
THE ACADEMIC PENDULUM AND SELF-ESTEEM OF AFRICAN AMERICAN MALES

Lena Wright Myers, Ph.D., Professor of Sociology, Department of Sociology and Anthropology, Ohio University

Introduction

We live in a society and era where success is often measured by the quality of performance in academic settings. It is believed that such should result in success in all other areas of human survival. Formal education is believed to promote social inequality. It fosters the kind of competition that causes some individuals to be labeled as failures; many of whom are African American males. African Americans, in general, and African American males, specifically, have historically been denied access to the best schools; are perceived as having performed poorly on standardized tests; and have attended college in lower numbers than whites. The reasons for the persistent educational experiences of African American males have their origins in segregation and racial discrimination.

Education: Primary and Secondary

Tracking (known as ability grouping) is one example of reinforced segregation within schools; of which numerous black males are victims. This process involves sorting students into different groups or classes according to perceived intellectual ability and performance. Tracking is based on teachers' judgements, grades, and primarily standardized tests. Teachers' judgment as one of the evaluative measures is often biased against black males which effects the *self-fulfilling prophesy*. Based on the negative perceptions of black males by the larger society, some teachers prejudice their ability to perform. Thus, they are given repetitive and unchallenging tasks and are taught a curriculum empty of ideas. In reality, if one is perceived and labeled as having low ability, he/she will conform to that perception. This process leaves many black males in the lower track defining themselves as inferior, while students in the upper track define themselves as superior. How damaging must it be to many black males who have to stand on the "smart or dumb" continuum? The results can be seriously destructive to the self-esteem of anybody, much less black males.

Children must have a sense of competence if they are to regard themselves as people of worth; the failure that minority-group children, in particular, experience from the beginning can only reinforce the sense of worthiness that the dominant culture conveys in an almost infinite variety of ways, and so feed the self-hatred that prejudice and discrimination produce (Silverman, 1974:67). Chronic failure produced by preju-

dice and discrimination may result in self-hatred leading to behavior problems. In essence, failure to learn produces the behavior problems. The behavior problems *do not* produce the failure to learn.

A child who is poor, black, and male is much more likely than some others to be physically disciplined, suspended, expelled, or made to repeat a grade. All of these practices are shown to increase the likelihood that the child will drop out of school. In addition, a black male is three times as likely as a white male to be placed in vocational education or in classes for the learning disabled (Allen and Jewell, 1995; Myers, 1998). The preceding statements provide some explanation of experiences in primary and secondary education.

Higher Education

Indicators of educational, economic, and social well-being clearly relate to the unique status of attainment problems of black males in America. According to Wilson and Carter (1988), black males have experienced “the greatest slippage in enrollments and number of degrees earned and the least progress in the numbers of faculty positions held.” Between 1976 and 1986, the percentage of black male high school graduates (ages 18 to 24) increased to almost ten percent. However, high school graduation rates were not translated into increased rates of college entry. When group comparisons of total enrollment in post-secondary institutions are made, we find a pattern similar to that established at the secondary school level. There is a continuing decline in enrollment for black males (down one percent). When total enrollment is broken down by levels, the unique severity of underrepresentation and attrition by black males in higher education participation is plainly evident.

What do the preceding statements relative to the socializing agent of education suggest? They suggest that black males face formidable challenges to their educational development beginning in early childhood throughout the lifelong process of socialization. Their achievement aspirations are frequently stifled by the social structure based on the negative stereotypes associated with their circumstances of birth.

Substantially reducing racial economic disparity among entrants in the workforce requires supporting and holding accountable the institutions that should inspire, train and educate the youth. Given the fact that many African American men are stuck in dead-end jobs, and possess limited educational credentials, this paper explores the effects of educational attainment on measures of self-esteem and self-worth. If individuals have a low level of self-esteem, I argue that those individuals will continue to view society in a negative manner, becoming even more alienated from society.

A Research Perspective

Data for this paper were secured from a systematic random sample of 230 African American men residing in a Southern City. Personal interviews were conducted with the men over a period of three years: 1988 to 1990. The age of the subjects ranged from 17 to 76 years of age with the majority of the respondents being between the ages of 34 and 57. A specific breakdown of age shows that 15.2% were in the age group 17 to 23; 14.3% in the group 24 to 33; 39.6% in the category 34 to 47; 21.3% in the group 48 to 57 and 9.6% were age 58 and over. Marital status range included single (16.5% never married), married (53%), separated (9.6%), divorced (13.4%), widowed (2.6%), or cohabited with a woman (4.7%). The number of children sired ranged from zero to nine and monthly family income ranged from \$370 to \$3,000. The formal educational background of the sample ranged from elementary school to graduate school degrees. The majority of the sample had attended high school or college. Only 2% of this sample had completed only grammar school, which is below the national average of 22% for African American males. Again, referring to having attended college or graduate school, 34% had completed the bachelor degree, and an additional 7% had masters degrees or higher. The educational distribution also showed eight percent of the sample had attended trade or technical school and could be classified as skilled craftsmen.

Table 1
"Respect for Self" by Educational Background

<i>Self-Esteem</i>	<i>Educational Background</i>							
	<i>High School</i>		<i>College</i>		<i>Other</i>		<i>Total</i>	
	<i>Respect for Self</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>N</i>
Agree	77	56.6	38	49.4	14	82.4	129	56.1
Disagree	59	43.4	39	50.6	3	17.6	101	43.9
Total	136	100.0	77	100.0	17	100.0	230	100.0

Notes: $\chi^2 = 6.20^*$
df = 2
*p < .05

Table 2
 "Others Disappointed in You" by Educational Background

<i>Self-Esteem</i>	<i>Educational Background</i>							
	<i>High School</i>		<i>College</i>		<i>Other</i>		<i>Total</i>	
	<i>N</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>%</i>
Agree	32	23.5	25	32.5	9	52.9	66	28.7
Disagree	104	76.5	52	67.5	8	47.1	164	71.3
Total	136	100.0	77	100.0	17	100.0	230	100.0

Notes: $\chi^2 = 7.19^*$
 $df = 2$
 $*p < .04$

Table 3
 "No Intimate Friends" by Educational Background

<i>Self-Esteem</i>	<i>Educational Background</i>							
	<i>High School</i>		<i>College</i>		<i>Other</i>		<i>Total</i>	
	<i>N</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>%</i>
Agree	98	72.1	43	55.8	12	70.6	153	66.5
Disagree	38	27.9	34	44.2	5	29.4	77	33.5
Total	136	100.0	77	100.0	17	100.0	230	100.0

Notes: $\chi^2 = 5.94^*$
 $*p < .05$

Results

The self-esteem items that showed a statistically significant relationship to the respondents' educational background were: *respect for self, others' disappointment in respondents, and the effort to live up to friends' standards*, respectively.

It is fair to assume that most of the respondents for this research indicated that their level of self-esteem is affected by their educational background. However, the findings suggest that self-esteem is also affected by variables other than education. Some individuals are able to deal with adversity and may not allow it to deter their strides toward self-imposed goals.

The primary policy issue here is: If systemic institutional barriers to higher education are removed, positive levels of self-esteem development and maintenance may become visible for numerous African American males.

References

- Allen, Walter and Jewell, Joseph (1995). *African American Education Since an American Dilemma*. Daedalus. Vol. 124, No.1.
- Gibbs, J.T. (1998). *Young, Black and Male in America: An Endangered Species*, Dover, MA: Auburn House Publishing.
- Myers, L.W. (1994). "Reflection: Some Empirical Comments on Early Socialization of African-American Men." *CHALLENGE: A Journal of Research on African-American Men*.
- _____ (1996). "The Socialization of African American Males: A Broken Silence with Empirical Evidence." *CHALLENGE: A Journal of Research on African-American Men*, Vol. 7, No. 3, pp. 74-84.
- _____ (1998). "Black Male Socialization Revisited in the Minds of Respondents," Stamford, CT: JAI Press, Inc.
- Silverman, I.J. and Dinitz S. (1974). "Compulsive Masculinity and Delinquency: An Empirical Investigation." *Criminology* 11: pp. 498-515.