Self-Esteem Research in Black Communities: "On the Whole, I'm Satisfied with Myself" [1]

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> I read somewhere once that young white girls lose their self-esteem around this age and that black girls don't, which is kind of weird, since black girls have so much more to deal with…I'm not saying that I've got this huge amount of self-esteem; I'm saying that what amount I do have is mine. (Jaminica, a Black adolescent girl cited in Carroll, 1997, p. 94)

Introduction

Self-esteem remains a popular research topic especially as it pertains to African American[2] communities. Blacks were commonly understood to possess low self-esteem and, as a consequence, to suffer from a host of intra-psychic and interpersonal problems (Banks, 1976; Clark & Clark, 1950; Cross, 1991; Horowitz, 1939; Hoelter, 1982; Lind, 1914; Scott, 1997). More recent findings have documented that Blacks have higher self-esteem than Whites (Adams, 2003; Crocker & Lawrence, 1999; Crocker, Luhtanen, Blaine, & Broadnax, 1994; Harris & Stokes, 1978; Gray-Little & Hafdahl, 2000; Milkie, 1999; Porter & Washington, 1979; Rosenberg & Simmons, 1972; Simmons, 1978; Taylor & Walsh, 1979; Tashakkori, Thompson, Wade, & Valente, 1990; Twenge & Crocker, 2002).

A brief history of self-esteem research provides an illuminating view of the evolution of social science research in African American communities. This article has three aims: First, it presents social science reports that depicted Black low self-esteem (1900s to 1960s) and current empirical findings that have uncovered Black high self-esteem (1970s to the present). Second, it examines the explanations proffered for the past outcomes and their reversal. Third, it describes current self-esteem research on Black adolescent girls.

[1] From the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale, Rosenberg, 1986

[2] The terms *African American* and *Black* are used interchangeably in this writing.

Black Low Self-esteem from 1900s to 1960s

One of the first scientific inquiries into Black identity and self-esteem was made by Lind (1914), a White psychiatrist who believed that all Blacks suffered to some degree from a *color complex*. He asserted that Blacks lived in an environment that confirmed their inferiority, which evoked defensiveness and pre-conscious wishes to be White (Lind, 1914, p. 405). Lind based this conceptualization of the inferiority of Blacks on his observations of patients at the Government Hospital for the Insane in Washington, D.C.

In the 1920s-1940s leading scholars in the field of race relations, Park (1928) and Stonequist (1937), developed assimilation theories from which they created the concept of the *marginal man*. Conceptually, the marginal man is a member of a subordinated group; "liberated from his own culture," he endeavors to find his place in the new, mainstream culture (Scott, 1997, p. 22). The marginal man is caught between two societies; unfortunately the one he seeks to join (the White mainstream) rejects him. A person in this marginal position experiences low self-esteem, identity problems, spiritual instability, and malaise (Scott, 1997, p. 22).

Mead (1934), an important contributor to self esteem research, defined self-esteem in the following way: "The individual experiences himself as [an object]… not directly, but only indirectly from the particular standpoints of other individual members of the same social group, or from the generalized standpoint of the social group as a whole to which he belongs" (p. 138). Popular conceptualizations during this time depicted *self-esteem* as equivalent to *self-concept* which consisted of one's *personal identity* plus *group (or racial) identity* (Cross, 1991). In reference to Black communities, the 'generalized standpoint of the social group' was considered to be that of White communities. Thus scholars asserted Blacks used Whites as a reference group with which to define themselves.

Horowitz (1939), a White mental health clinician, conducted the first empirical study of racial and personal identity in Black and White children. Horowitz gave her participants, 17 White and 7 Black boys and girls between the ages of 2-5 years old, variations of the *Show Me Test* that asked children to racially identify themselves and select preferred companions (from photos and stick drawings of Black and White children) in several imagined situations. The Black and White girls showed no difference in their choices, thus Horowitz disregarded this result and focused only on the White (n= 11) and Black (n= 5) boys in the sample. She reported the following:

> When the restriction of the forced choice was removed, in the portrait series, the Negro children identified more freely with members of both groups than did the White boys. What this means we can only guess. It

can, of course be interpreted as 'wishful activity' (Horowitz, 1939, pp. 97-98).

Horowitz concluded that this 'wishful activity' meant that Black children identified with others without using skin color as the predominant factor. She also suggested that Black children defined themselves in relation to Whites, seeing themselves as the Other, or the 'Not White' (Horowitz, 1939, p. 98). Although there were clear methodological issues (such as measurement, sampling, and the decision to dismiss the results of the girls), Horowitz's work has often been cited as a support for the supposition that Blacks wish to be White, a supposition coinciding with Lind's (1914) conceptualization of the color complex.

Black psychologists Clark and Clark (1939, 1947, 1950) conducted doll studies of children's racial identification. Their findings were consistent with Horowitz' suppositions (see an excellent review in Scott, 1997). Their sample consisted of 160 Black children between the ages of 5-7 years. The Clark's argued that racial subjugation had substantially damaged the self-esteem of Black children. Study results "point strongly to the need for a definite mental hygiene and educational program that would relieve children of the tremendous burden of feelings of inadequacy and inferiority which seem to become integrated into the very structure of the personality as it is developing" (Clark & Clark, 1950, p. 350). Their work relied heavily on anecdotal evidence, sometimes dismissing outcomes derived from more scientific means. Based on the works of Horowitz and the Clarks, a Black self-hatred thesis was assembled and buttressed with a theory of Jewish self-hatred (Lewin, 1941).

Jews in Europe and the United States were considered to suffer from similar psychic damage as African Americans. Lewin (1941, 1948) asserted that self-hatred was for Jews, "A matter of personal identity—that is, they identified with the 'more powerful' people who persecuted them and, in consequence, directed their hostility toward themselves rather than toward their oppressors" (as cited in Wren, 2003, p. 9). Further, subordinate groups in close proximity to dominant groups tended to view themselves as essentially inferior to the dominant group, thus negative group identity, such as the isolating Jew, resulted in self-hatred at the intrapsychic level. For Jews, who were assumed to have a replenishing culture and religion, one that the "good" Jew could embrace, it was assimilation that led to self-hatred.

According to Scott (1997), "Lewin pointed to blacks as 'one of the better known and most extreme cases of self-hatred'" (p. 26). Race relations experts asserted that social proximity between Blacks and Whites often resulted in hostile and rejecting experiences for Blacks (Scott, 1997, p. 24). Some race relations experts believed that Black Americans were between a rock and a hard place: Left with no culture to embrace and forced to identify with a White society which viewed their actions as

imitative and second-rate. For instance, Frazier (1957) described the Black middle-class as, "Lacking a cultural tradition and rejecting identification with the Negro masses on the one hand, and suffering from the contempt of the white world on the other, the black bourgeoisie has developed a deep-seated inferiority complex" (p. 27).

During the 1950s amidst debates about Black culture, Black psychological damage, and Black low self-esteem, a trend developed in the social science field that represented a reversal of theory-based assertions on interracial relations for a clear, unapologetically liberal political stance. Social scientists surrendered their theories of assimilation, the marginal man, and self-hatred in favor of their political opinions. In direct opposition to previous scholarship and with no extant empirical support, the social science community asserted that interracial social proximity would remedy Black low self-esteem and self-hatred (Scott, 1997, pp. 122-130). Though well intentioned, it assumed all Black children were in need of 'mental hygiene' and all Black schools were inferior to White schools. This dialogue about Black low self-esteem and self-hatred greatly influenced the *Brown v. Board of Education (1954)* case. It transformed Civil Rights advocacy from an assertion of human rights to a discussion of Black intra-psychic damage. This strategy enlisted White pity and also supported an assumption that all Black institutions were inherently inferior to White institutions (Scott, 1997). This brief examination is illustrative of the prominence and influence of social science discourse on African American communities.

Transformation From Low to High Self-Esteem Among Blacks

Until the 1960s, self-esteem studies continued to report that Blacks suffered from low self-esteem. Using only studies that employed standardized instruments, Cross (1991) reviewed studies of Black personal and group identity that were published from 1939-1960. He found one personal identity study and near consensus in 17 group identity studies which reported that Blacks suffered from low self-esteem.

Concomitant with the social and political changes in the 1960s were the changes in self-esteem findings on Black Americans. Suddenly, researchers were reporting that Blacks possessed fair to high self-esteem. Rosenberg (1986) addressed the long held belief that oppressed communities must experience low self-esteem: "In fact, everything stands solidly in support of this conclusion except the facts—at least those facts yielded by the relatively large-scale systematic surveys of the sixties" (Rosenberg, 1986, p. 151). By the 1970s, a majority of empirical studies found that Blacks had high self-esteem (Simmons, 1978; Taylor & Walsh, 1979; Rosenberg & Simmons, 1972; Harris & Stokes, 1978; Porter & Washington, 1979). Cross (1991) also reviewed studies published from 1968 to1980, and found that 74% of the studies reported that Blacks had equal or higher self-esteem than Whites.

In order to better understand the transformation from low to high self-esteem among Blacks, it is necessary to clarify the development of the concept of self-esteem. The work of Rosenberg (1986) added flesh to Mead's definition of self-esteem. Rosenberg and colleagues developed a detailed description of self-esteem in its global and specific manifestations (Rosenberg, Schooler, Schoenbach, & Rosenberg, 1995). Rosenburg (1986), for example, emphasized the importance of the interplay between the individual and his/her reference group, such as those people valued and respected by the individual. (For blacks, these people are often other Blacks, not Whites.) Rosenburg provided distinct definitions of the self-concept, personal or global self-esteem, and specific self-esteems. Personal or global self-esteem differs from specific self-esteems such as academic self-esteem and racial esteem. Specific self-esteem has a more cognitive origin and taps into behavioral outcomes. Other useful self-esteem components were highlighted, such as *psychological centrality* and *selectivity*, which suggested that an individual prioritizes which activities are meaningful for him or her and what influences his or her self-esteem. For example, Blacks may give more value to their family's approval and to interpersonal relationships, as opposed to the opinion of peers or concerns about academic achievement. With these concepts one can understand that personal self-esteem may not positively correlate with racial esteem, and Black self-esteem is not shaped by White society.

The Impact of the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements (1960s)

As empirical evidence on high Black self-esteem was mounting in the 1970s, several explanations for the transformation from low to high self-esteem findings were offered. Some scholars believed that the Civil Rights and the Black Power Movements triggered Black racial pride, which resulted in positive Black personal self-esteem (Gurin & Epps, 1975; Hughes & Demo, 1989; McCarthy & Yancey, 1971; Porter & Washington, 1979; Taylor & Walsh, 1979). Some scholars believed that these movements differentially affected the self-esteem of middle-aged Blacks and young adult Blacks: Young adults would experience more positive and unconflicted self-esteem than middle-aged Blacks; thus, Black self-esteem would vary depending on age. Yancey, Rigsby, and McCarthy (1972) tested this proposition. In a study of self-esteem among Black and White residents of Nashville and Philadelphia, they reported, "There is no tendency for the effects of age to be stronger for black respondents than for white respondents" (p. 354). Using a sample of city workers, Taylor and Walsh (1979) tested this hypothesis and found no relationship between age and self-esteem for Blacks and Whites. Hughes and Demo (1989) also reported similar findings: Personal and racial self-esteem did not change significantly for Blacks due to age. Like Simmons (1978), Cross (1991) and Banks (1976) questioned the validity of self-esteem research prior to the 1960s. Instead of a sudden improvement in Black self-esteem, Cross (1991) stated that African Americans had always possessed fair to high personal self-esteem. According to Cross, the chief

difference inspired by the 1960s was the movement away from a Eurocentric worldview and towards a more Afrocentric perspective.

Modification of Established Theories

Other responses to the change from low to high self-esteem findings among Blacks resulted in the modification of established theories and in the development of new theories. For example, *social comparison theory* (Festinger, 1954) posited that Blacks use White society as a comparison group. Due to historical injustices in education, wealth and in social political realms, Blacks would negatively compare themselves to Whites. *Reflected appraisals* (Cooley, 1902; Mead, 1934) proposed that an individual's self-esteem is comprised of the reflected images of others; thus, Blacks would be damaged by the derogatory representations of the dominant society. Presently it is generally accepted that Blacks use their immediate context, not White society, as a reference group (Rosenberg, 1986; Crocker & Lawrence, 1999). Specifically, Blacks compare themselves with other similar Blacks; therefore, White norms do not determine Black self-appraisals or Black self-esteem.

The Contingencies of Self-Esteem Theory posited that self-esteem is dependent upon the sources an individual uses to validate his/her self-esteem. Blacks are more likely to base self-esteem on religious sources, which are less vulnerable to change than the sources used by European and Asian Americans (i.e., academic achievement and peer approval) (Crocker & Lawrence, 1999). There are unanswered questions to address related to measurement and external validity for this proposition.

Social Identity Theory asserted that "Black Americans, as members of a distinctive minority group, derive a higher level of collective and eventually personal self-esteem from identification with their in-group than do members of the majority" (Tajfel & Turner, 1979 cited in Gray-Little & Hafdahl, 2000, p. 27). Black group identity positively influences personal self-esteem. There has been inconsistent support for this proposition (Cross, 1991; Demo & Hughes, 1990; Phinney, Cantu, & Kurtz, 1997; Porter & Washington, 1979, 1989).

The Locus of Control Model assumed that Blacks utilize system blame, an external locus of control, with a belief that discrimination is at fault; as a consequence, Blacks are able to protect their self-regard from societal critique (Crocker & Major, 1989; Hendrix, 1980; McCarthy & Yancey, 1971; Tashakkori & Thompson, 1991). Many scholars support this explanation yet the empirical research has been inconsistent (Adams, 2003; Crocker & Major, 1989; Hendrix, 1980; McCarthy & Yancey, 1971; Tashakkori & Thompson, 1991).

Finally, methodological explanations for the change in self-esteem findings were offered. Simmons (1978) suggested the use of improved methodologies contributed

to the change in Black self-esteem outcomes, listing the use of larger samples, the conceptual separation of self-esteem from racial esteem, the inclusion of adolescents and young adults who are more cognitively equipped to deal with identity issues than pre-latency groups and the use of standardized scales. Accordingly, she suggested that the low Black self-esteem results prior to the 1960s were erroneously produced. Another theory, *Extreme Response Bias*, suggested that Blacks respond to attitudinal survey items in a more extreme manner than Whites (Bachman & O'Malley, 1984a, 1984b; Johnston, O'Malley, & Bachman, 2001; Robinson, Shaver, & Wrightsman, 1991), and, as a consequence, they score more positively on self-esteem measures; studies by Adams (2003) and Gray-Little and Hafdahl (2000) found no support for this explanation.

Current Self-esteem Research: The Case of African American Adolescent Girls

Since the 1990s, self-esteem studies have focused on the low self-esteem of adolescent girls. Surveys conducted by the American Association of University Women [AAUW] (Haag & AAUW, 1990) and Brown and Gilligan (1992) depicted adolescent girls exchanging their own expansive and authentic selves for constricted and socially ascribed female roles. Books, videos and websites have been developed to address the self-esteem crisis teenage girls face. Titles such as *Reviving Ophelia* conjured images of girls in need of rescue; based on studies of White economically privileged girls, they indirectly claimed to represent the experience of African American girls.

Black adolescent girls are confronted with gendered role messages on sexual attractiveness and accommodation as well as racial messages about Black marginality in White America. Despite the effects of negative media images, early puberty onset, and unplanned pregnancies, a plethora of quantitative and qualitative studies have reported that Black adolescent girls consistently present high self-esteem scores (Adams, 2003; Alan Guttmacher Institute, 1999; Brodsky, 1999; Brown et al., 1998; Dukes & Martinez, 1994; Gray-Little & Hafdahl, 2000; Makkar & Strube, 1995; Milkie, 1999; Twenge & Crocker, 2002). In an empirical review of race comparative research published from 1980-2000, Adams (2003) found that 23 of 26 studies reported that Black girls had higher self-esteem than White girls. Black adolescent girls may be facing difficult circumstances but they consistently rate higher on self-esteem than any other racial group (Twenge & Crocker, 2002).

Studies have also found that Black girls have higher self-esteem than Black boys (Dukes & Martinez, 1994; Martinez & Dukes, 1987; Richman, Clark, & Brown, 1985; Rotheram-Borus, Dopkins, Sabate, & Lightfoot, 1996). One study found the self-esteem of Black boys to be less stable than that of Black girls (Wade, Thompson, Tashakkori, & Valente, 1989). Other studies have shown that Black girls are more

ethnically identified than Black boys (Keith, Pottebaum, & Eberhart, 1986; Rotheram-Borus, et al, 1996). Further research is needed to examine this phenomenon.

Conclusion

In sum, research related to Black self-esteem has spanned more than a century. From the absolute and pervasive belief in Black low self-esteem and self-hatred with its pseudoscientific foundation to more consistent scientific findings of high Black self-esteem, this historical review illuminates the fallibility of social research with African American communities.

Unfortunately, the continual re-packaging of self-esteem in Black communities as intrapsychically and interpersonally deficient persists (Gibbs, 1998; McLoyd & Steinberg, 1998). McLoyd and Steinberg (1998) identified a decrease in articles about African American adolescents in the journals of the American Psychological Association. Though there is an abundance of articles on deviance and negative developmental outcomes among Black adolescents, there is little research on normal or positive outcomes (McLoyd & Steinberg, 1998). The lack of adequate research on Black adolescents' self-esteem undermines the development of multicultural practice, research, education and policy.

More research on African American adolescents succeeding in difficult situations (Jessor, 1993) needs to be executed and disseminated. The strengths of Black girls need to be acknowledged in discussions of normal adolescent development along with their positive ramifications for practice with African American communities.

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