
ISSUES OF BLACK IDENTITY: A REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

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The complex history of race in the United States in the twentieth century is paralleled by a complex literature on racial identity. Throughout the century psychologists, sociologists, and clinicians studied racial identity among African Americans. I begin this review of the literature by outlining the various ways in which scholars have defined the concept of Black identity. In the following sections I summarize the research on sociodemographic, experiential, and psychological variables that are related to Black identity. In the final section I review macro-level studies of African American identity.

The Changing Definition of Black Identity

In the history of research on Black identity, scholars have defined and operationalized the concept in many different ways. The earliest sociological research on Black identity focused on the racial preferences and self-identification of children. Early studies (E. Horowitz 1936; R. Horowitz 1939; Clark & Clark 1939a, 1939b, 1940, 1947, 1950) used photographs, drawings, or dolls representing Black and White children to study the concept. The child's choice of object (Black or White) was taken to indicate a preference for or self-identification with the corresponding racial group. In this early research the authors concluded that Black children had a more negative orientation to their own race than White children.¹ During the Civil Rights and Black Power movements, researchers critiqued these early studies and developed a new paradigm of Black identity that stressed its resilience despite oppression (see Banks 1976; Rosenberg & Simmons 1971; Porter & Washington 1979; Cross 1985, 1991).

Cross (1985, 1991) used a different definition of Black identity. He focused on the process of Black identity change across an individual's life course; he termed this process "nigrescence." Nigrescence is a "*resocializing* experience; it seeks to transform a preexisting identity (a non-Afrocentric identity) into one that is Afrocentric" (Cross 1991:190, italics in original). Cross produced a five-stage model describing the process of nigrescence.

¹ This is a broad generalization of these conclusions. See Cross (1991) for a detailed examination and critique of the studies by the Horowitzes and the Clarks.

In the past twenty years there has been a proliferation of research on Black identity. Scholars continued to analyze the earlier works and added extensively to the empirical research on Black identity with work using the National Survey of Black Americans (Jackson & Gurin 1987) and other studies. Authors in this area have struggled to create a complete yet parsimonious conceptualization of Black identity. Broman et al. (1988) used the concept of “racial group identification” and defined it as “the feeling of closeness to similar others in ideas, feelings, and thoughts” (p. 148). They operationalized their definition as the respondent’s level of feelings of closeness to various other groups of Blacks (e.g. poor Blacks, religious Blacks, young Blacks). Harris (1995) also used this operationalization of Black identity.

Demo and Hughes (1990) followed Burke’s definition of an identity as the “meanings a person attributes to the self as an object in a social situation or social role” (1980:18). They argued that Black identity is a multidimensional concept that encompasses a wider array of feelings than simply closeness to other Blacks. They expanded the concept to include not only feelings of closeness, but also Black separatist sentiments, which they define as “commitment to African culture and the degree to which Blacks should confine their social relationships to other Blacks,” and racial group evaluation, which is a general measure of a respondent’s positive or negative evaluation of Black people as a group (Demo & Hughes 1990:367). Phinney (1990) also utilized these three aspects in her definition of racial identity. Thornton, Tran and Taylor (1997) argue that Black identity is complex and multidimensional and has been oversimplified. In their study they separate feelings of closeness to other Blacks into closeness to elite Blacks, closeness to the masses, and closeness to the rebels.

Finally, Omi and Winant (1994) and Cornell and Hartmann (1998; Cornell 1990) investigated Black identity at the macro-level. These works examine characteristics of society, the state, and the group itself that affect the macro-level construction of Black identity. They conceptualize Black identity as the society-wide meaning attached to the racial category “Black.”

Clearly, conceptualizations of Black identity are not uniform across academic disciplines. The characterization of Black identity as a process (e.g. nigrescence) is more prevalent in the counseling and cross-cultural psychology literature. The tripartite definition used by Demo and Hughes (1990) is more common in the social psychological literature. The macro-level understanding used by Omi and Winant (1994) and Cornell and Hartmann (1998) is most familiar to sociologists.

Correlates of Black Identity

Using these varying definitions, scholars have investigated numerous correlates of Black identity. The following sections will review the research on social and demo-

graphic, experiential, and psychological correlates of Black identity. The final section will summarize the literature on Black identity as a macro-level phenomenon.²

Social and Demographic Correlates of Black Identity. Broman et al. (1988) reviewed two possible theoretical explanations discussed by Porter and Washington (1979, 1993), which connected social and demographic variables to Black identity. The relative deprivation theory predicts that, in some situations, Blacks compare their situation to that of Whites and feel relatively deprived, which leads to high levels of racial group identification. Young Black males who are middle class and reside in urban areas would be most likely to be aware of relative deprivation and therefore are predicted to have stronger Black identity. The alienation perspective, on the other hand, theorizes that individuals at the bottom of the social hierarchy are most disconnected from mainstream norms and values (Broman et al. 1988). This disconnection leads to the formation of a distinctive subculture and therefore a stronger Black identity. Supporters of this theory posit that those with lower socioeconomic status are more likely to experience alienation and therefore have stronger Black identities.

Broman et al. (1988) found that older Blacks, the least educated Blacks who live in urban areas, and college-educated Blacks who live outside the West had higher levels of racial identity; however, they found that income and gender were not related to feelings of closeness to other African Americans. Demo and Hughes (1990) found that age has no independent effect on feelings of closeness to other Blacks and this apparent correlation could be explained by the fact that religiosity and close family and friendship relationships are intervening variables between age and Black identity.³ These complex findings supported neither theory convincingly, but came closer to the predictions of the alienation perspective.

Allen et al. (1989) theorized that because race and class are linked objectively and psychologically, socioeconomic status would be negatively correlated with racial identity. As a Black individual moves into the middle class, he or she feels more distant from the majority of Blacks. Further, they argued that higher education should allow an individual to challenge racist stereotypes more successfully and therefore lead to a more positive racial group evaluation. Finally, Allen et al. (1989) posited that higher socioeconomic status causes a Black individual to become more integrated into mainstream society and therefore less supportive of separatist notions.

² Another very interesting strand of research, which I do not cover here due to space limitations, is work on the identities of Black immigrants; see Waters (1999) and Vickerman (1999).

³ Smith and Thornton (1993) provide a detailed analysis of relationships between sociodemographic variables and Black identity for older African Americans. Due to space limitations I do not summarize their results here.

Demo and Hughes (1990) found that higher socioeconomic status (measured by education and occupational prestige) is related to lower levels of feelings of closeness to other Blacks and separatist feelings, but a more positive group evaluation when controlling for background, parental socialization, and strength of relationships. This relationship between education and feelings of closeness to other Blacks mirrors those found by Broman et al. (1988) and Allen et al. (1989). These results support the hypotheses of Allen et al. (1989) that movement into the middle class causes the individual to feel more distant from other Blacks.

Hughes and Hertel (1990) investigated the effect of complexion (darkness or lightness of skin color) on Black identity. They found that dark skin is positively related to feelings of closeness to other Blacks and Black separatist notions, but is not related to racial group evaluation. However, the relationship disappeared when socioeconomic status was controlled. They concluded that socioeconomic status is an intervening variable in the relationship between skin color and Black identity.

Thornton, Tran and Taylor (1997) asserted that using a multidimensional operationalization of Black identity (defined as feelings of closeness to other Blacks) results in a more complex set of findings. They found that age, being married, and being from the South are positively related to closeness to the masses. Urbanicity and education are negatively related to closeness to the masses. Older Blacks, those with lower education, those in rural areas, and those with lower incomes feel especially close to the elite Blacks. Young male respondents and those with little income from outside the South identify closely with the rebels (Thornton, Tran & Taylor 1997).

Experiential Correlates of Black Identity. A second group of variables examined for their relationships with Black identity are variables that describe aspects of the individual's life experience. One consideration is the effect of interracial contact, both in childhood and adult life, on Black identity. Following Gurin et al. (1980), Broman et al. theorized that "identification is stronger when contact within a group is maximal and contacts with outgroups minimal" (1989:371). Demo and Hughes (1990) agreed, suggesting that interracial contact causes the racial group to be less distinct in the social environment, and therefore racial identity is less significant.

Demo and Hughes (1990) found that childhood interracial contact decreases both feelings of closeness to other Blacks and separatist ideas. Broman et al. (1989) also found that childhood interracial contact decreases feelings of closeness to other Blacks, which supports their hypothesis that increased contact with the outgroup weakens identification. Demo and Hughes (1990) found that adult interracial contact also decreases separatist notions, but increases racial group evaluation, and has no relationship to feelings of closeness to other Blacks.

Demo and Hughes (1990) found that experiences of religious involvement and close adult interpersonal relationships affect Black identity. These variables are positively related to feelings of closeness but are not correlated with separatist ideas. Allen et al. (1989) suggested that more integration into the community, through involvement in a Black church, would increase feelings of closeness to other Blacks. Their findings with respect to religiosity mirrored those of Demo and Hughes (1990) and supported their theoretical propositions.

Another important set of experiences affecting Black identity is parental socialization regarding race. Demo and Hughes (1990) found that socialization concerning what it means to be Black and how to get along with Whites experienced during childhood was related to Black identity. Those respondents who experienced integrative/assertive or cautious/defensive socialization⁴ had stronger feelings of closeness and higher levels of separatist feelings. Respondents socialized in an individualistic/universalistic manner had more positive Black group evaluation but the approach was not related to feelings of closeness to other Blacks or separatist feelings. Similarly, Phinney and Chavira (1995) found an association between parental preparation for diversity and higher levels of ethnic identity among a sample of African American students. The perception of discrimination is also related to Black identity. Eggerling-Boeck (1999) found that increased perception of discrimination was positively correlated with separatist feelings.

Psychological and Attitudinal Correlates of Black Identity. The primary work on psychological correlates of Black identity is Cross' examination of the relationship between personal identity and racial group orientation. Cross defines personal identity as a measure of psychological functioning (1991:44). Variables in this category, such as self-esteem, concern for others, and anxiety, apply to all human beings regardless of race. However, race (along with gender and class) may mediate the strength of these variables. In other words, racial groups may differ on their average levels of these variables. Racial group orientation is the way in which an individual evaluates a social group to which he or she belongs. In earlier research on Black identity it was assumed that psychological variables were related to racial identity. However, in his review of the Black identity literature, Cross concluded that "there is no overall pattern of a relationship between [personal identity] and [racial group orientation]. That is, the variability that Blacks demonstrate on general personality, self-esteem,

⁴ The integrative/assertive approach emphasizes a positive evaluation of and identification with Blacks, stressing racial pride, Black heritage, and the importance of getting along with Whites. The cautious/defensive approach teaches that Whites hold the power and are prejudiced. The individualistic/universalistic approach does not mention race, but encourages one's children to work hard, to think positively of themselves, and to believe that all people are equal.

and personal identity tests is not correlated with the variability they evidence on measures of racial preference, group identity, or reference group orientation” (1991:139).

Macro-level Examinations of Black Identity. The research reviewed up to this point focused on individual levels of Black identity. Some sociologists have investigated the phenomenon of Black identity from a macro-level perspective. Omi and Winant (1994) view Black identity as the meaning given to the category “Black” by the society under consideration (i.e. the United States). In their examination of race in the United States, they concluded that the state and social movements determine racial identity and its meaning (1994:88). Political policy has the power to define racial categories and differentially affect the members of these categories. Social movements also have the power to shape the meaning of Black identity. The Civil Rights and Black Power movements, specifically, “*redefined the meaning of racial identity, and consequently of race itself, in American society*” (Omi and Winant 1994:99, italics in original).

Cornell and Hartmann (1998) also provide a thorough analysis of racial and ethnic identities at the macro-level.⁵ They argue that these identities, including Black identity, are a product of assignment (by others or society in general) and assertion (by the group or individuals within the group). Although their book addresses racial and ethnic identities for all groups, they include some analysis of African American identity specifically. In the case of Black Americans, the social context of slavery erased ethnic identities and provided Blacks with a common language and culture that formed the basis for a Black racial identity (Cornell 1990; Cornell & Hartmann 1998). However, Cornell and Hartmann suggest that while the racial identity “Black” is predominantly an assigned identity, African Americans “also have become an ethnic group, a self-conscious population that defines itself in part in terms of common descent (Africa as homeland), a distinctive history (slavery in particular), and a broad set of cultural symbols (from language to expressive culture) that are held to capture much of the essence of their peoplehood” (1998:33).

Conclusion

In the past century we have gained much valuable knowledge about the racial identity of African Americans. Researchers examined Black identity at both the micro- and macro-levels, and determined individual and social characteristics correlated with

⁵ Although Mary Waters’ *Ethnic Options* (1990) focuses primarily on White ethnic identity, she also includes an enlightening discussion of the relationship between White ethnic identities and racial identities, including Black identity, at the macro-level.

Black identity. However, there are several ways those studying Black identity can improve the literature. First, the substantial body of quantitative study of Black identity is not matched with qualitative in-depth research on the topic. With a few notable exceptions,⁶ scholars have not used qualitative methods to explore the ways in which African Americans understand their racial identity.

Another improvement, albeit a more difficult one to attain, is to complete research using more recent data. Much of the work in the field uses the first wave of the National Survey of Black Americans (data gathered in 1979 and 1980). Research using later waves of the survey or other more recent data would greatly improve the literature. Many young Black adults today never experienced the Civil Rights or Black Power movements, as did those interviewed in the NSBA. It would certainly be beneficial to investigate the identity experiences of these younger adults. Further, it would be valuable to update the information gathered at earlier points in time on adults who did live through these social movements.

Finally, researchers in this field need to focus on the development of theory. The empirical research has produced a large set of facts about African American identity, but very little theory in which to contextualize these facts. This tradition of research is a ripe area for scholars to theorize about factors that affect Black identity at both the micro- and macro-levels. The work of Omi and Winant (1994) and Cornell and Hartmann (1998) is a helpful starting point for a theory of Black identity. However, these theories address identity more generally, including many racial and ethnic groups; further, they do not extend their theories to the micro-level. A theory specifically about African American identity would be extremely beneficial to this field of research.

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⁶ The work of Mary Waters (1991, 1994, 1999) on Black immigrants, Lois Benjamin's *The Black Elite* (1991), and Mary Pattillo-McCoy's *Black Picket Fences* (1999) are three examples of qualitative explorations of Black identity.

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