# Self-Evaluation of
# Black and White College Students*
## Keith D. Parker

A major issue in the social psychology of race relations has been the axiom that blacks tend to manifest lower self-esteem than whites.[1] Much of the empirical support for this hypothesis came from studies demonstrating that blacks are stigmatized and subjected to a variety of unpleasant and derogatory experiences.[2] However, these studies are limited in two respects: first, by their use of small, nonrepresentative samples (primarily nursery school and kindergarten children) and second, by their reliance upon inferential (semi-projective) measures of self-esteem.[3]

Research focusing on studies based on more substantial samples and employing relatively direct measures of self-esteem questions the assumption of many scholars and policy-makers that blacks have lower self-esteem than whites.[4] Indeed, the preponderance of evidence supports the opposite conclusion. In three of thirty-two comparisons, blacks rate higher than whites in self-esteem, in four comparisons there is no significant difference in the self-esteem of blacks and whites, and in five comparisons whites rate higher than blacks in self-esteem.[5] Although few of the studies introduce formal controls for socioeconomic status (SES) and academic achievement, in the case of those which do,[6] all but one report that blacks have higher self-esteem than whites.[7]

Despite the findings that blacks normally manifest self-esteem equal to, and often greater than, that of whites (especially those of comparable social backgrounds) the debate over race and self-esteem remains active,[8] and numerous explanations have been suggested.[9] One explanation assumes that mainstream discrimination and oppression must have harmful effects on the black psyche. In particular, white dominance pushes blacks either to excessive compliance and low self-esteem or to excessive militance and exaggerated self-esteem.[10]

Other explanations assume varying degrees of autonomy for black culture, allowing it to buffer or swamp the negative evaluations of

mainstream whites. Theorists such as Gloria J. Powell and Marielle Fuller, for example, hypothesize that high self-esteem in blacks is a reflection of recent historical trends, specifically the dramatic increase in black nationalism, with its emphasis on black pride.[11] They further contend that the adverse psychological effects associated with desegregation are the results of the prejudice and discrimination accompanying white resistance to integration.[12]

Although the arguments are provocative, they are not easily validated and, in some instances, they contradict existing evidence. For example, the assertion that there has been an increase in black self-esteem during the past two decades implies that blacks have had substantially lower self-esteem in the past.[13] But the noncomparability of past and present research makes comparison difficult, if not impossible, to test this hypothesis.[14] If we assume that the "new mood" which emerged in the black community in the late 1960s had its primary impact upon the young, then an indirect test suggests itself: "there should be a stronger inverse relationship between age and self-esteem among blacks than among whites."[15]

A more theoretical approach to the issues is proposed by John D. McCarthy and William L. Yancey and elaborated by Morris Rosenberg and Robert G. Simmons. These authors question the common assumption that blacks accept white definitions of themselves, noting that "the sources of evaluation important to self-identity are individuals occupying social positions quite similiar to ego."[16] In summary, these authors assert that, by and large, blacks compare themselves with other blacks and thus are effectively insulated from potentially invidious cross-racial comparisons.

The purpose of this article is to compare seven dimensions of the self-concept of black and white students enrolled in a predominantly white, state-supported university in the Deep South. This study differs from earlier investigations in two important aspects. First, it provides a more accurate assessment of the direct relationship between self-concept and race, by using a research design which effectively controls for the extraneous influences of socioeconomic status and academic achievement. Second, this study focuses upon aggregate differences at the college level, rather than examining self-esteem at the level of the individual.

# Method

## Sample and Data Collection

The data upon which this analysis is based were drawn from a predominantly white, state-supported university located in the Deep South. In the spring of 1981, the Tennessee Self-Concept Scale was administered to 320 undergraduate students enrolled in the College of Arts and Sciences and the College of Business. After adjusting the sample for those who did not complete the instrument, 298 eligible respondents remained. The sample, sub-divided by race, consisted of 149 black (82 females and 67 males) and 149 white students (74 females and 75 males).

## Instrument and procedure

The Tennessee Self-Concept Scale, a standardized Likert-type instrument, was used to assess self-esteem.[17] The standardization group from which the norms were developed included a broad sample of 626 individuals from various parts of the country and ranged in age from twelve to sixty-eight. "There were approximately equal numbers of both sexes, both negro and white subjects, representatives of all social, economic, and intellectual levels from sixth grade through the Ph.D. degree."[18]

The seven dimensions used in the study were: Physical Self, Moral-Ethical Self, Social Self, Personal Self, Family Self, Self Criticism, and Total Positive Score. The Tennessee Scale's manual describes the Physical Self as the individual's view of body, state of health, appearance, skills, and sexuality. The Moral-Ethical Self is described as relating to perceptions of "Moral Worth," relationship to god, feelings of being a "good" or "bad" person, and satisfaction with one's religion or lack of it. The Personal Self score is reflective of the individual's sense of personal worth. The Social Self items indicate the person's sense of adequacy and worth in interaction with people in general. The Family Self score reflects one's feelings of adequacy, worth, and value as a family member. Self Criticism reflects obvious defensiveness. The Total Positive score reflects the overall level of self-esteem.

The Tennessee Scale was administered under classroom conditions in March and April of 1981 by both the professor and the researcher. The subjects were instructed to respond to every item on the questionnaire. They were assured that their responses would be used only for research purposes.

# Findings

### Black/White Self-Esteem

Table 1 shows subscale and composite or Total Positive self-esteem scores for black and white students. The self-evaluations of black and white students do not differ significantly. An inspection of mean scores for each item on the subscale reveals no differences in the levels of self-esteem reported by the respondents. This finding supports the earlier findings that indicated no self-esteem disadvantage for black students. That is, black students are as likely as white students to evaluate themselves in a positive manner. In sum, the findings of no differences in reported self-esteem between black and white students on each item of the subscale are consistent with the basic postulates of this study.

A comparison of the composite score or Total Positive score for the various dimensions of the Tennessee Self-Concept Scale reveal no race differences in self-esteem. According to Table 1, the composite score or Total Positive score made by black and white students with the norm group suggests no significant departure. The mean composite score or Total Positive score was 345.54 for the norm group, 344.8 for black students, and 341.7 for white students.

## Table 1

A comparison of the Normative scores with scores made by Black and White College Students on the Tennessee Self-Concept Scale

| TSCS | NORM GROUP (N=626) | | BLACK STUDENTS (N=149) | | WHITE STUDENTS (N=149) | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| SUBSCALES | MEAN | SD | MEAN | SD | MEAN | SD |
| Physical Self | 71.78 | 7.67 | 72.3 | 7.46 | 68.7 | 7.55 |
| Moral-Ethical Self | 70.33 | 8.70 | 67.2 | 7.68 | 68.0 | 7.92 |
| Personal Self | 64.55 | 7.41 | 67.1 | 8.37 | 66.3 | 7.49 |
| Family Self | 70.83 | 8.43 | 69.7 | 7.55 | 70.3 | 7.67 |
| Social Self | 68.14 | 7.86 | 68.5 | 7.89 | 68.2 | 7.87 |
| Self Criticism | 35.54 | 6.70 | 34.4 | 5.49 | 36.4 | 5.63 |
| Total Positive | 345.54 | 30.70 | 344.8 | 30.10 | 341.7 | 29.60 |

Similarly, the Total Positive score made by black students do not show a significant departure from the Total Positive score made by white students (all t scores were tested at .05 level of significance). The findings

show black and white students reporting the same level of self-esteem, 344.8 and 341.7, respectively. The results for black and white students, in terms of Total Positive scores, indicate no difference in reported self-evaluations.

Table 1 also provides a comparison of the mean scores of the seven basic dimensions of self-esteem made by black and white students and the norm group. The net result is that black and white students, on the self-evaluation items, do not differ from the norm group of any of the seven dimensions measured. The mean scores for black and white students and the norm group on each item of the subscale are essentially the same. In other words, the mean scores for black and white students on each item of the subscale as compared to the norm group do not differ.

The next step of the investigation was to look at the percentage of students, by race, having high self-esteem. According to Table 2, fifty-four percent of black students score high in self-esteem, in contrast to forty-three percent of white students. The findings support the earlier research that black students are as likely as white students to have high self-esteem. Moreover, the findings reported in Table 2 are consistent with the postulates of this study.

**Table 2**

Self-Esteem by Race
Percent Having High Self-Esteem

|  |  | Black | White |
|---|---|---|---|
| Self-Esteem | Low | 46.3% (69) | 57% (85) |
|  | High | 53.7% (80) | 43% (64) |
|  | N | 100% (149) | 100% (149) |

**Sex, Race and Self-Esteem.** The final step in the investigation focuses on whether or not the sex of the student is important in terms of self-esteem. When each racial group is broken down by sex, females of both groups are less likely to have high self-esteem, and within each racial group the differences between males and females are about the same (see Table 3). The results in Table 3 indicate that more than sixty percent of black males evaluate themselves in a positive manner, followed by white males, black females and white females, respectively.

## Table 3

### Self-Esteem by Race, by Sex
### Percent Having High Self-Esteem

| | Black | | | White | |
| Males | Females | | Males | Females |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 61.2% | 47.6% | | 52.0% | 33.8% |
| (41) | (39) | | (39) | (25) |

The net result is that white females have significantly lower self-esteem than do any of the other groups.


## Summary and Conclusions

In summary, this study measured the self-esteem of 298 undergraduate black and white students enrolled in a predominantly white, state supported university in the Deep South. The findings reported here are consistent with earlier research in the following aspects: (1) blacks evince a level of self-esteem at least equal to that of whites; and (2) females of both races report lower self-esteem than do males, with white females reporting the lowest self-esteem of all. This consistency in different geographical and temporal contexts is extremely important given the controversy surrounding this entire topic and the widespread assumption that white discrimination and segregation depresses and debilitates the psyche of the average black person in the U.S.

The reported findings that blacks do not have lower self-esteem than whites may or may not be generalizable to studies utilizing small, nonrepresentative samples such as nursery school and kindergarten children, but they do warn against assuming that blacks suffer diminished self-evaluations. The findings reported during the course of this analysis suggest that black students, those participating in this investigation, appear to have resources enabling them to maintain a level of self-esteem at least equal to that of white students. These findings are interpreted here within the context of reference group theory and, for the most part, they are consistent with that approach. Moreover, the conclusions reached in this study are of a potentially sensitive nature and should be generalized with a measure of discretion.

The findings of this investigation also suggest that black persons, like white persons, live through threatening and oppressive situations without experiencing radical damage to a more stable self-image. The

inferences made here suggest that the psychic resources available to the black respondents are of longstanding existence rather than the product of a recently developed ideology. Similarly, the resources of psychic support seem to be available to the participants at varying educational levels and operate most effectively at self-esteem maintenance in the sphere of physical self, personal self, social self, and the overall level of self-esteem.

To ascertain the reasons why black respondents do not have lower self-esteem than whites requires explication and further research. The utilization of reference group theory, however, provides evidence that black respondents compare themselves with other blacks rather than whites. Thus, reference group theory serves as a basis for social comparison within the same race and socioeconomic position. In sum, the findings of this study support the earlier research that blacks compare themselves with other blacks rather than whites.

# Notes

[1]Kenneth B. Clark. *Dark Ghetto: Dilemmas of Social Power.* (New York: Harper and Row, 1965); E. Franklin Frazier. *Black Bourgeosie.* (New York: Basic Books, 1968); Abram Kardiner and Lionel Ovesey. *The Mark of Oppression.* (New York: Norton, 1951).

[2]Hugh Butts. "Skin-Color Perception and Self-Esteem." *Journal of Negro Education.* Vol. 32, No. 1 (1963)122; Kenneth B. Clark and Mamie P. Clark. "Racial Identification and Preference in Negro Children." In T.M. Newcomb and E. L. Hartley (eds.), *Readings in Social Psychology.* (New York: Holt, 1947); Mary E. Goodman. *Race Awareness in Young Children.* (Cambridge, Mass.: Addison-Wesley, 1952); Gary F. Jensen, C.S. White, and James M. Galliher. "Ethnic Status and Adolescent Self-Evaluations: An Extension of Research on Minority Self-Esteem." *Social Problems.* Vol. 30, No. 2 (1982)222-239; Catherine Landreth and Barbara C. Johnson. "Young Children's Responses to a

Picture and Inset Test Designed to Reveal Reactions to Persons of Different Skin Color." *Child Development.* Vol. 24, (1953)63-80; J.K. Morland. "Racial Recognition by Nursery School Children in Lynchburg, Virginia." *Social Forces.* Vol. 37, (1958)132-137; Harold W. Stevenson and Edward C. Stewart. "A Developmental Study of Racial Awareness in Young Children." *Child Development.* Vol. 29(1958)86-96.

[3]Darrel W. Drury. "Black Self-Esteem and Desegregated Schools." *Sociology of Education.* Vol. 53, (April, 1980)88-89.

[4]Morris Rosenberg and Roberta G. Simmons. *Black and White Self-Esteem: The Urban School Child.* (Washington, D.C.: American Sociological Association, 1972); Gloria J. Powell and Marielle Fuller. *Black Monday's Children: A Study of the Effects of School Desegration on Self-Concepts of Southern Children.* (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1973).

[5]The twenty-three comparisons in which blacks rate higher than whites in self-esteem are: Jerald G. Bachman. *Youth in Transition.* Volume II: *The Impact of Family Background and Intelligence on Tenth-Grade Boys.* (Ann Arbor: Survey Research Center, Institute for Social Research, 1970); J.G. Bachman and P.M. O'Malley. "Black-White Differences in Self-Esteem: Are They Affected by Response Styles?" *American Journal of Sociology.* Vol. 90, No. 3(1984)624-639; Robert L. Crain and Carol S. Weisman. *Discrimination, Personality, and Achievement.* (New York: Seminar Press, 1972); Jacqueline Fleming. *Blacks in College: A Comparative Study of Students Success in Black and in White Institutions.* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bas Publishers, 1984); Chad Gordon. *Self-Conception and Social Achievement.* Ph.D. dissertation, U.C.L.A. (Ann Arbor: University Microfilms, 1963); Anthony R. Harris and Randall Stokes. "Race, Self-Evaluation and the Protestant Ethic." *Social Problems.* Vol. 26, No. 1 (1978)71-85; J.W. Hoelter. *Differential Impact of Significant Others on Self-Evaluation: A Multiple Group Analysis.* Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Indiana University, 1981; J.W. Hoelter. "Factorial Invariance and Self-Esteem: Reassessing Race and Sex Differences." *Social Forces.* Vol. 61, No. 3 (1983)834-846; David E. Hunt and Robert H. Hardt. "The Effects of Upward Bound Programs on the Attitudes, Motivation and Academic Achievements of Negro Students." *Journal of Social Issues.* Vol. 25, No. 3 (1969)122-124; Melvin L. Kohn. *Class and Conformity: A Study in Values.* (Homewood, IL: The Dorsey Press, 1969); Edward L. McDill, Edmund D. Myers, Jr., and Leo C. Rigsby. *Sources of Educational Climate in High School.* (Final Report, Project No. 1999, Contract UOE-3-10-080 submitted to Bureau of Re-

search, Office of Education, Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, 1966); Robert L. McDonald and Malcolm D. Gynther. "Relationship of Self and Ideal-Self Descriptions with Sex, Race and Class of Southern Adolescents." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology.* Vol. 1, No. 1 (1965)85-88; Keith D. Parker. "Relationships Between Self-Concept and Academic Achievement Among Black and White Undergraduate Students Enrolled at Delta State University." (Unpublished Manuscript, Mississippi State University, 1981); Keith D. Parker and David H. Demo. "Relationships Between Self-Concept and Academic Achievement Among Black and White Undergraduate Students at a Southern University." Paper presented at the Annual Mid-South Socological Meeting, Birmingham, Alabama, (October, 1983); Gloria J. Powell and Marielle Fuller. "School Desegregation and Self-Concept." Paper presented at the 47th Annual Meeting of American Orthopsychiatric Association (San Francisco, CA: 1970); Gloria J. Powell and Marielle Fuller, *Black Monday's Children.* (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1973); Morris Rosenberg and Roberta G. Simmons. *Black and White Self-Esteem: The Urban School Child.* (Washington, D.C.: Rose Monograph Series, 1972); M. Schwartz and S. Stryker. *Deviance, Selves and Others.* (Washington, D.C.: Rose Monograph, 1970); J.F. Short and F. Strodtbeck. *Group Process and Gang Delinquency.* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1965); Robert G. Simmons, Leslie Brown, Diane M. Bush, and Dale A. Blyth. "Self-Esteem and Achievement of Black and White Adolescents." *Social Problems* Vol. 26 (October, 1978)86-96; Gail E. Thomas. *Black Students in Higher Education: Conditions and Experiences in the 1970s.* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1981); Castellano B. Turner and Barbara F. Turner. "Gender, Race, Social Class, and Self-Evaluations Among College Students." *The Sociological Quarterly.* Vol. 23 (Autumn, 1982)491-507; Marilyn M. Wendland. "Self-Concept in Southern Negro and White Adolescents as Related to Rural-Urban Residence." Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1967).

The four comparisons indicating no significant difference are: Earl Baughman and W. Grant Dahlstrom. *Negro and White Children: A Psychological Study in the Rural South.* (New York: Academic Press, 1968); James S. Coleman, Ernest Q. Campbell, Carol J. Hobson, James McParland, Alexander M. Mood, Frederick D. Weinfeld, and Robert L. York. *Equality of Educational Opportunity.* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1966); J. Heiss and Susan Owens. "Self-Evaluation of Blacks and Whites." *American Journal of Sociology.* Vol. 78, No. 2 (1972)360; Robert L. Williams and Harry Byars, "Negro Self-

Esteem in a Transitional Society." *Personnel and Guidance Journal.* Vol. 47, No. 2(1968)120-125.

The five comparisons in which whites rate higher than blacks in self-esteem are: Robert L. Crain and Carol S. Weisman. *Discrimination, Personality, and Achievement.* (New York: Seminar Press, 1972); Chad Gordon. *Looking Ahead: Self-Concepts, Race and Family as Determinants of Adolescent Orientations to Achievement.* (Washington, D.C.: Rose Monograph Series, 1969); Melvin Herman, Stanley Sadofsky, Joseph Bensman, Robert Llienfeld, and Caterine Manas. *Study of the Meaning, Experience and Effects of the Neighborhood Youth Corps on Negro Youth Who are Seeking Work.* (New York: N.Y.U. Graduate School of Social Work, Center for the Study of Unemployed Youth, 1967); Melvin L. Kohn. *Class and Conformity: A Study of Values.* (Homewood, IL: The Dorsey Press, 1969); Morris Rosenberg. *Society and the Adolescent Self-Image.* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1965).

The thirty studies yield thirty-two comparisons, since Kohn's (1969) factor analysis produces two factors (self-deprecation and self-confidence) and Crain and Weisman (1972) report separate findings for Northern-and-Southern-Born blacks.

[6]Bachman, 1970; Harris and Stokes, 1978; Kohn, 1969; McDill et al., 1966; Powell and Fuller, 1973; Rosenberg and Simmons, 1972; Simmons et al., 1978.

[7]Kohn, 1969.

[8]Barry D. Adams. "Inferiorization and Self-Esteem." *Social Psychology.* Vol. 41, No. 1 (1978)47-53; Thomas F. Pettigrew. "Placing Adam's Argument in a Broader Perspective: Comment on Adam's Paper." *Social Psychology.* Vol. 41, No. 1 (1978)58-61; Roberta G. Simmons. "Blacks and High Self-Esteem: A Puzzle," *Social Psychology.* Vol. 41, No. 1 (1978)54-57.

[9]Marylee C. Taylor and Edward Walsh. "Explanations of Self-Esteem: Some Empirical Tests." *Social Psychology Quarterly.* Vol. 42, No. 3 (1979)242-253.

[10]Adams, 51.

[11]Powell and Fuller, 282.

[12]Ibid., 282.

[13]Drury, 90.

[14]Rosenberg and Simmons, 8.

[15]Taylor and Walsh, 242-243.

[16]John D. McCarthy and William L. Yancey. "Uncle Tom and Mr. Charlie: Metaphysical Pathos in the Study of Racism and Personal Disorganization." *American Journal of Sociology*. Vol. 76, No. 4(1971)664.

[17]William H. Fitts. *Manual for the Tennessee Self-Concept Scale*. (Nashville: Counselor Recordings and Tests, 1965).

[18]Ibid., 13.

# Critique

"Self-Evaluation of Black and White College Students" presents informative results of a study concluding that blacks have higher self-esteem than whites at one Southern university. Although self-esteem in blacks at the university under study may be higher than that of whites, the same is not the case in elementary school districts throughout the Los Angeles Basin in Southern California.

An accurate assessment of self-esteem in blacks as a whole is an impossible task to achieve, but J. Kenneth Morland and Ellen Suthers show how pre-school black children see themselves vis-a-vis whites:

> There is probably an unconscious preference for and identification with [whites] by very young black children. Upon entry into school, especially when racial balance is practiced, black children learn clearly the race to which they belong [is inferior].[1]

Young children are likely to be open and honest about their basic emotions. University students, on the other hand, have learned to mask theirs. Making judgements about self-esteem appears to be a risky undertaking.

Although Parker uses reference group theory to partly explain self-esteem in blacks in his study (blacks compare themselves to other blacks rather than to whites), this critic wonders if something is being masked by the theoretical statement. If blacks compare themselves to other blacks rather than to whites, the basis for the author's argument is destroyed. Parker's study leaves it to the reader to clarify why his black students maintain higher self-esteem than whites.

Although the author maintains that black students "participating in this investigation appear to have resources enabling them to maintain a level of self-esteem equal to white students," and have the resources and networks of support as key elements for maintaining high self-esteem, the evidence presented in the article does not support the contention.