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# The Clarity and Confusion Offered by Historical Personal Identity Studies

By: Nikitah Okembe-RA Imani

## Abstract

This literature review and analysis focuses on the historical reference group orientation and personal identity study material done on Blacks in the United States. It argues that these studies were critically flawed in the sense that they made inappropriate assumptions about the link between the two kinds of measures that are the respective foci of their inquiry (i.e., personal identity and group self-esteem). As a result, their conclusions and implications, in terms of the development of psychological and sociological theories based upon their findings, constitute a major obstacle to the ultimate and accurate understanding of the processes of development of Black self-esteem and collective spirit.

The research documenting the supposedly low self-esteem of Blacks may be flawed. It may in fact be failing to measure its intended variable. I propose an examination that may influence both the nature and interpretation of the results in light of important methodological and theoretical questions. This article examines the question of whether there is adequate evidence in the present literature to substantiate the conclusion that Blacks have relatively lower levels of personal self-esteem.

The first problem facing traditional social science studies investigating Black self-esteem and collective identity in the United States is their failure to distinguish personal identity (PI) from reference group orientation (RGO) methodologically. In an excellent and thoroughgoing literature review and critique, Cross (1985) described the implications of this continued error on the trends that have been noted in the development of Black personality. The research of Clark and Clark (1939, 1940) was most important. That study established the doll technique as the dominant method at that time for assessing group identity and children and was employed to suggest that segregated educational environments proved debilitating to the development of a healthy sense of self-worth among Black youngsters. Studies like these began with an affirmation that the concept of the self is extremely important to the study of human behavior. It is then suggested that information on how persons orient themselves toward their socially ascribed group can provide accurate information on how they feel about themselves at the personal level. The implicit assumption is that the correlation between PI and RGO is positive and linear.

Cross (1985) suggests that the only manner in which the conclusions of these studies can be analyzed is to identify them either as PI or RGO studies and to assess how well they distinguish between the concepts in arriving at their results. Cross defines RGO studies as those treating race or color as the dependent measure, making it a salient component of the stimuli. The subject in such tests must make a preference or relate attitude types toward his or her socially ascribed group in order to achieve a high in-group score. PI studies are defined as those that attempt to investigate how "universal elements" of behavior vary in intensity. Such elements are more likely to be present across different racial groups. PI studies consider how various groups seek to define their personal "sense of selfhood." They assume for Western cultures

that one's self-concept, personal identity, or generalized personality consists of certain universal human tendencies, traits, behavioral elements, or capacities. Race is treated as an independent variable. The researcher locates some personality scale, inventory, or questionnaire that purports to tap universal elements of personality and that contains no reference to ascriptive characteristics. The device is administered to Black and White subjects, and the researcher determines whether racial group differences exist on the measure.

Cross (1985) identified 161 studies for classification, systematically excluding field studies that relied on case study and participant observation techniques and studies that used unsealed informal questionnaires or interviews for gathering data, since the latter work has played a relatively minor role in documenting the alleged negative Black identity from 1939 to 1967 and documenting the apparent change in Black identity from 1968 to the present. The studies in the former group were primarily personal identity studies (63% ).

Self-hatred among Blacks was a well-documented trend of empirical studies on Black identity by 1954 and an assumed fact by 1960. During this interval, there were about 18 empirical studies reported, and 94% were RGO studies. In other words, the self-hatred argument, which would appear to be a PI -related hypothesis, was developed on the accumulation of evidence from RGO studies. The irony is that when each of the RGO studies for this period is reviewed, the experimenter clearly specifies in the method section that a blatantly related RGO construct was assessed. In the discussion section, however, the distinction between PI and RGO information is blurred, and the construct self-hatred is injected as if PI and RGO data had been collected or as if it had been established that PI and RGO were highly correlated. Consequently, conclusions about the negative or positive nature of the personal identity of Blacks from 1939 to 1960 were highly speculative.

Of the 161 studies reviewed, 73% were conducted during the period 1968-1977. Of these, 71% were PI related. A significant number of PI studies from this period found that Blacks had adequate to above average levels of self-esteem. Strictly speaking, the only evidence documenting change in Black identity comes from RGO studies for which there is a past and present trend. On the other hand, the number of PI studies conducted when the "negative Black identity notion" was being documented was not large enough to constitute a trend. Because PI studies did not contribute to the establishment of the negative pattern, there is no reference point for comparing trends in PI studies since 1968. Because studies of the third type, PI/RGO investigations, were not conducted before the 1970s, no past versus present trend can be compared. The PI/RGO studies have not contributed to documentation of Black identity. Thus those who would call attention to the large number of PI-related studies conducted after 1968 as evidence of Black identity change have mistakenly assumed that PI studies were conducted in the distant past and that PI has been shown to correlate with RGO. Ironically, from 1939 to 1960 RGO studies dominated the field and researchers argued that self-hatred (a PI variable) had been demonstrated. Today, PI studies are predominant and researchers point to the PI data as proof of group identity change. Both have been guilty of mixing apples with oranges because the empirical evidence supporting the presumed PI/RGO link has been nonexistent.

Banks (1976) reviewed 20 investigations of evaluative preference and 12 studies of preferential self-identification, all RGO studies. The results showed that 69% revealed no race preferences in Black subjects. Banks explained these unexpected results, stating that reliance upon White comparative frames has perpetuated the notion of Black self-rejection, that a priori standards tended to reflect presumptions about the desirability of highly ethnocentric response sets (as are common only to Whites), and that the fact that Blacks failed always to prefer Black stimuli evaluatively has generally been interpreted as a failure to adopt positive racial self-regard.

For the PI studies, 72% showed Black self-esteem to equal or exceed that of Whites. The seemingly drastic differences between PI and RGO historically noted may be due solely to a number of operationalization factors. Self-esteem inventories are more complex, allowing for a multidimensional conception of the self. They tend to be valid only when administered to older individuals, unlike RGO doll tests that are given to young children.

When a few scholars finally tested the correlation between PI and RGO, the results were at best inconclusive. McAdoo (1977) found no correlation between the variables in his tests on Black students at various stages in their chronological development. Studies supporting a PI-RGO correlation were found to be circumstantial or misrepresentative. The independence of self-esteem means that even if all evaluative preference/self-identification studies showed Blacks to have an out-group orientation, much information would offer little knowledge about the personal identity of Blacks. The implication for the ideas underpinning the logic of the Brown decision is that the studies upon which they were based did not measure Black PI as they purported, and to the extent that they effectively measured RGO (considerably in doubt given the limitations of the methodological approaches employed), they failed to consider the role of age and further socialization on the applicability of their conclusions for older children and adults.

But the methodological confusion of PI and RGO is not the only problem with the historical research. Other problems exist on the microtheoretical level, at the level of conceptualization rather than operationalization. Global self-esteem consists of an individual's belief in his or her own virtue and moral self-worth and efficacy (personal control) (Franks & Marolla, 1976; Gecas & Schwalbe, 1983). These two variables have been demonstrated to be strongly correlated, and those exhibiting various degrees of self-esteem could reasonably be expected to have similar degrees of personal efficacy.

In light of such a hypothesis, Blacks in the United States represent an apparent anomaly. They have been found to possess a high level of personal self-esteem and a lower level of personal efficacy. In an excellent piece by Hughes and Demo (1989), it is discussed in detail why this situation represents a problem. It challenges three longstanding theoretical principles concerning personal self-esteem: reflected appraisal, social comparison, and self-attribution. Reflected appraisal suggests that a person's sense of self-esteem is a product of how that person believes others perceive him or her (Cooley, 1902; Rosenberg, 1979). Self-attribution submits that self-esteem is a result of individuals' evaluation of their own behavior and characteristics in terms of personal successes and failures (Bern, 1967).

Rosenberg (1979, pp. 157-175; 1981, pp. 604-607) argues that these principles result in error when applied without modification to Blacks. These principles assume that the appropriate standards of reference for Blacks in terms of self-esteem are Whites and White society and that Blacks as a whole attribute their status to themselves rather than to systematic racial discrimination. But research has shown that Black self-esteem is relatively unaffected by White attitudes (Rosenberg, 1979, pp. 157-170). The reflected appraisals of parents, friends, and teachers (Hoelter, 1982; Krause, 1983; Rosenberg & Simmons, 1972) are more important. Taylor and Walsh (1979) found no relationship between the attribution of blame to the system and the level of self-esteem across racial categories or within them.

One of the problems with the past analyses may have to do with the glaring omission of the function of religious institutions within the Black community as a source for the development of both personal identity and personal self-esteem. This is despite the fact that study after study has emphasized the centrality of the church as a social structure that supports psychological well-being (Blackwell, 1985).

The relatively low sense of personal efficacy reported for Blacks in the face of a sustained high degree of personal self-worth has been best explained by the work of Gecas and Schwalbe (1983), who argue that the most important factor in the development of a sense of personal efficacy is the experience of effective

performance. The social contexts particularly conducive to efficacious activity are institutional in nature, and therefore an individual's location within the macrostructure of society would be expected to be a strong predictor of personal efficacy. This hypothesis had not been tested until Hughes and Demo (1989) evaluated it.

In their study, Hughes and Demo (1989) analyzed data on self-esteem and personal efficacy, controlling variables in the area of personal relationships, religion, social class, work status, and racial ideology. Consistent with the hypothesis suggested by the literature, individual indicators of socioeconomic class were the most significant predictors for the variable. Among these were education attainment and personal income. In the regression analyses, the ethnicity and racial ideology variables, religious involvement, and job characteristics were found to be unrelated.

The strongest influences on personal efficacy and self-esteem among all respondents were the quality of family and friendship relations and the level of religious involvement. The socioeconomic class variables are much weaker here. When the derived personal efficacy measure is treated as an additional variable, it is found that education and self-evaluation of job performance become nonsignificant. The correlation between Black identity and self-esteem disappears in the regression analysis due to the strong correlations between the former and the variables of religious involvement and family and friendship relations.

The weak relationship between socioeconomic class variables and personal self-esteem evidenced in the study suggests that Blacks generally attribute individual success and failure to a discriminatory system beyond their control, thereby rendering social class irrelevant.

These conclusions have several important implications for those doing research on Black self-esteem. First, the environmental context for the development of Black self-esteem is the Black community itself and not the wider society. Therefore, any perceived lack of self-esteem on the part of Black students may not be rectified by immersion into the larger society (Krause, 1983). Second, theories concerning the centrality of social class in the development of self-esteem established by research on White male adults (Rosenberg & Pearlman, 1978) appear to be irrelevant for Black adults. Third, racial discrimination has resulted in serious instability in Blacks' institutionalized workroles, necessitating that they find alternative bases for developing self-esteem (Zurcher, 1977). Fourth, the effect of interracial contact vis-a-vis White society is the development of increased racial awareness and sensitivity to one's own culture.

In sum, the conclusion is that the research documenting the supposedly low self-esteem of Blacks is severely flawed. From a methodological standpoint, it may fail to measure its intended variable. From a microtheoretical standpoint, the conceptualization of racial identity, personal identity, and personal efficacy, as well as other field terms, is unclear. As such, it is concluded that such research must be reevaluated in terms of certain important methodological and theoretical questions that may influence both the nature and interpretation of the results. There is simply no evidence in the present literature for the assumption of poor Black personal self-esteem. What is evidenced is the glaring bicultural psychology characteristic of Blacks and a continuing cycle of collective and individual experience with racial discrimination by Whites that inhibits personal efficacy and positive life outcome expectations.

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