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Being Black and its Affects on One's Self-Esteem

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Abstract

Black self-hatred exemplifies the hatred a black person has for himself and the members of his racial group. The history of blacks and the effects of slavery in American society, along with the prominent ideals of the dominant white culture, have relegated blacks to an inferior status within society. Blacks have internalized the negative thoughts and attitudes against them as a race. As a result, it has negatively influenced the development of their self-esteem. This research looks at the effect of being black on self-esteem.

Being Black and its Affects on One's Self-Esteem

What does it mean to be black? Based on racist ideologies, the name black is associated with evil, and white with virtue (Hunter, 1998). According to Frantz Fanon, the great revolutionist, the word black dehumanizes black people. "Whereas 'blacks' is not a proper name, anti-black racism makes it function as such . . . Each black is, thus, ironically nameless by virtue of being named 'black'. So blacks find themselves. .. not structurally regarded as human beings" (Gordon, 2002, p. 12). References to blacks imply they are intellectually inferior, have the absence of feelings, and are sexually insatiable (Watts, 2003). The definitions of black according to *The New Oxford American Dictionary* (2005) are: stained with dirt; of a period of time or situation; characterized by tragic or disastrous events; causing despair or pessimism; full of anger or hatred; archaic very evil or wicked. As such, because of these negative connotations, there has been immeasurable damage on the psyche of each generation. Being black has dramatically damaged the development of a black person's self-esteem, and has resulted in black self-hatred.

Blacks have been enslaved, discriminated against, stigmatized, and marginalized. The question this research aims to answer is how does this perception of blackness affect the development of the self. The key is to understand what it is like to be black in America and its affects on one's self-esteem. The objective is to define black self-hatred, to explore the influence of slavery on the origination of the concept, to look at the ways in which blacks view themselves in respect to rest of society, and to study the impact all of this has on the development of the self for blacks.

What is Black Self-hatred?

Within any one race, there are members of that race who maintain a dislike for himself and the members of his own race. This dislike is based on or stems from the known stereotypical characteristics of his race and can lead to an attitude or feeling of loathing for his race. This may also be a result of the prominence of the accepted qualities of the predominant race. This dislike is described as self-hatred. Black self-hatred is exemplified in the hate a black individual has for himself and members of his race. He or she detests his or her racial identity and everything it denotes, and will do what is necessary to achieve distance between his or her racial identity and its characteristics.

The treatment blacks have received from the white American society has contributed greatly to the development of their self-hatred. Their relegation to "second class citizen," and the white's insistence of black inferiority have created problems in the self-evaluation of blacks. An integral part of black self-hatred is the rejection of one's self, for the idealized qualities of whites, who they harbor hostility toward, in a sense adding to their own self-rejection. By emulating the attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors of whites, blacks are essentially "reinforcing the prejudiced feelings and beliefs of the majority" (Parham, White, & Ajamu, 2000, p.61). The tendencies of blacks to imitate whites, to mask their true selves, or to act white have led to over assimilation, resulting in a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Black self-hatred represents a contradiction of feelings. According to Parham, White, and Ajamu (2000) the concept of self-hatred represents the repression of threatening hostile feelings toward whites who, has keep them in an oppressive state. The suppressed feelings are then internalized as the hatred of the self and of the group at

large. What becomes conflicting is blacks coexisting feelings of hatred for whites and their want to imitate them. This is the consequence of a confused identity.

Black self-hatred is more than an identification of race and skin color. Williams (2004) defines race as "a careless, deeply unconscious, and highly aesthetic phenomenon" (p.106). She sees whiteness as the "artful visions of the possible," "privileged," filled with ideas of being "whatever it wants to be" (p.106). Whereas, blackness is "whatever remains"(Williams, 2004, p.106). More importantly, being black goes beyond skin color to a construct that reflects identity, culture, and a sense of self (Sniderman & Piazza, 2002). Black ethnicity is rooted in vernacular cultural expression and the indicators of cultural authenticity often are found there" (Harris, 2003, p.18). It is representative of a way of life. It is evident in the ethnic customs, the traditions shared among members of the group, their religions, the food preferences and style of preparation, in one's swagger, clothing, music, and linguistic form. Therefore, blacks who self-hate reject all that is representative of being black.

William E. Cross' theory of Nigrescence systematically outlines the process of becoming black, which can lead to black self-hatred. This involves the process of moving between different stages of identity. The first stage of Cross' theory, pre-encounter, depicts a black individual who defines his social self based on his or her perception of being an American and individual, and not based on ethnicity or race. Very little importance is given to ethnic or racial group identity (Grantham & Ford, 2003). As a black individual, he or she shows no connection to and is not engaged in the black community. He or she views the world based on white norms, values or ideals. This person subscribes to the negative descriptions and labels assigned to blacks and

experiences self- loathing associated with black self-hatred (Parham, White, &Ajamu, 2000; Grantham & Ford, 2003).

<center>The Influence of Slavery</center>

The experience of blacks in America is unlike any other experience faced by other immigrants. During slavery, blacks were dehumanized and treated as being inferior based solely on skin color. They were represented as being subhuman. Shaming blacks was a technique used to break their spirit and diminish them to non-humans. They were chained together like animals and left to sit in their excrement during the middle passage, and displayed naked on auction blocks. Blacks were paraded in front of civilized whites, naked, for their amusement (Hooks, 2003). After slavery, the oppression of blacks was further proliferated though laws of the United States Constitution and Supreme Court rulings, which extended segregation and racial discrimination. In the case of the Dred Scott decision in 1857, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that slaves were not citizens; they were referred to as property (Killoran, Jarrett, & Zimmer, 2000).

Historically, a system was created by whites that determined the boundaries for blacks. Known as Jim Crow laws, they enforced segregation between blacks and whites, hence the concept "separate but equal" (Watts, 2003, p.132). These laws were nothing but institutionalized racism against blacks. This system ranked individuals based on race, and reduced blacks to exiles in their community. Blacks were told where they could sit, which fountain they could drink from, what parks they could play in, and which bathrooms they could use. Whites could move around freely, but blacks had to vigilantly observe the stringent codes established by whites. There was nothing equal about it but everything was separate (Killoran, Jarrett, & Zimmer, 2000). The unequal treatment of

blacks was evident in the quality of education, jobs, and judicial rulings extended to blacks.

According to Na'im Akbar, "the sense of inferiority borne out of slavery has contemporary manifestations such as . . . the physical emulation of white people, and the tendency to think of dark skin and kinky hair as unappealing and African features as less desirable" (Allen & Bagozzi, 2001, p. 6). Slavery and its codes have instilled in blacks the ideals that they are inferior to whites. At the end of slavery, those who were able to demonstrate non-black characteristics or distance themselves from being black were more likely to succeed. This led to the belief that anything associated with blacks and black culture is inferior.

In her book, *Open House: Of Family, Friends, Food, Piano Lessons, and the Search for a Room of My Own,* attorney and writer, Patricia Williams recalls how her aunt Mary polished, honed, and transformed herself so as not to look black. "When she donned her magical cloak, her hindersome African ancestors became invisible; they disappeared as though by the wave of a wand" (Williams, 2004, p.41). For many post slavery blacks, in order to partake in the opportunities reserved only for whites, one would have to recreate him or herself to pass for anything but black.

The American constitution once defined the black man as being "three-fifths" of a man and as "[having] no rights that a white man was bound to respect" (Baldwin, p. 84). Blacks have internalized the prejudiced, discriminatory, and racist things conceived about them as a people, and as a race. As a way of distancing themselves from the stereotypes of themselves that they detest, they internalize the attitudes, customs, and styles that are known of the white culture so they could be more accepted. The horrific treatment

endured by blacks has contributed to a permanent stain on their psyche. This results in the hatred of themselves and their racial identity.

A Sense of Self-esteem

In her book, *Rock my Soul: Black People and Self-esteem*, Bell Hooks (2003) notes the resonating sound of an absence of self-esteem among black folks. Individuals revealed "feelings of inadequacy," "self-loathing and distrust" (Hooks, 2003, p. Xi). Hooks refers to the work of psychologist, Nathaniel Branden to define what is meant by self-esteem. Branden explains:

> Self-esteem is confidence in our ability to think; confidence in our ability to cope with the basic challenges of life; and confidence in our right to be successful and happy; the feeling of being worthy, deserving, entitled to assert our needs and wants, achieve our values, and enjoy the fruits of our efforts (2003, xii).

Without self-esteem, one feels unworthy and inferior; and this longing remains until one develops the sense of self-worth. For Branden, in order to have and maintain a healthy sense of self one must possess: "personal integrity, self-acceptance, self-responsibility, self-assertion, living consciously, and living purposefully" (Hooks, 2003, p.xii).

Identity is an integral part of an individual's self-concept. It encompasses attitudes, feelings, and behavioral characteristics, which allows one to identify with his or her group as a whole. Identity helps to give the individual a sense of belongingness; it defines one's existence, and facilitates in easing one's encounter with negative social messages that can be dehumanizing to the psyche of the individual (Allen & Bagozzi, 2001). Through the relationship fostered with the members of one's group, the individual can come to understand his or her role in the society. The bond created through the

identification with one's group contributes to the positive development of identity (Grantham & Ford, 2003). In essence, the definition one has of him or herself is based on the integration of the I, the individual, and the we, the collective group (Allen & Bagozzi, 2001).

At the core of the identity of blacks is the sense of belonging to a collective. The nature of black ancestry is imbedded in the idea of community and a sense of responsibility for each other (Pinkney, 2000). In looking at identity, certain questions must be addressed:

'Who am I?' Is the question of identity, where it is important to understand the nature of one's humanness. 'Am I who I say I am?' is a question of achieving congruence in assessing how our spiritual, cognitive, affective, and behavioral dimensions align with our self-definition. 'Am I all I ought to be?' is a question of self-actualization where one seeks to achieve the fullest expression of all one is supposed to become (Parham, White, Ajamu, 2000, p.42).

Low attachment to ethic group and a need for internalized group values, as in the case of those experiencing black self-hatred, is associated with low levels of self-esteem (Goodstein & Ponterotto, 1997).

Blacks encounter problems within society that prohibit the healthy development of their self-esteem and racial identity (Grantham & Ford, 2003). As members of a marginalized or stigmatized group, blacks have placed low value on themselves because they are regarded as such by society (Gray-Little & Hafdahl, 2000). One's self-esteem is also based on a measure of his or her social position. "Self-esteem is most often considered a general judgment of personal worth or value" (Gray-Little & Hafdahl, 2000,

p. 27). Because blacks represent a high percentage of working and lower class, are relegated to lower income paying jobs, and are least likely to obtain a college degree, they are more likely to make harsher self-evaluations resulting in a lower sense of self (Gray-Little & Hafdahl, 2000).

Once discord exists within the self, it is difficult for one to establish a healthy self-concept. One's self-concept is generated based on how the individual believes others perceive him or her (Parham, White, & Ajamu, 2000). This is synonymous with Charles Cooley's theory of the "looking-glass self." Cooley notes that an individual's identity is achieved through the perception of those in society. The process of identity development is based on the principles of envisioning how one appears to others, seeing how the person judged one's appearance, and developing the self based on the judgments of others (Yeung & Martin, 2003). The development of black self-esteem and self-concept is influenced by the division of class based on race, and the assigning of blacks to the status of inferiority, in comparison to whites. Approval and validation is sought from the dominant group in society. Because the larger white society, both in the present and in the past, has held negative attitudes toward blacks, there exist no affirmative viewpoint of blacks that would promote the development a healthy self-concept.

Kenneth and Mamie Clark, in their famous experiment reinforced the correlation between self-concept and self-esteem. They examined the psychological effects of segregation on black children. Children more likely ascribed positive characteristics to white dolls (Gray-Little & Hafdahl, 2000). Based on the children's action "[the] Clarks concluded that 'prejudice, discrimination, and segregation' caused black children to develop a sense of inferiority and self-hatred" (The Library of Congress).

Over fifty years after the original doll test carried out by the Clarks, the findings are still the same. Kiri Davis (2005) replicated the Clarks study for her documentary, *A Girl Like Me,* and found that black children still perceived the white doll to be nicer than the black doll. They also thought the black doll to be bad because it was black. Fifteen out of the twenty-one children that participated in the study preferred the white doll to the black doll. On a societal level, this demonstrates the tendency for black children to prefer white skin, white dolls, and white friends (Parham, White, Ajamu, 2000).

Both the Clarks and Cooley illustrate the influence the white culture has on self-esteem on the development of blacks. There are no positive images of blacks in white American culture that reflects blacks as having a sense of value, pride, and self-worth. Because of slavery, blacks have lost their sense of identity. Furthermore, being told one is from Africa does not provide a sense of belonging because Africa is a continent comprising of fifty-four countries, each with their distinctive culture and practices. The uncertainty of not knowing where one is from creates a missing part within one's self.

<div align="center">The Mis(representation) of Blacks</div>

At the root of black self-hatred are the stereotypes of blacks being disseminated. At one point in black history, quasi-scientific methods were used to define blackness and to establish white superiority and black's inferiority based on physicality. Now, according to Williams (2004), real blackness goes beyond a darkened skin complexion to the deeper cultural codes that establish black character. The stereotypical images of blacks contribute to their oppression and internalized self-hatred. The following explore some stereotypical images held of blacks.

Mammy

The image of the mammy during the time of slavery was based on the characterization of a woman who was "black, fat with huge breasts, and a head covered with a kerchief to hide her nappy hair, strong, kind, loyal, sexless, religious and superstitious." The representation of her implied that black women were suitable only as domestic workers (The Jim Crow Museum of Racist Memorabilia). The mammy was a cook, cleaner, wet nurse and surrogate mother to the white man's family. "Her loyalty to her "white folks" was a thing of beauty," she never allowed anyone to speak ill of them (Harris, 2003, p.92).

Jezebel

The image of the jezebel portrays black women as over-sexualized, and animal like. Black women were associated with the character of being loose and filled with uninhibited passion (Harris, 2003).

The Black Female

When black women are not being characterized as being mammies or jezebels, they are depicted as society's social problem. Black women are expressed as welfare mothers, lazy, and unwilling to do anything but make babies. There has always been a drastic difference in the portrayal of white women in comparison to black. White women are represented as soft, feminine, and warm, while black women are viewed as the opposite. Williams explains black women had to fight to overcome the "stereotypes of being strong, overly sexualized, workhorses" (p. 132).

The Black Male

The black male is stereotypically believed to be inferior. It is maintained that the black male portrays sub-standard masculine attitudes. He is thought of as being

unassertive, irresponsible, unmotivated, and as having no desire to work to provide for himself or his family. He is also thought by white American society to be unintelligent and inclined to violence (Watts, 2003).

<div align="center">Standards of Beauty</div>

Blacks define themselves by the standard of beauty imposed upon them by the dominant white culture. "Dark brown skin, kinky hair, and wide noses themselves started to represent barbarism and ugliness. Similarly, straight blond hair and white skin as physical traits began to represent civility and beauty" (Hunter, 1998, p.519). In her documentary, *A Girl Like Me*, Davis (2005) presented an anthology of stories that reflected the experiences of young, black females. A recurring theme among the young ladies was the concern of the effects of the standards of beauty imposed on black females by the dominant culture in society and its affect on their self-image. These young ladies felt that many are influenced by the notion that the closer one is to being white the more acceptable he or she will become.

Skin Color

The Hypodescent rule has been the predominant definition of who is considered black in America. Based on this rule, "one drop of black blood makes you black" (Hunter,1998). This did not rely on appearance but on the idea that you were black as long as some African blood could be traced along one's genealogical line. From the time of slavery, lighter-skinned blacks were preferred. Light-skinned slaves were the result of sexual relations between black female slaves and their white master. They were thought to be intelligent in contrast to the darker-skinned slaves, and they were chosen to be house slaves over the darker counterparts (Hall, 1995). A higher value was placed on the

blacks of lighter skin, and as a result, they were offered privileges unavailable to blacks of a darker complexion (Hunter, 1998).

Based on research, Hall (1995) noted that the lighter one's complexion the more social and economic opportunities become available. One's complexion is a determinant in the level of educational attainment, occupation and income level. Those of a lighter complexion are more likely to attain a higher status than those of darker skin (Hunter, 1998). In contrast to light-skinned women, women of a darker complexion are viewed as unhappy, unsuccessful, less intelligent, experiencing less love, and not as popular (Hall, 1995; Hunter, 1998).

The Bible is no exception in referring to the beauty of blacks with shame. In the Song of Solomon, chapter one, verse five states: "I am black but comely" (Holy Bible, 2000, p.464 & Harris, 2003). This declaration makes it seem unusual for blacks to be associated with beauty, and therefore one should be apologetic, "I am beautiful despite being black" (Harris, 2003, p.1).

"The slogan 'black is beautiful' was popularized in an effort to undo the negative racist iconography and representations of blackness that had been an accepted norm in visual culture" (Hooks, 2003, p.2). However, the damaging perceptions of a darker complexion still permeate American society. Robert Coles notes, "no psychological 'defense' will enable the Negro to feel 'secure' or 'himself' until he is no longer the white man's social and economic prey" (Hooks, 2003, p.22).

Hair

In an attempt to have their hair look like that of white women, black women used hot combs, chemicals such as lye, and hair extensions; this was all done because it was

the view that the long, smooth, soft hair of white women were the standards of femininity and beauty. The terms "good hair" and "bad hair' were used to describe the quality and texture of the hair of black women (Hall, 1995). Good hair was hair that is close in texture and appearance to the hair of white women, and bad hair represented hair that was curly, wooly, or fizzy. In measuring if one had good hair or not, it was based on whether or not a comb could pass through one's natural hair easily (Hunter, 1998).

Body Composition

The attitudes of blacks differ from those of whites in relation to body satisfaction. Thinness is not associated with beauty by black women. Due to societal pressures to conform to the white standards of beauty, black women are showing signs of concerns with their weight (Hall, 1995). Anorexia nervosa, an eating disorder commonly associated with white females of a high socioeconomic background is showing signs of increasing within the black female population. Black females are displaying a high degree of dissatisfaction with their bodies, and those in high economic groups demonstrate a greater level of body dissatisfaction (Hall, 1995).

The pressure to conform to white standards of beauty has caused a great amount of stress on black women. Comparing themselves to the white standards of beauty results in black women feeling inadequate. Most suffer the devastating effects due to their inability to conform and they display negative body images, self-hatred, depression, and eating disorders (Hall, 1995). In dealing with the negative consequences of blacks inability to change to fit society's white standards of beauty, the black community needs to inoculate its members against "the propaganda of white beauty standards" (Hall, 1995, p.134). "Women of color may need to receive a better understanding of the political and

social realities, and obtain tools with which to fight an oppressive society" (Hall, 1995, p.135).

Discussion

James Baldwin wrote, "to be Negro and relatively conscious is to be in a constant state of rage almost all the time" (Charney, 1963, p.65). Blacks have suffered an immeasurable amount of damage due to their internalized anger; this has resulted in black self-hatred and low self-esteem. Self-esteem requires that the individual maintain a sense of integrity. It is necessary that one is honest with him or herself, and that he or she set clear principles of standards and beliefs by which he or she defines his or her behavior (Hooks, 2003). In order for blacks to develop a sense of self-esteem, they need to reject the white principles and create those of their own. Blacks need to heal themselves; they need to create an environment in which they are accepted for who they are.

Blacks raised in communities that are multiracial and multicultural are more accepting of differences that are not solely established on white cultural ideals (Hall, 1995). They are more objective in embracing different standards of beauty. Children raised in such environments are exposed to other children, some who are similar and others who are different, yet all are still perceived to be beautiful. Children also learn how to interact with those who are different from themselves.

It is necessary for black families to establish a positive image of black people in the eyes of their children. They need to instruct them that the images portrayed in the media are not representative of them as a group; it only signifies the stereotypical view held by society. They should educate them on forming their own standards of beauty and not buying into the "propaganda of white beauty standards" (Hall, 1995, p. 134). Black

individuals and communities should also inculcate into the minds of their children from a young age the importance of understanding their history and their differences. By reinforcing these ordeals, the negative images proliferated in the media and the wider society becomes a false depiction of who they know and see themselves to be.

The history of blacks has left them psychologically damaged, but they should put effort into formulating a future that will transform their image. This way they can set their own standards, and have some control over they way others perceive them, thus ensuing a catalyst for future societal change. It is the hope that this sort of effort will result in a similar type of change that the Black Panther revolution or the Civil Rights Movement ensued. Like Martin Luther King Jr. said of the Civil Rights Movement, "[it] was a struggle not only to remove racism's structural barriers to black progress but also the psychological impediments" (Allen & Bagozzi, 2001, p.6). I hope that blacks can generate another movement to completely alter the psychological effects of black history.

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