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The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare

Volume 7
Issue 2 *March*

Article 12

March 1980

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Recommended Citation

Jayaratne, Srinika; Chess, Wayne A.; Norlin, Julia; and Bryan, John (1980) "Demographic Correlates of Self-Esteem Among Black and White AFDC Recipients," *The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare*: Vol. 7 : Iss. 2 , Article 12.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jssw/vol7/iss2/12>

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DEMOGRAPHIC CORRELATES OF SELF-ESTEEM, AMONG BLACK AND
WHITE AFDC RECIPIENTS¹

BY

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ABSTRACT

This study was concerned with the extent to which different demographic characteristics would offer explanations with regard to self-esteem among black and white AFDC recipients. Basically, the analysis revealed no differences in self-esteem between the black and white women in this sample. The major correlates of self-esteem for whites were work and education, whereas, the major correlates of self-esteem for blacks were the presence of children and work.

DEMOGRAPHIC CORRELATES OF SELF-ESTEEM AMONG BLACK
AND WHITE AFDC RECIPIENTS

Self-esteem is a widely studied concept in social psychology, and numerous studies have addressed the differences between blacks and whites. Most of these studies, however, have been conducted with children and college students, and very little information is available on adults in general, and virtually none on welfare recipients. Some of the earlier investigations on self-esteem differences between blacks and whites showed that whites had higher self-esteem than blacks (Clark and Clark, 1947 ; Himmelweit, 1955; Pettigrew, 1964). More recent studies, however, indicate that these differences have dis-

appeared, and in fact argue that some of the earlier findings may have been due to class differences rather than race (Hunt and Hunt, 1977; Lessing and Zagorin, 1972; Simmons, Brown, Bush and Blyth, 1978). It is well to remember though, that all of these studies dealt either with college students or young children. In dealing with a welfare population such as the respondents in this study, we are very much in a speculative arena. While these findings should hold true for the welfare group as well, there is no systematic evidence to support either position.

In general, self-esteem refers to the personal judgements we make of our own worth, and it tends to reflect the views that others hold of us (Coopersmith, 1967). While our particular interest in this paper lie in comparing the demographic correlates of self-esteem between blacks and whites within a group of welfare recipients, and not in determining the absolute levels of self-esteem, it is perhaps a fair statement to note that the receipt of social services must carry with it some inherent negativism and self-devaluation. As Skidmore and Thackeray (1976) point out, many of these individuals who receive public assistance must experience "Humiliation, embarrassment, and a deep sense of personal failure (p.30)." Whether this is a fact or not, these individuals must somehow cope with the reality of dependence on public social services and AFDC and the stigma related to it, while at the same time, managing to maintain a sense of dignity and self-worth in order to exist. It is the need for the maintenance of self-esteem and those demographic characteristics that would contribute to it's enhancement, that we are examining in this study.

Study Design and Sample

These data were collected as a part of a larger study on the evaluation of social services in the State of Oklahoma. In order to be included in the sample, a service recipient (a) had to be at least 18 years old, (b) received AFDC services for atleast 60 days, and (c) must have had her service case closed within 4-6 months prior to the interview date.

Anticipating crossracial comparisons, we oversampled the black population. Personal interviews were conducted with all respondents. Following a statewide random sampling procedure, we were able to complete a total of 267 interviews, of which 135 were white and 132 black. Table 1 presents the demographic characteristics of the study sample by race. A chi square analysis revealed that the two groups are similar with respect to age, education, work status, and income, but differ significantly with regard to marital status and number of

children. The black respondents in our sample are more likely to be unmarried and have more children than the white respondents.

Criterion Variables

Our major dependent variable was self-esteem, and it was measured by the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (Rosenberg, 1965). This scale has a strongly agree-strongly disagree rating dimension, and is considered to have reasonably good reliability and validity (Robinson and Shaver, 1973). We opted to use this scale given its brevity and the fact that it was designed for use with individuals with high school educations.

The demographic correlates we employed in this study were work status (whether or not the respondent was working for pay), level of education attained, marital status (whether or not the respondent was married at the present time), the number of children the respondent had living with her, and the respondent's age. We excluded income as a potential factor since the income level was low and uniform for both groups. These demographic factors were among those isolated by Osmond and Grigg (1978) as correlates of poverty.

Insert Table 1 Here

Results and Conclusions

A comparison of mean scores of the blacks and whites on the self-esteem scale produced no significant differences, although the white respondents reported higher levels of self-esteem in absolute terms (17.22) compared to the blacks (18.23). These data, then, are in accord with the more recent literature indicating the disappearance of differences in self-esteem between blacks and whites (see for example, Lessing and Zagorin, 1972; Powell and Fuller, 1973; Rosenberg and Simmons, 1972; Simmons, Brown, Bush and Blyth, 1978). As stated earlier, most of the available data are on college students and young children. In general, these authors tend to view the civil rights and affirmative action activities and the various programs aimed at raising the consciousness of the black person, as being major contributors to the emerging equality self-esteem between the races (Street, 1977).

Table 2 presents the data from a multiple classification analysis using the five demographic characteristics work status, education level, marital status, number of children, and age as predictors. The eta value indicates the extent of the relationship between each predictor variable and self-esteem. The beta values provide essentially the same information, but "the rank order of the betas indicates the

relative importance of the various predictors in their explanation of the dependent variable if all other predictors were held constant" (Andrews, Morgan, Sonquist, and Klem, 1973). Although the total variance explained by the predictor variables in combination is not very high, different patterns do emerge for the two racial groups.

Both blacks and whites consider work to be an important correlate of self-esteem, with the blacks considering it to be most important (.32). The white respondents, on the other hand, report education as being the most important determinant of self-esteem (.21). Interestingly, the black respondents report a very weak association between education and self-esteem (.07). A strong predictor of self-esteem for the blacks in this sample is the presence of children (.26), a factor which has little association to self-esteem among the whites (.09). Despite the significant difference between the two groups with respect to marital status reported earlier, this variable has the lowest predictive value with respect to self-esteem for both groups of respondents (.04).

Insert Table 2 Here

First, let us consider the issue around the number of children. Numerous fertility studies report that poor blacks tend to have large families compared to poor whites and other socioeconomic groups (Nye and Berardo, 1973). This has generally been attributed to stronger familial ties evident among the poor black families, and the greater likelihood for black women to retain custody of their children even in cases of illegitimacy compared to their white counterparts (Caven, 1964; Eshleman, 1978). Thus, the existence of a larger number of children in our black sample is not a surprise. But the question that emerges concerns why it is that these black women consider their large families to be so important in the development of self-esteem? -- despite the economic hardships that this would bring about. Scanzoni makes an observation in this regard: "In white marriages, 'objective' resources such as husband's occupational status, education, and income tend to generate optimal attainment of these goals (that is, participate in the economic benefits of the society). Yet, because blacks face discrimination in these areas, we found it was more difficult for these kinds of factors to optimize desired goals" (Scanzoni, 1971, p.264).

To the extent that economic wellbeing and life satisfaction are tied to the development of self-esteem, then this type of factor should provide some explanations in our sample. Indeed, we find that our white respondents report that the so-called objective factors of work and education to be the most important correlates of self-esteem. For the black respondents on the other hand, the one objective factor of work is accompanied by a much more subjective factor, the number of children.

The black women in our sample then, perceive a source of self-esteem that is somewhat antithetical to the objective values prescribed by the dominant society. Staples (1974) argues that this value may have its roots in the black historical experience. "There can be little doubt about the importance of motherhood to the black woman... Motherhood signifies maturity and the fulfillment of one's functions as a woman" (p.555).

On the other hand, work and education are well established correlates of self-esteem. Work has been found to enhance self-esteem among factory workers (Morse and Weiss, 1968), among AFDC recipients (Bureau of Social Science Research, 1969), and among WIN program participants (Smith, Fortune and Reid, 1975). Thus, our data corroborate further the relationship between work and self-esteem, even among AFDC recipients. On a similar vein, education has been identified as an important element in the development of self-esteem. For example, Street (1977) notes that education "is popularly believed to be the major factor in social mobility" (p. 942), an implicit vote for education as a factor related to increased self-esteem. In fact, Goodwin (1972) in his study of WIN program participants observed that "a high level of education strengthens confidence and makes welfare less acceptable" (p.85), thus suggesting a direct relationship between education and self esteem. While these observations are indeed powerful, it appears that the relationship between self-esteem and education is more applicable to the white AFDC recipient and not to the black. But if one accepts the notion that education is the "major factor in social mobility" in this society, then some explanation is in order with regard to the black respondents.

In an attempt to clarify the situation further, we performed an analysis of variance employing the three major predictors (work status, education level, and number of children) as independent variables. As expected, we find that those respondents who work reporting significantly higher self-esteem scores compared to those who do not work, regardless of race. Educational attainment show similar results for the whites, with the higher educated reporting higher self-esteem. The black respondents show a similar linear trend, although the reported scores are not significant between the different levels of education. These data are in support of the correlational evidence presented earlier, and certainly add credence to the objective value of work and education as major correlates of self-esteem. We do not, however, find that the absolute number of children produce any significant differences within the blacks or whites. That is, the presence of larger families does not result in higher self-esteem, even among the blacks. In fact, the highest levels of self-esteem in terms of absolute scores are reported by those women with one child among both blacks and whites. The implica-

tion then, is that what is valued is the sheer presence of children rather than the number of children per se, an observation which would concur with the comment by Staples cited earlier with respect to black women.

Insert Table 3 Here

A theoretical explanation for these findings may lie in Kohn and Schooler's (1969) observation that there are two dimensions of self-esteem. The first, "self-confidence," pertains to the more traditional perspective of self-esteem, and centers around the attainment of goals. Here, our data would support the preeminent value of the Protestant ethic and work in this society, with gainful employment being viewed as goal attainment. Hence, our findings with regard to the significantly higher self-esteem reported by the working respondents is congruent with this position.

The second dimension, "self-deprecation", is a more complex one, and could be interpreted as resting on the recognition that one may gain psychologically by avoiding costs, as well as attaining goals. It is perhaps within this dimension that we can best explain the differential values attached to education and the number of children. Harris and Stokes (1978) argue that, with class held constant, blacks should give greater salience to cost avoidance than whites. As such, the two races may in effect employ fundamentally different modes of self-evaluation. "Within a social structure where caste and class affect the chances for goal attainment, persons blocked from goal attainment will surely seek alternative strategies for the maintenance of self-esteem. Furthermore, these alternatives will emphasize efficacy in the avoidance of costs" (Harris and Stokes, 1978, p.74).

We placed work in the first dimension because it was somewhat more pragmatic, in that, work is a legally mandated value for AFDC recipients. As such, the issue of cost avoidance really does not enter the picture. In contrast, the benefits of education, while "ideally" important, does not have the same power of immediacy that both work and children provide. Education in the absolute sense is viewed by the black women as being desirable, but it is viewed within the context of "blocked opportunities". Hence, they must devalue the importance of education in the development of self-esteem, thus avoiding the psychological costs which may accrue by aspiring for higher education. But, as Harris and Stokes point out, these individuals must find an alternative strategy to maintain their self-esteem. It is here that the importance of children come into play.

Our data point out that the presence of a child is viewed as being more important to the maintenance of self-esteem by the black respondents.

In addition to the typical explanations that are usually attributed to the presence and value of children (Berelson, 1972), it could be argued that these black mothers may be hoping for their children what they did not have themselves. They may value education as something their children may benefit from, and to some extent, may even attain vicarious self-esteem off the potential success of their children. In fact, a number of studies report that the less advantaged parent may hold as high or higher aspirations for their children as their more fortunate counterparts (Scanzoni, 1971; Sewell, 1971). In contrast, the white respondent sees less blocked opportunities with respect to education, and therefore, is less likely to refer to cost avoidance.

In summary, our data indicate that there are no differences in self-esteem between the black and white AFDC recipients. However, the two groups differ somewhat on their perceptions about the sources of self-esteem. Both groups value work as a major determinant of self-esteem. Beyond this, however, the black respondents value the presence of children and the whites educational attainment. This differential perception is explained in terms of a two dimensional view of self-esteem, with blacks utilizing cost avoidance procedures as a result of blocked opportunities.

TABLE 1
Demographic Characteristics of Study Sample¹

	White (N=135)		Black (N=132)	
	N	%	N	%
<u>Marital Status</u>				
Married	45	33.3	22	16.9
Unmarried	90	66.7	108	83.1
<u>Number of Children</u>				
One	39	28.9	27	20.5
Two	29	21.5	33	25.0
Three	26	19.3	22	16.7
Four	33	24.4	24	18.2
Five or more	8	5.9	26	19.7
<u>Age</u>				
30 years or less	74	54.8	71	53.8
31-45	53	39.3	47	35.6
46 years or more	8	5.9	14	10.6
<u>Education</u>				
8th. grade or less	20	14.8	12	9.1
High school	100	74.1	100	75.8
College	15	11.1	20	15.2
<u>Work Status</u>				
Working	46	34.1	58	44.3
Not working	89	65.9	73	55.7
<u>Income</u>				
3,999 or less	82	64.6	87	69.6
4,000 - 9,999	38	29.9	32	25.6
10,000 or more	7	5.5	6	4.8

1. Different N's reflect missing data in the various categories

TABLE 2
Demographic Predictors of Self-Esteem

<u>Predictors</u>	<u>White</u>		<u>Black</u>	
	<u>Eta</u>	<u>Beta</u>	<u>Eta</u>	<u>Beta</u>
Work Status	.23	.17	.25	.32
Education	.25	.21	.09	.07
Marital Status	.09	.04	.05	.04
Number of Children	.12	.09	.22	.26
Age	.10	.09	.10	.13
	R ² = .11		R ² = .15	
	R = .33		R = .39	

TABLE 3
 Analysis of Variance on Self-Esteem by Work Status,
 Education, and Number of Children

<u>White</u>	N	Mean	Sd	F-ratio	Sig
Working	45	16.56	4.49	7.690	.001
Not Working	88	19.08	5.19		
8th. Grade	20	20.95	5.72	5.686	.01
High School	98	18.11	4.97		
College	15	15.33	3.02		
One	39	17.25	4.13	1.213	ns
Two	29	18.75	6.29		
Three	26	18.58	4.98		
Four or more	36	19.45	5.05		
<u>Black</u>					
Working	54	15.94	3.96	8.747	.001
Not Working	68	18.24	4.46		
8th. Grade	12	19.50	3.45	2.034	ns
High School	93	17.09	4.42		
College	17	16.35	4.50		
One	27	16.03	4.08	1.389	ns
Two	33	18.18	4.27		
Three	22	17.14	4.09		
Four or more	45	17.28	4.87		

1. Different N's reflect missing data on any given combination of variables: Work status, education level, number of children, and the lack of a score on the S-E scale.

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