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SCHOOL ENVIRONMENT, SELF-ESTEEM, AND DELINQUENCY

LEE E. ROSS

School of Social Welfare
University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee
Milwaukee, Wisconsin 53201

ABSTRACT

The positive and negative effects of one's school environment (and interracial contact within this environment) have been widely debated. A question of great concern is whether the racial composition (e.g., school environment) of a school affects one's self-esteem. The present study explored whether self-esteem, race-esteem, school commitment, and delinquency differ by the racial composition of a school. Self-report questionnaires were administered to a random sample of 1,100 high school students in a large midwestern city of the United States. The findings (a) suggest that all four measures differ by school environment, and (b) provide partial support for earlier studies claiming that, within racially homogeneous school environments, African American students, in particular, enjoy higher self-esteem. Moreover, this finding might suggest that racial diversity within certain school environments (e.g., mostly Caucasian or equally mixed) carries with it lower levels of self-esteem. Higher rates of self-reported delinquency, however, were found in the equally mixed school environment than in racially homogeneous school environments.

INTRODUCTION

The formation and development of self-esteem has interested social scientists for many years. Early social theorists such as Cooley (1902) argued that self-concepts are formed as reflections of responses and evaluations by others in one's environment. Since the landmark case of *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* (347 U.S. 483, 1954) the racial composition of American public schools has

changed steadily and has altered the learning environment considerably in both positive and negative ways. Researchers have been particularly interested in the effects of these changes on students' self-esteem (see Clark and Clark, 1947; Cooley, 1902; Coopersmith, 1965; Rosenberg, 1977).

The purpose of this article is twofold: (a) to review and further examine the effects of a schools' racial composition (referred to as school environment) on self-esteem; and (b)

to explore whether self-esteem, race-esteem, school commitment, and delinquency differ by school environment.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The advantages and disadvantages of a schools' racial composition on the self-esteem of African Americans are well documented. Two competing hypotheses—the “contact” and “insulation” hypotheses—have emerged and are widely recognized (see Krause, 1978). The contact hypothesis (originally advanced by Alport, 1954) maintains that the segregation of African American schoolchildren “from others of similar age and qualifications solely because of their race generates feelings of inferiority as to their status in the community that may affect their hearts and minds in a way unlikely ever to be undone” (*Brown v. Board of Education*, as quoted in Stephen, 1978:217). Moreover, attending a predominantly white school enhances the self-esteem of African American students.

Conversely, the insulation hypothesis maintains that, instead of bolstering the self-esteem of African American students, increased contact with majority members (Caucasians) might lower it (Krause, 1978). Moreover, according to Rosenberg (1977), the self-esteem of African Americans in integrated settings would be lower because of the confluence of certain dissonant factors. In such settings, the possibility of racial teasing, conflicting cultural norms and values, and comparisons of academic achievement would damage African Americans' self-esteem.¹

Increasingly, the weight of empirical evidence tends to favor the insulation hypothesis (Krause, 1983). Various researchers suggest that African Americans in segregated school settings enjoy much higher levels of self-esteem than African Americans in integrated settings (for reviews of the literature, see Epps, 1978; St. John, 1975; Stephen, 1978; Wylie, 1979). Therefore, one of the purposes of this article is to examine further the effect of school environment on self-esteem. Unlike prior studies, however, this study includes school environments

that reflect a variety of racial compositions. Moreover, this study explores the relationship between school environment and self-esteem within the broader framework of race, self-esteem, and delinquency.

WHAT IS SELF-ESTEEM?

Most researchers have found it difficult to define self-esteem because of its complexity and the wide range of similar terms (e.g., self-evaluation and self-concept) used to represent it. For many observers, self-concepts are symbols representing varied perceptions, memories, and experiences that have meaning in people's lives. Self-concepts enable people to determine their character, beliefs, values, and certain personality traits. To paraphrase Coopersmith (1965), the resulting concepts lead to the development of certain mental images. The manner in which people regard these images and feelings about themselves is a collection of evaluative sentiments known as self-image. This definition represents what is commonly called a “personal identity” measure of self-esteem. It does not, however, characterize one's esteem for his or her race, ethnicity, or other reference group.

Historically, research in race and self-esteem has assumed that racial identity correlates highly with personal identity (see Brown, 1979; Lewin, 1941; Paul and Fisher, 1980; Stephen and Rosenfeld, 1979). Cross (1991) and later Ross (1994), however, argue that these are two independent factors which, when combined, equal one's self-concept. Cross (1991) views self-esteem as a measure of one's personal identity while equating it with terms such as self-worth and self-evaluation. Likewise, he regards racial identity as a reference group orientation synonymous with terms such as group identity and race-esteem. This study employs both self-esteem and race-esteem because it is important to recognize each as a separate measure.

As the possible effects of self-esteem on delinquency are explored, several other possible influences on this relationship should be acknowledged. According to Cernkovich and Giordano (1992), important factors include

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