

Race/Ethnicity and Self-Esteem in Families of Adolescents

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ABSTRACT. Self-esteem and perceived competence have only been explored minimally in family studies with ethnically diverse samples. The current study explores self-esteem and perceived competence in a sample of adolescents, their mothers, and their fathers from three racial/ethnic groups: African American, Hispanic/Latino/Latina, and Caucasian. Results show that African American mothers report higher perceptions of athletic competence than Caucasian or Hispanic/Latina mothers. African American fathers and Hispanic/Latino fathers report higher perceptions of physical appearance and global self-worth than Caucasian fathers. Adolescents' reports of perceived competence and global self-worth did not differ across racial/ethnic groups. Significant associations within the family were found for some domains of per-

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ceived competence. Results are discussed in terms of functioning within families of different racial/ethnic groups. [Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-HAWORTH. E-mail address: <docdelivery@haworthpress.com> Website: <<http://www.HaworthPress.com>> © 2005 by The Haworth Press, Inc. All rights reserved.]

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Historically, there has been a great deal of interest in racial/ethnic differences in self-esteem, self-worth, and perceived competence (Jackson & Lassiter, 2001). Although early studies suggested that African American children experienced lower self-esteem than Caucasian American children, more recent studies suggest exactly the opposite. In a meta-analysis of studies that included over half a million participants, Gray-Little and Hafdahl (2000) found that African American children, adolescents, and young adults reported higher self-esteem than Caucasian American children, adolescents, and young adults. In addition, these differences appeared to increase as the age of the child increased. In another meta-analysis, African American adults were found to have higher self-esteem than Caucasian adults, though that difference was not found in elderly samples (Twenge & Crocker, 2002). Overall, there is relatively consistent evidence that African American children, adolescents, and adults report higher global self-esteem and self-worth than do same-aged Caucasians.

Somewhat less is known about self-esteem and self-worth within Hispanic/Latino/Latina groups. There is evidence that Hispanic youth report lower levels of self-esteem than African American or Caucasian American youth (Carlson, Uppal, & Prosser, 2000), but there is also evidence that Hispanic youth do not differ significantly from other youth in their reports of self-esteem (Martinez & Dukes, 1997). Results from a meta-analysis suggest that Hispanic/Latino/Latina youth and adults in the United States reported significantly lower rates of self-esteem when compared to Caucasians, but the effect sizes are small (Twenge & Crocker, 2002). Thus, research results have yielded conflicting conclusions.

Note also that there are extensive debates on the results of the meta-analyses related to self-esteem and race/ethnicity (Gray-Little & Hafdahl, 2000; Hafdahl & Gray-Little, 2002; Twenge & Crocker, 2002). One central issue has been the exploration of global self-esteem versus exploration of different domains of self-esteem and perceived

competence. For example, Gray-Little and Hafdahl (2000) found larger effect sizes showing higher self-esteem in African American samples when measures of global self-esteem were used. When measures that included academic self-esteem were evaluated, the same pattern of findings were revealed (i.e., African Americans reported higher levels of self-esteem than did Caucasians), but the effect sizes were smaller (Gray-Little & Hafdahl, 2000). In addition, when specific domains of self-worth are explored in adolescents, different patterns emerge for different racial/ethnic groups. For example, self-perceptions of physical appearance decreased over time in both African American and Caucasian girls across the ages of 9 to 14, but this decrease was significantly more severe for Caucasian girls than for African American girls (Brown et al., 1998). These studies suggest that both global self-esteem and specific domains of self-esteem should be explored in different racial/ethnic groups.

Even with this interest in racial/ethnic differences and similarities in self-esteem, there has been little investigation into the relationships between family members' self-esteem within different racial/ethnic groups. In general, most research on self-esteem looks at the self-esteem of individuals rather than exploring self-esteem within the family unit.

FAMILIES, RACE/ETHNICITY, AND SELF-ESTEEM

Research on families of differing races/ethnicities has moved from a search of pathological functioning in ethnic minority families to an exploration of strengths and resilience within ethnic minority families (Parke & Buriel, 1998). There remains, however, a dearth of studies that explore self-esteem and perceived competence within the family. Particularly lacking are any studies that explore associations of self-esteem directly with mothers, fathers, and youth (Campbell, Pungello, & Miller-Johnson, 2002). Based on the family socialization theory (Maccoby & Martin, 1983), adolescents' self-esteem would be expected to be related to parental self-esteem. These associations, however, have rarely been explored in racially and ethnically diverse samples (Ruiz, Roosa, & Gonzales, 2002).

The research that has been completed in this area has been geared toward finding associations between the parent-child relationship, parents' behavior (especially mothers' behavior), and self-esteem in children and adolescents. In general, associations have been found be-

tween the parent-adolescent relationship and adolescents' self-esteem. Adolescents and parents who perceived themselves to have a better relationship were more likely to report higher levels of self-esteem than adolescents and parents who perceived a troubled relationship (Demo, Small, & Savin-Williams, 1987). In an ethnically diverse sample, adolescents who were being raised by someone other than their mother or father showed lower levels of self-esteem than those who were being raised by at least one biological parent (Corcoran & Franklin, 2002). One study of African American adolescents found that boys whose parents were married showed higher self-esteem than boys whose parents were divorced, but there were no differences in girls' self-esteem based on parental marital status (Mandara & Murray, 2000).

There has been a fair amount of research on parenting behaviors and self-esteem in youth. Within a sample of Caucasian, African American, and Hispanic/Latina young adolescent girls, authoritative parenting was associated with higher self-esteem whereas family stress was related to lower self-esteem (Carlson et al., 2000). It appears, however, that the association between parenting practices and self-esteem in youth may be stronger in Caucasian families and middle-class families. Ruiz and colleagues (2002) found that the parenting practices of Caucasian parents were more predictive of young adolescents' self-esteem than the parenting practices of Mexican/American parents.

It appears then that the associations between parental behavior and adolescent functioning may vary across different racial/ethnic groups. McGoldrick and Giordano (1996) argued that ethnicity may play a central role in how family members function, both as individuals and as a family unit. This type of research has been lacking in the area of self-esteem. The connections between fathers' functioning and adolescents' self-esteem has also largely been ignored (Phares, 1992, 1999). Although fathers are more visible in the lives of some groups of adolescents (e.g., Caucasian, Hispanic/Latino/Latina) than others (e.g., African American), it is important to explore the connections between fathers and their offspring when studying family functioning (Parke & Buriel, 1998; Silverstein, 2002).

THE CURRENT STUDY

The current study addresses these issues within a sample of adolescents, mothers, and fathers from the community. Because self-esteem and perceived competence are associated with socioeconomic status

(Twenge & Campbell, 2002), an attempt was made to include adolescents from comparable, ethnically diverse, communities. It is expected that African American youth, their mothers, and fathers will report higher self-esteem than their Caucasian American and Hispanic counterparts. Additionally, it is expected that the self-esteem of adolescents, mothers, and fathers will be related within families in all three racial/ethnic groups.

METHOD

Participants

As part of a larger study of family functioning, a total of 104 families (adolescents, mothers, and fathers) participated in this study. All participating families in the current study included an adolescent, the mother, and the father. Adolescents were required to have at least monthly face-to-face contact with their biological mother and their biological father for inclusion in the larger study. For the current investigation, only families from the three primary racial/ethnic groups (African American, Hispanic/Latino/Latina, and Caucasian American) were included. Too few participants from other racial/ethnic groups (e.g., Asian American, Native American) were recruited for adequate inclusion of the groups. Adolescents ranged in age from 11 to 17 years ($M = 13.38$; $SD = 1.94$) and equal numbers of boys (50.0%) and girls (50.0%) participated in the current study. The majority of mothers and fathers were still married to each other and living together (83.7%). Mothers had a mean of 14.15 years ($SD = 2.25$) of education and fathers had a mean of 13.94 years ($SD = 2.46$) of education. Based on the Hollingshead criteria (Hollingshead, 1975), family socioeconomic status (SES) represent lower middle class ($M = 42.96$; $SD = 10.67$).

Race and ethnicity were diverse within the sample. A total of 40 of the adolescents were Caucasian American/nonHispanic (38.5%), 35 were African American (33.7%), and 29 were Hispanic/Latino/Latina American (27.9%). Based on a power analysis (Cohen, 1992) with a power of .80 using an alpha of .05 and expecting a large effect size, a minimum of 28 families per racial/ethnic group were needed for an adequate test of the hypotheses. Thus, this sample provides an adequate number of participants for exploration of group differences as well as associations within families of each racial/ethnic group. Unfortunately, participants were not asked to provide greater specificity about their

race/ethnic group (e.g., Cuban Americans, Puerto Rican Americans, and Mexican Americans would have all endorsed the category of Hispanic/Latino/Latina rather than a more specific categorization).

The racial/ethnic groups did not differ on any major demographic variables, including adolescent age, $F(2, 101) = 0.56, p = .946$, maternal education, $F(2, 101) = 2.39, p = .097$, paternal education, $F(2, 94) = 0.54, p = .584$, or family SES, $F(2, 99) = 0.96, p = .386$.

Measures

Participants completed the age-appropriate version of the Harter Self-Perception Profiles, which conceptualize self-esteem as perceived competence in multiple domains. Adolescents in eighth grade and below completed the Harter Self-Perception Profile for Children (Harter, 1985). Adolescents in ninth grade and above completed the Harter Self-Perception Profile for Adolescents (Harter, 1988). Mothers and fathers completed the Harter Self-Perception Profile for Adults (Messer & Harter, 1986). Thus, adolescents, mothers, and fathers all provided their own self-reports of their perceived competence and self-esteem.

All three versions of the Harter Self-Perception Profile assess specific domains of perceived competence as well as global self-worth. In addition to global self-worth, the child version assesses five domains (scholastic competence, social acceptance, athletic competence, physical appearance, and behavioral conduct; Harter, 1985), the adolescent version assesses eight domains (scholastic competence, social acceptance, athletic competence, physical appearance, job competence, romantic appeal, behavioral conduct, and close friendships; Harter, 1988), and the adult version assesses eleven domains (sociability, job competence, nurturance, athletic abilities, physical appearance, adequate provider, morality, household management, intimate relationships, intelligence, and sense of humor; Messer & Harter, 1986).

The following subscales are comparable across all three measures: social acceptance, physical appearance, athletic competence and global self-worth/self-esteem. Because one goal of this study was to explore interconnections of self-esteem within the family, only those four subscales will be used in the current analyses. The social acceptance domain assesses participants' perceptions of feeling accepted by peers, feeling popular, and feeling comfortable around others. The physical appearance domain assesses participants' self-perceptions of their attractiveness and their satisfaction with their appearance. The athletic competence domain assesses participants' feelings of their competence

in sports and other physical activities. The global self-worth subscale assesses participants' feelings about themselves overall (i.e., not tied to any specific domain; Harter, 1985, 1988; Messer & Harter, 1986).

All three versions of the Harter Self-Perception Profile show strong psychometric properties and have been used extensively. Internal consistencies range from .75 to .86 on the child version (Harter, 1985), .77 to .92 on the adolescent version (Harter, 1988), and .73 to .92 on the adult version (Messer & Harter, 1986) for the subscales that are used in this study. The Harter Self-Perception Profiles have been found to be reliable and valid in ethnically diverse samples (Dimmitt, 1995). For all three versions, mean scale scores range from 1 to 4, with higher numbers reflecting higher self-esteem.

Procedures

Families were recruited into the study through advertisements in community newspapers (including local newspapers that were targeted to ethnic minority communities). Families with an adolescent who had face-to-face contact with their biological father and mother were invited to participate. After expressing interest in the study, families attended a three-hour data collection session at a university in a metropolitan city in the southeast. Each family member completed their measures separately. Families were given \$60 each in appreciation for their participation.

RESULTS

Table 1 presents means and standard deviations for the three domains of perceived competence (social acceptance, physical appearance, and athletic competence) and for the global self-worth of adolescents, mothers, and fathers in each racial/ethnic group. In order to test for the racial/ethnic group differences proposed in the first hypothesis, a series of ANOVAs were completed for each informant (adolescents, mothers, and fathers). Significant ANOVAs were followed-up by post-hoc Duncan's tests.

For social acceptance, there were no significant group differences for adolescents, mothers, or fathers (all p 's > .05). For physical appearance, there were no significant group differences for adolescents or mothers, but fathers showed significant group differences, $F(2, 94) = 3.16, p = .047$. Post-hoc Duncan's analyses showed that African American fa-

TABLE 1. Means and Standard Deviations for Self-Esteem

	Race/Ethnicity			<i>F</i> -Value
	<i>Caucasian</i>	<i>African American</i>	<i>Hispanic/Latino/Latina</i>	
Social Acceptance				
Adolescents	3.15 (.76)	3.13 (.74)	3.38 (.51)	1.17
Mothers	3.23 (.67)	3.44 (.55)	3.25 (.60)	1.21
Fathers	2.98 (.71)	3.36 (.62)	3.20 (.66)	2.81
Physical Appearance				
Adolescents	2.82 (.85)	3.06 (.77)	2.92 (.75)	0.81
Mothers	2.49 (.84)	2.82 (.84)	2.70 (.70)	1.56
Fathers	2.79 (.51) ^a	3.14 (.82) ^b	3.13 (.65) ^b	3.16*
Athletic Competence				
Adolescents	2.79 (.87)	2.96 (.80)	3.18 (.66)	1.96
Mothers	2.04 (.79) ^a	2.49 (.78) ^b	2.07 (.64) ^a	3.95*
Fathers	2.79 (.58)	2.90 (.68)	2.88 (.75)	0.27
Global Self-Worth				
Adolescents	3.34 (.60)	3.35 (.66)	3.25 (.65)	0.23
Mothers	3.17 (.76)	3.32 (.67)	3.24 (.71)	0.39
Fathers	2.96 (.62) ^a	3.33 (.72) ^b	3.38 (.53) ^b	4.59*

Note: Standard deviations are in parentheses. Different superscripts signify significant mean differences.

* $p < .05$

thers and Hispanic/Latino fathers reported significantly higher perceived competence in the physical appearance domain than did Caucasian fathers. Regarding athletic competence, there were no significant group differences for adolescents or fathers, but mothers showed significant group differences, $F(2, 101) = 3.95, p = .022$. Post-hoc analyses showed that African American mothers reported significantly higher perceived competence in the athletic competence domain than did Caucasian mothers or Hispanic/Latina mothers. For global self-worth, there were no significant group differences for adolescents or mothers, but fathers showed significant group differences, $F(2, 94) = 4.59, p = .013$. Post-hoc analyses showed that African American fathers and Hispanic/Latino fathers reported significantly higher global self-worth than did Caucasian fathers. Overall, adolescents did not differ by group in any domain of perceived competence, African American mothers reported greater athletic competence, and African American and Hispanic/Latino fathers reported greater physical appearance, perceived competence, and global self-worth.

In order to explore the second hypothesis, correlations were computed for dyads within the family (adolescent-mother, adolescent-father, and mother-father). As can be seen in Table 2, no correlations were significant for social acceptance for any of the three racial/ethnic groups. For physical appearance, Hispanic/Latino/Latina mothers' and fathers' reports correlated significantly ($r = .38$; $p = .045$). When considering athletic competence, Hispanic/Latino/Latina adolescents' and their mothers' reports correlated significantly ($r = .37$; $p = .05$). For global self-worth, there were two significant correlations. In African American families, the global self-worth of adolescents and their fathers correlated significantly ($r = .40$; $p = .024$). In Hispanic/Latino/Latina families, mothers' and fathers' reports of global self-worth were correlated significantly ($r = .62$; $p = .001$). Overall, there was no significant association between family members' perceived compe-

TABLE 2. Correlations Within Families in Each Racial/Ethnic Group

	Race/Ethnicity		
	<i>Caucasian</i>	<i>African American</i>	<i>Hispanic/Latino/Latina</i>
Social Acceptance			
Adolescents & Mothers	.25	.01	-.24
Adolescents & Fathers	-.01	-.30	-.25
Mothers & Fathers	-.19	-.13	.14
Physical Appearance			
Adolescents & Mothers	.11	-.01	-.15
Adolescents & Fathers	.06	.03	-.10
Mothers & Fathers	.06	.16	.38*
Athletic Competence			
Adolescents & Mothers	-.02	-.01	.37*
Adolescents & Fathers	.04	.20	.28
Mothers & Fathers	.11	.32	.23
Global Self-Worth			
Adolescents & Mothers	.23	.02	.01
Adolescents & Fathers	.07	.40*	-.10
Mothers & Fathers	.10	-.05	.62***

Note:

* $p < .05$

** $p < .01$

*** $p < .001$

tence within Caucasian families. There was one significant association (between adolescents' and their fathers' global self-worth) within African American families, and there were three significant associations within Hispanic/Latino/Latina families (mothers' and fathers' reports of physical appearance, adolescents' and mothers' reports of athletic competence, and mothers' and fathers' reports of global self-worth).

Although the power analysis suggested that the current sample size was sufficient to uncover large effect sizes, additional correlational analyses were completed with the entire sample. With all three racial/ethnic groups combined, comparable results were found. Thus, the non-significant correlations within racial/ethnic groups appear to hold-up even with the larger sample of combined groups.

DISCUSSION

These results suggest the complexity of race/ethnicity, parenting status as mother or father, and family relationships regarding self-worth and self-esteem. There is partial, but not overwhelming, support for the hypotheses. Specifically, there was a trend toward the African American self-esteem advantage (Gray-Little & Hafdahl, 2000; Twenge & Crocker, 2002) with mothers' athletic competence, fathers' physical appearance, and fathers' global self-worth, but not adolescents' self-perceptions. Contrary to the meta-analysis that showed Caucasians to have a self-esteem advantage over Hispanic/Latino/Latina adults (Twenge & Crocker, 2002), this study found that Hispanic/Latino fathers reported significantly higher self-perceptions of physical appearance and global self-worth than Caucasian fathers. This study highlights the complexity of racial/ethnic group differences in perceived competence, global self-worth, and self-esteem.

Regarding the correlational analyses, patterns of self-worth within families have been all but ignored in the research literature. Although some researchers have explored parenting behavior in relation to children's and adolescents' self-esteem in different racial/ethnic groups (e.g., Ruiz et al., 2002), there is little work with which to compare the correlational findings in this study. The current results suggest that physical appearance is associated for mothers and fathers in Hispanic/Latino/Latina families, athletic competence is associated in adolescents and their mothers in Hispanic/Latino/Latina families, global self-worth is associated in adolescents and their fathers in African American families, and global-self-worth is associated in mothers and

fathers in Hispanic/Latino/Latina families. Given the correspondence between other psychosocial characteristics within families such as psychological symptoms (reviewed by Phares, 1999), it is surprising to find that there were not more consistent associations of perceived competence and global self-worth within families. Perhaps the development of self-esteem (i.e., the positive side of mental health) is a different process than the development of psychological symptoms (i.e., the negative side of mental health; Kaplan, 2001).

Given the unique nature of this sample based on recruitment (i.e., adolescents having at least monthly face-to-face contact with both their biological mother and their biological father), it may be that this sample is not completely representative of families in the community. Demographic data suggest that family constellations differ across racial/ethnic groups. When biological parents are considered (as they were in this study), 71.5% of Caucasian youth live with both their mother and father, 31.7% of African American youth live with both parents, and 62.9% of Hispanic/Latino/Latina youth live with both their biological mother and biological father (Hofferth, Stueve, Pleck, Bianchi, & Sayer, 2002). When children and adolescents do not live with both biological parents, they are most likely to live with their single-mother (Hofferth *et al.*, 2002). Given that participants in the current sample were recruited only if adolescents had face-to-face monthly contact with both their biological mother and biological father, this sample is not representative of the naturally occurring demographics in the community. The strength of this type of sample is that we can explore family relationships that do occur when adolescents have contact with both biological parents. The limitation, of course, is that for many racial/ethnic groups (especially African American), these family constellations are not the norm (Hofferth *et al.*, 2002). Interestingly, if two-parent families had been explored (whether the parents were biological parents or step-parents), then this sample would have been a bit more representative of the experiences of African American youth. Parke and Buriel (1998) reviewed research on family socialization and found that 42% of African American children and adolescents live within a two-parent family (including families with a step-parent). Thus, this study may be useful in understanding the self-perceptions and self-esteem relations within families where adolescents live with two parents.

Another issue that was not explored in this study but may be relevant to the findings is the level of ethnic identity that existed within these families. Ethnic identity refers to an individual's connection with and identification with traditions, customs, and rituals within their ra-

cial/ethnic group (Marsella & Yamada, 2000). Ethnic identity is associated with higher self-esteem in middle school and high school students (Martinez & Dukes, 1997). Within Hispanic/Latino/Latina samples, the association between ethnic identity and higher self-esteem was particularly strong when adolescents lived in an area where they were part of the majority (Umana-Taylor, Diversi, & Fine, 2002). It may be that ethnic identity within families is a moderating factor in the connections between mothers', fathers', and adolescents' self-esteem and perceived competence. Future research in this area should include measures of ethnic identity.

Another aspect of functioning within ethnic minority families relates to ethnicity-related stressors. Stressors such as discrimination, being stereotyped, and own-group conformity pressure (i.e., feeling pressure to live up to expectations of one's ethnic/racial group) are associated with higher rates of psychological symptoms and physical problems (Contrada et al., 2000). Although ethnicity-related stressors are not related significantly to lower rates of global self-esteem (Contrada et al., 2000), it may be that ethnic-related stressors play some role in the interconnections of self-esteem within families. This topic is worthy of further research within ethnically diverse samples of families.

Although there are limitations to the current study, the results suggest that research on self-worth in families from different racial/ethnic backgrounds is a fruitful area of investigation. In particular, the continued exploration of fathers from different ethnic/racial backgrounds seems imperative in order to understand adolescents' functioning within the family unit.

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