The Media, Group Identity, And Self-Esteem Among African Americans: A Program Of Research

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Introduction

The print and the electronic media, and especially cinema and television, have shown African peoples and other people of color in comedic stances and in degrading ways. The depictions have suggested that African peoples are not interested in and do not care about serious matters, are frivolous and irresponsible, and are unable to participate in the mainstream of U.S. society. Television has been notably powerful in implying, suggesting, and maintaining this myth (Comer, 1982; Stroman, Merritt & Matabane, 1989-90).

Boume (1990) noted that the images of African Americans, when not controlled by African Americans, serve a specific purpose for those who control those images, namely, to reinforce and rationalize blacks' subordinate place in society. The current black images emanating from Hollywood serve essentially to entertain, to advocate no change, and significantly, to suggest that the current social and political order is legitimate (Ukadike, 1990).

Television has been credited with providing the most influential interpretations of social reality of all the mass media (Allen, Dawson, & Brown, 1989; Allen & Waks, 1990; Gray, 1989; Pierce, 1980; Signorielli, 1990). Further, television has had a particularly important relationship with African Americans. Aside from watching more television than the general population, African Americans are also heavily dependent on television for information about blacks and the black community and tend to use television as a source of information about the world (Dates & Barlow, 1990; McDonald, 1983; Poindexter & Stroman, 1981; Stroman et al., 1989-1990).

Black media may be seen as a filter of African American information sources pertaining to the general status of African Americans both as a distinct group and in relation to the dominant society. Thus, the black media play a significant role in determining the content of blacks' view of themselves, or stated differently, they influence the content of the African American racial belief system. The black media, especially the black print media, have served two basic functions: (a) as an agent of social change, and (b) to crystallize black racial consciousness (Allen, Thornton, & Watkins, 1993). Although in referring to black media the emphasis is on black print fare, given the importance of television as a medium and purveyor of ideas, it is likely that content pertinent to Africans will be specifically attended to and will be quite influential. Black-oriented television fare in its complexity depicts both accurate and distorted images of African Americans. Thus, its impact on the African American racial belief system is both positive and negative (Allen et al., 1989).

Group Identity and Racial Belief Systems

It is within the aforementioned context that one examines the self-concept of the African in the United States. On the one hand, the literature informs us about the historical and contemporary onslaught on the African psyche, on the other hand, it also reflects the strength shown in creating viable alternatives. As many have noted, Africans have very difference experiences than other groups in the United States and consequently, their view of the world and especially of themselves and of their group would depart in fundamental ways from others in this country (Akbar, 1981, 1988). DuBois (1964) addressed this issue in terms of an everpresent dilemma--a double consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of the world that looks on in amused contempt and pity (p. 16-17).

The identity of Africans in the United States is not monolithic but is characterized by tensions and paradoxes that are manifestations of oppression and exploitation. Attempts to capture the essence of this identity (or self-concept) have led to a wide range of perspectives, theorizing and oftentimes conflicting empirical findings (Cross, 1991; Phinney, 1990; Porter & Washington, 1979). Some work suggests that as a consequence of the aforementioned historical onslaught on Africans, they have internalized, to a substantial degree, the view, and thus have a low view of themselves and their group (see, for example, Clarke & Clarke, 1947; Grier & Cobb, 1968). Other research, noting the same forces working against Africans, finds that they tend to have a high view of self and group, particularly relative to whites (see Cross, 1991; and Phinney, 1990, for reviews of this literature).

Recent Findings

In the main body of our research, we have assembled a set of research findings by systematically mining two large and valuable datasets. Our work on African American racial belief systems has been developed primarily in the National Survey of Black Americans (NSBA) (Allen et al., 1989; Dawson, Brown, Allen, 1990; Allen & Thornton; 1992; Allen et al., 1993). My work on white's beliefs about racial equality have been pursued in the 1988 American National Election Study (Allen & Kuo, 1991). We have been involved in two independent data collections in the Detroit metropolitan area in the last ten years; and we have collected data in Venezuela to extend my work comparatively (Allen & Izcaray, 1988; Allen, 1991).

Our work on African American racial belief systems is based upon schema theory and begins with a model

to explain the development of five important sets of attitudes in this population: negative stereotypical beliefs, positive stereotypical beliefs, black autonomy, closeness to elite groups, and closeness to mass groups. Group identification is a central construct here, having been developed as a historical heuristic for supplanting individual utility with group utility. Allen and his collaborators (1989) work to identify the structure of this belief system and the impact of socioeconomic status on it. The authors conclude that as blacks become more affluent, they are: 1) less likely to adopt a separatist view, while 2) they view themselves as more distant from other groups of blacks, both elite and mass. Religiosity is a countervailing force, as individuals with lower socioeconomic status are more religious, leading to a stronger positive identification with the black community in both mass and elite terms. In this work, the hypothesized role of black-oriented media was generally confirmed, although additional research was needed. From a measurement perspective, this analysis was extended in Allen, Thornton, and Watkins (1993). Here, the invariance of the model across income groups was more strongly established in the case of black autonomy, positive stereotypes, and closeness to mass groups. And the stronger negative stereotypes and closer attachments to elite groups were confirmed among lower status blacks.

   In much of this research, we have relied primarily upon survey methods. At the same time within this approach, we employ comparisons of groups and utilizes structural equation model with latent variable to test hypotheses. We, thus, have pushed surveys into the realm of quasi-experimentation. As a consequence, our research has gone beyond model fitting and provides a firmer foundation for inferences than often found in survey research literature.

National Cross-Sectional Study: Group Identity and Self-Esteem

   The theoretical framework and empirical findings revealed in a recently completed study that has been submitted for publication--Group Identification and Self-Esteem in the African American Community: I Am Because We Are. Here we have gone beyond the investigation of recursive models and examined reciprocal causation between key attitude constructs. We modeled simultaneity between self-esteem on the one hand, and closeness to masses, closeness to elites, and positive and negative stereotypes, on the other hand. Each of the endogenous constructs were corrected for random error thereby enhancing interpretation of findings.

Results from Preliminary Study

The initial stage of our analysis entailed an examination of the measurement properties of our constructs. First, we explored two competing models of our six indicator self-esteem construct and found that although both of these models fit the data well, the model that included a method factor was more parsimonious and more theoretically defensible, thus it was used in all our subsequent analyses. Second, the other constructs that composed our general construct of African American racial belief system were also scrutinized psychometrically. We found that for all these multiple indicator constructs, they were reliable and contained desirable measurement properties. We therefore were able to proceed to our substantive concerns.

Four hypotheses were tested; each predicted that group identity would lead to self-esteem. Only one hypothesis assumed a reciprocal relationship. That is, the greater the self-esteem, the less the negative stereotyping. All of the hypotheses were supported. That is, we found that the African American's positive view of the group influence the individual's positive view of himself or herself, and even when there was a reciprocal effect it strengthened this result. Tnose who had greater self-worth were less likely to embrace negative stereotypes about the group. One unexpected finding was that those who had less self-esteem were more likely to feel close to elites. This represented a countervailing effect.

General Conclusions

While the form of the psychological infringement has changed over time, its contemporary impact has been of considerable interest to scholars for many years and many different hypotheses and various speculations have been proffered. While a substantial body of literature points to the group identity and self-worth as two problem areas for African Americans, our results support the idea that how you feel about your group influences considerably how you feel about yourself hence the phrase, "I am because we are".

Recognizing the movement within the African American communities toward liberation schools, independent education, and African-centered curricula, this study assumes considerable importance. While one of the major goals of these schools is to increase the individual's self-esteem or self-worth, the findings suggest that as a strategy, it may be more beneficial to first increase the feeling toward the group, albeit no indication is given about how to reach this goal. This study was one of the few that has formally investigated the self-esteem/group identity relationship, and it used a number of constructs reflecting the general notion of group identity. A number of caveats,

however, should be stated. First, any conclusions regarding cause and effect must be viewed as tentative. While, the findings constitute necessary conditions for inferring casualty and eliminating some competing hypotheses, they are not sufficient. To validate these findings, longitudinal studies, replications and quasi-experiments are needed. Further, it would be useful to explore other causal sequences. Both group identity and self-esteem are dynamic processes that may change dramatically for individuals and for groups, depending on the prominence of particular historical events.

Future Research

Our research needs to be extended to examine the recursive models by subjecting some of the earlier work to an examination of reciprocal causation between the group identity constructs and self-esteem. We will more directly deal with the issue of direction of causality by undertaking a longitudinal analysis. The previous work relied heavily on other national datasets, primarily the National Survey of Black Americans (NSBA), a multi-stage probability sample with many survey designs. For a thorough presentation of the analysis, and the execution of this program of research, see Jackson (1991) and Jackson, Tucker, & Bowman (1982).

In order to more thoroughly and systematically examine the directionality of the African American racial belief system and self-esteem connection and the stability of these constructs over time, we need to have panel data. Fortunately, we will have access to such data to explore a host of other important and related research questions. For example, we will investigate whether there is differential effects of the mass media, especially the black media, on self-esteem and different constructs of black identity over time. Further, we will observe the influence of social structural variables on exposure to black media over time and their influence on self-esteem and group identity over time. Also, as a validation of our self-concepts (self-esteem and group identity), we will explore the relationships of these constructs with other related outcomes (depression and self-satisfaction). We will expect our self-concepts to have predictable relationships with certain criterion variables (e.g., depression, life satisfaction, helping behaviors).

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