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Self-Esteem Changes in the Middle School Years: A Study of Ethnic and Gender Groups

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Abstract

The current study investigated how ethnicity and gender affect changes in the self-esteem of early adolescents during the middle school years. Self-report data were collected from more than 4,000 early adolescents from three ethnic groups: European American, African American, and Hispanic and analyzed using a consecutive three-year cross-sectional design to investigate group trajectories. Distinct group trajectories of self-esteem from sixth to eighth grade were found for each ethnic group. African American adolescents had high and stable self-esteem across these years while Hispanic adolescents had low and stable self-esteem. In contrast, self-esteem among European Americans began moderately high in sixth grade but dropped precipitously by eighth grade. Girls had lower self-esteem than boys in the Hispanic and European American groups, but not in the African American group. We conclude that past studies that found a sharp decline in self-esteem during the middle school years may have been conducted in a largely white sample and thus obscure important individual ethnic factors.

Introduction

Adolescence marks a time of greater introspection and concerns about one's role in the world (DuBois, Tevendale, Burk-Braxton, Swenson, & Hardesty, 2000; Harter, 1999; Rosenberg, 1965). Multiple changes such as puberty and the transition to middle school can have a profound, negative impact on adolescents' general sense of personal worth or self-esteem (Gray-Little & Hafdahl, 2000; Seidman, Allen, Aber, Mitchell, & Feinman, 1994). In fact, self-esteem among junior high school students has been shown to decline from 6th through 8th grade (DuBois, Burk-Braxton, Swenson, Tevendale, & Hardesty, 2002; Rhodes, Roffman, Reddy, & Fredriksen, 2004).

Self-esteem is an important marker of general well-being. Adolescents with lower levels of self-esteem often experience negative outcomes, including depression, anxiety, substance abuse, and dissatisfaction with life (Bolognini, Plancherel, Bettschart, & Halfon, 1996; Harter, 1999; Hoffmann, Baldwin, & Cerbone, 2003; Kaplan, 1996; Stacy, Sussman, Dent, Burton, & Flay 1992). Ethnicity and gender appear to influence an individual's level of self-esteem, as well as the direction and magnitude of change in self-esteem during the early adolescent years (DuBois et al., 2002; Hirsch & DuBois, 1991). To date, however, the studies conducted to understand the influence of these variables have generally been limited by small, relatively homogeneous samples. In this study we use a large sample size to investigate how ethnicity, gender, and the interaction between these two factors impact the trajectory of early adolescents' self-esteem during the middle school years.

Although the association between ethnicity and changes in early adolescent self-esteem is not yet fully understood, some consistent patterns have been uncovered. For example, there is some evidence that African American adolescents have higher levels of self-esteem and are less vulnerable to declines in self-esteem than their white or Hispanic peers (Harter, 1999; Kling, Hyde, Showers, & Buswell, 1999; McRae, 1991; Zimmerman, Copeland, Shope, & Dielman, 1997). A strong pride in ethnic identity and sense of community may contribute to high-levels of self-esteem among members of this group (Gray-Little & Hafdahl, 2000; Ward, 2002). Thus, studies reveal that the self-esteem of African-American adolescents remains comparable to or higher than that of their European American peers (Gray-Little & Hafdahl).

The few studies that have investigated self-esteem in Hispanic¹ adolescents yield findings that are far from consistent. A recent meta-analytic analysis of ethnicity and self-esteem found that Hispanic adolescents have significantly lower levels of self-esteem than European Americans and African Americans (Twenge & Crocker, 2002). This general relationship, however, seems to fluctuate depending on the specific Hispanic subgroup under investigation. For instance, Mexican Americans show significantly lower levels of self-esteem than Cuban Americans (Twenge & Crocker). In contrast, Puerto Rican adolescents exhibit comparable levels of self-esteem when compared to European Americans adolescents (Erkut, Szalacha, Coll, & Alarcon, 2000). Erkut et al suggest that varying levels of socioeconomic disadvantage and discrimination may contribute to the inconsistent findings among different Hispanic subgroups and when Hispanic groups are compared to European Americans and African Americans.

Like ethnicity, gender can affect changes in self-esteem during the early adolescent years. Girls consistently experience sharper declines than boys in their levels of self-esteem (Carlson, Uppal, & Prosser, 2000; Ornstein, 1995; Sotelo, 2000). It is unclear, however, whether these gender-related trends in self-esteem vary among different ethnic groups. Although few studies have investigated the interaction between ethnicity and gender on early adolescents' self-esteem, it has been established that African American girls are less vulnerable to declines in self-esteem than adolescent girls of other ethnicities (Harter, 1999; Kling et al., 1999; McRae, 1991; Zimmerman et al., 1997). Hispanic girls have been shown to have higher levels of self-esteem than European American and African American girls during preadolescence, but then to experience a precipitous drop in self-esteem during adolescence (AAUW, 1992). Additionally, male Hispanic adolescents exhibit higher levels of self-esteem than their male European American peers and lower levels than their male African American peers (AAUW; Dukes & Martinez, 1994; Gray-Little & Hafdahl, 2000).

Despite these interesting trends, most of the studies cited above have relied on relatively small, homogeneous samples and have focused on a limited range of group comparisons. Moreover, the studies have tended to encompass only one time point during a period of considerable developmental flux. In this study, we aim to overcome past methodological limitations by (1) studying a large sample of more than 4,000 adolescents; (2) simultaneously comparing self-esteem among adolescents from three different ethnic groups: African-American, European American, and Hispanic; (3) employing a consecutive three-year cross-sectional design that allows the investigation of group trajectories; and (4) investigating the interaction between ethnicity and gender on early adolescents' self-esteem. Based on the literature, we predict that, across ethnic groups, girls will report lower levels of self-esteem than boys and that across all ethnic groups, girls will suffer more rapidly declining levels of self-esteem over time. We also predict that African Americans will have higher self-esteem over time and Hispanic adolescents will have steadily lower self-esteem compared to their European American peers.

Method

Our data were drawn from a large longitudinal evaluation of early adolescents in middle schools across Illinois². The schools that participated in this study were all members of a statewide middle school association, which serves students from geographically, socioeconomically, and ethnically diverse backgrounds. The proportion of European American, African American, and Hispanic adolescents represented in each of the three grade samples was roughly equivalent. Our sample consisted of data from three consecutive cross-sectional studies completed annually, beginning in the sixth grade in 1995. The sample was

not followed longitudinally because significant imbalanced attrition reduced and biased the longitudinal sample toward more European American respondents. Administrators in the schools agreed to participate in the study as part of a statewide school assessment plan. The focus of the current study is on the student self-reported data about their general levels of self-esteem.

Participants

Participants were 4,619 students who were in the sixth (26.4%), seventh (38.7%), and eighth (35.0%) grades in 1997. This subsample was drawn from a larger sample that also included Asian Americans, Native Americans, and multi-racial individuals. These latter groups were not included in the analyses because they were underrepresented. The sample for this study was comprised of European American (37.1%), African American (35.3%), and Hispanic (27.6%) students. Approximately half of the participants were girls (52.3%). The adolescents attended 30 different Midwestern schools, most of which (77%) housed grades six through eight. The remaining schools housed four or more grades. Average grade enrollment ranged from 68 to 414 students. Eligibility to receive free or reduced-price lunches was used as a proxy of low-income status. At the beginning of middle school, fewer than half the students (40.1%) reported receiving free lunch and 7.4% reported receiving reduced price lunch at school. Half the students (47.5%) reported that their mothers had two years of post high school education or higher.

Measures

The self-report surveys were administered to the students in their homeroom classrooms by their teachers. Instructions and individual items were read aloud while the students read along silently. The informed consent of students and their parents was obtained and confidentiality was assured. Fewer than 10% of the parents refused to provide consent for their children to participate.

Demographic characteristics. Single items were used to assess students' grade level, gender, ethnicity, whether they received free lunch or reduced price lunch at school, and mother's educational level.

Self-esteem. Self-esteem was indexed by the eight-item global self-esteem subscale of the Self-Evaluation Questionnaire (SEQ) (DuBois & Felner, 1991; DuBois, Felner, Brand, Phillips, & Lease, 1996). DuBois et al. have reported convergent and discriminant validity of the scale. Students rated statements such as "I like being the way I am," "I am happy with myself as a person," "I am as good a person as I want to be," on a 4-point scale (strongly disagree to strongly agree) with higher ratings indicating higher levels of self-esteem. Internal consistency of the subscale for the three years was $\alpha = .83$, $\alpha = .83$, and $\alpha = .84$, respectively. DuBois et al. have reported strong internal consistency of the global self-esteem subscale ($\alpha = .83$), as well support for its discriminant validity (mean $r = .55$) and convergent validity across self-report and interview scores (mean $r = .78$) (see also Dubois, Bull, Sherman, & Roberts, 1998; Dubois, Felner, Brand, & George, 1999).

Results

Data Analysis

The exploratory analysis indicated that the variables were normally distributed with no significant skewness or kurtosis (within ethnic group and within gender). Table 1 presents correlations among primary study variables that are based on averages across all three grades. Self-esteem was correlated with all of the variables except for free lunch status ($r = -0.01$). A series of one-way ANOVAs was conducted to examine whether group differences in self-esteem was affected by ethnicity, gender, and grade level.

Table 1
Correlations of Self-Esteem, Gender, Ethnicity, and Free Lunch

	1. Gender	2. Ethnicity	3. Free Lunch	4. Self-Esteem
1. Gender	—	.03	.04**	-.08**
2. Ethnicity	—	—	.47**	-.03*
3. Free Lunch	—	—	—	-.01
4. Self-Esteem	—	—	—	—

** $p < 0.01$, * $p < 0.05$

Group Differences

Ethnicity. Ethnicity was significantly associated with self-esteem ($F(2, 4616)=43.58, p < 0.001$)(see Figure 1). A Tukey post hoc with an alpha level of .01 revealed significant differences among all three ethnic groups. African American students revealed the highest levels of self-esteem, followed by European Americans, and then Hispanic students.

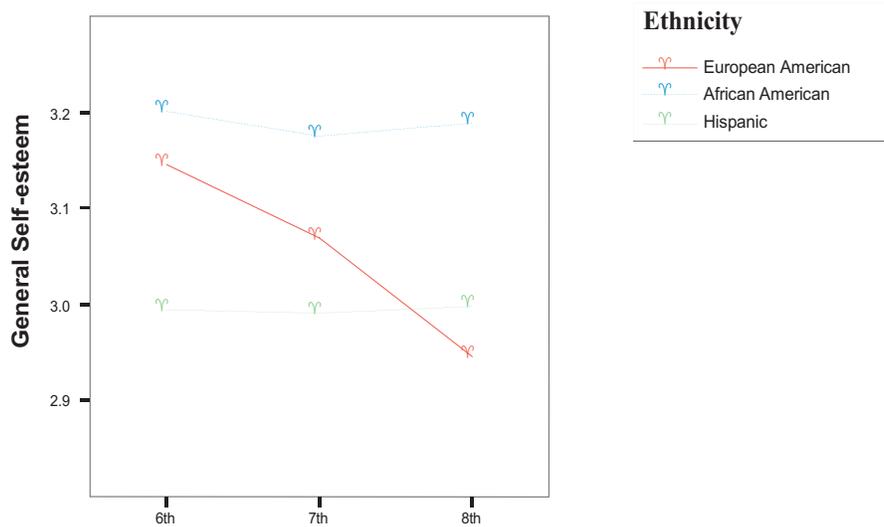


Figure 1. The impact of ethnicity on self-esteem in grades six through eight

Gender. Across all three grades, levels of self-esteem differed significantly by gender ($F(1, 4617)=31.21, p < 0.001$), such that boys had higher levels of self-esteem than girls. Within each grade (sixth, seventh, and eighth), however, differences in self-esteem by gender were not significant.

Grade. Levels of self-esteem differed significantly by grade ($F(2, 4616)=7.93, p < 0.001$). There were significant declines in self-esteem from sixth to eighth grade ($p < 0.0001$). The differences in self-esteem from sixth to seventh and seventh to eighth grades were not significant.

Ethnicity and gender. A 3 X 2 factorial ANOVA on ethnicity and gender with a dependent variable of self-esteem revealed a significant interaction between gender and ethnicity ($F(2, 4613)=8.00, p < 0.0001$). Post-hoc analysis revealed no differences between African American and European American boys. Hispanic boys, however, exhibited lower self-esteem than their African American ($p < 0.001$) and European American male peers ($p < 0.02$). Furthermore, post-hoc analyses revealed that African American girls exhibited significantly higher levels of self-esteem than European American ($p < 0.001$) and Hispanic ($p < 0.001$) girls. There was no significant interaction between gender and grade level ($F(2, 1267)=0.35, p < 0.71$).

Ethnicity and grade. A 3 x 3 ANOVA with factors ethnicity and grade level revealed a significant interaction with self-esteem ($F(4, 4610)=5.01, p<0.001$). A pairwise comparison test revealed that, in the sixth grade, African Americans and European Americans had significantly higher levels of self-esteem than Hispanics ($p<0.0001, p<0.002$; respectively). In the seventh and eighth grades, African American adolescents reported significantly higher levels of self-esteem than both European Americans ($p<0.003$) and Hispanic adolescents ($p<0.0001$). This pattern was continued in the eighth grade.

Differences Within Ethnicity

A 2 x 3 factorial ANOVA with gender and grade level was performed within each ethnic group.

European American. Within the European American group, there was a significant effect of grade level ($F(2, 1709)=14.31, p<0.001$) and gender ($F(1, 1709)=30.42, p<0.001$), with self-esteem declining precipitously from sixth to eighth grade and females having lower levels of self-esteem than their male peers. There was no interaction between grade level and gender ($F(2, 1709)=2.209, p=0.11$).

Hispanic. As predicted, Hispanic male's self-esteem was significantly higher than their female counterparts ($F(1, 1267) = 14.76, p<0.001$). There was no significant main effect for grade level ($F(2, 1267)=0.03, p=0.97$) and no interaction between grade and gender ($F(2, 1267)=0.35, p=0.71$).

African American. Within the African American group, there were no significant effects for grade level ($F(2, 1625)=0.40, p=0.67$) and gender ($F(1, 1625)=0.54, p=0.46$). In addition, there was no significant interaction between grade level and gender ($F(2, 1625)=1.03, p=0.36$).

Discussion

This study investigated how gender and ethnicity affect changes in the self-esteem of early adolescents during the middle grades. Self-report data were collected from more than 4,000 early adolescent European American, African American, and Hispanic students. Low socioeconomic status, as measured by whether or not individuals received a free lunch, was not predictive of self-esteem levels. Distinct trajectories in self-esteem from sixth to eighth grade were found for each ethnic group. In particular, African American adolescents had high and stable self-esteem across these years while Hispanic adolescents had low and stable self-esteem. In contrast, self-esteem among European Americans began moderately high in sixth grade, but plummeted steeply in the seventh grade and declined even more in the eighth grade to end up lower than that of their Hispanic peers. Girls had lower self-esteem than boys in the Hispanic and European American groups but not in the African American group. We conclude that past studies that found a sharp decline in self-esteem during the middle school years may have been conducted in a largely white sample and thus obscure important individual ethnic factors.

Ethnic Differences

What can explain these ethnic differences in self-esteem? Given societal prejudice and the negative portrayal of African Americans in the media, it may appear surprising that African American adolescents have high, stable levels of self-esteem. One possible explanation is that a strong sense of community may instill African American adolescents with a sense of ethnic pride before sixth grade. African American parents often actively teach their children to ignore negative societal images of their ethnic group and to cope with negative feelings evoked by these messages through the support of family (Ward, 2002). Pride in racial and ethnic identity has been associated with higher levels of self-esteem in African Americans (Gray-Little & Hafdahl, 2000). It is conceivable that early pride-enriched identification with their ethnic group may contribute to high levels of self-esteem in African American adolescents. In contrast, DuBois has hypothesized that a weaker sense of racial and ethnic identity in European American youth could be linked to lower levels of self-esteem within this group (DuBois et al., 2002).

Perhaps European American and Hispanic adolescents may experience a decline in their self-esteem during the junior high years because they begin to measure themselves against unattainable athletic and beauty

ideals. Future research studies are needed to explain the underlying reasons for the precipitous drop in self-esteem among European American middle school students and the overall low levels of self-esteem in their Hispanic counterparts from sixth to eighth grade.

Lastly, previous studies revealed that ethnic and income incongruity among school peers are important predictors of differences in self-esteem. Specifically, lower-income European American students attending school with other lower-income students, most of whom were African American, suffered steeper declines in self-esteem than low-income European American students attending school with higher-income students of the same ethnicity (Rhodes, Roffman, Reddy, & Fredriksen, 2004). Therefore, it appears that lower-income European American youth who attend less affluent schools where the majority of students are of another ethnicity may be at highest risk of downward trajectories in self-esteem during the middle school years.

Gender Differences

Gender had a significant effect on self-esteem in European American and Hispanic groups with girls having lower self-esteem than boys from the same ethnic group. These findings mirror the results of the AAUW (1992) study for both ethnic groups even when different Hispanic subgroups were analyzed independently. Our findings may be explained by gender socialization within Hispanic and European American culture. Boys in these cultures are often more encouraged to express self-reliance and independence in ways that could promote feelings of competence and higher levels of self-esteem (Ornstein, 1995). Girls, on the other hand, are encouraged to develop nurturing behaviors in which they may exhibit submission to avoid confrontation.

Gender, like race and ethnicity, may also influence self-esteem. Males may have greater positive gender identity than females and this could account for boys' overall higher levels of self-esteem when compared to their female peers (DuBois et al., 2002). Moreover, differential rewards for active versus passive behavior based on gender may lead male and female early adolescents to base their personal self-worth on different characteristics. Boys tend to derive self-esteem from their competence or talents and girls are more likely to develop feelings of personal self-worth based on their physical appearance (AAUW, 1992).

In contrast, African American girls did not have lower self-esteem levels than their male same-ethnicity peers. Ornstein (1995) argues that African American girls derive their personal self-worth in part from their sense of community, family, and responsibility for younger siblings. In addition, the model of European femininity grounded in helplessness and physical frailness does not have a counterpart in black history. Instead, from slavery to the present, African American women have often derived their sense of personal worth through strength of character and tenacity. In addition, African American girls may be less susceptible to feeling pressure to obtain stringent, often unhealthy, beauty ideals represented in the media that are based mostly on white women.

It may appear contradictory that there were statistically significant differences in self-esteem between boys and girls *across* all grade levels but no differences between boys and girls *within* the three grade levels investigated. Since, however, this analysis combined all ethnic groups this finding may be accounted for by ethnicity having a larger influence upon an adolescent's self-esteem than gender. These findings underscore the importance of accounting for ethnicity when examining self-esteem among adolescents.

Strengths and Limitations

This study has several strengths. Few studies have examined ethnic differences in self-esteem in such a large sample and across multiple ethnic and age groups. The large sample size and the fact that socio-economic status was uncorrelated with self-esteem confer confidence in our ability to generalize our findings. Our design method was the most appropriate for our sample, as employing a longitudinal design would have given undue weight to the European American sample. The consecutive three-year cross-sectional design allowed us to examine changes in self-esteem over time all the while maximizing our ethnic minority sample.

Despite the strengths of this study, several limitations should also be noted. First, this study examined cross-sectional data from adolescents at three different grade levels as opposed to ongoing longitudinal data from

the same sample over time. Although we can use these data to infer change across the middle school years, firm causal conclusions about such change are not possible within the current design. In addition, we relied solely on self-report data. Future studies would be strengthened through the collection of data from additional sources (e.g., teachers, parents). It should also be noted that the broad ethnic category of “Hispanic” is extremely heterogeneous, and that it is likely that additional variation exists within particular subgroups. For example, Erkut and colleagues (2000) have noted the ways in which Puerto Rican adolescents differ from Hispanic adolescents in ethnic subgroups. Future studies should investigate self-esteem within each specific Hispanic subgroup. In addition, inclusion of Asian American, Native American, and multi-racial adolescents would further our understanding of how ethnicity affects self-esteem.

Lastly, the Self-Esteem Questionnaire which was used in this study was normed on a largely European American sample (DuBois et al., 1996). It should be noted, however, that the authors state that validation research provides support for the use of this measure in demographically diverse samples, including African Americans (DuBois, Lockerd, Reach, & Parra, 2003). Moreover, although the SEQ contains several subscales, this study only tracked general self-esteem. Previous studies have found that African American youth scored higher than white youth on peer, sports/athletics, and body image dimensions of self-esteem, but lower on the school dimensions (DuBois et al., 2002). Analyses of changes in various types of self-esteem would allow for greater insight into group differences (DuBois et al.) and a deeper understanding of the way in which global scores of self-esteem are influenced by specific dimensions of self-esteem.

Future Directions

Future studies should examine the specific protective and risk factors that are involved in fostering the respective high and low self-esteem levels among African American and Hispanic early adolescent groups. Specifically, various individual, contextual, and societal influences should be considered for their influence in perpetuating ethnic and gender related self-esteem differences in the lives of early adolescents. With regard to the findings of this study, it appears particularly important to gain a better understanding of what precipitates the staggering drop in European American adolescents’ self-esteem during the middle school years. Deeper understanding of the particular challenges and resources available to different subgroups will facilitate the development of sensitive and effective self-esteem interventions for early adolescents.

Endnotes

¹The original dataset used the designation of *Hispanic* and we use this terminology to accurately reflect the subjects’ endorsement of ethnic identity. The authors acknowledge, however, the limitation of this terminology and prefer the broad term *Latino*. The term *Latino* includes all persons living in the United States that can be traced back to Spanish speaking regions of Latin America, emphasizing the role of indigenous Indian cultures and African American slaves in Latin American history. To accurately represent self-report ethnic categories, we will use the term *Hispanic* throughout this paper.

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