African American Psychology
From Africa to America
The fowl does not act like the goat.

—Ghana proverb

The Self-Esteem Fraud: Feel-Good Education Does Not Lead to Academic Success

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Self-esteem theory made its first dramatic impact upon American schools in 1954, when the Supreme Court accepted that school segregation damaged the self-esteem of African-American children in its Brown v. Board of Education ruling. Low self-esteem, the Court said, “affects the motivation of a child to learn, and has a tendency to retard children’s educational and mental development.” According to author Barbara Lemer, this proposition makes three questionable assumptions about Blacks: Low self-esteem is the major cause of low academic achievement; Blacks have a lower self-esteem than Whites; and changing White attitudes toward Blacks will raise Black self-esteem. Taken together, these notions provide the reasoning behind the current reputation of high standards and expectations in the public schools.

In reality, research reveals that Black children at the same grade level and in the same school system as White children display a higher sense of self-esteem. African-Americans usually report slightly higher levels of agreement with statements about taking a positive attitude toward oneself, judging oneself to be a person “of worth,” and being generally satisfied with oneself.

Studies show that, like Whites, enhancement of global self-concept is not a potent intervention for academic improvement for African-American adolescents. Stanley Rothman and his colleagues at Smith College’s Center for the Study of Social and Political Change found that, while the self-esteem levels of Blacks now are at least as high as those of Whites, the average academic attainment among African-American students still is below that of Whites. They conclude that the evidence “appears to show quite conclusively that the low self-esteem hypothesis is neither a necessary nor sufficient explanation of African-American achievement levels.”

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As illustrated in Shokrai's article, the study of self-esteem and self-concept has played an important role in the history of African Americans. Although the popular notion that African Americans, because of their history of oppression, suffer from low self-esteem has not been supported, self-attributes such as self-esteem, self-concept, and racial identity have been studied more than any other topic in African American psychology. Not only are these self-attributes interesting to study in their own right, but perhaps more important is the study of the relations between these constructs and the well-being and functioning of African Americans across several domains, including academic and vocational achievement, interpersonal and social relations, and mental and physical health.

We begin this chapter by considering conceptualizations and definitions of the self and identity, with attention to cultural differences therein. Historical and contemporary models of self-concept among African Americans are then discussed. Identity development and change are discussed next, as theory and research show that identity is not static across the life span. We also describe models of racial identity, and we review the research on variables related to high and low levels of racial and ethnic identity. We show that racial socialization and acculturation are cultural constructs that, like racial identity, impact the functioning and well-being of African Americans. Methodological issues related to measuring identity and related constructs are examined, and we end the chapter with a summary.

DEFINING SELF-ESTEEM AND SELF-CONCEPT

The self has been studied extensively in psychology. Many of the early studies in African American psychology were on the topics of self-concept and self-esteem (Clark & Clark, 1939).

Self-concept involves beliefs and knowledge about the self. Our self-concept organizes and manages information about how we see ourselves (Baumeister, 1999). The self-concept is a component of our self-schema. A self-schema is a cognitive representation of the self. It organizes how we process information about the self and others (Fiske & Taylor, 1991). A question one may ask relevant to self-concept is, “Can I accomplish a particular task?” In contrast, self-esteem is one’s affective reaction toward and feeling about oneself that is also evaluative. The question, “Do I like myself?” is a question relevant to self-esteem.
CULTURAL DIFFERENCES IN SELF-CONCEPTUALIZATION

Conceptualization of the self depends on culture and socialization. Cultures can be categorized as collective, where people have an interdependent view of the self, or individualistic, where people hold an independent view of the self. Interdependent cultures include many from Africa, Asia, and Latin American countries. Independent cultures include the cultures of Europe and the United States. Differences in self-attributes among members of interdependent and independent cultures have been observed (Markus & Kitayama, 1999). Many of these self-attributes are described throughout this book. People of African descent are likely to have interdependent conceptualizations of the self, as are many women, and members of Latino, Asian, and Native American cultural groups.

In interdependent cultures, the self is seen as interdependent with the surrounding social context, and the self is considered in relation to others. This means that one’s thinking and acting are influenced by the relevant others in one’s social context. For example, if I am a member of an interdependent culture, I cannot make a decision about employment without considering members of my family. Fitting in, attentiveness to others, and harmonious relationships are important.

In individualistic cultures, emphasis is placed on the uniqueness of the self. If I am a member of an individualistic culture, my self-interest and well-being are more likely to direct my thoughts and actions than the well-being of others. In addition, I will be less likely to care about the consequences of my actions for others. I will want to stand out as an individual and not be like other people. An example of cultural differences in self-attributes can be found in commercial advertisements found in interdependent and individualistic cultures. In individualistic cultures, an ad might show how a product can be used to make a person “stand out from the crowd.” This ad would appeal to one’s need to be separate from others and to be unique. In interdependent cultures, an advertisement might emphasize that others use this product and that the use of this product would make one “fit in.”

In interdependent cultures, relationships are important, and maintaining a connection to others means being constantly aware of others’ needs, desires, and goals. The assumption here is that one needs to consider the goal of others in order to meet one’s own goal.

In summary, one’s beliefs and feelings about the self may be linked to one’s social group for those from interdependent cultures and less so for those from independent cultures.

SOCIAL IDENTITY

Social identity is that part of an individual’s self-concept which is derived from his or her membership in a social group and adherence to the values associated with that group (Tajfel, 1981). Identity may be thought of
As an adaptation to a social context (Baumeister & Muraven, 1996), identity focuses on self-ascribed definitions that include social roles, reputation, values, and possibilities. Social identity may include one's self-concept with relation to nationality, religion, gender, sexual orientation, age, health status, and racial and ethnic identity. The latter two types of identity have been studied extensively among African Americans because of the physical salience of race in the American context.

Conceptualization of identity along racial lines can be contrasted with conceptualization of identity among other salient personal attributes. Racial identity models have most often emphasized that race is the key defining feature of one's social reference group. Salience models assume that race is only one of several other types of referent factors that may determine salience of one's social identity group. Other factors might include ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, or gender. Whether or not one's identity is based on race or some other attribute, it is likely to be influenced by contextual factors. For example, race is likely to be salient for a lone Black person in a White group, whereas gender is likely to be salient for a lone female in an all-male group.

There is a difference of opinion regarding the terminology that best describes the identity of African Americans. Some scholars prefer the term *racial identity* because race is seen as the single most important aspect of the person's social identity (Helms, 1990). Others prefer the term *ethnic identity* because of the lack of clarity regarding what constitutes a race. Ethnicity is culturally prescribed, whereas race is biologically prescribed.

**Racial Identity and Ethnic Identity**

Racial identity is based on the perception of a shared racial history. Helms (1990) defines racial identity as "a sense of group or collective identity based on one's perception that he or she shares a common racial heritage with a particular racial group" (p. 3). Racial group orientation is the psychological attachment to the social category that designates the racial group to which one is a member (Helms, 1990).

Ethnic identity is defined by involvement in the cultural practices and activities of a particular ethnic group and by positive attitudes toward, attachment to, and feelings of belonging to that group (Phinney, 1995).

In this chapter, the usage of one term over the other (i.e., racial identity vs. ethnic identity) corresponds to that of the particular author and literature being cited.

**Other Related Constructs**

Other constructs are kin to and sometimes confused with racial and ethnic identity. These include acculturation, racial socialization, and...
Africanic values. Acculturation refers to both individual and group-level changes in behaviors, attitudes, and values that take place over time as two or more cultural groups come into contact (Berry, 1990). Racial socialization is a process involving messages and behaviors about race that parents or other members of a person’s social context transmit to children and adolescents (Stevenson, 1995). Africanic values are the beliefs, attitudes, and worldview that come from people of African descent. Acculturation and racial socialization are discussed later in this chapter. (See Chapter 2 for a discussion of the Africanic worldview.)

Self-Concept Among African Americans

HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE ON BLACK SELF-CONCEPT

Historically, Blacks in the United States have been described as having a negative self-concept and self-denigration as a result of inferior status in this country. Kardiner and Ovesey (1951, 1962) wrote about the impact of oppression on the self-concept of Blacks. Their classic work, The Mark of Oppression, makes the point that Blacks have a negative self-concept because of oppression, discrimination, and inferior status. In another early book on the Negro self-concept, Jean Grambs (1965) explains why “Negroes” perceive themselves as inferior and have negative self-concepts. “The self-concept of the Negro is contaminated by the central fact that it is based on a color-caste complex” (p. 13). “The self-esteem of the Negro is damaged by the overwhelming fact that the world he lives in says, ‘White is right; Black is bad’” (p. 15). The author goes on to cite instances of the manifestation of low self-concept including increased Black-on-Black crime, aggression, low levels of educational achievement, and unstable household and parenting practices.

A central premise in the landmark Brown v. Board of Education (1954) case, which outlawed school segregation, was that Blacks who attended Black schools not only suffered educationally but socially and psychologically from low self-concept; the findings from the “doll” studies conducted by Mamie and Kenneth Clark were cited as evidence of this. Clark and Clark (1939) conducted studies with African American preschool children using dolls as stimulus materials. Children were asked to choose the doll that they would like to play with, the doll that was the prettiest, the doll that was the smartest, and the doll that most looked like them. Children were more likely to select the White doll as the one that they would most like to play with and the one that was the prettiest. A conclusion from this study was that the historical context of separatism and racism had affected the self-esteem and racial identity of Black children.
There were several methodological concerns with this study that later replications have addressed and these later studies have yielded different results concerning Black self-concept. One concern was that asking children to select a doll that is most like them did not take into account the diversity of complexion among African American children. Lighter complexioned children may see themselves as more similar to the White doll than to the Black doll. Another problem was that the White dolls were very similar in appearance to the Black dolls and only differed in skin color. Additional research (e.g., Goss, 1991; Spencer 1982) has further clarified the distinction between young children's feelings of self-worth and their racial self-awareness and knowledge of cultural biases. Although young children understand racial categories and biases by the time they are of school age, their self-esteem is not directly linked to this awareness and they do not necessarily feel negatively toward themselves.

CONTEMPORARY MODELS OF BLACK SELF-CONCEPT

More affirming models of Black self-concept do not assume that minority status results in negative self-concept. Wade Nobles's (1991) model of the extended self and Adelbert Jenkins's (1995) model of self as an agent of change are two such examples of more affirming models.

According to Nobles, people of African descent have an extended sense of self. The extended self-concept is derived through identification with people of African descent. This self-concept encompasses others that are significant to the individual. One's personal well-being is intricately linked to the well-being of others in the group. The saying "I am because we are, and because we are, I am," (Mbiti, 1991, p. 106) exemplifies this conceptualization of the self. For African Americans, one's self-concept is closely aligned with racial identity and one's sense of connection and identification with members of the group. Using Nobles's model of the self, self-concept will only be high if racial identity is high. In fact, some recent studies have shown this to be the case: High self-concept is associated with high racial identity among adolescents (Townsend & Belgrave, 2000).

Adelbert Jenkins's (1995) model does not centrally consider others key to the self-concept, as does Nobles's (1991). A primary assumption of Jenkins's model is that the self is an active agent. By agent, he means we recognize ourselves as persons who can take action, initiate, and make decisions. The self is way of talking about our ability to make choices and to shape the course of our lives. This view of the self is a humanistic and empowering view, as it considers the active role that the person plays in shaping and carrying out his or her own destiny. The humanistic model of the self conveys that even under conditions of oppression and discrimination, African Americans are active in shaping their own destiny.
It is possible to consider Jenkins's and Nobles's perspectives as complementary. For example, African Americans may have a sense of being collectively agentic, feeling positive about themselves as members of a group working actively on their own behalf. It is also possible that these perspectives may emphasize specific dimensional aspects of African American personality, with some individuals having a more collective orientation and some having a more agentic emphasis. It might also be possible for individuals to be high (or low) on both dimensions.

Identity Development and Change

The development of identity is a process that involves personal insight and observation of oneself in a social context. The observation might make one realize that members of one's ethnic group are treated differently than members of other ethnic groups. The self-observation may also point out how the behavior of one's ethnic group differs from the behavior of other ethnic groups. As we discuss next, ethnic identity is important and serves many functions. Ethnic identity is not static; it changes throughout the life span.

IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT

Identify formation begins at birth and continues throughout the life course. Early understanding by children of ethnicity and race is mainly derived from the family and the community (Spencer & Markstrom-Adams, 1990). Research and theory suggest that children's understanding of self, ethnicity, and ethnic identity changes developmentally. As children’s social cognitive development progresses, they move from understanding and describing themselves based on individual external characteristics to increasingly emphasizing more internal, multidimensional, psychological, and situational factors (Damon & Hart, 1982). American children develop an understanding of racial categories, their group membership, and the broad cultural ascriptions and biases associated with race and ethnicity during their preschool years, and this appears to be shaped in part by their general social cognitive development (Spencer, 1982).

It is during the adolescent years that identity formation is emphasized, as explained by the psychosocial stage theory of Erik Erikson (1963, 1968). With developmental increases in cognitive ability, dramatic physical changes in adolescence, and the impending transition to adulthood, the question of “Who am I?” becomes increasingly important. Identity development is dependent on prior experiences, developmental context, and historical period.
Building on Erikson's perspective of adolescence identity exploration and commitment, Marcia (1966, 1980) articulated four identity statuses for adolescents: achievement, moratorium, foreclosure, and diffusion. African Americans' experiences of these statuses may differ from those of majority youth.

- **Identity achievement** is the status reflecting the exploration of and commitment to an identity. At this stage, adolescents understand and accept who they are in terms of their racial and ethnic background. For example, individuals may refer to themselves as Black and be committed to being African American.

- **Identity moratorium** occurs when there has been or there is an ongoing exploration of identity, but no commitment has been made to a specific identity. Individuals may have some confusion about their ethnicity during this stage. They may know that they are African American but may not necessarily feel committed to this as part of their identity and subsequently may not participate in activities of their ethnic group.

- **Identity foreclosure** is when individuals have clarity about their ethnicity but have not explored their identity. Feelings about their ethnicity may be positive or negative depending on the socialization process. Individuals in this status may be clear that they are African American, but they do not think deeply about what it means to be African American.

- **Identity diffusion** is a status in which the individual has neither explored his or her identity nor developed a clear understanding of identity-related issues. An individual in this stage has not thought about or experienced aspects of being African American.

**ETHNIC IDENTITY CHANGE**

Situational and environmental factors have an impact on one's ethnic identity. Identity change may occur if an individual moves into a new situation or a new environment, or has a change in life circumstances such as relocation, marriage, new job, new school, and so on. When a new situation is encountered, the individual is prompted to search for a new source of support. The new support may move the individual into another context in which he involves himself in activities and organizations that support that new identity. For example, students starting college previously may have had support for their identity within their community or church environment. However, once in college, they may find support for their identity through greater involvement in Black clubs and organizations. This may especially be the case if they attend a predominately White college. In fact, research has shown that ethnic minority students' feelings
of belonging to a group and commitment to their ethnic group increase when they go from a predominantly minority community to a predominately White college (Saylor & Aries, 1999).

**INCREASING ETHNIC IDENTITY**

Ethnic identity serves many functions. Identity (a) provides a sense of group belonging and affiliation; (b) acts as a buffer against stress that may arise from prejudice, racism, and discrimination; and (c) serves as a link to a larger social group. Being part of a group that shares one’s history, perspectives, and values is important in developing a positive sense of one’s self-worth.

Some of the beneficial aspects of having a positive ethnic identity include higher academic achievement, less drug use and violence, better peer relationships, better coping skills, and higher self-esteem. Because of the positive associations with ethnic identity, there has been a growing movement for programs to increase ethnic identity among ethnic minority youth. These programs seek to increase or improve ethnic identity using culturally appropriate methods and topics.

**Rites of Passage Programs**

Rites of passage programs have been used as a vehicle for promoting positive identity. Rites of passage have been used in both historical and contemporary times as a mechanism for encouraging youth to develop the attitudes and behaviors necessary for productive citizenship. Many of the rites of passage programs for African Americans are modeled after those in Africa. For example, in some traditional African cultures, male youth are taken away from the village to learn skills that contribute to the survival of the village, for example, hunting and food gathering. Contemporary rites of passage programs do this symbolically by asking parents for permission to take their youth away from their community environment. Generally this is done in a weekend or overnight retreat. Often the youth participants are taken to naturalistic environments outside of their home environment (e.g., farm settings, peaceful retreat, etc.).

In contemporary times, rites of passage programs have been used to provide the structure to promote a change in the lives of participants. Rites of passage programs may help African American youth to clearly define their gender roles, and they may be used to initiate males and females into adult social roles and responsibilities. Rites of passage can be viewed as a developmental progression that separates individuals from their previous identity and facilitates their transition into a new identity that incorporates their new role, responsibilities, and status.

Brookins (1996) describes four stages in a rites of passage program called the Adolescent Developmental Pathway Paradigm (ADPP).
• The first stage is the preparation and awareness stage, in which individuals are encouraged to become aware of their personal and ethnic characteristics. There is an initial ceremony that provides information on what is involved in the rites of passage process. During this stage, the beginner is introduced to community members who will serve as adult role models and be responsible for guiding youth through the process.

• The second stage is one of separation. During this stage, individuals are provided with opportunities to increase their awareness of the need to develop a new identity. The formal beginning of the transition process begins during this stage. The youth are urged to evaluate previous beliefs, roles, and responsibilities. There may be some anxiety during this stage, as youth are encountering new values and behaviors that may be foreign to them. There are activities designed to help them understand their fear and to begin the official training in the roles and responsibilities for adulthood. Genealogical and ancestral information may be discussed in terms of how it relates to the youth's current situation and their hopes and possibilities for the future. Life-management training sessions may focus on skills, knowledge, and values associated with responsible adulthood, such as careers and social success. Group-based community service projects may be carried out in order to help individuals develop an understanding of the social and political factors within their environment.

• The third stage is the transition stage. It is during this stage that adolescents may begin to adapt to new ways of thinking and behaving. They begin to understand their abilities and future possibilities in the vocational, academic, and personal realms. Attitudes and feelings toward their own and other ethnic groups become more salient. During this period, adolescents begin to develop psychological resistance strategies. These strategies are developed through an understanding of the historical struggle of African people and the culturally derived means by which African people have counteracted oppression. These strategies are useful to help African American youth deal with experiences of prejudice and discrimination.

• Reincorporation is the final stage, in which the individual and the community acknowledge that the old identity and peer group have been abandoned, and a new identity has developed along with a new support group. During this stage, the community is recognized formally as important and influential to the adolescent.

In summary, rites of passage programs have proven effective in enhancing identity and other positive values and beliefs among African American youth.

Nigrescence Models of Racial Identity

Most racial identity models assume that people progress through phases or stages of identity. Individuals in a particular stage have certain attitudes,
beliefs, and behaviors that are distinct from those that emerge within other stages. Nigrescence models of racial identity have been widely studied, although new perspectives on racial identity are emerging.

Nigrescence models take in account the process by which Blacks become aware of being Black in this country. Nigrescence, a French term, means "to become Black." Nigrescence models have been developed by African American psychologists, including Charles Thomas, William Cross, Jenet Helms, and Thomas Parham. These models provide a template of what happens during each of the stages that African Americans go through to reach racial awareness. Each of these stages is characterized by certain affective, cognitive, and behavioral features. A description of the stages follows (Helms, 1990).

**STAGE 1: PRE-ENCOUNTER**

In the pre-encounter stage, there is an orientation toward White culture and away from Black culture. People in this stage may feel ashamed and embarrassed about being Black and may hold the values of the White culture. These individuals may feel that Blacks are responsible for their own oppression and fate. Correspondingly, they may hold individualistic views about opportunities, seeing the individual and not the environment as responsible for what happens to people. Individuals in this stage may believe that Blacks who do not do well are responsible for their lack of success and that the historical background of slavery and discrimination are not relevant factors. Individuals in this stage are likely to engage in activities with Whites or activities that they assume are culturally White.

Emotional reactions during this stage may be defensiveness, avoidance, and anxiety. The individual in this stage is looking for acceptance among Whites, which may or may not be available. Compliance and conformity to societal norms are also seen in this stage.

Individuals in this stage may hold beliefs and behaviors that are not overtly anti-Black and pro-White (especially if they want to be seen as politically correct) but which may be inferred from unobtrusive and indirect indicators. This may be seen, for example, when individuals prefer to buy from White merchants over Black merchants and rationalize that the product, the service, or both are better.

**STAGE 2: DISSONANCE**

During the dissonance or encounter stage, individuals encounter an event or series of events that shatter the perception of themselves or the perception of the conditions of Blacks in America. This experience
described as "pulling the rug from under one's feet" (Cross, Parham, & Helms, 1998, p. 9), makes salient the consequences of being Black. An example might be when a person realizes that he cannot buy a house in a certain neighborhood because of his race. Dissonance may also be experienced when an individual is transitioning from one environment to another. This might occur when a person leaves a predominately Black high school to attend a predominately White school. In the transition process, his race becomes salient to himself and to others.

During the dissonance stage, the person begins to wonder what it might be like to have an identity as a Black person. This person may begin reading and seeking out information about Blacks and may begin to question what he had previously believed to be true about Blacks and Whites. The emotional state associated with this stage is one of vigilance and anxiety. The person in this stage is motivated to learn about Blacks and actively seeks out information about being Black. He may begin to read magazines and listen to Black-oriented television shows.

STAGE 3: IMMERSION AND EMERSION

The immersion and emersion stage is characterized by a new way of thinking and a new identity that incorporates being Black. Immersion is the beginning phase and emersion the end phase of this stage. Individuals in this stage may have a glorified perception of the goodness of being Black. Dichotomous thinking comes to the fore: For example, Black is good and White is bad. Persons in this stage want to affiliate only with other Blacks and participate in organizations that are Black. These individuals also attend events and participate in activities that affirm and support the Black identity. The first part of this stage has been described as total immersion into Blackness, with individuals experiencing the emotions of energy and elation. During the second part of this stage, called emersion, there is some leveling off of this energy and elation.

STAGE 4: INTERNALIZATION

During this stage, the individual has internalized a new identity. The conflicts between the old and the new identity have been resolved and the anxiety, emotionality, and defensiveness of the prior stages are gone. The individual feels more calm and secure. This person knows who he is, and he does not have to display his Blackness in order to prove that he is Black. Blacks are still seen as the primary reference group, but friendships and interactions with Whites are possible. Furthermore, persons in the internalization stage do not participate in Black organizations exclusively. Their thinking is more flexible, and they are more tolerant of people from other cultural groups.
STAGE 5: INTERNALIZATION-COMMITMENT

At the fifth stage, called internalization-commitment, the individual possesses all of the characteristics of those in the internalization stage. However, not only does she have a firm self-identity about what it means to be Black, but she also is likely to work for the liberation of all oppressed people. For example, a person in the internalization-commitment stage might work to support the civil rights of other oppressed groups (e.g., gays and lesbians).

ADAPTATIONS AND REFINEMENTS
OF NIGRESCENCE THEORY

The Nigrescence theory of racial identity has been modified since its original conceptualization over a quarter of a century ago. These modifications more accurately reflect identity among contemporary African Americans.

Lifespan Development Perspective

Parham (1992a) modified the Nigrescence theory to include a lifespan perspective on racial identity. His adaptation addresses how the stages of racial identity are manifested in three phases of life: (a) late adolescence/early adulthood, (b) midlife, and (c) late adulthood. Each of these phases has a central theme that relates to a particular stage of racial identity. Parham's adaptation of the model accounts for how one would experience Nigrescence during the three developmental periods.

During childhood and late adolescence, parents and the immediate environmental context (e.g., schools, neighborhoods, churches, etc.) have greater influence than during later developmental stages. This means that individuals might be more likely to progress through stages during adolescence and early adulthood. For example, leaving home during late adolescence and going to a new school environment might trigger the dissonance stage. One's immediate sociocontextual environment, close contact and collaborations with other Blacks might also encourage the emersion-immersion stage.

A lifespan approach to identity also recognizes that recycling occurs. In recycling, the individual goes back to an earlier completed stage. Parham (1992a) defines recycling as the reinstatement of the racial identity struggle and resolution after having achieved it at an earlier time in one's life.

During midlife, changes and transitions might cause one to reevaluate racial attitudes and return to an earlier stage and/or move forward to another stage. Events such as child rearing, marriage, and new or changing jobs may serve as catalysts for a particular attitude.
The lifespan perspective also assumes that a person's initial identity can be at any of the stages and that it does not always have to begin at the pre-encounter stage. For example, if a child is immersed in a culture of pro-Black activities and beliefs based on his parents and other socialization influences, he may never have held pre-encounter attitudes.

The lifespan perspective on Nigrescence holds that identity resolution can occur in one of three ways: (a) stagnation or failure to move beyond one initial identity stage, (b) through the sequential linear stage progression described previously, and (c) by recycling.

Multidimensional Model of Racial Identity

In contrast to stage or developmental models, Sellers and colleagues (Sellers, Rowley, Chavous, Shelton, & Smith, 1997) have developed a model that emphasizes the multidimensional nature of racial identity. The multidimensional model of racial identity (MMRI) builds on symbolic interactionism and outlines four primary dimensions of racial identity: salience, centrality, ideology, and regard. Salience involves the extent to which individuals emphasize race as an important dimension of their self-concept at a specific point in time. Sellers and colleagues note that the salience of racial identity may vary over time and from situation to situation. Centrality refers to the extent that race is core to individuals' self-concept and how they normally define themselves. Ideology is the third dimension of the MMRI and describes four different sets of beliefs and attitudes: (a) nationalist, (b) assimilationist, and (d) humanist. The nationalist perspective emphasizes "the importance and uniqueness of being of African descent." The oppressed minority ideology focuses on oppression and commonalities with other oppressed groups. The assimilationist perspective emphasizes "commonalities between African Americans and the rest of American society." Finally, the humanist perspective underlines "the commonalities of all humans." The fourth dimension of identity, regard, involves both the individuals' feeling about group membership (private regard) and their sense of others' evaluations and feelings about their group (public regard). This model seeks to address a variety of research and conceptual issues on racial identity. We discuss the Multidimensional Inventory of Black Identity (MIBI), which is based on the MMRI, later in the chapter.

Correlates of Self-Concept and Racial Identity

There are causes and effects of having high and low self-concept and racial identity. We discuss next the relationship between racial identity and
own-group preference and then the relationship between racial and ethnic identity and other variables.

**RACIAL IDENTITY AND OWN-GROUP PREFERENCES**

Individuals in the pre-encounter stage compared with the other stages are more likely to have anti-Black attitudes. These individuals are more likely to be mistrusting of other Blacks, to affiliate less with other Blacks, and to blame Blacks for their predicament. Blacks in the pre-encounter stage also have a stronger desire to assimilate within White cultures than do Blacks in other stages (Helms, 1990).

A study found that racial identity attitudes are related to Africentric values such as harmony with nature and positive social relations (Carter & Helms, 1987). Racial identity attitudes are not related to Eurocentric values such as mastery over natural forces and individualism. Immersion/emersion and internalization are associated with group-oriented beliefs and social relations. Internalization attitudes are associated with a belief in harmony and nature. Persons with pre-encounter and internalization attitudes are less anti-White while high immersion/emersion attitudes show more hostility and anti-White attitudes.

Persons in the transitional immersion/emersion stage have been found to engage in behaviors that separate themselves from the White world. Individuals with these attitudes show an outward presentation of Blackness. Their outward presentation includes hairstyles, clothing, speech patterns, value system, and self-designation (e.g., changing one's name to an African name). Individuals high in the immersion/emersion stage are rejecting of White colleges and institutions but accepting of all Black colleges and institutions (Helms, 1990).

**RACIAL IDENTITY AND RACIAL SELF-DESIGNATION**

Racial self-designation is one's preferred self-referent, or the name with which one labels oneself. African Americans have been labeled colored, Negro, black, Black, Afro-American, and African American. Does an individual's racial consciousness relate to how she defines her racial group? Speight, Vera, and Derrickson (1996) addressed this question using a community and college student sample. The authors examined the relationship between racial identity attitudes, self-esteem, and racial self-designation. The age of the sample ranged from 17 to 32 years old. The majority, 49%, preferred the label Black, followed by 30% who favored African American. Sixteen percent chose the term Afro-American and 6.5% the term American. Five percent chose other terms (3% Other, 1.3% Negro, and 0.9% African). Those who chose the term Black did no: have a
particular reason or value for this preference. Those who preferred the term *African American* appeared to do so for symbolic reasons. *African American* tended to be chosen as a term that showed a sign of empowerment and political consciousness. Respondents who chose the term *Afro-American* did so primarily because of heritage. The term *American* was selected to de-emphasize race and to reflect an American heritage.

Racial identity attitudes were related to racial self-designation. Persons with higher pre-encounter attitudes were more likely to use labels such as *Other*, *American*, and *Black* (Speight et al., 1996) speculated that individuals with pre-encounter attitudes would be reluctant to embrace the label *African American* because being Black is not salient to their identity and also because they do not want to emphasize the connection with Africa. Individuals with high immersion/emersion scores were more likely to choose the term *African American* because of the relevance of African descent to their identity.

**RACIAL IDENTITY STAGES AND DEMOGRAPHIC VARIABLES**

Several studies have examined the Nigrescence stages of racial identity (described previously) and their correlations with demographic variables. One question is whether or not certain demographic factors are more likely to be found among persons in a specific racial identity status. A study that used data from the National Survey of Black Americans (NSBA) and the National Election Panel Study (NEPS) addressed this question (Hyers, 2001). The authors found that some demographic variables correlated with different identity stages. Respondents were classified into one of three racial identity types—pre-encounter, immersion, or internalization—based on their responses to questions on the NSBA and the NEPS. Persons were classified into the pre-encounter stage if they answered yes to a question such as, “Do you think what happens generally to Black people in this country will have something to do with what happens in your life?” An immersion-type question was, “How much say or power do you think Black people have in American life and in politics?” A question aimed at internalization was, “How close do you feel in your ideals and feelings to White people in this country?” The study found that most of the respondents (80% in the NEPS and 84% in the NSBA) could be classified into the pre-encounter, immersion, and internalization stages. The percentage categorized as pre-encounter in the NSBA survey was 44% and in the NSBA survey 35%. Immersion types represented 16% of the NEPS sample and 21% of the NSBA sample. The internalization types represented 40% of the NEPS sample and 28% of the NSBA sample.

The findings indicated that socioeconomic status is a predictor of identity status. Less educated and lower income respondents were more likely...
to be in the pre-encounter than the immersion stage. In addition, respondents in the NEPS from urban areas were more likely to be in the pre-encounter than in the immersion stage. Data from the NEPS showed that men and older participants were more likely to be in the internalization than in the immersion stage.

Individuals classified in the pre-encounter stage were the least likely to blame the system for the problems Black people had, most likely to have White friends, and least likely to self-label as Black. Those in the pre-encounter stage, compared with those in the immersion and internalization stages, were least likely to report experiencing racism or having a family member who had experienced racism, and were least likely to report feeling discriminated against in hiring and other situations. Regarding psychological well-being, individuals in pre-encounter were the most satisfied, those in internalization were the second most satisfied, and individuals classified within immersion were the least satisfied with their lives. While pre-encounter types reported high psychological well-being, they had the lowest level of global self-esteem. This may be because self-esteem has been linked to high ethnic identity. Internalization types had the highest level of global self-esteem.

RACIAL IDENTITY STAGES AND MORAL REASONING

Stages of racial identity functioning also seem to be related to moral reasoning. Moral reasoning is the evaluation of the “goodness” or the “rightness” of a particular behavior or choice. It helps to explain why some people behave as they do. Moreland and Leach (2001) administered the Defining Issues Text (a measure of morality) and the Racial Identity Attitude Scale to African American college students. They found that less mature racial identity attitudes (i.e., pre-encounter attitudes) were related to less mature moral reasoning. Persons with more developed racial identity attitudes (i.e., internalization attitudes) had more highly developed moral reasoning. Immersion attitudes were also associated with less mature moral reasoning. Immersion attitudes glorify Black values and standards and reject beliefs and values perceived to be White. These individuals would selectively perceive their environment and may therefore be less likely to make objective moral decisions.

ETHNIC IDENTITY AND ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT

Findings regarding the relationship between ethnic identity and school achievement are mixed. On the one hand, high ethnic identity should foster achievement-related activities, such as studying and affiliating with peers who have high academic success. On the other hand, Fordham and Ogbu (1986) note that high achievement among African American youth
may be viewed as "acting White" by their peers. For some, high achievement may be seen as selling out the Black culture. This occurs when students do not see academic achievement as a core-defining attribute for themselves and their peers; consequently, high academic achievement is not a positive accomplishment. Research findings and conceptual perspectives on this issue have varied.

This purported devaluing of educational achievement has a historical context. Historically, White America has doubted Blacks' capabilities to perform well, and some Blacks subsequently bought into this, doubting their own capabilities. In order to maintain self-esteem, Blacks have thereby defined success for Whites as school achievement and defined success for Blacks based on other attributes. From this perspective, students who are strongly connected to their culture and who have high racial identity may not be successful in school.

This finding was confirmed in a study that found that high school students with high dissonance and immersion attitudes had a lower grade point average. Involving oneself strongly in the Black culture is a central feature of the immersion attitudes. Some Black students may fear that successful academic achievement associated with White behavior (Witherspoon, Speight, & Thomas, 1997). This may be especially so for males, who are more likely to have immersion attitudes than are females. The reaction of teachers and others in the learning environment that Black males are hostile may also be a contributor to the association between immersion attitudes and not valuing academic success.

In contrast, Spencer, Noll, Stolzfus, and Harpalani (2001) found African American youth who scored high on Eurocentric identity to have lower academic achievement and those higher in Africentric identity to have higher achievement. Spencer and colleagues challenged the "acting White" hypothesis, noting empirical and conceptual work in several areas that challenge this hypothesis. These include important individual differences among African Americans in their conceptions of identity, the role of biculturality and code switching in negotiating American culture, and positive youth and parental values on education among African Americans.

The relationship between ethnic identity and academic achievement for males and females may also be better understood by examining the unique components of ethnic identity (Oyserman, Harrison, & Bybee, 2001). Separating the components of ethnic identity helps to explain how ethnic identity relates to academic achievement among males and females. One component of ethnic identity includes positive in-group identification that involves having a positive sense of connection to the common fate of Black people. This component makes salient group norms and practices. A second component is the awareness of negative out-group perception. This component involves being aware that others are likely to see Blacks as members of a negatively valued group. This component of ethnic identity may help by providing a framework for understanding others' negative responses but can also have a negative impact on academic self-efficacy by
making salient others’ negative expectations. For some youth, this may be a component that adds to stereotype vulnerability, that is, the greater risk of having lower performance in performance situations where racial stereotypes regarding achievement are made salient (Steele, 1992). The third component, labeled “viewing academic achievement as part of one’s ethnic identity,” focuses on the extent to which one’s academic achievement is seen as important to or embedded in one’s racial-ethnic group. This component may focus attention and motivation on doing well and succeeding. There are gender differences in how these components of ethnic identity relate to academic achievement. The achievement component of ethnic identity might be more salient for females because having beliefs that academic achievement is important to Blacks may serve as a buffer even when the awareness of racism is high. On the other hand, the connectedness component of racial identity might be most beneficial for helping males to achieve academically.

ETHNIC IDENTITY AND PROBLEM BEHAVIORS

Several studies have examined ethnic identity in relation to problem behaviors including drug use, risky sexual activity, juvenile delinquency, and violence. Much of this research has been conducted with adolescents. These studies have generally found ethnic identity to be a protective factor for youth. Ethnic identity provides an alternative to poor behaviors and a more appropriate way of resisting negative forces that lead to problem behaviors.

There are several other ways in which positive ethnic identity protects against problem behaviors (Brook, Balka, Brook, Win, & Gursen, 1998). One way is that a positive ethnic identity may support adolescents’ identification with their parents. Identification with parents in turn leads to better problem-solving skills. Rather than seeking approval from deviant peers, adolescents seek and receive support from parents. This support may also include socialization in culturally sanctioned, prosocial coping strategies.

Another way that high ethnic identity protects against problem behaviors is that high ethnic identity buffers against poor self-esteem that could be a risk factor for drug use and other problem behaviors. Youth with high ethnic identity are not likely to have poor self-esteem and feelings of incompetence, which lead to problem behaviors.

Acculturation and Racial Socialization

ACCULTURATION

Acculturation refers to the extent to which ethnic minorities participate in the cultural traditions, values, beliefs, and practices of their own culture
versus the mainstream White culture (Landrine & Klonoff, 1996a). Ethnic minorities function on an acculturation continuum, with traditional on one end and acculturated on the other end. In the middle are those who are bilingual. Traditional individuals retain the values, beliefs, and practices of their indigenous cultural group. Individuals who are highly acculturated have assimilated the beliefs and behaviors of the majority White culture. Bicultural individuals hold the beliefs and practice the behaviors of their traditional culture but have also assimilated White beliefs and practices.

In a series of studies, Landrine and Klonoff (1996a) investigated the relationship between acculturation and mental health, physical health, and other variables among African Americans. They report that acculturation is associated with the amount of racism experienced, with more traditional African Americans experiencing more racism than more acculturated African Americans. Racism in turn predicts health-related problems such as smoking and hypertension.

In looking at the relationship between acculturation and mental health problems, Landrine and Klonoff (1996a) found that predictors of poor mental health (i.e., depression, anxiety, obsession-compulsion) differed for acculturated and traditional persons. Acculturated persons tended to blame themselves and to take responsibility for their problems, whereas traditional people tended to deny and avoid their problems. Acculturated persons also tended to appraise their everyday stress at higher levels. In general, mental health symptoms among acculturated African Americans are related to self-blaming and ordinary stressors, whereas symptoms among traditional African Americans are associated with denial of problems.

RACIAL SOCIALIZATION

One process that supports ethnic identity development is racial socialization. Racial socialization involves messages and practices that provide information concerning one's race as it relates to (a) personal and group identity, (b) intergroup and interindividual relationships, and (c) position in the social hierarchy (Thornton, Chatters, Taylor, & Allen, 1990). Racial socialization is the process by which messages are communicated to children to bolster their sense of identity in light of the fact that their life experiences may include racially hostile encounters (Stevenson, 1995). Racial socialization messages are more likely communicated by mothers than by fathers and by married parents than by never-married parents. Also, older and more educated parents provide more racial socialization messages than do younger and less educated parents. Those who live in more racially mixed neighborhoods are more likely to provide racial socialization messages than those who live in predominately African American neighborhoods.
What are the types of socialization that parents provide? Parents socialize their children in several ways. Parents may socialize their children into the mainstream of American society, they socialize them as to their minority status in the country, and they socialize them to their Black culture (Thornton, 1997).

Different types of socialization experiences promote different messages. When parents socialize their children regarding minority status, they may socialize them to, for example, “Accept your color.” Mainstream socialization messages might say something like, “Hard work will pay off in a good life.” Parents who provide socialization messages related to the Black experience might convey to their children, “It is important to study Black culture and history.”

These socialization experiences affect children’s psychosocial and academic development. For example, children who are aware of racism and racial barriers may perform better than those who are not. Sanders (1997) found that students who have a strong awareness of racism show increased academic motivation and effort.

In general, children of parents who report higher ethnic socialization are more likely to have a racial identity that questions the majority standards and values. These children are more likely to value being African American and participate in African American experiences and activities. In addition, they are more prepared for and less likely to be adversely affected by racist and discriminatory practices.

There are some gender differences in the racial socialization messages parents provide to their children. Parents tend to emphasize racial pride for girls and racial barriers for boys (Thomas & Speight, 1999).

Parents want girls to be proud of being Black. They want their boys to understand that they will be discriminated against. Gender differences in socialization messages may be due in part to realistic barriers for African American males.

Methodological Issues

Methodological issues center on the conceptualization and measurement of self and identity constructs. One issue is clarification of the components of the self that are important to the well-being of African Americans. The importance of measuring certain components of the self is discussed in this section. A second issue is clarity regarding racial and ethnic identity constructs. Although the terms racial identity and ethnic identity are often used interchangeably, they are different constructs and require different measures. In this section, we review measures of both racial identity and ethnic identity, along with measures of racial socialization and acculturation.
COMPLEXITY AND MEASUREMENT OF SELF-CONCEPT

Findings from studies that have investigated the relationship between self-concept and other variables have been mixed. Some studies have found that self-concept is not related to academic performance, mental health, and problem behaviors (e.g., violence, drug use), whereas others have found positive relationships. Closer examination of how self-concept is measured shows that global measures of self-concept are not correlated with these variables, but domain-specific measures of self-concept are. For example, in a study using a sample of African American youth, global self-concept was not related to risky drug attitudes and behavior but self-concept in the social and interpersonal domain was (Townsend & Belgrave, 2000). High self-concept in the social and interpersonal domains was related to less risky drug behavior. Other studies have similarly shown that social and physical (e.g., athletic) aspects of self-concept are correlated with social and psychological well-being for African American youth, especially males (Whaley, 1993). In general, what the literature suggests is that measures of self-concept for African Americans should be domain specific and not global.

MEASURES OF RACIAL AND ETHNIC IDENTITY

Several good measures of racial and ethnic identity and related constructs exist for both adolescent and adult populations.

The Racial Attitudes Identity Scale (RAIS), developed by Janet Helms (1990), is the most widely used racial identity scale for adults. There are four subscales of the RAIS that correspond to the racial identity attitudes described previously. An example of a pre-encounter item is "I feel very uncomfortable around Black people." A dissonance item is "I find myself reading a lot of Black literature and thinking about being Black." An immersion item is "I believe that everything Black is good, and consequently, limit myself to Black activities." An internalization item is "People, regardless of their race, have strengths and limitations." The 50-item scale uses a Likert format whereby respondents indicate the degree of agreement from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree.

The Multi-Ethnic Identity Measure (MEIM) is a measure of ethnic identity and not racial identity. The MEIM was developed to measure ethnic identity in ethnically diverse populations. It has been extensively used with several ethnic minority adolescent populations. The measure assesses young people's identification with unique characteristics of their ethnic group (Phinney, 1992).

The three subscales of the MEIM include (a) affirmation and belonging, (b) ethnic identity achievement, and (c) ethnic behaviors. There are
14 items on a 4-point scale that goes from strongly agree to strongly disagree. An example of an item that measures affirmation and belonging is “I am happy to be a member of the group I belong to.” An item that measures ethnic identity achievement is “In order to learn more about my ethnic background, I have often talked to other people about my ethnic group.” An ethnic behaviors item is “I am active in organizations or social groups that include mostly members of my own ethnic group.” Respondents are also asked to indicate their ethnicity and the ethnicity of their mother and father.

Smith and Brookins (1997) developed a measure of ethnic identity specifically for African American youth. The Multi-Construct African American Identity Questionnaire (MCAIQ) is used with youth from 11 to 18 years of age. Four components of ethnic identity are included in the measure. The social orientation subscale assesses the youths’ affinity toward socializing with their own or other racial and ethnic groups. An item from this subscale is “I prefer White friends.” The appearance orientation subscale assesses the values regarding physical characteristics (“Black is beautiful”). The attitudinal subscale assesses the degree to which respondents accept or reject stereotypical portrayals of African Americans (“Blacks can do anything if they try”). The other group orientation subscale assesses preferences for working with people other than Blacks (“I like working with other people better”).

The Multidimensional Inventory of Black Identity (MIBI) is based on the Multidimensional Model of Racial Identity (MMRI) and has 56 items assessing three stable dimensions of racial identity: centrality, ideology, and regard (Sellers et al., 1997). Centrality is measured with 8 items (e.g., “Being Black is important to my self-image”). Regard is measured using two subscales: a 6-item scale for Private Regard (e.g., “I feel good about Black people”) and a 6-item scale measuring Public Regard (e.g., “Overall, Blacks are considered good by others”). There are four scales, each with 9 items, examining Ideology. These subscales include Assimilation (e.g., “Blacks should try to work within the system to achieve their political and economic goals”), Humanism (e.g., “Blacks would be better off if they were more concerned with problems facing all people than just focusing on Black people”), Minority (e.g., “The same forces that have led to the oppression of Blacks have led to the oppression of other groups”), and Nationalism (e.g., “White people can never be trusted where Blacks are concerned”).

The African Self-Consciousness Scale (ASC) is an Africentric measure of Black self-concept. While it is generally considered a measure of Black personality, it also measures racial identity. The ASC has 42 items and uses an 8-point Likert scale. There are four subscales that correspond to the four components of African self-consciousness identified by Kambo (1998): (a) awareness and recognition of one’s African identity and heritage; (b) general beliefs and activity priorities for African survival, liberation, self-knowledge, and affirmation; (c) collective African survival through the practices of
African values and customs; and (d) a position of resistance toward anti-African and anti-Black forces. (For more details, see Chapter 2.)

**MEASURES OF OTHER CULTURAL CONSTRUCTS**

**Acculturation Measure**

The African American Acculturation Scale is a widely used scale that measures acculturation among African Americans (Landrine & Klonoff, 1994). The 74-item scale has several subscales:

1. Preference for African American Things ("I try to watch all the Black shows on TV")
2. Traditional Family Practices and Values ("I often lend money or give other types of support to members of my family")
3. Traditional Health Beliefs, Practices, and Folk Disorders ("Some people in my family use Epsom salts")
4. Traditional Socialization ("When I was young, I was a member of a Black Church")
5. Traditional Foods and Food Practices ("I eat a lot of fried foods")
6. Religious Beliefs and Practices ("I like gospel music")
7. Interracial Attitudes ("Whites don't understand Blacks")
8. Superstitions ("What goes around comes around")

A shorter version of the scale, with 33 items, also exists (Landrine & Klonoff, 1995).

**Racial Socialization Measure**

Racial socialization has been studied by asking adolescents what messages they have received from parents and grandparents. Stevenson (1995) developed a 45-item Racial Socialization Scale that measures these processes. The scale is used with adolescents and has four components. The spiritual and religious coping component includes items about messages that recognize spirituality and religion as helpful to surviving life's experiences. A second component is extended family care. These items express attitudes and interactions that promote the role of extended and immediate family as serving a child-rearing and caring function. A third component is teaching of African American history, culture, and pride to children. This component is called cultural pride reinforcement. The fourth component is racism awareness teaching. These items focus on messages and attitudes
that promote cautious and preparatory views regarding the presence of racism in society. In addition to the adolescent scale, there is a recently developed parental racial socialization scale.

Summary

The study of self-attributes such as self-esteem, self-concept, and racial and ethnic identity has a long-standing history in African American psychology. Aspects of the self relate to well-being and functioning across several domains.

Self-concept is knowledge about and beliefs about the self, and self-esteem is one's evaluation of the self. Conceptualization of the self depends on culture and socialization experiences. Racial identity is group or collective identity based on one's perception that he or she shares a common racial heritage with a particular racial group. Ethnic identity is defined by involvement in the cultural practices and activities of one's ethnic group and by positive attitudes toward, attachment to, and feelings of belonging to one's group. Acculturation refers to both individual and group-level changes in behaviors, attitudes, and values that take place over time as two or more cultural groups come into contact. Racial socialization involves messages and behaviors about race that parents and others transmit to children.

Historically, Blacks in this country were described as having a negative self-concept and were believed to engage in self-denigration as a result of inferior status in this country. However, more contemporary models of Black self-concept are affirming and indicate that the self-concept of African Americans is not negative. Both Nobles's (1991) model of the extended self and A. H. Jenkins's (1995) model of the self as an agent of change convey positive conceptualizations of the self-concept of African Americans. The development of identity is a process that involves personal insight and observation of oneself in a social context. Nigrescence models are the most common models of racial identity. Nigrescence models account for what happens during each of the stages through which African Americans go through to reach racial awareness. New models emphasize that there are multiple dimensions important to understanding racial identity. In general, studies have found that high ethnic identity is associated with better self-concept, better mental health, higher achievement, and fewer problem behaviors.

There are several good measures of racial and ethnic identity as well as acculturation and racial socialization.

The African proverb "The fowl does not act like the goat" implies important lessons about what it means to be African American in our commonality, in our uniqueness, and with our individual differences.