For example, we have identified: (1) omitted lynchings; (2) in-

cluded lynchings that are listed more than once; and (3) several factual problems (for instance lynchings reported in counties before they were created). Future examinations of black lynchings should avoid uncritical adoption of the NAACP inventory.

12. Since the number of black lynchings is a positively skewed count variable, we also explored models where the dependent variable was the square root of the frequency of black lynchings. In all instances those results were perfectly consistent with the results presented in Table 2.

13. Figure 6 indicates the net effect of percent black after controlling on population size, white illiteracy rate, percent urban, and racial composition of the state. Control variables were evaluated at their medians, and expected lynchings plotted for the observed range of percent black in each region.

14. We have examined the residuals of the regressions presented in Table 2 and have been unable to identify any particularly influential observations.

15. Under a grant from the National Science Foundation, we are currently creating a more useful inventory of southern lynchings by combining evidence from three sources (the NAACP inventory; lynchings reported in the Chicago Tribune from 1882 to 1918; and information in the Tuskegee University archives), then cross-verifying the data with contemporary southern newspaper accounts of lynchings. Once completed, this more comprehensive inventory will be used to explore linkages between many dimensions of southern social structure and lynching, between 1882 and 1931.

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