



Racial differences in self-esteem revisited: The role of impression management in the Black self-esteem advantage

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ABSTRACT

Black individuals consistently report the highest levels of self-esteem of any racial group in the United States. The present study utilized the bogus pipeline procedure (i.e., the use of physiological equipment that ostensibly allows the researcher to detect if individuals are lying) to examine whether impression management plays a role in the relatively high levels of self-esteem that are reported by Black individuals. Participants were 95 undergraduates who volunteered to complete a measure of self-esteem before later responding to the same measure of self-esteem under either bogus pipeline or control conditions in the laboratory. Black participants with high levels of self-esteem were found to report more modest feelings of self-worth in the bogus pipeline condition than in the control condition. The results of the study suggest that impression management may be an important consideration when examining the feelings of self-worth reported by members of stigmatized groups.

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1. Introduction

Every society has groups that are socially devalued and that serve as targets for prejudice and discrimination. An important issue is the extent to which membership in these stigmatized groups influences how individual members feel about themselves (e.g., Adam, 1978; Crocker & Major, 1989). A clear answer to this seemingly straightforward concern has continued to elude researchers as evidenced by inconsistent and sometimes contradictory results across studies (see Major & O'Brien, 2005, for a review). At the risk of oversimplifying such a complex issue, there are two basic perspectives that have emerged concerning the link between social stigma and self-esteem. The first perspective suggests that membership in a stigmatized group often has negative consequences for self-esteem due to an awareness that society has placed a negative value on some aspect of one's social identity. In essence, it is assumed that members of stigmatized groups internalize the negative views of their group that are held by other members of society resulting in low self-esteem and other negative consequences (i.e., *internalization of stigma* hypothesis).

It is important to note, however, that not all stigmatized groups report low levels of self-esteem. One of the most notable exceptions to this pattern is that Black individuals (i.e., African Americans of sub-Saharan biological ancestry) consistently report

higher levels of self-esteem than White individuals (i.e., non-Hispanic Caucasians of European heritage) despite their stigmatized status in the United States (see Gray-Little & Hafdahl, 2000, or Twenge & Crocker, 2002, for meta-analyses concerning this issue). This pattern is often referred to as the *Black self-esteem advantage* because Black individuals consistently report the highest levels of self-esteem of any racial group in the United States. Findings such as this have led to the development of a second perspective concerning the link between social stigma and self-esteem which suggests that membership in a stigmatized group may not necessarily lead to lower levels of self-esteem but may actually protect or enhance self-esteem to the extent that it allows individuals to attribute their negative experiences to prejudice rather than their own characteristics or behavior (e.g., Crocker & Major, 1989). This explanation is appealing for a variety of reasons but it has important limitations including the fact that it only appears to apply to certain stigmatized groups. If the simple version of this "stigma as self-protection" hypothesis was correct, then other stigmatized groups (e.g., Hispanics) should also report relatively high levels of self-esteem but this has not been observed.

The purpose of the present study was to extend what is known about the Black self-esteem advantage in order to gain a better understanding of the link between social stigma and self-esteem. Therefore, it may be helpful to review the history of racial differences in self-esteem. Black individuals have not always reported higher levels of self-esteem than White individuals. In fact, the results of early studies suggested that Black individuals experienced

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lower self-esteem than White individuals (Clark & Clark, 1947). These results were consistent with the internalization of stigma perspective and seemed to reflect the history of Black individuals in the United States (e.g., slavery, legalized segregation) as well as their experiences at the time these studies were conducted (e.g., negative stereotypes, prejudice, discrimination; Adam, 1978). However, the levels of self-esteem reported by Black individuals began to increase with the Civil Rights and Black Power movements of the 1960s, managed to catch up with the self-esteem levels of White individuals during the 1970s, and surpassed the self-esteem levels reported by Whites in the early 1980s (for a review see Twenge & Crocker, 2002).

Social changes such as the Civil Rights movement are often thought to explain the relative gains in self-esteem that were observed for Black individuals beginning in the 1960s but these social changes are not the only potential explanation for these shifts (Adam, 1978). Two important – and related – methodological changes took place in the 1960s and 1970s that may have influenced the results of studies examining racial differences in self-esteem. One of these methodological changes is that later studies began to focus more attention on the actual construct of global self-esteem rather than making inferences about self-esteem that were derived from the attitudes of participants concerning their racial identity (e.g., attitudes about being Black or toward Black individuals in general; Clark & Clark, 1947). This methodological change was important because disentangling self-esteem from racial attitudes allowed for the possibility that individuals could feel good about themselves despite being aware of the stigmatized status of their racial group.

The second methodological change that occurred during this time was a shift toward using standardized measures of self-esteem rather than semi-projective measures such as the choice of White dolls over Black dolls (Clark & Clark, 1947). These standardized measures of self-esteem almost exclusively capture self-esteem by directly asking respondents to report on their feelings of self-worth. For example, the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (Rosenberg, 1965) asks respondents to rate their level of agreement with statements such as “I feel that I’m a person of worth, at least on an equal plane with others”. This direct method of measuring self-esteem makes a great deal of sense considering that self-esteem is a subjective evaluation of the self but this approach to assessing self-esteem is not without its limitations. Perhaps the most important drawback of this direct measurement approach stems from one of the underlying assumptions of this strategy which is that individuals will respond to these measures in a manner that accurately reflects their feelings about themselves. This suggests that direct measures of self-esteem will only be accurate to the extent that respondents are willing to share their attitudes with others. This leaves open the possibility that the self-esteem gains that have been observed for Black individuals in recent decades may be at least partially accounted for by the way individuals are responding to direct measures rather than reflecting actual changes in their feelings of self-worth. For example, it is possible that the high levels of self-esteem reported by Black individuals may be a defensive response to the stigma surrounding their racial group rather than being a product of actual improvements in their attitudes about themselves. That is, Black individuals may sometimes exaggerate their reported levels of self-esteem in an effort to convince either themselves or others of their feelings of self-worth. This sort of response distortion may be a form of socially desirable responding such that they may provide responses in accordance with social or normative pressure rather than giving veridical reports (Paulhus, 1984).

Impression management is a form of socially desirable responding that refers to the tendency to intentionally distort information about oneself in an attempt to be perceived more favorably by

others than is actually warranted (Paulhus, 1984). Individuals may intentionally dissemble on direct measures of self-esteem because of their desire to have others perceive them as having higher levels of self-esteem than they actually possess in order to reap some of the social benefits associated with the ostensible possession of high self-esteem (e.g., Zeigler-Hill & Myers, 2011). Impression management may be especially appealing to members of stigmatized groups because it may result in better treatment by others in their social environment.

1.1. Overview and predictions

The goal of the present study was to improve our understanding of racial differences in self-esteem by attempting to determine how Black and White individuals *really* feel about themselves. That is, we wanted to know if individuals from different racial/ethnic backgrounds actually believe the high levels of self-esteem they report experiencing or if those feelings of self-worth are at least somewhat inflated. This was accomplished by creating a situation in which individuals would be motivated to provide more honest responses than they may give under standard conditions. We used the bogus-pipeline technique to foster this sort of situation and manipulate the impression management concerns of the participants (e.g., Jones & Sigall, 1971). The bogus pipeline technique promotes greater honesty on the part of participants through the use of physiological equipment (e.g., a lie detector) that ostensibly allows the researcher to detect if the participants are attempting to lie. This technique has been used successfully in past research to create a situation that increases the probability that participants will provide direct reports concerning their self-esteem that are more closely aligned with their actual feelings of self-worth (e.g., Myers & Zeigler-Hill, 2012). Our prediction was that Black individuals who reported high levels of self-esteem under standard conditions would report significantly lower levels of self-esteem in the bogus pipeline condition than they would in the control condition. The rationale for this prediction is that the high levels of self-esteem reported by Black individuals may be, at least in part, a defensive response to the stigma surrounding their racial/ethnic group. If the high levels of self-esteem expressed by Black individuals under standard conditions are partially due to impression management concerns, then they may express more modest feelings of self-worth when they believe that others will know if they are not providing honest responses.

2. Methods

2.1. Participants and procedure

Participants were 106 undergraduate students (15 men, 91 women) at a university in the southern region of the United States who received partial fulfillment of a research participation requirement in exchange for volunteering to participate in the present study. As a result of the present study being concerned with the self-esteem of Black and White individuals, 11 participants were excluded from the study who did not identify themselves as either Black or White (6 multiethnic, 2 Hispanic, and 3 Asian). Of the remaining 95 participants, 53 were Black and 42 were White. The mean age of the participants was 21.53 years ($SD = 4.43$) and their median age was 20 years.

During Phase 1 of the study, participants completed the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (Rosenberg, 1965) – along with other measures that are not relevant for the present study – via a secure website. The Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale is a widely used 10-item measure of global self-esteem (e.g., “I take a positive attitude toward myself”) for which respondents are asked to provide

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