

## Academic Achievement and Self-Esteem Among Black and White College Students

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### **Abstract:**

Most studies on self-esteem among black and white Americans include samples of elementary school and high school students. In the present study, data on 298 black and white college students and an examination of the relationship between student's grade point average and self-esteem were presented. Several findings corroborate earlier research on school-age children. Self-esteem scores of blacks and whites were not significantly different, despite blacks having significantly lower grade point averages than whites. The relationship between grade point average and self-esteem, however, was negligible among blacks and among white males, suggesting that academic achievement is not critical to the self-concept of college students.

### **Article:**

The issue of race differences in global self-esteem is one that generates considerable academic interest as well as some controversy. Most of the studies on this topic conducted in the United States have examined public school populations and have indicated no consistent differences between the self-esteem levels of black and white American students (Porter & Washington, 1979; Wylie, 1979). Over the last 15 years, findings of greater self-esteem among blacks than whites have been reported among samples of elementary school students (Cicirelli, 1977; Rosenberg & Simmons, 1972) and adolescents (Bachman, 1970; Powell & Fuller, 1973; Simmons, Brown, Bush, & Blyth, 1978). Porter and Washington's (1979, p. 62) review indicated that "the bulk of studies do not report lower personal self-esteem among blacks," particularly when appropriate controls (e.g., age, sex, education, socioeconomic status) are employed.

The present study extended past research by examining self-esteem among students in this slightly older and more mature age bracket. Young children and adolescents may be more vulnerable to social pressures and may have different value structures compared to individuals who are confronting the challenges and responsibilities of early adulthood. Specifically, the first question is whether significant race differences in global or overall self-esteem exist among students at the college level. Second, within racial groups, what are the net effects of gender on self-esteem? The research conducted by Simmons and her associates (Simmons, Blyth, Van Cleave, & Bush, 1979; Simmons et al., 1978) indicated lower self-esteem for white females attending public schools, but it is unclear whether that pattern persists into the college years. Third, what is the effect of academic performance on overall self-esteem? Many studies have examined this relationship among children and adolescents, but little is known about the effects of academic achievement upon the self-esteem of college students and whether these effects are uniform across race and gender subgroups.

### ***Race and Self-Esteem***

Early writers (most notably Clark, 1965; Clark & Clark, 1947; Kardiner & Ovesey, 1951; Proshansky & Newton, 1968) presumed that, because of anti-black prejudice and discrimination, blacks have a tendency to view themselves as inferior and thus experience lower self-esteem than whites. Over the last two decades, however, this position has been seriously questioned as a result of methodological criticisms of the early studies (Greenwald & Oppenheim, 1968), the failure to explore alternative interpretations (see Simmons, 1978), and mounting empirical evidence that blacks have equal or greater self-esteem compared to whites.

The implicit (and in some cases explicit) reasoning of researchers who have hypothesized lower self-esteem among blacks is a combination of two theoretical principles: social comparisons and reflected appraisals. Consistent with the social comparisons principle, members of an underprivileged group (e.g., blacks) compare themselves with members of a more privileged group (e.g., whites) and internalize the unfavorable result in the form of negative self-evaluations.

Second, and consistent with the principle of reflected appraisals, members of a dominant group discriminate against those of minority status, who, in turn, perceive these actions as negative reflections on themselves, prompting low self-esteem. Research has demonstrated, however, that the frame of reference or comparison group for blacks is other blacks—not whites (McCarthy & Yancey, 1971; Pettigrew, 1971; Rosenberg, 1979). Because blacks, like whites, tend to live in consonant contexts, the significant others with whom they identify and compare themselves are likely to be of the same race and general social background. Reflected appraisals and social comparisons still operate, but the role that race plays in these processes (and in influencing self-esteem) is diminished. Neither of these principles, therefore, would lead to a prediction of race differences in self-esteem.

### *Academic Achievement and Self-Esteem*

Should academic achievement affect the self-esteem of college students as it does for younger students? Four theoretical principles (social comparisons, reflected appraisals, self-perception, and psychological centrality) have been supported in recent research (Demo & Savin-Williams, 1983; Rosenberg & Pearlin, 1978) and would seem to explain the commonly reported relationship between academic achievement and self-esteem among children and adolescents. In a competitive and grade-conscious educational institution, students are constantly reminded of the importance of their grades (i.e., grades should be psychologically central); students have daily opportunities to compare their own performances with those of others (i.e., social comparisons are made); the reactions of friends (and others) are monitored and internalized (i.e., reflected appraisals are common); and personal determinations of success or failure shape self-concept (i.e., self-perceptions are formed). Research also suggests a reciprocal process whereby academic accomplishments foster self-esteem, and high self-esteem, in turn, facilitates academic achievement (Purkey, 1970).

Indeed, research indicates that academic ability is associated with self-esteem among elementary school children (Black, 1974; Rogers, Smith, & Coleman, 1978), early adolescents (Demo & Savin-Williams, 1983), and later adolescents (Bachman & O'Malley, 1977; O'Malley & Bachman, 1979). Picou, Cosby, Curry, and Wells (1977) proposed that, among high school students, school performance has a stronger direct effect on the academic self-concept of blacks than on that of whites.

Two studies (Bachman & O'Malley, 1977; O'Malley & Bachman, 1979), however, have suggested that educational success becomes less salient during late high school and the years that follow, and consequently educational accomplishments are less influential in shaping self-esteem. Their findings are based on data obtained from two large, nationally representative samples of high school students, with follow-up data collected up to 6 years after graduation. Such samples also include large numbers of people who do not go on to college and for whom educational achievements could understandably assume lesser significance.

One question, then, is whether academic achievement has the same significance to college students as it does for younger students. If it does, then individuals would be expected to evaluate themselves and others on the basis of academic achievement and an association between academic achievement and self-esteem would also be expected.

## METHOD

### *Subjects*

A disproportionate stratified probability sample of 298 undergraduate students was examined. Respondents were enrolled in the spring of 1981 at a state-supported southern university. The university enrolls students from predominantly middle-class and lower-middle-class families. The sample was disproportionate in that although three fourths of the students enrolled at this university are white, blacks were oversampled to create approximately equal numbers in each race and gender subgroup. Forty-eight percent of the participants in this study were male and 52% were female.

### *Instruments*

The Tennessee Self-Concept Scale (TSCS; Fitts, 1965), is a 100-item Likert-type scale that was administered in classrooms. Wells and Marwell (1976) reported that because of the vast amount of research using the TSCS (e.g., Fitts, 1972), the scale has accumulated considerable evidence of criterion-related validity, and Robinson and Shaver (1973) reported that the test-retest reliability of the Total Positive Score is .92 over two weeks. The Total Positive Score is a measure of one's overall level of self-esteem and is derived from responses relating to several dimensions of the self (physical self, moral-ethical self, personal self, family self, and social self). Self-esteem thus refers to an overall or global evaluation of oneself.

Academic achievement was operationalized as student cumulative grade point average (GPA). These data were obtained from university records, offering the advantage of enhanced reliability over students' self-reports of their GPAs, which usually have a reliability of only about .7 (Birnbaum, 1972; Picou & Carter, 1976).

## RESULTS

### *Self-esteem*

As the data in Table 1 indicate, there was no significant difference between the self-esteem levels of black and white college students, as determined by a two-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) (Race x Gender). The mean for blacks was 343.59 (SD = 30.32) whereas the mean for whites was 342.42 (SD = 29.81,  $F = .208$ , ns). Although the overall interaction effect of race and gender was not significant ( $F = .396$ ), examination of the scores by subgroups indicated that white females scored lower than white males ( $p < .05$ ), whereas black males and black females did not differ significantly. The group with the lowest self-esteem was white females, corroborating the results of research on early adolescents (Simmons et al., 1978; Simmons & Rosenberg, 1975). The main effects test for gender differences revealed that females reported significantly lower self-esteem than males ( $p < .05$ ).

### *Academic Achievement*

Consistent with the results obtained by Simmons et al. (1978), the data presented in Table 1 indicate that the mean grade point average (GPA) for whites (2.70) was significantly higher than that of blacks ( $M = 2.36$ ,  $F = 21.239$ ,  $p < .001$ ). The main effect of gender was also significant, with females ( $M = 2.64$ ) having significantly higher GPAs than males ( $M = 2.41$ ,  $F = 10.121$ ,  $p < .01$ ), a sex difference commonly found among high school students (Alexander & Eckland, 1974). Most of the difference obtained in the

**TABLE 1**  
**Mean Self-Esteem and GPA Levels by Race and Gender**

Subjects	N	Self-esteem		GPA	
		M	SD	M	SD
Blacks	149	343.59	30.32	2.36***	.685
Whites	149	342.42	29.81	2.70	.669
Males	142	347.01*	27.90	2.41**	.664
Females	156	339.36	31.48	2.64	.711
Black males	67	346.64	28.76	2.32	.692
Black females	82	341.10	31.49	2.39	.681
White males	75	347.35*	22.29	2.50***	.631
White females	74	337.43	31.57	2.91	.645
Total	298	343.01	30.02	2.53	.697

\*p < .05. \*\*p < .01. \*\*\*p < .001.

**TABLE 2**  
**Self-Esteem by Cumulative Grade Point Average, by Race**

Self-esteem	Blacks		Whites	
	High GPA	Low GPA	High GPA	Low GPA
High	47.5(28)	55.6(50)	48.1(39)	36.8(25)
Low	52.5(31)	44.4(40)	51.9(42)	63.2(43)
Total	100.0(59)	100.0(90)	100.0(81)	100.0(68)

*Note.* The means for the total sample for GPA and self-esteem (reported in Table 1) were used to dichotomize these variables into high and low.

present study, however, is attributable to greater differentiation between white males ( $M = 2.50$ ) and females ( $M = 2.91$ ,  $p < .001$ ) than between black males ( $M = 2.32$ ) and females ( $M = 2.39$ , ns).

Comparing same-sex groups, white females had significantly higher GPAs than black females ( $p < .001$ ), whereas white males and black males did not differ significantly. For GPA then, there were significant main effects of race and gender (with race having the stronger effect), as well as a significant interaction effect (Race x Gender,  $F = 4.78$ ,  $p < .05$ ). The data also suggest that the sex difference in academic achievement may be limited to whites (see also, Howell & Frese, 1979). Finally, it bears repeating that white females, who had the highest GPAs, also reported the lowest mean self-esteem level.

### *Correlations between GPA and Self-Esteem*

For the sample as a whole, there was no association ( $r = .00$ ) between academic achievement and overall self-esteem. The data in Table 2 show that the relationship was not significant for either racial group. Among blacks the association was negative in direction,  $\chi^2(1) = 0.94$ ;  $r = -.08$ . Among whites there was a weak positive relationship,  $\chi^2(1) = 1.95$ ;  $r = .11$ . The data thus suggest that academic achievement was not influential in determining the overall self-esteem of whites or blacks at the college level, consistent with the claims of O'Malley and Bachman (1979). An equally plausible interpretation is that self-esteem was not influencing academic achievement.

Nonsignificant correlations between GPA and self-esteem were also obtained for the two gender groups, although there was a stronger relationship among males ( $r = .10$ , ns) than among females ( $r = -.01$ , ns). When the sample was divided by race and sex (Table 3), the strongest relationship was found among white females,  $r = .24$ ,  $p < .05$ . Although the correlations for the other subgroups were not significant, the moderate correlation among white females is interesting because this group was generally high in GPA and low in self-esteem. Further, it appears that academic achievement had a conditional effect on self-

esteem. Data not presented in the tables indicate that, when self-esteem was dichotomized into "high" and "low" by dividing at the mean for the total sample, 52% of white males had high self-esteem compared to less than 34% of white females, a difference of 18%. But an examination of Table 3 shows that when GPA was controlled the difference increased to 22% for the high GPA group and nearly 31% for the low GPA students. In fact, only 3 white females with low grade point averages reported high self-esteem.

## DISCUSSION

The present study of college students adds to the growing literature reporting black self-esteem equal to or greater than that of whites. White females reported the lowest self-esteem of the groups studied, consistent with earlier research (Simmons et al., 1978; Simmons & Rosenberg, 1975). Simmons and her associates suggested that during early adolescence white females may develop value systems different from their male counterparts: The emphasis placed on sociability and appearance may operate to the detriment of adolescent girls at a point in life when their physical appearance is undergoing the changes associated with puberty and when they are forced to change schools, to make new friends, and to impress a new set of teachers. Further, boys

**TABLE 3**  
**Percentage (and N) Having High Self-Esteem by GPA, Race, and Gender**

Subjects	Cumulative grade point average		$\chi^2$ (1)	
	High	Low		
Black males	62.5(15)	60.5(26)	0.00	.02
Black females	37.1(13)	51.1(24)	1.06	-.14
White males	63.0(17)	45.8(22)	1.40	.16
White females	40.7(22)	15.0(03)	3.25*	.24**

*Note.* The means for the total sample for GPA and self-esteem were used to dichotomize these variables into high and low.

\*corrected  $\chi^2$ ,  $p = .07$ .

\*\* $p < .05$ .

begin to exert sexual pressures that produce additional anxieties and self-doubts for pubescent girls (Simmons et al., 1979). Although considerably more research is necessary to answer these questions with certainty, one possibility stemming from the evidence presented here is that white females remain vulnerable through the college years, perhaps as a result of persisting pressures to be beautiful, popular, and sexually active. An unanswered question, however, and one that might guide future research, is why the self-esteem of black females was not similarly affected, given that they were experiencing the same social and developmental changes.

It has been suggested that one of the critical resources protecting and enhancing black self-esteem is blacks' "insulation" from prejudiced whites (Rosenberg, 1979; Rosenberg & Simmons, 1972; Taylor & Walsh, 1979). Life in the black community provides the individual with significant and referent others who judge him or her on personal characteristics rather than racial membership. Yet the blacks who participated in the current study were enrolled in a university in which three-fourths of the students were white, the blacks had significantly lower GPAs, but the blacks did not have lower self-esteem. Of course, it is likely that blacks still relied on other blacks (and whites relied on other whites) for social comparisons, and it must also be recognized that by studying college students high achievers from both racial groups are being compared. But the data presented here provide further evidence that minority students attending predominantly white educational institutions do not suffer losses to their self-concept (see Krause, 1983 for similar findings based on analyses of elementary school, junior, and senior high school students). Future research is recommended to investigate the possibility, raised by Taylor and Walsh (1979, p. 251), that the self-concept of black Americans is sustained and enhanced by "the resources of more supportive primary groups." Specifically, the extended kin network (Stack, 1974) may provide the primary relationships, social support, stability, and security that foster high self-esteem (Coopersmith, 1967), whereas the black organizations that have proliferated on white campuses provide further mechanisms for blacks' individual and group identity.

When the relationship between academic achievement and self-esteem is examined, the data presented here largely support the conclusion of O'Malley and Bachman (1979) that academic accomplishments decline in significance in the years following high school. This was not the case for white females, however, whose self-esteem was generally low and significantly correlated with academic achievement. Rosenberg and Simmons' (1975, p. 157) research on adolescents led them to conclude that "women are socialized to feel inferior and thus have lower self-esteem." The present findings suggest that this pattern persists into the college years and that for white females academic achievement exerts a conditional influence on self-esteem. This group is generally characterized by low self-esteem, and depending on the level of their academic performance, either their self-feelings are bolstered or their feelings of inferiority are exacerbated.

But for the majority of the present sample there was no association between academic achievement and self-esteem. Perhaps it is the degree, and not one's GPA, that is important to most college students, so they are evaluating themselves and others on personal characteristics and abilities other than GPA. If academic achievement is important to self-concept at this point in life, apparently it is not of sufficient magnitude to affect global feelings about the self. A suggestion for future research is to employ a more specific measure, one focusing on academic self-concept, to explore the relationship more fully and gain a better understanding of the complexities of self-concept. The findings presented in the present study, however, support the conclusion that academic achievement is not important to global self-evaluations during the transition to adulthood.

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