Determinants of Self-esteem in African-American and White Adolescent Girls

By

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Introduction

The considerable discussion in recent years of the decline in self-esteem among adolescent girls (Gilligan, 1990; AAUW, 1990) has primarily been based on white girls and argues that entering puberty engenders a crisis in confidence focused primarily on self-perceptions linked to gender-role identity development. Others have argued that the constellation of predictors of self-esteem differs by race and sex (Hare and Castenell, 1985; Wade et al., 1989) even where the levels of self-esteem might be similar (e.g., among black and white girls). Erkut et al. (1999) suggest that girls from different races and ethnic groups use different standards to judge self-worth and Eccles et al. (in press) conclude that gendered self-concepts and self-esteem not only vary across domains and ethnic groups but that there is much more variation within groups than between groups.

This paper extends the Eccles et al. analysis from middle school to high school and examines the determinants of self-esteem among African-American and white girls in the eleventh grade. We find, similarly, that, unlike earlier years, there is no significant difference in levels of self-esteem between the two groups of girls at this age (mean is 16.5 years); that the sources for their self-esteem still diverge; and that they take on new form in the eleventh grade.

Sample

The analysis is based on a longitudinal survey of seventh, eighth and eleventh graders in one public school district in a mid-Atlantic state which is comprised of 65% African Americans and 30% whites. The sample is unique in that the families of both groups have comparable socioeconomic status, with income ranging from less than $5000 to more than $200,000, and the median is at roughly $42,500 for African-Americans and $49,000 for whites in 1993.

Measures

Using multivariate regression techniques, individual factors such as sense of self in various domains (e.g., physical attractiveness, feminine self-image, masculine self-image, academic self-concept) were examined, along with contextual factors such as relations with adults (e.g., youth's perceptions of family climate, of mom's psychological control, and of parental worries about negative outcomes), peers (e.g., popularity) and school (e.g., grade point average, importance of academics for the future, school as serving a social function, and having to take remedial courses). The global self-esteem measure, used as the dependent variable, is adapted from Harter's (1983) global self-worth scale. This 3-item scale (alpha at eleventh grade is .75) taps adolescents' confidence in and satisfaction with themselves (sample item: *How often would you change lots of things about you if you could?),* assessed on a 5-point Likert scale (responses range from *almost always* to *almost never*). Higher scores on the scale reflect greater self-esteem.

Results

The overtime figure clearly shows an increase in self-esteem for both boys and girls and whites and blacks between seventh and eighth grade but a downward trend for most into the eleventh grade. Scale means were 3.59 (s.d.=.96), 3.89 (s.d.=.96) and 3.85 (s.d.=.87) for the seventh, eighth, and eleventh grades, respectively. This is consistent with the argument that it is the change in school environment that creates the negative impact on adolescents' sense of self-worth (Eccles et al., 1993; Simmons & Blyth, 1987). It is clear however that it is the white girls who are significantly different from the other groups throughout although the black girls appear to be losing their edge by the eleventh grade. (See figure.)

While there is no significant difference in levels of self-esteem between black and white girls in the seventh grade (3.79 vs. 3.63), the sources for that self-esteem diverge. In the seventh grade, as reported by Eccles et al. (in press), self-esteem for both groups of females is largely based on their sense of their physical attractiveness (beta=.44 and .43, respectively) but interpersonal satisfaction with the adults in their lives plays a larger role for white girls (beta=.43) than for black girls (beta=.25) whose sources of self-esteem are more varied while still reflecting their relationships with adults. Academics play a role for white girls at this age (beta=-.23) but not for black girls.

By the eighth grade, levels of self-esteem between black and white girls are considerably different. Black girls have increased their mean levels much more dramatically than the white girls although both have gone up but not enough to catch up with the boys (3.89 vs. 357, p. < .001). And the sources of their self-esteem continue to be different. Both are generally concerned with their physical attractiveness (beta=.11 and .12), their feminine self-image (beta=.36 for both) and their weight (beta=-.16 and -.20), but black girls' self-esteem is also predicted by their social self-consciousness (beta=-.18), the disparity between their educational aspirations and expectations (beta=-.16), and an anchoring in traditional gender roles (-.12) while white girls' self-esteem is based on their masculine self-image (beta=.21), parental worries about potential negative outcomes (-.19) and test anxiety (-.11).

In eleventh grade, there is again no significant difference in level of self-esteem for black and white girls (3.79 vs. 3.63) but, once again, there are variations in their predictors as well as a change in their content. (See figure below which contains the *absolute* beta values). Whereas in earlier years, physical attractiveness--including worries about weight--was a factor, albeit declining, in both groups of girls' sense of self-worth, it surprisingly seems to no longer play a role. Instead, the large proportion of variance is explained by the girls' feminine self-image (beta = .45 for black girls and .55 for white girls), i.e., how good looking and popular they *wish* they were rather than how good looking they *are*, and some by their masculine self-image (beta= .11 and .28, respectively). Black girls' sense of worthiness is now based on the importance of academics (beta=.15) and their perception of the amount of psychological control exerted by their mothers (beta=-.24) whereas white girls are positively impacted by having social reasons for going to school (beta=.22) and negatively impacted both by having had to

take a remedial course (beta=-.11) and parental concerns about potential negative outcomes (beta=-.11).

Discussion

The results suggest, first, that adolescence is not necessarily a crisis of confidence in *all* girls, as African-American girls' level of self-esteem generally retains that of their male counterparts. We also confirm the divergence in sources of self-esteem for different racial groups, reflecting varied strengths in the two groups. As Hancock (1990) and others have argued, the basis for girls' self-esteem, but especially white girls' self-esteem, is mired in their evaluations of their appearance. African-American girls appear to draw strength from their families in both early and later adolescence while white girls shift from supportive family relationships to their social life at school as a source of esteem. What is worrisome is the converging levels and feminine content of self-esteem for both groups at later adolescence which indicate that these African-American girls, who come primarily from a middle class background, may be losing their foothold and falling prey to the same unrealistic standards of feminine beauty reflected in contemporary American society as are their white girlfriends.

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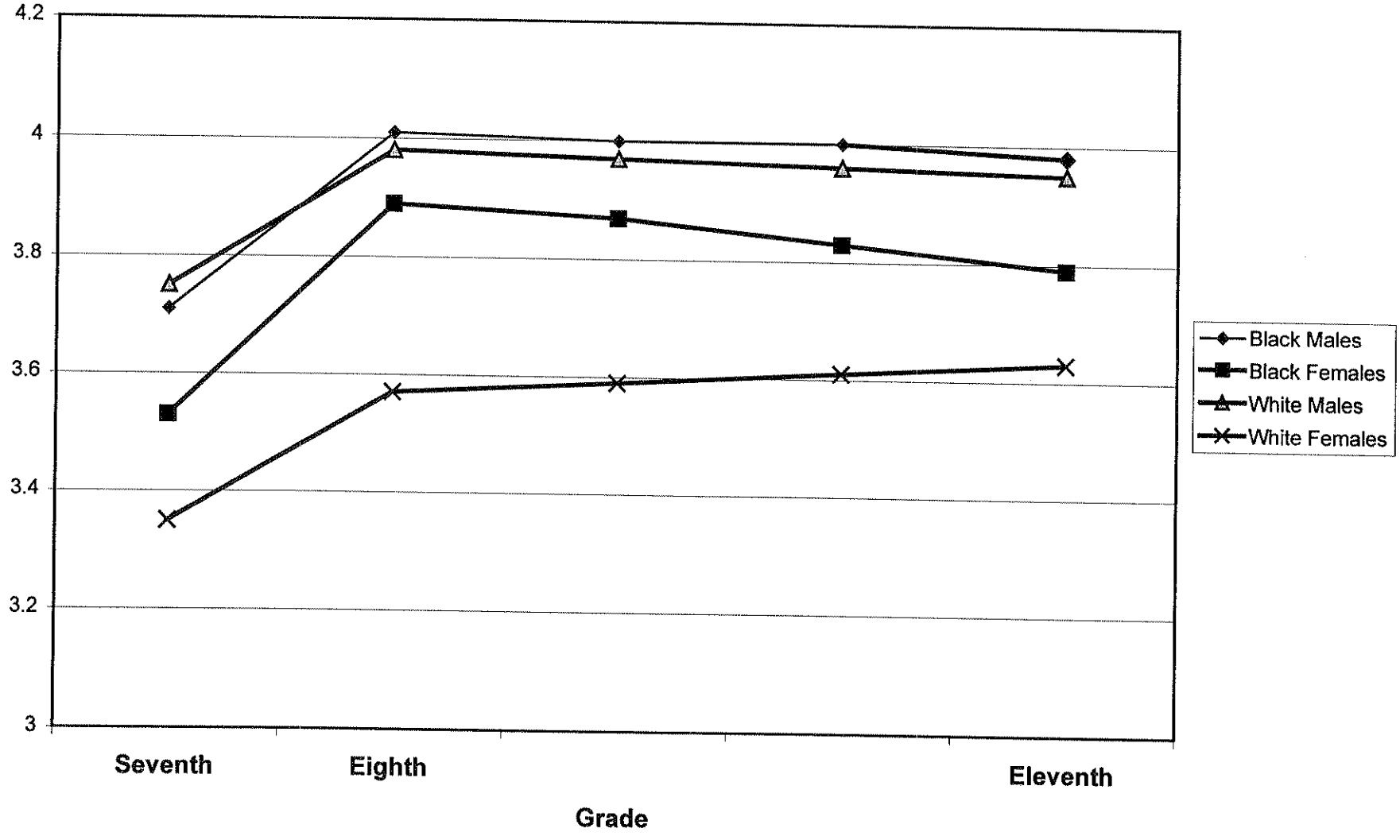
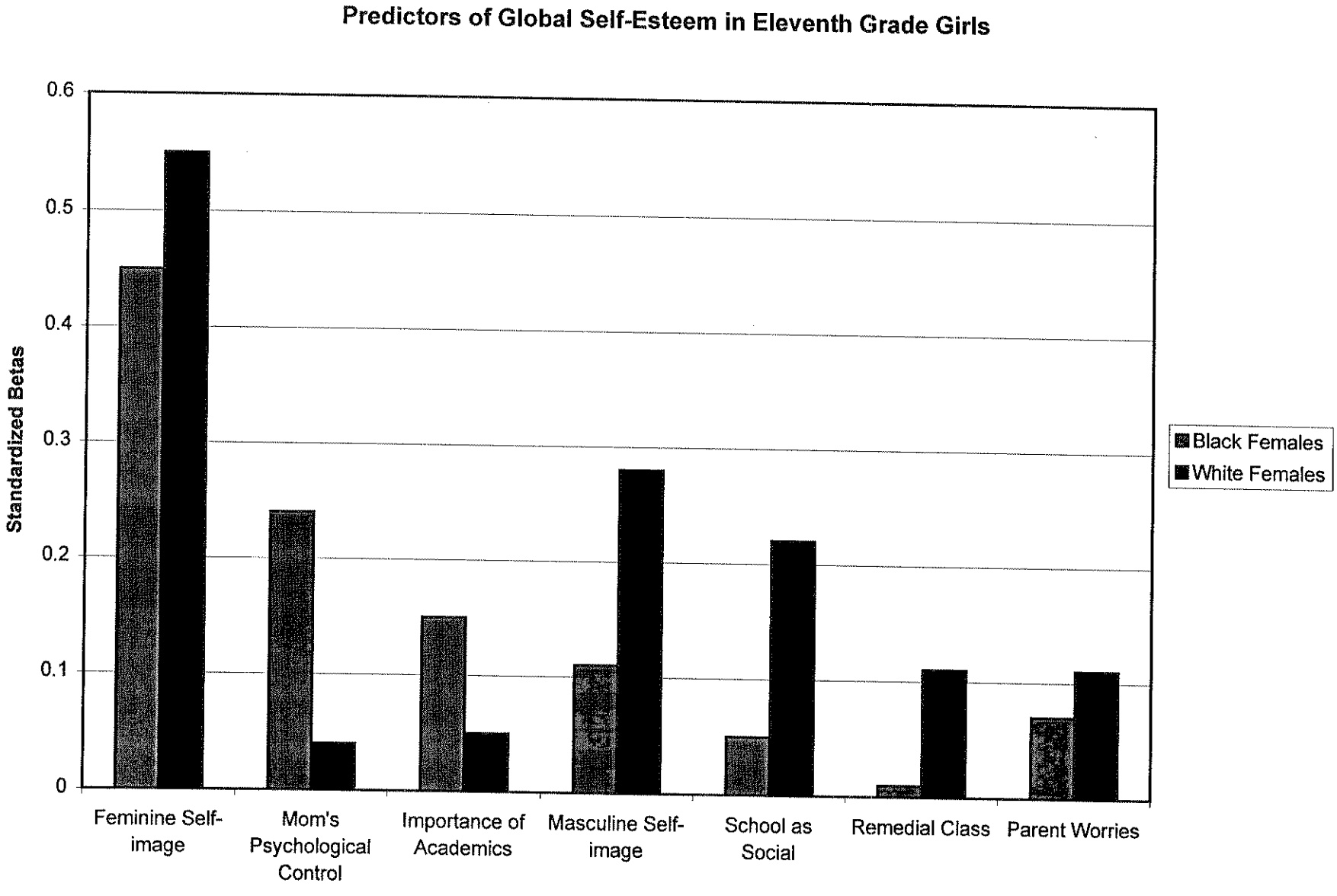
Mean Self-Esteem in Adolescence by Race and Gender




Predictors of Global Self-Esteem in Eleventh Grade Girls
Standardized Betas
0.6
0.5
0.4
0.3
0.2
0.1
0
Feminine Self-image
Mom's Psychological Control
Importance of Academics
Masculine Self-image
School as Social
Remedial Class
Parent Worries
Black Females
White Females