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# Understanding the Different Realities, Experience, and Use of Self-Esteem Between Black and White Adolescent Girls

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## Abstract

African American adolescent females possess higher self-esteem than any other racial or ethnic adolescent female group. This article tests two popular empirically supported explanations for Black high self-esteem: *contingency of self-esteem theory* and the *locus of control model*. This article builds on past research to illustrate the specific mechanisms of self-esteem for Black and White adolescent girls. To facilitate an investigation of these theories, self-esteem was explored as a bidimensional construct consisting of self-worth and self-deprecation. The sample consisted of 453 Black and 1,902 White adolescent females. Multivariate regression analyses produced the following outcomes: The contingency of self-esteem theory and the locus of control model were not supported. A significant race by social support interaction found that even in low support situations Black adolescent females reported less self-deprecation than White females.

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## Keywords

bidimensional self-esteem, self-worth, self-deprecation, locus of control, contingency of self-esteem, social supports, adolescent females, race

Race comparative self-esteem research in the United States has an intriguing history. The assumption that oppressed communities, people of color, view themselves negatively had been broadly asserted. Early-20th-century social scientists proposed that Black<sup>1</sup> Americans struggled with self-esteem issues more than White Americans and offered some of the following explanations for Black low self-esteem: the existence of a *color complex* (Lind, 1914), reflected appraisals theory (Mead, 1934), wishes to be White (Horowitz, 1939), Black self-hatred thesis (Lewin, 1941), damaged psyches (Clark & Clark, 1950), social comparisons theory (Festinger, 1954), and reference group theory (Pettigrew, 1967). These theories, though important, when tested with Black American communities were not empirically supported. Rosenberg (1986) addressed the long-held belief that Black communities would experience low self-esteem: "In fact, everything stands solidly in support of this conclusion except the facts—at least those facts yielded by the relatively large-scale systematic surveys of the sixties" (p. 151).

Since the 1960s, empirical studies have found that Black Americans have consistently reported fair to high self-esteem (Harris & Stokes, 1978; Porter & Washington, 1979; Rosenberg & Simmons, 1972; Simmons, 1978; Taylor & Walsh, 1979). In a meta-analysis covering 1960 to 1998, including 261 studies, Gray-Little and Hafdahl (2000) concluded that Blacks reported higher self-esteem than Whites during childhood, adolescence, and young adulthood. According to a review by Twenge and Crocker (2002), Blacks have higher self-esteem not only than Whites but also than Latino and Asian Americans. This article tests two popular and empirically supported explanations for Black high self-esteem: *contingency of self-worth theory* (Crocker & Lawrence, 1999; Crocker & Wolfe, 2001) and the *locus of control model* (Gurin, Gurin, Lao, & Beattie, 1969). This article aims to build on past research on Black high self-esteem, to test the strength of the two theories and to illuminate the specific mechanisms of self-esteem for two groups of adolescent girls. It endeavors to contribute to our understanding of the influence of self-esteem for adolescents.

During the 1990s, self-esteem queries centered on adolescence and gender: Brown and Gilligan (1992) and Gilligan (1993) reported that adolescent girls were exchanging their own expansive and authentic selves for limited and socially ascribed female roles, which led to plummeting self-esteem. Significantly, this research documented the experience of White adolescent females

of a specific economic background. Black adolescent females demonstrated a much different experience; these females were reporting fair to high self-esteem throughout adolescence (Gray-Little & Hafdahl, 2000; Twenge & Crocker, 2002). This article asserts that the core developmental challenges of adolescence for females are similar across race, but the privileges and disparities as well as other factors associated with race contribute to the differential use and experience of self-esteem between these two groups.

Importantly, an understanding of the different realities, experience, and use of self-esteem would suggest the need for more select psychological interventions. An example of this, young Black females disproportionately face devastating health issues, HIV/AIDS being one of the most serious. Positive self-esteem has been shown to activate and sustain protective behaviors (Kahng & Mowbray, 2005; Salazar et al., 2005). For Black adolescent girls, as a group that has consistently reported high self-esteem, increasing self-esteem may not be as important as specifically employing self-esteem as a mediator to decrease risky sexual behaviors. For White adolescent girls who tend to report low self-esteem, a focus on increasing self-esteem might be an effective first step. What follows is a brief description of self-esteem as a bidimensional construct to enable a more nuanced understanding of self-esteem's functions for the two groups, later a discussion of the theories to be studied, the methodology, the findings, and conclusions.

## Self-Esteem

*Self-esteem* is as an evaluation of the self-concept that consists of positive and negative appraisals (Rosenberg, 1986). It represents a healthy sense of self-acceptance. Sommer and Baumeister (2002) suggested that high self-esteem people possess "effective and efficient defenses" to sustain negative messages. Self-esteem has been linked to self-efficacy as well as communication and negotiation skills (Salazar et al., 2005). Adolescents with high self-esteem tend to use problem-solving skills more (Mullis & Chapman, 2000). Typically, self-esteem (as measured by the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale [RSE], 1986) is most often used as a one-dimensional construct.

Recently, several self-esteem investigations have asserted that the RSE is a bidimensional construct (Ang, Neubronner, Oh, & Leong, 2006; Farruggia, Chen, Greenberger, Dmitrieva, & Macek, 2004; Kahng & Mowbray, 2004, 2005; Martin, Thompson, & Chan, 2006; Owens, 1994; Owens & King, 2001; Rosenberg & Owens, 2001; Sheasby, Barlow, Cullen, & Wright, 2000). Owens (1994) identified the RSE to have two sub-scales, which he referred to as self-worth and self-deprecation. These concepts, though highly correlated,

have distinct psychometric characteristics and construct validity (Farruggia, Chen, Greenberger, Dmitrieva, & Macek, 2004; Martin et al., 2006; Owens, 1994). *Self-worth* is specifically a person's positive personal evaluation of the self. *Self-deprecation* represents "the degree to which an individual disparages his or her worth and efficacy" (Owens, 1994, p. 393). The following is a brief discussion of two popular theories that explain self-esteem in adolescent girls.

## Locus of Control Model

Locus of control concept refers to a person's causal attributions: how an individual perceives his or her efforts relate to outcomes. A female with internal control believes that individual efforts determine outcomes and considers herself an active agent in control of her life circumstances and that her plans bear predictable outcomes. Whereas a female with external control perceives her efforts may be unrelated to outcomes, planning may have no impact on attaining goals because life is determined by outside factors such as luck or powerful others (Gurin et al., 1969). The locus of control model asserted the following: Blacks are daily challenged by prejudice and institutional racism. When confronted with failure, Blacks must distinguish personal failure (self-blame) from racist interventions (system blame). The assumption is that Blacks have a more external locus of control. Blacks are more apt to blame an oppressive environment for personal failure rather than to question their own self-esteem; as a consequence, their self-esteem is more impervious to life circumstances than the self-esteem of Whites. Whites possess a more internal locus of control and consider setbacks as evidence of personal failure; thus, their self-esteem is more vulnerable and less stable than Blacks (Crocker & Major, 1989; Gurin et al., 1969; Hendrix, 1980; McCarthy & Yancey, 1971; Tashakkori & Thompson, 1991). The current article will study if there is a positive relationship for Black adolescent females among an external locus of control, self-esteem, and self-worth.

## Contingencies of Self-Worth Theory

Crocker and Wolfe (2001) equated self-esteem with global judgements of self-worth. They proposed that self-esteem differs depending on the contingencies (or sources) of one's self-esteem. Crocker's contingencies of self-esteem theory relied on three assumptions: First, a person or group's source of self-esteem may differ; it may be based on approval, appearance, God's love, family support, school competency, competition, or virtue:

Whereas self-esteem is based on competencies for some people, for others, it may be based on the (real or imagined) approval or disapproval they receive from others, or on whether they are a good and virtuous person, or on the faith that they are loved by God or other religious or spiritual beliefs about self-worth, or on some combination of these or other contingencies of self-worth. (Crocker & Wolfe, 2001, p. 594)

Second, self-esteem depends on these sources and the particular environment; thus, self-esteem is not necessarily a stable trait. Third, self-esteem will covary with the identified source of self-esteem. Contingency of self-worth theory explained Black high self-esteem as being based on “god’s love,” an intractable and invulnerable source. In contrast, explanations for White low self-esteem are presented as a dependence on peer approval, family supports, academics, or appearance; thus, their self-esteem is more vulnerable and less stable (Crocker & Lawrence, 1999; Crocker, Luhtanen, Blaine, & Broadnax, 1994; Crocker, Luhtanen, Cooper, & Bouvrette, 2003; Crocker & Major, 1989; Crocker & Park, 2004; Crocker & Wolfe, 2001; Twenge & Crocker, 2002; Zeigler-Hill, 2007).

In support of this hypothesis, Crocker and colleagues noted that African American groups are more religious than European American groups. More than any other adolescent group, African American females have reported that religion is very important in their lives (Child Trends, 2004). From slavery, through legal segregation up to the present, the Black church has been central to the social welfare of Blacks (see detailed discussion in Adams, 2003, 2004). As stated by Taylor and Chatters (1991), “Black religious beliefs and religious institutions traditionally have provided an emotional and psychological haven from a harsh and discriminatory social system” (p. 121). The present article tests the contingency theory by examining the impact of religious belief on self-esteem, self-worth, and self-deprecation of Black adolescent females.

## Social Support

For both Black and White girls, support from one’s peers and family is essential for the successful transition through adolescence. Several studies have reasoned that the more relationships an individual has, the higher their self-esteem will be (Cutrona, Suhr, & MacFarlane, 1990; Eckenrode & Wethington, 1990; Pierce, Sarason, & Sarason, 1990). The present article defines social support as the frequent access to someone to talk with, to turn to, and someone

who will provide assistance. According to the contingency of self-esteem framework, social supports would be a contingency similar to *the approval of others* and *family support*, which they have found better predictors of self-esteem for White adolescent females than for Black adolescent females (Crocker & Wolfe, 2001). In agreement with this hypothesis, but from a different angle, is research that presents social supports as having a mixed impact on Black self-esteem.

Research has found that the role of social supports for African Americans can be varied. Studies with African American samples have found that high social support is a resource for women with low optimism, high experience of racism, and high financial stressors (Lincoln, Chatters, & Taylor, 2003; Mattis, Fontenot, & Hatcher-Kay, 2003; Shelby et al., 2008). In a study of optimism in African American women, Shelby et al. (2008) suggested that high levels of social support do not provide an added benefit for women with high levels of optimism. Utsey, Lanier, Williams, Boden, and Lee (2006) found that for African Americans at higher levels of self-esteem, social support has less beneficial attributes, suggesting that social support best serves as a resource in adverse situations. The present article tests the contingency theory by examining whether the impact of social supports on self-esteem, self-worth, and self-deprecation will be a better predictor for the White females than for the Black females.

Figure 1, the conceptual model for this study, displays an investigation of the impact of the contingency of self-worth and the locus of control models regressed on a bidimensional self-esteem construct, moderated by race and employing control variables known to confound outcomes when studying adolescent females: school ability, household composition, maternal education, and geographic region. This model provides an analytic framework to address the specific mechanisms of self-esteem for Black and White adolescent females.

The present article poses the following hypotheses, when controlling for school ability, household composition, maternal level of education, and geographic region:

*Hypothesis 1:* External personal control beliefs (locus of control model) will account for the higher self-esteem and self-worth found in Black American adolescent females when compared with White American adolescent females.

*Hypothesis 2:* Religious beliefs (contingency of self-worth 2 theory) will explain the higher self-esteem and self-worth in Black American adolescent females in comparison with White American adolescent females.

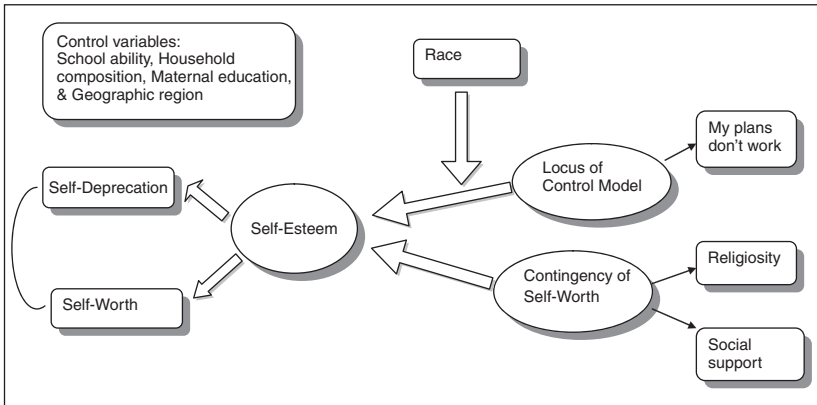


Figure 1. Conceptual model

*Hypothesis 3:* Social support (contingency of self-esteem theory) will have less of an impact on Black self-esteem, self-worth, and self-deprecation than White self-esteem, self-worth, and self-deprecation.

## Method

### Sample

Monitoring the Future (MtF; Johnston, O'Malley, & Bachman, 1999–2001) is an annual survey that has documented substance use and related social psychological attitudes among American adolescents for the last 30 years. Approximately 16,000 high school seniors participate each spring by completing questionnaires during normal classroom periods. MtF applies a three-stage sampling process—(a) selection of geographic areas, (b) selection of high schools (about 130 public and private schools), and (c) selection of high school seniors—thus creating a nationally representative, stratified, clustered sample. MtF data sets of 3 years (1998–2000) were concatenated. Because of a large number of missing values in the initial sampling frame, an attrition analysis was completed among the cases with missing values and the cases without missing values. The completed surveys and the incomplete surveys showed no significant differences in the variables of interest. The result created a sample of 2,355 high school senior girls: 453 Black and 1,902 White. The sample showed that the mothers of Black females completed less education,



were more likely not to live in the household, and Black females reported less school ability than their White counterparts.

## Measures

Variables were examined for normality. The means, standard deviations, kurtosis, and skew were within acceptable limits and there were no missing values. MtF does not use standardized scales though it includes a wealth of items dealing with social psychological concepts, many identical to well-known measures. This necessitated creating composite variables consistent with theoretical definitions, consisting of three to eight items, using Likert-type scales of four or more levels. Factor analyses were completed to validate that each composite variable contained only one factor with all factor loadings above .5, and each composite variable provided adequate to good reliability estimates (see Tables 1 and 2).

*Self-esteem* contained eight items ranging from *I am a person of worth* to *I often feel useless*, with a Cronbach  $\alpha$  of .88. A factor analysis of the total sample found (using the varimax rotation method, which converged in three iterations) two factors with eigenvalues greater than 1 (see Table 1). Both Black and White American groups produced a single factor loading on self-worth (i.e., *I am a person of worth*) and for self-deprecation (i.e., *I feel useless*), thus confirming that the RSE acts as a bidimensional construct for this sample.

*Self-worth* contained four of the positively worded items from self-esteem: *I take a positive attitude toward myself*; *I feel I am a person of worth, on an equal plane with others*; *I am able to do things as well as most other people*; *On the whole, I'm satisfied with myself*. *Self-worth* had a Cronbach  $\alpha$  of .83. *Self-deprecation* consisted of four negatively phrased items: *I feel I do not have much to be proud of*; *Sometimes I think that I am no good at all*; *I feel that I can't do anything right*; *I feel that my life is not very useful*. *Self-deprecation* had a Cronbach  $\alpha$  of .84.

The *external control variable* for this sample contained three items about the usefulness of making plans: *Planning only makes a person unhappy since plans hardly ever work out anyway*; *When I make plans, I am almost certain that I can make them work* (reverse coded); *Planning ahead makes things turn out better* (reverse coded). This composite variable was employed because it loaded on one factor and presented the best reliability estimate: a Cronbach  $\alpha$  of .65 in comparison with other items. *Religious beliefs* consisted of three items that loaded on one factor: *How important is religion in your life?* *How often do you attend religious services?* *Are you likely to contribute to church*

**Table 1.** Characteristics of composite variables (N = 2,333-2,355)

Variable	Number of items	Likert-type scales	Number of factors for Blacks and Whites	Factor loadings	Cumulative variance
Self-esteem	8	1-5	2	.74-.81	67%
Self-worth	4	1-5	1	.77-.86	69%
Self-deprecation	4	1-5	1	.82-.86	70%
External personal control	3	1-5	1	.73-.81	59%
Religiosity	3	1-4	1	.83-.86	73%
Social supports	3	1-5	1	.55-.93	66%

**Table 2.** Zero-Sum Correlations and Reliability Estimates (N = 2,322-2,347)

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. External personal control	(.65)						
2. Self-esteem	-.47***	(.88)					
3. Self-deprecation	.44***	-.92***	(.84)				
4. Self-worth	-.40***	.86***	-.63***	(.83)			
5. Religious beliefs	-.17***	.17***	-.13***	.18***	(.82)		
6. Social support	-.32***	.48***	-.45***	.42***	.14***	(.70)	
7. School ability	-.18***	.23***	-.20***	.19***	.10***	.08***	
8. Mother's education	-.09***	.07**	-.07**	.04	.06**	.06**	.24***

\*\*\*p < .0001. \*\*p < .005. \*p < .05.

or religious organizations? Religious beliefs had a Cronbach  $\alpha$  of .82. *Social support* depicted interpersonal relationships and their availability, three items loaded on one factor: There is always someone I can turn to if I need help; There is usually someone I can talk to, if I need to; I usually have a few friends around that I can get together with. Social support has a Cronbach  $\alpha$  of .70. The control variables engaged in the analysis included school ability in which the student rated their grades in comparison with others (1-7 Likert-type scale), maternal education (listing levels of education), household composition (dichotomous, yes or no, your mother lives in the household), geographic region (do you live in the northeast, south, north central, or western region). Geographic region was identified as a confounding variable by the data set authors, Johnston et al. (1999–2001).

## Analyses

Consistent with the high scores present in the correlation table (Table 2), the model displayed evidence of multicollinearity with variance inflation factors more than two (Fox, 1991, as cited in Morrow-Howell, 1994; Frazier et al., 2004). External personal control, religious beliefs, and social support variables were centered along with their interaction terms (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2001), thus producing variance inflation factors of less than two for the entire model and satisfactorily reducing multicollinearity. The assumptions for regression were met; factor analyses, correlations, and multiple regressions with interactions were estimated with SAS and SPSS programs. The predictors, geographic region, household composition, and race were dummy-coded. The South, mother in the household, and White were coded as reference groups so that the regression coefficients in the equation provided a comparison between the south versus the northeast and the north central regions; mother in the household versus mother's absence from the household; and White adolescent females versus Black adolescent females. (Note: For the geographic region variable the *western* region was not included in this study due to an omission of religious items in their surveys.) To test the hypotheses, the predictors' external personal control, religious beliefs, social support, and their product terms were each regressed on the dependent variables self-esteem, self-worth, and self-deprecation, while controlling for school ability, geographic region, maternal education, and household composition.

## Results

Table 2 presents the variable correlations and reliability estimates. The reliability estimates ranged from acceptable to very good (.70-.88), except for the external personal control composite variable, which was .65. The bivariate correlations found that nearly all the variables were significantly related. The magnitude and direction were as expected. Self-esteem was positively related to self-worth, religious beliefs, social support, school ability, and mothers' education level. Self-esteem and self-worth were negatively related to self-deprecation and external personal control. Self-worth was not related to mother's level of education.

Before proceeding to a more detailed discussion of the results, it is necessary to consider two qualifications related to the variable *geographic region* and the investigation of moderators: Geographic region relates to self-esteem in the MtF data sets because most Black respondents reside in the South, with the smallest proportion of Blacks living in the Northeast; thus, race is related

to region in these data sets. Black females tend to have higher self-esteem than White females; as a consequence, in comparison with the referent variable, the South, the Northeast is negatively related to self-esteem and self-worth.

An examination of interactions is a method used to identify which interventions work best for which people (Frazier, 2004). Effect sizes for interactions tend to be small. According to Cohen's (1992) conventions, a small effect size in multiple regression corresponds to an  $R^2$  value of .02 (Frazier et al., 2004). Also, a more lenient  $p$  value cutoff may be used for interaction terms (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2001).

### Self-Esteem

While controlling for geographical region, presence of mother in the home, mother's education, and school ability, the independent variables external personal control, social support, religious beliefs, and their interaction terms were regressed on self-esteem. The model accounted for 38% of the variance in self-esteem,  $F(12, 2332) = 116.97, p < .0001$  (Table 3).

Living in the Northeast, mother's absence, and external personal control were all negative and significantly related. Mother's education, the north central region, religious beliefs, and the interaction terms *Black by external personal control* and *Black by religious beliefs* were insignificant. Being Black, school ability, and social support were positive and significantly related to self-esteem. The *Black by social support* interaction term was negative and marginally related ( $b = -.07, t = -1.68, p = .09$ ). By computing the predicted values of self-esteem for the Black and White groups, such as those who score at the mean and 1 standard deviation above and below the mean on the predictor and moderator variables, a figure that represents the interaction was produced. The Black group exhibited a flatter slope, thus signifying a weaker relationship between social support and self-esteem than that of the White group (see Figure 2).

### Self-Deprecation

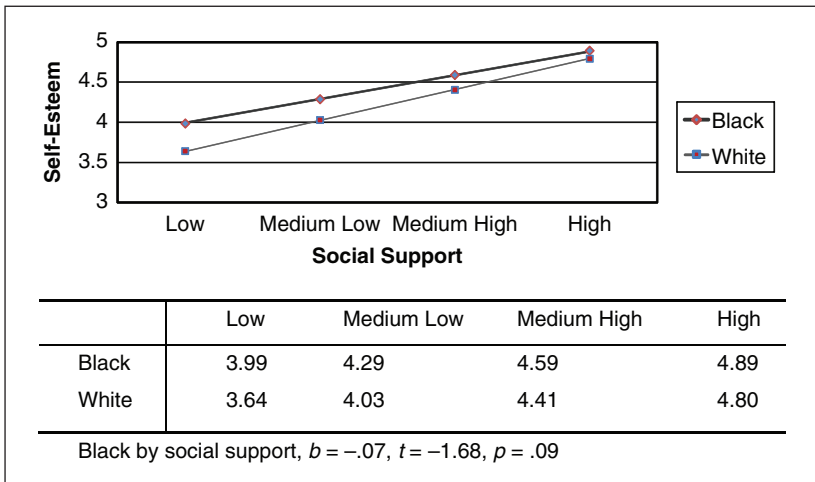
Next, self-esteem as a bidimensional construct was investigated. For self-deprecation the model was significant and accounted for 32% of the variance,  $F(12, 2332) = 89.86, p < .0001$  (Table 4).

Mother's absence and external personal control were positive and statistically significant. School ability, being Black, and social support were negatively related. Region, mother's education, and religious beliefs were insignificant. The interactions terms *Black by external personal control* and *Black by religious*

**Table 3.** Multiple Regression of Self-Esteem ( $N = 2,355$ )

Variable	B	$\beta$	t Value	p Value
Northeast	-.11	-.07	-3.46	.0006
North Central	-.01	-.003	-0.24	.8089
Maternal education	-.01	-.01	-0.70	.4813
Mother absent	-.11	-.04	-2.46	.0139
School ability	.12	.16	8.99	<.0001
Black	.22	.11	5.65	<.0001
Social support	.39	.38	19.65	<.0001
External personal control	-.29	-.30	-14.82	<.0001
Religious beliefs	.004	.002	0.27	.7890
Black $\times$ Social Support	-.07	-.03	-1.68	.0932
Black $\times$ External Personal Control	.02	.01	0.60	.5475
Black $\times$ Religious Beliefs	.01	.01	0.27	.7884

Note:  $F(12, 2332) = 116.97, p < .0001. R^2 = .38.$



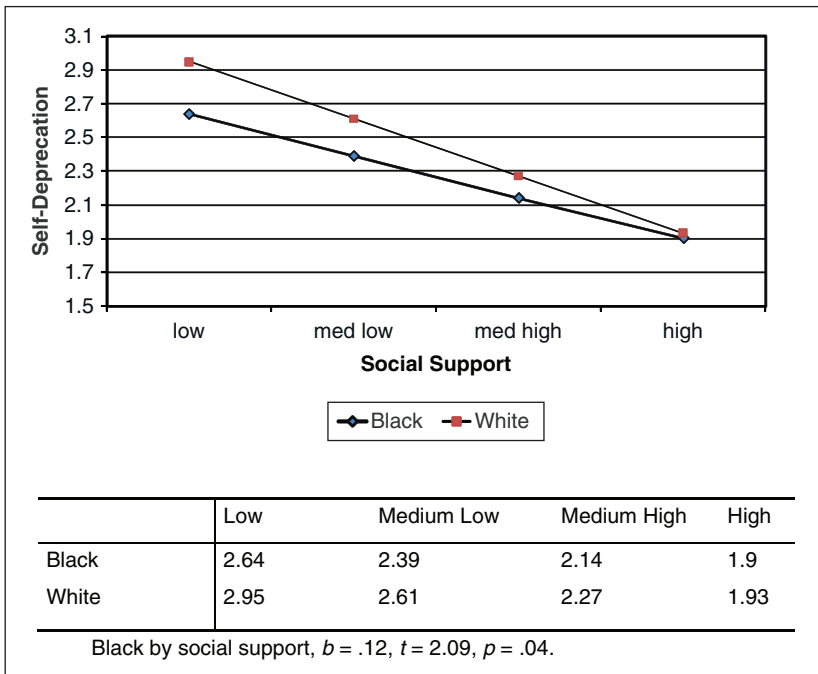
**Figure 2.** Self-esteem: Race by social support

beliefs were also insignificant but the *Black by social support product* term was significantly related ( $b = .12, t = 2.09, p = .04$ ). Social supports do not predict self-deprecation as well for Black adolescent females than it does for White adolescent females. In the interaction, the White group exhibited a steeper slope, thus showing a stronger negative relationship between social support and self-deprecation than for the Black group (see Figure 3).

**Table 4.** Multiple Regression of Self-Deprecation (*N* = 2,355)

Variable	<i>B</i>	$\beta$	<i>t</i> Value	<i>p</i> Value
Northeast	.07	.03	1.55	.1219
North Central	-.04	-.02	-0.90	.3689
Maternal education	-.003	-.004	-0.22	.8294
Mother absent	.14	.04	2.41	.0162
School ability	-.12	-.14	-7.55	<.0001
Black	-.22	-.09	-4.31	<.0001
Social support	-.44	-.36	-17.67	<.0001
External personal control	.33	.28	13.30	<.0001
Religious beliefs	-.005	-.005	-0.27	.7888
Black $\times$ Social Support	.12	.04	2.09	.0365
Black $\times$ External Personal Control	-.002	-.0007	-0.04	.9719
Black $\times$ Religious Beliefs	.05	.02	0.90	.3688

Note:  $F(12, 2332) = 89.86, p < .0001, R^2 = .32$ .



**Figure 3.** Self-deprecation: Race by social support

**Table 5.** Multiple Regression of Self-Worth ( $N = 2,355$ )

Variable	B	$\beta$	t Value	p Value
Northeast	-.16	-.09	-4.74	<.0001
North Central	-.05	-.03	-1.56	.1195
Maternal education	-.02	-.03	-1.61	.1072
Mother absent	-.09	-.03	-1.79	.0742
School ability	.11	.15	8.02	<.0001
Black	.23	.12	5.58	<.0001
Social support	.33	.33	16.13	<.0001
External personal control	-.25	-.26	-12.21	<.0001
Religious beliefs	.003	.004	0.19	.8520
Black $\times$ Social Support	-.03	-.01	-0.67	.5028
Black $\times$ External Personal Control	.05	.02	1.11	.2674
Black $\times$ Religious Beliefs	.08	.03	1.61	.1078

Note:  $F(12, 2332) = 86.29, p < .0001, R^2 = .31$ .

## Self-Worth

An examination of the self-worth variable demonstrated that the model was significant and accounted for 31% of the variance in self-worth,  $F(12, 2332) = 86.29, p < .0001$  (Table 5).

Living in the Northeast, mother's absence, and external personal control were significant and negatively related to self-worth. School ability, being Black, and social support were positively associated with self-worth. North central region, mother's education, religious beliefs, and the interaction terms were not significant.

All the regression models were significant and produced notable effect sizes (see Tables 3, 4, and 5). Social support was found to be the strongest predictor of self-esteem, self-worth, and self-deprecation. The analysis confirmed that African American adolescent females have higher self-esteem, higher self-worth, and lower self-deprecation than the European American adolescent females.

## Discussion

### *Locus of Control Model*

The hypothesis that external control beliefs (locus of control model) would account for higher self-esteem and higher self-worth for Black American

adolescent girls than for White American adolescent girls was not supported. In the multiple regression analyses, external control beliefs consistently related negatively to self-esteem and self-worth, and the assumption that external personal control beliefs increase Black self-esteem was directly questioned by the positive association of external control to self-deprecation. The influence of external control beliefs on self-esteem, self-worth, and self-deprecation were similar for both groups. There was no evidence of racial difference in the magnitude or direction of external personal control. The locus of control model asserted that Whites are more internal and consider failings as evidence of personal fault; thus, their self-esteem is more vulnerable. In this study, the presumption of White internal control advantage was not supported.

The current findings are consistent with other studies. Taylor and Walsh (1979), Demo and Hughes (1989), and Adams (2003) found externality or system blame was irrelevant to self-esteem in Blacks. Banks, Ward, McQuater, and DeBritto (1991) reviewed locus of control studies and reported that "roughly 45% of the published data fail to establish blacks as either internal or external" (p. 186). Graham (1994) examined 16 race-comparative locus of control studies from 1960 to 1990 and reported that 7 studies found Whites to be more internal than Blacks, 4 studies showed no differences between the groups, while 5 studies showed mixed outcomes.

### *Contingency of Self-Worth Theory: Religiosity*

As stated earlier, African Americans rank more religious than other racial/ethnic groups in the United States. "Among twelfth graders in 2004, 54 percent of black students reported that religion played a very important role in their lives, compared with 27 percent of white students" (Child Trends, 2004, 4¶). Nevertheless, the contingency of self-worth theory's suppositions built around religion's importance as a source of self-esteem for Black adolescent girls was not entirely confirmed in this study. The assumptions that Black high self-esteem is based on god's love or "other religious or spiritual beliefs about self-worth" and that religious beliefs are an intractable and invulnerable source were not supported. All the regressions of religiosity on self-esteem, self-worth, and self-deprecation produced insignificant outcomes. Race did not moderate the relationships between religion and self-esteem or religion and self-deprecation for Black or White adolescent females. Yet it is important to note that the race by social support interaction on self-worth ( $b = .08, t = 1.61, p = .11$ ), which would have indicated that religion predicts self-worth better for Black females than White females, did approach significance.



### *Contingency of Self-Worth Theory: Social Support*

Conversely, the contingency of self-worth theory in the case of social supports did predict the dynamics of self-esteem for White adolescent female groups. A review of the contingency theory's three assumptions illustrates this point: First, that a person or group's source of self-esteem may differ; the present study holds up this supposition showing that social support to be a better source of self-esteem for White females than for Black females. Second, that self-esteem depends on these sources; thus, self-esteem is not necessarily a stable trait. This study suggests that changeability in social supports does affect the stability of White self-esteem. And the third assumption that self-esteem would covary with the identified source of self-esteem also was confirmed. More significantly for White adolescent females than for Black adolescent females, lower social support related to lower self-esteem.

### *Self-Deprecation and the Race by Social Support Interaction*

External control beliefs predicted self-deprecation for both groups. Importantly, the only predictors to decrease self-deprecation were school ability, being Black, and social supports. Religion had no significant impact on self-deprecation for either group. The moderators, race by external personal control and race by religion, had no influence on self-deprecation. Yet the race by social support interaction was significant: Social support displayed higher decreases in self-deprecation for White adolescent females than for Black adolescent females. The earlier marginally significant race by social support interaction on self-esteem may have been a hidden representation of the more defined race by support interaction on self-deprecation. This interaction's effect size and significance point to its robust nature. The interaction found that African American females start at a lower level of self-deprecation than the European American group. The interaction suggested that even in circumstances of low social support African American females presented low self-deprecation.

In the current study, social support worked differently for Black American adolescents than for the White American group. What might account for this difference: Possibly a difference in sources of social support and its functions for specific groups? African American adolescent females are more likely than White adolescent females to select *mother* (instead of peers) as a closest friend (Coates, 1987). Perhaps maternal support presents a more stable form of social support for African American adolescent females. Conceivably this points to developmental issues: Are Black high school senior females less

influenced by social supports at this stage than their White counterparts? Several scholars have commented on the differences in developmental paths shaped by culture as well as by institutional and interpersonal discrimination (Gibbs, 1998; McLoyd & Steinberg, 1998; Spencer, 1995). Finally, this sample of African American females may exemplify the occurrence of a high self-esteem group that experiences minor benefit from high social supports as alluded to by prior research (Shelby et al., 2008; Utsey et al., 2006).

### *Limitations*

Some important limitations challenged this study. Secondary data analysis often results in measures that are not optimal. The internal consistency for the external personal control variable was low ( $\alpha = .65$ ), though within an acceptable range, and it solely represented beliefs that planning is not helpful, planning makes a person unhappy, and my plans don't work, which is only a component of external personal control beliefs. The religiosity variable tapped into religion's importance, religious attendance, and contributing to church; yet it is possible that more specific questions around spirituality might better capture the beliefs of adolescents rather than the more conventional measures. This measurement issue may have attenuated the Black by religious beliefs interaction in relation to self-worth. Also, when investigating interactions unequal sample sizes across groups decrease power (Frazier et al., 2004).

Nonetheless, there were strengths in this study. MtF is a nationally representative study of high school seniors, which in turn lends these findings some external validity. The deconstruction of self-esteem into its constituent parts, self-worth, and self-deprecation facilitated a more detailed understanding of the differences in self-esteem by race. Self-deprecation depicted the contribution of negative self-appraisals and illuminated important associations, thus drawing a more complete picture of how self-esteem functions for groups.

Several research questions emerged from the present study: What accounts for Black adolescent females, even at low levels of social support, lower levels of self-deprecation than the more privileged (in conventional terms) White adolescent females? What other protective factors lessen the impact of self-deprecation in Black adolescent girls? What accounts for the vulnerability of self-esteem and the higher levels of self-deprecation for White adolescent females? Does the protective characteristic of religion for Black communities vary over the life cycle, so that during adolescence religion is not a protective factor for Black Americans?

As in other situations where African Americans have fewer resources and still find benefit, this study affirms the importance of the study of resilient

outcomes. Currently, many studies have identified that the relationships among social psychological factors may differ across racial and ethnic groups. These findings confirm the importance of using culturally and developmentally specific interventions and programs.

As stated earlier, the differences highlighted are not explained by race (a specious concept) but by the correlates to racial membership in the United States. For White and Black Americans, the differential impact of slavery and segregation, dominant and African American cultures, and historic and persistent financial distress or affluence contribute to the varied uses and dynamics of self-esteem, self-worth, and self-deprecation by these groups. The acknowledgement of differences across racial and ethnic groups in the United States by social science researchers will lead to the development of more deliberate and responsive intervention strategies for all our clients.

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### **Note**

1. Black and African American are used to represent people of African descent due to a lack of information on specific ethnicities. White and European American are also used interchangeably.

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