

Examining Racial Identity and Masculinity as Correlates of Self-Esteem and Psychological Distress in Black Men

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Data presented for 124 young adult Black men indicate that self-esteem was positively related to participants' Internalization racial identity attitudes, and negatively related to conformity to traditional masculine norms in the dominant culture in the United States. Psychological distress was positively related to Pre-Encounter and Immersion-Emersion racial identity attitudes (J. E. Helms, 1995) and to conformity to masculine norms.

Los datos se presentan para 124 jóvenes adultos Negros, que indican que el autoestima fue relacionado positivamente a la Interiorización actitudes de la identidad racial, y negativamente relacionado a la conformidad a normas masculinas tradicionales en la cultura dominante en los Estados Unidos. La angustia psicológica fue relacionada positivamente al Pre-Encounter y el Immersion-Emersion actitudes de la identidad racial (J. E. Helms, 1995), y a la conformidad a las normas masculinas.

Black men and women's experiences of racism in the United States are believed to contribute to problems of anxiety, depression, and substance abuse (Burke, 1984; Outlaw, 1993); low levels of self-esteem (Simpson & Yinger, 1985); life satisfaction (Broman, 1997); and academic success (Gougis, 1986). Addressing Black men specifically, White and Cones (1999) posited that "the continuing presence of racism creates powerful emotions and uncertainty in the lives of African American men. Over the long haul, prejudice and discrimination can generate rage, anger, frustration, bitterness, resentment, grief, despair, or any combination of these emotions" (p. 141).

Black men's racial identity in response to racism, or how much they prefer or identify with a Black or White reference group, is believed to contribute to their self-esteem and psychological distress (Cross, 1971). For example, it is suggested that Blacks who have a strong, positive Black identity are likely to have better mental health than those who identify with the dominant White culture in the United States (Helms, 1990). More specifically, for Blacks in this country, positive racial identity is described as rejecting the negative racial portrayals of Blacks found in U.S. society "to achieve a self-affirming and realistic racial-group or collective identity" (Helms & Cook, 1999, p. 84).

On the basis of Cross's (1971, 1978) nigrescence theory, Helms (1995) developed a four-status model of Black racial identity. The Pre-Encounter status is the least affirming racial identity status for Blacks in the United States and is characterized by racial identity attitudes that denigrate Black culture and idealize White cultural values. Encoun-

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ter, the second racial identity status, begins when an individual has a personal and challenging experience with White or Black society that leads the person to question his or her "Blackness." The Immersion-Emersion status follows the Encounter experience and involves learning the meaning and value of one's race and unique culture. However, the individual may not internalize an authentic sense of Blackness but may become reactionary toward the dominant White culture. This may lead to anger and distrust of Whites that may contribute to psychological distress (Parham & Helms, 1985a). In the fourth status, Internalization, the individual's Black identity is experienced as a self-affirming and valued aspect of the individual. The calming down period that characterizes the Internalization status enables the individual to assume a more realistic and healthy experience of her or his sense of Blackness that is self-affirming (Helms, 1995).

Results from the racial identity literature have shown that these statuses are related to self-esteem and psychological distress as predicted by Cross (1971, 1978). Pre-Encounter attitudes are reported to relate to lower levels of self-esteem (Munford, 1994; Parham & Helms, 1985b; Pyant & Yanico, 1991), higher levels of anxiety (Parham & Helms, 1985b), and lower levels of psychological health (Pillay, 2005). Immersion-Emersion attitudes are reported to relate to feelings of inferiority, inadequacy, hypersensitivity, low-actualizing tendencies, low self-regard, and high anxiety (Munford, 1994; Parham & Helms, 1985a). Finally, Internalization attitudes are reported to relate positively to self-esteem (Poindexter-Cameron & Robinson, 1997; Speight, Vera, & Derrickson, 1996) and negatively to depression (Munford, 1994).

In addition to racial identity, it is also important to examine the role of Black men's conformity to the traditional masculinity norms of the dominant White culture when attempting to understand Black men's self-esteem and psychological distress. Results from predominantly White samples have indicated that traditional masculinity relates to lower self-esteem (Cournoyer & Mahalik, 1995) and higher levels of anxiety and depression (Cournoyer & Mahalik, 1995; Sharpe & Heppner, 1991), anger and abuse of substances (Blazina & Watkins, 1996), hostility and irritability (Mahalik, 2000; Mahalik, Locke, et al., 2003), somatic complaints (Mahalik et al., 2003), and general psychological symptomology (Good et al., 1995; Hayes & Mahalik, 2000; Mahalik, Locke, et al., 2003). However, no research to date has examined how masculinity predicts self-esteem or psychological distress in racial minority men, making generalization of these findings to non-White samples problematic.

Because race and gender are two central parts of Black men's identity, it is critical to examine both racial identity and masculinity in the context of each other as predictors of Black men's self-esteem and psychological distress. One reason to do so is that it is not known whether each construct uniquely predicts self-esteem or psychological distress beyond the variance accounted for by the other. Another reason is that integrating racial identity and masculinity is likely to be complicated for Black men in the United States. Media present unflattering images of Black men, for example, as gangbangers and as absent fathers (White & Cones, 1999). Experiences with racism make it more difficult to live up to U.S. masculine ideals of success

and power (Clatterbaugh, 1990; Pierre, Mahalik, & Woodland, 2002). Cultural values in the Black community such as interdependence or collectivism (Caldwell & White, 2000; Sue, 2000) may be incompatible with White America's masculine ideal of rugged individualism.

We are suggesting that it is critical to examine these two central aspects of Black men's identity—racial identity and masculinity—in the context of each other. This study seeks to determine whether these two constructs explain unique variance in Black men's self-esteem and psychological distress. We hypothesized that (a) Pre-Encounter and Immersion-Emersion racial identity attitudes and conformity to traditional masculinity norms will predict lower self-esteem and higher psychological distress and (b) Internalization attitudes will predict higher self-esteem and lower psychological distress.

method

PARTICIPANTS

Data were obtained from participants in Pierre and Mahalik's (2005) study. One hundred twenty-four participants self-identified as Black; their average age was 20.35 years ($SD = 1.98$). They identified their ethnic group primarily as African American ($n = 69$, 55.6%) but also reported being Caribbean American ($n = 17$, 13.7%), African ($n = 1$, 12.1%), Cape Verdean ($n = 15$, 12.1%), Haitian ($n = 7$, 5.6%), Other ($n = 1$, .8%); 14 participants did not report their ethnic group. Their sexual orientation was primarily heterosexual ($n = 102$, 82.3%), but 12 participants (9.7%) reported being bisexual and 8 (6.5%) reported being gay; 2 men not report their sexual orientation. Almost all of the participants were single ($n = 115$, 92.7%). Of the 124 men, 87 were recruited from universities, and 37 were recruited from the community. The largest number of the participants ($n = 46$, 37.1%) had attended a "majority White" high school, while fewer had attended a high school that was "majority Black" ($n = 32$, 25.8%), "integrated/even" ($n = 28$, 22.6%), "all Black" ($n = 13$, 10.5%), "all White" ($n = 4$, 3.2%), and 1 did not report on the ethnic makeup of his high school.

INSTRUMENTS

Black Racial Identity Attitude Scale (BRIAS; Helms & Parham, 1996). The BRIAS, a 50-item inventory that uses a 5-point Likert-type scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 5 = *strongly agree*) to assess racial identity attitudes as conceptualized in Cross's (1971) model of nigrescence. The measure includes four subscales that correspond to the four statuses of Black racial identity (i.e., Pre-Encounter, Encounter, Immersion-Emersion, and Internalization); these statuses are scored as average item scores for each subscale ranging from 1 to 5. Support for the racial identity constructs comes from studies reporting satisfactory internal consistency reliability coefficients for the four subscales (Helms & Parham, 1996) and 1-month subscale stability estimates ranging from .52 to .66 (Lemon & Waehler, 1996). Other studies

have only been able to identify a three-factor structure corresponding to Cross's Pre-Encounter, Immersion-Emersion, and Internalization statuses, with no support for the Encounter status (Ponterrotto & Wise, 1987). In our study, the coefficient alphas for Pre-Encounter, Encounter, Immersion-Emersion, and Internalization .81, .37, .70, and .64, respectively. Because the reliability for Encounter was so low, it was dropped from all subsequent analyses.

The *Conformity to Masculinity Norms Inventory (CMNI; Mahalik, Locke, et al., 2003)*. The CMNI measures conformity to an array of masculinity norms found in the dominant culture in U.S. society. The inventory consists of 94 items that are answered on a 4-point scale (0 = *strongly disagree* to 3 = *strongly agree*) with possible scores ranging from 0 to 282. The CMNI yields 11 factor-validated masculinity norms and a Total score (Mahalik, Locke, et al., 2003), but only the CMNI Total score was used in this study to provide a global index of conformity to masculine norms in the dominant culture. Regarding validity, Mahalik, Locke, et al. (2003) reported that CMNI scores significantly related to other masculinity measures and related significantly and positively to psychological distress, social dominance, aggression, and the desire to be more muscular, and significantly and negatively to attitudes toward psychological help seeking. Addressing reliability, Mahalik, Locke, et al. (2003) reported that coefficient alpha for the CMNI Total score was .94, with a test-retest coefficient over a 2- to 3-week period of .96. In this study, coefficient alpha for the CMNI Total score was .88.

The *Coopersmith Self-Esteem Inventory (CSEI; Coopersmith, 1967)*. The 25-item CSEI measures a person's self-assessment of personal, family, academic, and social aspects of life. Each item consists of a trait description, to which the person responds "Like me" or "Unlike me." Total scores range from 0 to 100 and are the sum of ratings for each item (0 or 1) multiplied by four. Internal consistency reliabilities range from .87 to .92, and an impressive amount of information indicating construct, concurrent, and predictive validity exists (Peterson & Austin, 1985). In African American samples, the CSEI was found to relate in theoretically consistent directions with measures of self-concept, locus of control, and achievement (Burbach & Bridgeman, 1976; Howerton, Enger, & Cobbs, 1994; Wood, Hillman, & Sawilowsky, 1996). In this study, Cronbach's alpha was .79.

The *Symptom Checklist-90-Revised (SCL-90-R; Derogatis, 1994)*. The SCL-90-R measures psychological distress by assessing how much discomfort each symptom has caused the individual within the last week. To do so, persons rate 90 symptoms on a 5-point scale from 0 (i.e., *not at all*) to 4 (i.e., *extremely*). In this study, we used the Global Severity Index (GSI) to assess general psychological distress because it is the average rating given to all 90 items ranging from 0 to 4. Derogatis reported evidence for the validity, internal consistency, and test-retest reliability of the GSI. In our study, alpha was .91 for the GSI.

PROCEDURE

Black men between the ages of 18 and 25 years, both college students ($n = 87$) and community participants ($n = 37$), were recruited for this study. Specifically, three

methods were used to obtain Black male volunteers. First, two faculty members at two historically Black universities were asked by the second author to serve as contacts at their southeastern universities. The instructors identified potential participants at their institutions and administered the surveys to those individuals.

Second, to identify potential participants at a predominantly White northeastern university, the researcher (the second author) contacted faculty members in the Black Studies program; coordinators of the Black Student Forum; the campus chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People; and African American, Hispanic, Asian, and Native American students who shared a university housing facility. From these persons, the second author obtained contact information for individuals who were interested in participating in the study. These persons were then informed of the time and place to complete the questionnaires, which were administered by the researcher.

Third, contacts at an inner-city Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA) and an African Methodist Episcopal church in a northeast city were approached to help identify potential participants for the study. The YMCA and the Black church were both in predominantly Black and lower income neighborhoods. Contacts at these sites provided names and addresses of potential participants to the second author who then contacted them with the details of the study. Interested persons were then informed of the time and place to complete the researcher-administered questionnaires.

The packets that participants completed included a cover letter that assured the participants' anonymity, informed them of their rights (e.g., that they could withdraw from the study at any time), and explained the general nature of the research. Specifically, the participants were told that they were recruited because they were men who identified themselves as Black or African American and were between the ages of 18 and 25 years old. They were told that they would answer questions about their experiences with personal coping behaviors and distress, how much they endorsed certain masculine norms, and their attitudes toward self and culture to better understand how Black men cope and manage distress.

Each participant was asked to complete a set of a pencil-and-paper inventories, which consisted of a demographics form, the BRIAS, the CMNI, the CSEI, the SCL-90-R, and two other measures (i.e., the African Self-Consciousness Scale and the Africultural Coping System Inventory) used in another study conducted by the first and second authors. Participants took approximately 40 minutes to complete the questionnaires.

results

PRELIMINARY ANALYSES

A comparison of means and standard deviations from our study with those of other samples using the same measures indicated that our sample was within half a standard deviation of Black college men on Pre-Encounter and

Internalization scores (Whatley, Allen, & Dana, 2003) and within half a standard deviation of mostly White college men on the CMNI Total score (Mahalik, Locke, et al., 2003), self-esteem scores (Cournoyer & Mahalik, 1995), and GSI scores (Todd, Deane, & McKenna, 1997). Our sample was lower but within one standard deviation of Black college men on Immersion-Emersion scores (Whatley et al., 2003).

To determine whether the variables met the assumptions of normality for the main analyses, we calculated skewness and kurtosis values. Results indicated that all the scores in the study met the assumptions of normality.

Examining correlations between the racial identity and masculinity variables (see Table 1) indicated that Pre-Encounter scores were significantly related to CMNI Total scores ($r = .31, p < .001$). This correlation indicated that the more Black men used White people as their preferred racial reference group, the more likely they were to conform to the masculinity norms of the dominant culture in the United States.

We compared the means of the university and community samples to determine whether group membership should be modeled in the regression analysis to control for differences. Results indicated that the groups had similar scores on three of the six variables but that university students scored significantly higher than the men in the community on Internalization, $t(122) = 4.22, p < .001$, and self-esteem, $t(122) = 2.07, p = .041$, as well as significantly lower than the men in the community on Pre-Encounter attitudes, $t(122) = 2.14, p = .034$. Because men from these two groups differed on these variables, group membership (1 = university sample, 2 = community sample) was entered into the first step of the two hierarchical regression analyses.

TABLE 1
Means, Standard Deviations, Ranges, and Intercorrelations of
Black Racial Identity, Masculinity, Self-Esteem, and
Psychological Distress Variables

Variable	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Range	1	2	3	4	5
Black Racial Identity								
1. Pre-Encounter	2.27	0.56	1.28–4.11	—				
2. Immersion-Emersion	2.89	0.58	1.68–4.33	.27**	—			
3. Internalization	4.00	0.43	2.86–4.93	-.30***	-.05	—		
Masculinity								
4. CMNI Total	141.44	17.78	42–188	.31***	.15	.03	—	
5. Self-Esteem	83.39	9.32	56–100	-.34***	-.13	.27**	-.31***	—
SCL-90-R								
6. GSI	0.96	0.73	0.00–2.88	.45***	.29**	-.07	.36***	-.57***

Note. *N* = 124. CMNI Total = Conformity to Masculinity Norms Inventory; SCL-90-R = Symptom Checklist-90-Revised; GSI = Global Severity Index.

* $p < .05$, two-tailed. ** $p < .01$, two-tailed. *** $p < .001$, two-tailed.

MAIN ANALYSES

Two hierarchical regression analyses were conducted examining CSEI and GSI scores, respectively. For both analyses, group membership was entered in the first step, and the racial identity variables and the CMNI Total score were entered in the second step (see Table 2). Examining self-esteem scores indicated that group membership was significant in the first step ($\beta = -.19, p < .05$) but was not significant in the full model. In the second step, Internalization ($\beta = .24, p < .05$) and Masculinity scores ($\beta = -.26, p < .05$) were significant predictors of self-esteem scores in the full model.

Examination of psychological distress (GSI scores) indicated that group membership was not significant in the first step. In the second step, Pre-Encounter scores ($\beta = .35, p < .05$), Immersion-Emersion scores ($\beta = .16, p < .05$), and Masculinity scores ($\beta = .25, p < .05$) were significant predictors of GSI scores.

discussion

The results from the study confirmed five of the eight hypothesized relationships and suggested that both racial identity and conformity to masculine norms in the dominant culture explain unique variance in Black men's self-esteem and psychological distress. Specifically, self-esteem was positively related to Internalization attitudes and negatively related to conformity to traditional masculine norms in the dominant culture in the United States. Psychological distress was positively related to Pre-Encounter and Immersion-Emersion attitudes and to conformity to masculine norms.

TABLE 2

Hierarchical Regression Analysis of Racial Identity and Masculinity Predicting Self-Esteem and Psychological Distress in Black Men

Step and Variable	Self-Esteem Scores			Psychological Distress Scores		
	ΔR^2	β^a	sR^2	ΔR^2	β^a	sR^2
Step 1	.04*			.004		
Group membership		-.11	.009		.05	.002
Step 2	.20***			.29***		
Pre-Encounter		-.18	.024		.35***	.089
Immersion-Emersion		-.03	.001		.16*	.024
Internalization		.24*	.043		.04	.001
CMNI Total		-.26**	.058		.25**	.052
Full Model						
Multiple R	.49			.54		
Multiple ΔR^2	.20			.26		
F(4, 118)	7.74***			11.98***		

Note. N = 124. CMNI = Conformity to Masculinity Norms Inventory Total score.

^a β for full, 5-variable model.

* $p < .05$, one-tailed. ** $p < .01$, one-tailed. *** $p < .001$, one-tailed.

The finding that Black men's conformity to masculinity norms related to less self-esteem and more psychological distress is consistent with a growing number of studies reporting masculinity-related constructs to be associated with poorer psychological health in predominantly White samples (e.g., Cournoyer & Mahalik, 1995; Good et al., 1995; Hayes & Mahalik, 2000; Mahalik, Locke, et al., 2003). It is important to note that this is the first study to verify this relationship with Black men; all previous published work examining masculinity and self-esteem or psychological distress have used predominantly White samples.

These results are also consistent with previous research on racial identity's relationship to self-esteem and psychological distress (Carter, 1991; Munford, 1994; Parham & Helms, 1985a, 1985b; Pillay, 2005; Pyant & Yanico, 1991). The findings from this study confirm that as young adult Black men devalued their own racial group and looked up to White standards of merit (i.e., endorsed Pre-Encounter attitudes), they tended to have greater psychological distress. As they idealized their socioracial group and denigrated White standards (i.e., endorsed Immersion-Emersion attitudes), they tended to have greater psychological distress. As they experienced inner security with their Blackness and declined in anti-White feelings (i.e., endorsed Internalization attitudes), they reported greater self-esteem.

It is also noteworthy that the correlation reported in the preliminary analyses indicated that Black men who devalued their own racial group and looked up to White standards of merit (i.e., Pre-Encounter attitudes) tended to endorse the dominant culture's masculinity norms. This finding provides some support for the thesis of Mahalik, Locke, et al. (2003) that the CMNI measures conformity to the masculinity norms of the dominant culture. This finding may be important to explore in future research to understand the interaction of racial and gender identity in racial minority men. For example, if Black men prefer a White reference group, does this influence them to conform more to the dominant culture's masculinity norms, or if they use the dominant culture's masculinity norms as a reference group for masculinity, does this influence them to prefer a White reference group? In either case, Black men's constructions of identity are likely influenced by both their racial group reference and the dominant culture's messages about men's roles. Because both variables uniquely predicted variance in self-esteem and psychological distress scores in this study, future research should examine these two constructs simultaneously when trying to understand minority men's experiences.

Future research should also examine how both racial identity and gender role conformity may operate for women of color and for White men and women. For example, it may be that Pre-Encounter attitudes for women of color predict greater conformity to feminine norms in the dominant culture (e.g., thinness) possibly contributing to presenting problems counselors may see (e.g., eating disorders). For Whites, it may be the case that White men and women's gender roles are influenced by their racial identity or vice versa. Given that research has shown a consistent relationship between masculinity and psychological concerns (see Mahalik, Good, & Englar-Carlson, 2003) and that higher levels of unhealthy or defensive narcissism relate to less developmentally advanced statuses of White racial iden-

tity (Corbett, 1995), White racial identity and gender conformity may contribute to both identity development and presenting concerns in Whites.

These findings also suggest that counselors should explore Black men's experiences of both being Black and being men in U.S. society. Helms and Cook (1999) encouraged counselors to focus on racial identity statuses to inform the counseling process. Our results suggest that masculinity and racial identity are both uniquely associated with Black men's self-esteem and psychological distress and should both be a part of exploration and treatment planning.

limitations and conclusion

The findings of this study should be considered within the context of several limitations. First, the 18- to 25-year-old age range of the sample limits the generalizability of findings to other age groups. It is likely that Black men who are older than 25 years have had unique developmental experiences (e.g., as fathers, husbands, workers) and historical experiences (e.g., some experiential knowledge of the sociopolitical climate of the 1960s) that may affect their racial identity, gender role conformity, self-esteem, psychological distress, or any of the relationships among these variables.

Second, the relationships between racial identity, conformity to masculine norms, and well-being identified in this sample of Black men may be different for men of different racial, ethnic, or cultural backgrounds. Given the different sociopolitical experiences of various minority groups in the United States, results from this study should not be generalized to other minority men. The study also did not examine the influence of sexual orientation and socioeconomic status on Black men's masculinity. Because these two variables have been associated with men's construction of masculinity (see Kimmel, 1987, 1997), future studies should examine the ways in which these sociocontextual variables also interact with masculinity and race in contributing to men's psychological well-being. In addition, the study used self-report measures and reported correlational data. Thus, all of the sources of bias associated with self-report data and the problems with interpreting causality in the findings should be understood.

In conclusion, our results suggest that how one feels about being Black and the masculine norms that guide or constrain one's life as a man in U.S. society uniquely contribute to Black men's self-esteem and psychological distress. This study is the first to address the effect of these two critical elements in relationship to each other when predicting Black men's self-esteem and psychological distress. The results suggest that both aspects of identity are important and should be considered together when examining Black men's experiences.

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