



## 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

ratings of agreement based on how they generally feel about themselves using scales that range from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). The internal consistency of this instrument was .87 for the present sample.

Participants attended a laboratory session during Phase 2 of the study and were randomly assigned to either the bogus pipeline or the control condition. Of the 95 participants, 47 participants were assigned to the control condition (24 Black participants, 23 White participants) and 48 were assigned to the bogus pipeline condition (29 Black participants, 19 White participants). In both conditions, participants were asked to complete the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale ( $\alpha = .86$ ) along with other measures that were intended to disguise the true purpose of the study. It is important to note that the psychometric properties of the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale were comparable for Black and White participants during the first phase of the study ( $\alpha_{Black} = .81$ ,  $\alpha_{White} = .89$ ) as well as the second phase of the study ( $\alpha_{Black} = .74$ ,  $\alpha_{White} = .90$ ). This psychometric similarity is essential for making comparisons between these groups.

### 2.1.1. Bogus-pipeline condition

Upon arriving at the laboratory, participants in the bogus pipeline condition were greeted by a White female graduate student experimenter wearing a standard white lab coat who was accompanied by a White female undergraduate research assistant. Participants were informed that they would be monitored by lie-detecting physiological equipment during the session and that they would be videotaped in order to analyze their nonverbal behavior for signs of deception. Participants were told that the undergraduate research assistant would be monitoring their results from a computer station located directly adjacent to the laboratory before being escorted into a small, dimly lit room containing an array of physiological testing equipment which included a Grass Model 78D Polygraph machine, galvanic skin response equipment, and a blood pressure monitor. Participants were seated in a recliner and the various sensors for the physiological equipment were attached to them. To increase the discomfort of the participants with this situation, they were restrained using arm straps under the guise of avoiding any excessive movement on their part and a video camera was positioned approximately 30 inches from their faces at an angle of approximately 45° from their direct line of sight. Participants were then asked several obvious questions for the ostensible purpose of calibrating the equipment and instructed to either respond truthfully (e.g., “What is your name?”) or to lie (e.g., “What color is my lab coat?”). After each of these preliminary questions was answered, the researcher left the room to briefly consult with the undergraduate research assistant seated at the computer station outside the room in order to create the impression that the physiological equipment was functioning correctly and that it was possible to determine when the participants were being honest and when they were lying. Before beginning the actual task, participants were again reminded that their physiological measurements were being collected for the express purpose of assessing their potential misrepresentation of attitudes (e.g., “We will be able to tell if you are lying”). Participants were then instructed to read aloud each item from the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale which was projected on a screen mounted to the wall in front of them and to provide a verbal response.

### 2.1.2. Control condition

In accordance with past research (Boysen, Vogel, & Madon, 2006), the control condition was designed to be nearly identical to the bogus pipeline condition and differed only by the nature of the cover story. More specifically, participants in the control condition were told that they would be connected to the physiological equipment in order to allow the experimenter to gain

practice in using the equipment and to determine whether participants would have any difficulty completing tasks while the sensors were affixed. The presence of the video camera was explained by telling participants that it was to allow the experimenter to review her performance during the session. Before beginning the actual task, the experimenter clearly deactivated the physiological equipment and reminded participants that their physiological data was not being collected or recorded. Participants were then asked to respond to the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale in the same manner as the participants in the bogus pipeline condition.

## 3. Results

Racial differences in self-esteem were examined for the feelings of self-worth that were reported by our participants prior to the bogus pipeline manipulation (Phase 1). As expected, Black participants reported higher levels of self-esteem than White participants prior to the bogus pipeline manipulation ( $M_{Black} = 4.30$ ,  $M_{White} = 3.91$ ,  $t[93] = 2.40$ ,  $p < .05$ ,  $d = .50$ ). This pattern of results is consistent with previous studies concerning the Black self-esteem advantage (e.g., Gray-Little & Hafdahl, 2000; Twenge & Crocker, 2002).

A hierarchical multiple regression analysis was performed to examine whether Black and White participants responded differently to the bogus pipeline procedure. On Step 1 of this analysis, the experimental condition (0 = control, 1 = bogus pipeline), self-esteem level from Phase 1 (a continuous variable that was centered), and race (0 = White, 1 = Black) were entered. The two-way interactions of the main effect terms were entered on Step 2 and the three-way interaction was entered on Step 3. A main effect emerged for self-esteem level ( $\beta = .61$ ,  $t = 7.51$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $d = 1.57$ ) such that individuals with higher levels of self-esteem prior to the laboratory session (Phase 1) were more likely to report higher levels of self-esteem during the laboratory session (Phase 2). This main effect for self-esteem was qualified by the two-way interaction of self-esteem level and race ( $\beta = -.25$ ,  $t = -2.30$ ,  $p < .05$ ,  $d = -.49$ ) which was, in turn, qualified by the three-way interaction of condition, self-esteem level, and race ( $\beta = -.42$ ,  $t = -2.42$ ,  $p < .05$ ,  $d = -.52$ ). The predicted values for the three-way interaction are shown in Fig. 1. This interaction was probed by first examining whether the two-way interaction of condition and self-esteem level was significant for Black and White participants separately.

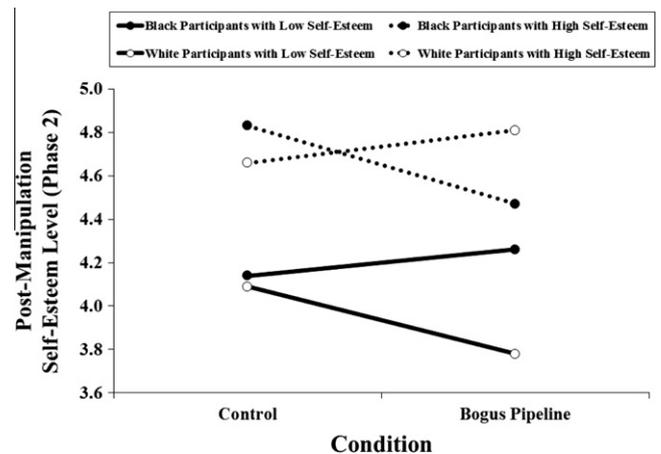


Fig. 1. Predicted values for post-manipulation self-esteem (Phase 2) illustrating the three-way interaction of experimental condition, race, and pre-manipulation self-esteem level (Phase 1) at values that are one standard deviation above and below its mean.

These analyses found that this two-way interaction emerged for Black participants ( $\beta = -.33$ ,  $t = -2.56$ ,  $p < .05$ ,  $d = -.73$ ) as well as White participants ( $\beta = .30$ ,  $t = 2.37$ ,  $p < .05$ ,  $d = .77$ ).

Simple slopes tests were then used to determine the degree of association between the predictor variable (experimental condition) and the criterion variable (self-esteem level during the laboratory session [Phase 2]) at specific values of the moderator variable (one standard deviation above and below the mean for pre-manipulation self-esteem level [Phase 1]). We used these simple slopes tests to determine whether the association between experimental condition and post-manipulation self-esteem was significantly different from zero for Black and White participants who possessed high or low levels of pre-manipulation self-esteem. Simple slopes tests indicated that Black participants with high levels of self-esteem prior to the session reported significantly lower levels of self-esteem in the bogus pipeline condition than in the control condition ( $\beta = -.30$ ,  $t = -2.38$ ,  $p < .01$ ,  $d = -.51$ ). The bogus pipeline technique did not influence the self-esteem of Black participants who reported low self-esteem prior to the session ( $\beta = -.02$ ,  $t < 1$ , *ns*). In contrast to the results for Black participants, White participants with high levels of self-esteem prior to the session did not differ in their post-manipulation levels of self-esteem between the bogus pipeline and control conditions ( $\beta = .14$ ,  $t = 1.27$ , *ns*). However, White participants with low self-esteem reported significantly lower levels of self-esteem in the bogus pipeline condition than in the control condition ( $\beta = -.25$ ,  $t = -2.29$ ,  $p < .01$ ,  $d = -.49$ ). These results show that Black participants with high self-esteem tended to report lower levels of self-esteem during the laboratory session when they believed that the researcher had access to their true feelings, whereas the feelings of self-worth reported by White participants with high self-esteem did not change in the bogus pipeline condition. This suggests the interesting possibility that the high levels of self-esteem reported by Black participants before the laboratory session may have been due, at least in part, to concerns about impression management. For those with low levels of self-esteem prior to the session, a strikingly different pattern emerged. That is, White participants with low levels of self-esteem before the laboratory session reported even lower levels of self-esteem in the bogus pipeline condition, whereas Black participants with low self-esteem did not appear to be influenced by the bogus pipeline manipulation. Taken together, these results suggest that the individuals who appear to be intentionally misrepresenting their feelings of self-worth through inflation are Black participants with high self-esteem and White participants with low self-esteem.

#### 4. Discussion

Our results found that the two groups who were the most likely to engage in impression management by inflating their feelings of self-worth were Black individuals with high self-esteem and White individuals with low self-esteem. The results for Black individuals with high self-esteem provide additional support for the possibility that the Black self-esteem advantage may be partially due to socially desirable responding. The pattern for the White participants with low self-esteem suggests the intriguing possibility that these individuals may also be inflating their feelings of self-worth due to self-presentational concerns. That is, White participants with low self-esteem may actually experience even lower self-esteem than is reflected in their responses to direct self-report measures under standard conditions.

The fact that Black participants with high self-esteem reported more modest levels of self-esteem when they were told that the experimenter would know if they were lying suggests that the positive attitudes they report about themselves may be at least partially due to their attempts to present themselves in a positive

manner through impression management. Our results suggest that there may be more to the Black self-esteem advantage than has been found in previous studies that simply asked individuals to directly report how they felt about themselves. More specifically, it appears that the high levels of self-esteem reported by Black individuals may be partially due to socially desirable response tendencies that reflect intentional forms of distortion. This suggests that future research should consider socially desirable responding far more carefully when examining the association between social stigma and self-esteem. Members of certain stigmatized groups may be especially likely to report overly positive feelings of self-worth in an effort to convince either themselves or others that they actually possess these attitudes. That is, it seems possible that being a member of certain stigmatized groups may lead individuals to deny problems and present themselves in an overly positive manner rather than their membership in these groups actually offering them genuine protection from negative experiences as has often been suggested in the past.

It is also important to note that White participants with low self-esteem reported even lower feelings of self-worth in the bogus pipeline condition than they did in the control condition. One possible explanation for this pattern is that these individuals may normally refrain from admitting just how low their feelings of self-worth actually are. This sort of distortion may reflect an attempt among these individuals to feel somewhat better about themselves for at least a brief period of time. This may reflect a relatively adaptive strategy given how negatively individuals with low self-esteem tend to be evaluated by others (Zeigler-Hill & Myers, 2011). This tendency may be especially pronounced among White individuals because they are more likely than Black individuals to base their feelings of self-worth on how they believe others feel about them (Zeigler-Hill, 2007).

The present study extends previous research concerning the Black self-esteem advantage by accounting for impression management concerns but this research has a number of limitations. The first limitation is that these studies were conducted using undergraduate students at a public university in Mississippi which may limit the extent to which they can be generalized to other age groups and areas of the country. For example, Twenge and Crocker (2002) observed regional variations in their meta-analysis of racial differences in self-esteem. More specifically, they found that the Black self-esteem advantage was stronger in the southern regions of the United States than in other areas. It is possible that the history of the southern United States (e.g., slavery) and the current experiences of living in this area (e.g., pervasive racism, the confederate flag remaining a part of the state flag of Mississippi) may make it more likely that Black individuals will be especially likely to engage in the defensive processes observed in the present study. It is an open empirical question as to whether the present results would replicate in other regions of the United States. It is also unclear as to whether these results would extend to other stigmatized groups or if they are unique in some way to Black individuals. Again, these are important questions that should be addressed in future research.

The second limitation of this study is that the graduate student experimenter and the undergraduate research assistant were always White females. This is potentially important because previous studies have found racial differences in responses to sensitive topics depending on the race of the experimenter (e.g., Hatchett & Schuman, 1975). However, this does not explain the pattern observed because this effect would have to be limited to only Black participants with high self-esteem assigned to the bogus pipeline condition. Therefore, this does not appear to diminish the present results but it would be interesting for future studies to include conditions in which the race of the experimenter was systematically varied in order to determine if this has any influence on the responses given by Black and White participants.

The third limitation is that the present sample was predominantly female. This has the potential to be important because sex differences in self-esteem exist such that men report a small but consistent self-esteem advantage over women (see Zeigler-Hill & Myers, *in press*, for a review). Although we found no evidence that sex moderated the present results, future research should include a larger number of male participants in order to provide a more definitive examination of this issue.

The present findings suggest that the high levels of self-esteem reported by Black individuals may not be as authentic and secure as they were previously assumed to be. The present results may provide a partial explanation for some of the negative outcomes that Black individuals are likely to experience at this particular point in history such as relatively high levels of violence and academic failure. There are certainly a host of other factors that contribute to these outcomes (e.g., higher levels of poverty, relative lack of positive role models) but the self-esteem issues that we have identified may play at least some small role. For example, it is possible that the exaggerated levels of self-esteem that were found to characterize Black individuals in the present study may make them less likely to persist in the face of failure because their feelings of self-worth may not adequately buffer them from adversity. Along these same lines, Black individuals may be less willing to ask for assistance in some cases because of their concerns about being evaluated negatively by others. It is possible that interventions could be developed for Black individuals in particular – as well as for those with fragile forms of high self-esteem regardless of their race – that would enhance the security of their feelings of self-worth and possibly improve some of these important real-world outcomes. We are not suggesting by any means that self-esteem is anything remotely resembling a panacea for the many problems confronting the members of stigmatized groups but we believe that interventions focused on making self-esteem more secure may be beneficial in addressing at least some of the problems that Black individuals face in their daily lives.

## 5. Conclusion

The present study found that impression management concerns appear to play an important role in understanding the racial differences in self-esteem that have been identified in previous studies. The bogus pipeline procedure revealed that the high levels of self-esteem reported by Black individuals were somewhat inflated

as evidenced by the fact that these individuals reported lower levels of self-esteem when they believed that others would know if they were lying. We believe that the fragile nature of the high levels of self-esteem reported by Black individuals may be due to their awareness of the negative views that broader society often has of their racial group. These results suggest that future studies examining the association between social stigma and self-esteem should account for the influence of socially desirable responding rather than merely asking stigmatized individuals how they feel about themselves and assuming that their responses tell the whole story.

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