

A Longitudinal Study of African American Women and the Maintenance of a Healthy Self-Esteem

Kelly L. Patterson

State University of New York at Buffalo

The present study examined the self-esteem of African American women (N = 428) over a 14-year period using the National Survey of Black Americans: A Panel Study of Black American Life 1979-1992 (NSBA; Jackson & Gurin, 1996). Difference-of-means tests were used to examine self-esteem in four time periods (1979 to 1980, 1986 to 1987, 1988 to 1989, and 1992), and OLS regression was used to determine the effect of three variable categories (support networks, achievement outcomes, and racial esteem) on self-esteem in 1979 and 1992. Although historical analyses of self-esteem predicted low self-esteem for Blacks in general and Black women in particular, African American women maintain a very high self-esteem in three decades. Support networks and achievement outcomes significantly affected self-esteem in both years, and racial esteem was significantly related to self-esteem in 1979. The findings are discussed in relation to historical and current analyses of self-esteem and within a feminist paradigm that supports the maintenance of a healthy self-esteem despite membership in a marginalized group.

Keywords: African American women; self-esteem; social support; Black feminism

Historically, social scientists posited negative psychological outcomes for African Americans (Allport, 1954; Clark, 1965; Clark & Clark, 1950; Grier & Cobbs, 1968; Johnson, 1957; Kardiner & Ovesey, 1962; Pettigrew, 1964; Simmons, 1978). This is not surprising given the totality of the African American experience. It was generally thought that an environment of racial oppression and segregation would devastate the Black psyche and cause self-hatred and low self-esteem. Therefore, scholars, emphasizing the impact of

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the social environment, conducted research based on the erroneous assumption that oppressed people must have degraded self-images.

These dire predictions did not bode well for African American women and their chances for mental health. This was especially true because African American women occupy the least favorable combination of low-status positions in society (Brewer, 1995; Farley, 1995; Smelser, Wilson, & Mitchell, 2001; Young & Dickerson, 1994). Consequently, Black women have limited life chances in most areas of their lives. Recognizing these constraints, feminist scholars have been concerned with how the effects of historical and contemporary subjugation are internalized by Black women and other marginalized groups (Beale, 1979; Collins, 1986, 1990; King, 1988). More specifically, these scholars want to know how being in the position of what Allen (2001) refers to as "unparalleled oppression" affects Black women's self-esteem (Boyd, 1993; Myers, 1975, 1980).

The primary objective of this study is to examine the self-esteem of African American women through a different theoretical lens. Keeping in mind the dire predictions of earlier works, which were based on a deficit model of the Black self, this research switches gears and examines the issue of African American women's self-esteem from a Black feminist perspective—one that wholly acknowledges the existence of multiple oppressions in Black women's lives. However, instead of focusing on these oppressions, the argument is recast to stress the sociocultural characteristics that enable Black women to attain and sustain a healthy sense of self despite being marginalized and devalued in society.

In effect, looking past the victimization thesis allows the examination of whether Black women have and maintain self-esteem within a broader race, class, and gender paradigm (Dill, 1979), a paradigm that is emancipatory in nature because it compels the researcher to view subordinate group members as active agents in their own outcomes (Collins, 1990; Dill, 1979; hooks, 1981). The assumption from this perspective is that Black women can and do have self-esteem. Thus, it becomes necessary to assess how self-esteem is developed and maintained over time in marginalized groups and to determine the predictors of a healthy self-esteem for African American women.

Although research regarding self-esteem and African Americans is substantial, it tends to be limited in three ways. First, most of the studies rely on cross-sectional data collected at one point in time. These data prohibit the researcher from analyzing the construct over a period of time. This present study uses longitudinal data collected in four waves over 14 years to assess the maintenance of self-esteem over time. Second, a large portion of the research on self-esteem deals with children and adolescents and not necessarily in representative numbers. Thus, they have been limited by sample

size. The present study focuses solely on African American women in a representative sample of Black adults. Here, the advantage is that these findings are more generalizable to the population of African American women according to the 1990 and 2000 U.S. Censuses. Third, self-esteem is typically studied as an independent variable that affects behaviors or some other psychological constructs rather than as an outcome variable. This study is interested in contributing to our knowledge of what actually predicts self-esteem for African American women.

REFUTING THE PRINCIPLES OF SELF-ESTEEM

An African American-centered, Black feminist perspective clarifies why the African American experience may run counter to the theoretical principles of self-esteem. The principle of reflected appraisals assumes that Blacks' relevant others are Whites. Under this principle, Blacks would not only have to be aware of the negative attitudes Whites have for them, but they would have to accept them, consider them significant, and believe them to be personally relevant (Hughes & Demo, 1989).

Research reveals that for the general Black population, Whites do not contribute significantly to the formation of Black self-esteem (Baldwin, Brown, & Hopkins, 1991; Crocker & Major, 1989; Rosenberg, 1979; Rosenberg & Simmons, 1972). Self-esteem is developed in immediate interpersonal environments. Because most Blacks live and socially interact in segregated environments, their relevant others are usually other Blacks (McCarthy & Yancey, 1971; Rosenberg, 1965; Rosenberg & Simmons, 1972). Even in interracial environments such as schools, Krause (1983) found that interracial contact with Whites did not negatively affect Blacks' self esteem.

The above findings are especially pertinent to the study of African American women and self-esteem. Black women were once predicted to have low self-esteem because scholars thought they internalized demeaning messages of themselves and measured themselves against a White female standard (Miller, 1992; Myers, 1975, 1980; Scott, 1991). Because they could never live up to the White "ideal," it was surmised that they would not value themselves. However, research findings over time do not support these predictions. Black women are consistently shown to have higher self-esteem than White women, and Black women may be better able to maintain high self-esteem throughout the life course (Boyd, 1993; DeFrancisco & Chatham-Carpenter, 2000; Hoelter, 1983; Myers, 1975, 1980; Turner & Turner, 1982). Black women also have been found not to internalize negative body images to the extent that White women do; thus, they are able to feel good about they

way they look despite not being the thin societal ideal (Harris, 1994; Miller, 1992; Molloy & Herzberger, 1998).

The more recent findings substantiate what Black scholars had long contended. African American women's primary sources of self-esteem are family, friends, church, and community, all of which are composed mostly of other Blacks (Eugene, 1995; Miller, 1992; Myers, 1975, 1980; Scott, 1991). In addition, Myers (1980) found that other Black women are the primary source of Black women's self-esteem because it is their evaluations that are most important for their own self-assessments. Eugene affirms that other Black women validate the experience, perspective, and feelings of African American women that mainstream society attempts to invalidate. Positive reinforcement by others like themselves enables these women to not internalize societal views (Eugene, 1995; Shorter-Gooden & Washington, 1996). The strength of their support networks provides a protective function for their self-esteem and buffers the negative effects of societal stressors, such as race discrimination, that might otherwise result in demoralization and low self-esteem (Gibbs & Fuery, 1994; Lykes, 1983; Miller, 1992; Myers, 1975, 1980).

The social comparisons component of self-esteem is related to relative deprivation theory (Abeles, 1976). It states that Blacks will objectively compare their socioeconomic status vis-à-vis the status of other groups. When they do not measure up to those standards, they will feel deprived, and as a result, they develop a low self-esteem (Pettigrew, 1964). But again, it is within their interpersonal environments where Blacks make the crucial comparisons that build self-esteem. DeFrancisco and Chatham-Carpenter (2000) found that African American women develop self-esteem through intergenerational transmission, primarily from their mothers. They found that African American mothers purposely teach young Black girls how to be resilient when they encounter demeaning onslaughts to their womanhood.

The final principle of self-esteem is the self-attribution component. Porter and Washington (1979) contend that this component is crucial to the self-esteem of African Americans. Some theorists initially believed that Blacks blame themselves for their failures (Heiss & Owens, 1972; Pettigrew, 1964; Turner & Turner, 1974, 1982), especially in relation to socioeconomic issues. But what they found was that African Americans actually attribute the cause of their shortcomings to external forces, such as racial discrimination, that they could not control (Crain & Wiessman, 1972; Gurin & Epps, 1975; Hughes & Demo, 1989). Thus, the structural obstacles that Blacks experience are not attributed to any deficiency in self but to the flaws of the system. Scholars term this concept *system blame* and have found that feelings of high system blame as well as high self-esteem result in a healthy sensitivity to the

real world and a proper psychological adjustment for marginalized groups in society (Gurin & Epps, 1975; Porter & Washington, 1979).

Although system blame is found to be intense in younger Blacks and Black men, the findings for Black women are unclear (Gurin & Epps, 1975; Hughes & Demo, 1989). It would seem, however, that because Black women learn at an early age that they are responsible for their own healthy sense of self and that their self-esteem is built from support systems of kin and nonkin and that it is sustained throughout their life course, system blame may not be as critical to the development of African American women's self-esteem as it might be for other marginalized groups.

INFLUENCES OF A HEALTHY SELF-ESTEEM

Recent research solidifies the notion that Black girls, adolescents, and women have high levels of self-esteem (Crain & Weisman, 1972; DeFrancisco & Chatham-Carpenter, 2000; Hoelter, 1983; Myers, 1975, 1980; Richman, Clark, & Brown, 1985; Rosenberg & Simmons, 1972; Turner & Turner, 1974, 1982). Somehow, in constructing their lives, Black females have developed implicit attitudes and explicit behaviors that enable them to possess internal sources of self-esteem that are socially rooted (Gibbs & Fuery, 1994). Hence, it is important to identify what specifically contributes to developing self-esteem for African American women.

ACHIEVEMENT OUTCOMES

From childhood, Black girls are socialized differently than White children—a vestige of slavery and, later, employment discrimination. According to White (1985), slave women had to be self-reliant and self-sufficient to develop their own means of survival because Black men were often not present to take care of them and their families. Slave women also relied on each other in what White calls a “female slave network.” They helped each other in the field, with household duties, and with the care of children.

Since the end of slavery, Blacks have been subjected to varying degrees of employment discrimination. This made it difficult for Black males to fulfill their provider role. Therefore, Black parents socialized Black girls and adolescents for the provider role because social circumstances necessitated that they be financially self-sufficient (Billingsley, 1992; Lewis, 1975; Turner & Turner, 1982). Black women's participation in the labor force and gains in education have resulted in their near socioeconomic parity with Black men (Collins, 1987; Cottingham, 1989; Dill, 1979; Gibbs & Fuery, 1994; Molloy & Herzberger, 1998; Woody, 1992). In this sense, Black women's achieve-

ment outcomes in education and income, and their role as primary provider for their families, positively contributes to their global self-esteem.

SOCIAL SUPPORT NETWORKS

Another important influence on African American women's self-esteem is the social support network. DeFrancisco and Chatham-Carpenter (2000) found that although self-reliance was an important factor in Black women's sense of self, it was taught and nurtured through the social support of family, friends, and community. Social support networks, which are so central for African American women, were also an outcome of the extremely oppressive circumstances of slavery, circumstances in which slave women had to rely on one another to survive (White, 1985). Again, in later years, Black women relied on kin and fictive kin to aid in supporting and taking care of families as women's labor force participation increased and the cost of child care was prohibitive (Stack, 1974; Valentine, 1978; Wilson, 1987; Woody, 1992).

DeFrancisco and Chatham-Carpenter (2000) found that self-esteem was fundamentally community based for the African American women in their study. These women asserted that the social support they received from immediate and extended family, which included fictive kin, friends, and church members, served the nurturing purpose of instilling the values of pride, respect, self-reliance, and racial esteem. DeFrancisco and Chatham-Carpenter explained that social support was so central to their participants' overall senses of self because it gave them the adaptive skills to survive, and even thrive, in an oppressive society.

In these women's lives, community enhanced self so that the women formed healthy self-esteem while maintaining interconnectedness with other Black women (DeFrancisco & Chatham-Carpenter, 2000). Because Black women often define themselves in terms of significant relationships (Gibbs & Fuery, 1994), Black women with strong support networks acquire the tools necessary to develop positive self-images. These self-images, in and of themselves, are acts of resistance because they are built and nurtured to transcend the limitations of being both Black and female in this society (Collins, 1987, 1990).

RACIAL ESTEEM

As mentioned earlier, one of the problems in the study of self-esteem and African Americans is the conceptual confusion in defining the term. Most of the findings of low self-esteem for Blacks were based on how they felt about Blackness versus Whiteness. Researchers found that most Black children

valued Whiteness more than Blackness (Clark & Clark, 1939, 1950). Therefore, they surmised that Blacks had low self-esteem.

Findings were consistent until the 1960s, when most scholars acknowledge a change in worldview. Some argue that the onset of the civil rights era brought a change in how Blacks felt about Blackness and how they felt about themselves (Allen, 2001; Porter & Washington, 1979; Simmons, 1978). Popular credos such as "Black is beautiful" and "Black pride" served to buttress the already positive feelings of accomplishment that Blacks felt during these struggles (Jones, 1985; Simmons, 1978). The civil rights, Black power, and women's movements collectively affected the self-esteem and racial esteem of Blacks (Allen, 2001; Porter & Washington, 1979; Simmons, 1978). Each of these movements fought hard against inequality and discrimination and, thereby, fought hard against degradation of the Black and female self. Black people saw (what were once thought to be) insurmountable barriers coming down, and these gains had a significant impact on the Black psyche (Allen, 2001; Porter & Washington, 1979; Simmons, 1978).

At the same time that analysts were refining their conceptual and operational definitions of self-esteem, the attitudes of Blacks about their race were said to be changing. Self-esteem was now distinctively conceptualized as self-worth, whereas racial esteem captured how Blacks felt about Blackness. Although these two constructs are conceptually distinct, racial esteem has been found to be a significant predictor of Blacks' self-esteem (Gurin & Epps, 1975; Hughes & Demo, 1989; Porter, 1971; Rosenberg & Simmons, 1972).

In the late 1960s and 1970s, studies began showing positive attitudes toward Blackness and positive own-race preference among Black youth (Hraba & Grant, 1970; Katz & Zalk, 1974; Simon, 1974). There were also consistent findings for Black preference in samples of Black adolescents and Black adults (Gurin & Epps, 1975; Schuman & Hatchett, 1974). These findings were indicative of changes in the Black self-concept due to a rise in Black consciousness. In essence, the civil rights movements socialized Black children and young adults into identifying more strongly with their own group (Hughes & Demo, 1989).

Porter and Washington (1979) concluded that group pride is an important factor in self-esteem for Blacks. Evidence beginning in the 1970s reveals this to be the case (Gurin & Epps, 1975; Hughes & Demo, 1989; Porter, 1971). These studies found that as racial esteem increased, so did self-esteem among African Americans. Thus, developing a positive sense of the group to which one belongs reinforces positive sentiments about the self.

This corresponds directly with how Black women develop a healthy sense of self while maintaining mutually interconnected relations with family,

friends, and significant others in the community (Gibbs & Fuery, 1994). Hence, it is imperative to examine whether positive group sentiment also affects African American women's self-esteem.

STUDY PURPOSE AND HYPOTHESES

Other than assessing whether African American women maintain their self-esteem over a 14-year period, this study's purpose is to examine the various influences on the self-esteem of Black women. If self-esteem is high in Black women, as is posited, it is important to understand why it is high, in spite of the race, class, and gender inequality they experience.

In the general population, the experience of effective performance has been found to affect global self-esteem. Therefore, an assessment of how well or poorly individuals perform in the various roles they occupy should affect their self-esteem. Because family is central to the lives of African American women, this study will analyze whether their assessment of how well they have taken care of their families affects their self-esteem.

A variation of this theme is a person's assessment of how his or her life turned out and assessment of how successful he or she has been. If respondents look favorably on their lives and how successful they have been, it should be reflected in their overall self-esteem. Additionally, self-esteem is one of the few personality concepts in Blacks that is found to be consistently affected by socioeconomic status (SES). This should be especially true for Black women who are overwhelmingly the primary providers for their households. Black women have also made significant gains in education. Thus, this study will also examine whether education and income positively influence Black women's self-esteem. The first hypothesis for the study's analysis is that achievement outcomes are positively related to self-esteem for African American women.

Of utmost importance in the research on African American women's well-being is the study of their social support networks. These networks of social support are shown in qualitative studies to be one of the primary reasons that African American women's self-esteem levels are so high (Boyd, 1993; DeFrancisco & Chatham-Carpenter, 2000; Myers, 1975, 1980). The interpersonal relationships that Black women have with their family and friends enhance their self-worth. Thus, it is hypothesized that kin and nonkin support networks will be positively related to the self-esteem of African American women.

Racial esteem is another factor that is found to be important to African American self-esteem. Although this concept has not been statistically tested in a representative sample of Black women, it should be a strong predictor

based on prior studies, which have shown that a component of self-esteem for Black women is a sense of “groupness” or community. In other words, Black women’s self-esteem develops through interaction with relevant others that happen to also be Black. Therefore, it is hypothesized that racial esteem will also have a positive relationship to self-esteem for African American women.

METHOD

PARTICIPANTS

Because the process of self-esteem formation occurs over time, the optimal design to study it consists of longitudinal data. This analysis will use data from the National Survey of Black Americans: A Panel Study of Black American Life 1979-1992 (NSBA; Jackson & Gurin, 1996). The NSBA is a self-weighted, longitudinal study of African Americans and is the first nationally representative sample of Black adults ages 18 and up in the United States.

The sample was drawn according to a multistage, area-probability procedure designed to insure that every Black household in the continental United States had the same probability of being selected for the study. This sampling procedure resulted in 2,107 completed interviews collected in 1979 and 1980, representing a response rate of nearly 70%. In the first wave of the survey (1979 to 1980), 1,301 (62%) of the 2,107 respondents were women. By the last wave of the survey, in 1992, 623 respondents from the original survey remained. Of these 623 panel members, 428 (68%) were women. The following study restricts analyses to the 428 women who participated in all four waves of data collection to limit possible problems because of changes in sample composition.

Sample attrition is a consistent problem in panel studies that affects the composition and representativeness of the sample. For the NSBA, this problem is even more pronounced because the original study was not conceived as a panel; rather, it was conceived as a one-time cross-sectional study (Taylor, Chatters, & Jackson, 1997). The 8-year time lag (1979 to 1987) between the first and second wave altered the demographic characteristics of the sample. Overall though, this national sample of 428 Black women is quite representative of the Black female population, 18 years of age or older, as reported by the 1980 U.S. Census (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1980).

As illustrated in Table 1, there is a slightly lower proportion of women from the western United States than is indicated by the 1980 U.S. Census fig-

TABLE 1
General Demographic Comparisons of the 1979 and 1980 NSBA Panel Participants and the Population of Black Women From the 1980 U.S. Census

	<i>1979 and 1980 NSBA Panel (%)</i>	<i>1980 U.S. Census (%)</i>
Region		
Northeast	18.7	19
North central	23.6	20
South	53.7	53
West	4	8
Urbanicity		
Urban	79	85
Rural	21	15
Marital status		
Never married	19.2	27.2
Married	53.2	49
Widow	14.7	14.3
Divorced	12.9	9.5
Education		
High school graduate	53	52
Income		
Median family	\$12,000-\$14,999	\$12,674
Median personal	\$8,250	\$8,481

SOURCE: National Survey of Black Americans: A Panel Study of Black American Life, 1979 through 1992 (Jackson & Gurin, 1996) and 1980 U.S. Census.

NOTE: *N* = 428. NSBA = National Survey of Black Americans

ures. There are also more rural representatives in the NSBA than in the 1980 Census. However, the greatest disparity between the NSBA and the Census is in the Marriage category. There is a moderately higher proportion of married respondents in the NSBA than there are married Black women in the United States. Yet there is a much lower percentage of African American women who were never married in the NSBA, 19.2% as compared to 27.2% for the 1980 U.S. Census.

Prior to the NSBA, there was only cross-sectional data for African Americans, and most of the literature on self-esteem was also based solely on cross-sectional studies (Hughes & Demo, 1989; Jackson & Gurin, 1996; Porter & Washington, 1979; Turner & Turner, 1982). This analysis uses the NSBA in four years (1979, 1987, 1989, and 1992) to examine, based on previous research, whether African American women maintain high levels of self-esteem over a 14-year time period. For this section, a simple difference-of-means test will be used to examine the self-esteem of these women at every

wave of the study. Regression analyses will also be used to analyze the effect of various independent variables on the self-esteem of Black women for 2 years, 1979 and 1992. These models will reveal changes that have taken place in these relationships over time.

Instruments

Self-esteem. The dependent variable for this study is based on Rosenberg's (1965) self-esteem index; a derived measure of self-esteem is used for both 1979 and 1992. It is an index of all the statements on the survey that dealt with self-esteem, approval, and acceptance. There are three positively worded statements: "I am a useful person to have around"; "I feel I am a person of worth"; and "As a person, I do a good job these days." There are three negatively worded statements: "I feel I don't do anything right"; "My life is not useful"; and "I feel I do not have much to be proud of." For each of the statements, there is a choice of four responses: 1 = *almost always true*, 2 = *often true*, 3 = *not often true*, and 4 = *never true*. The self-esteem index was constructed by first reversing the values for the positively worded statements so that low self-esteem was reflected by the low values. Next, the mean was calculated from the sum of the six responses. The possible values for the final index were 1 through 4, with 1 representing "low self-esteem," and 4 representing "high self-esteem." Wylie (1989) reported alphas ranging from .74 to .87 and test-retest reliabilities ranging from .63 to .91. In terms of validity, Rosenberg self-esteem scores have been linked negatively to depressive affect, anxiety, psychosomatic symptoms, and interpersonal insecurity (Wylie, 1989).

Achievement outcomes. For this analysis, there are three achievement-related items that assess how well Black women have done in general and in specific areas of their lives: (a) how well the respondent cared for her family, (b) whether the respondent got what she hoped for out of life, and (c) whether she was successful in life. How well the respondent cared for their family was assessed by the following question: "Given the chances you have had, how well have you done in taking care of your family's wants and needs? Do you think you have done very well, fairly well, not too well, or not well at all?" Whether the respondent got what she had hoped for out of life was assessed with the question, "Up to now have you gotten mostly what you hoped for out of life or have you gotten less than you hoped for?" This variable was only available in 1979. Last, how successful the respondent felt she was in life was measured by the question, "On the basis of your experiences so far, to what

degree would you say you have been successful in life? Would you say very successful, fairly successful, slightly successful, or not successful?" This variable was only available in 1992.

Support networks. The literature clearly shows that support networks are crucial to Black women's well-being. Here, three variables are used that indicate the density and intensity of and satisfaction with kin and nonkin relationships. Family satisfaction is measured with a question that asks the respondent, "How satisfied are you with your family life? Would you say that you are very satisfied, somewhat satisfied, somewhat dissatisfied, or very dissatisfied?" Contact with friends is measured with a question that asks, "How often do you have contact with your friends?" The respondent has four response choices, which range from "nearly everyday" to "at least once a month." The last response, "at least once a month," has been collapsed to include the responses "a few times a year," "hardly ever," and "never" because of the low number of responses in those categories. The last variable, friends to tell problems to, is composed of a question that states, "Think of the friends, not including relatives, that you feel free to talk with about your problems—would you say that you have many, some, a few, or no friends like that?"

Racial esteem. This variable is measured through an assessment of the participants' response to 14 questions that asked them how they felt about characteristics used to describe Black people. An index derived from answers addressing the following statement and subsequent questions:

Many different words have been used to describe Black people in general. Some of these words describe good points and some of these words describe bad points. How true do you think each of these words is in describing most Black people?

The choices are, then, that Black people do the following: keep trying, love their families, are ashamed of themselves, are lazy, neglect their families, are lying or trifling, are hardworking, do for others, give up easily, are weak, are proud of themselves, are honest, are selfish, and are strong. The respondents are asked, "Would you say it is very true, somewhat true, a little true, or not true at all for most black people?"

Addressing validity of individual-level psychosocial predictor variables. The individual-level predictor variables in this study included measures of various types of achievement outcomes, social support, and racial esteem.

Initial analyses indicated that the individual-level predictor variables were not highly correlated. In 1979, *family satisfaction* and *got what hoped for* were the most highly correlated variables, at .27. In 1992, *contact with friends* and *number of friends to tell problems* also had a correlation of .27. Thus, issues of multicollinearity on the results in the regression models would not seemingly be a problem.

General demographic variables. Commonly used demographic variables were included in the regression analyses. These include age, education, income, marital status, and region. Age was measured in years; education was in four categories: no high school diploma, high school graduate, some college, college graduate; imputed family income was between \$500 and \$30,000 and greater in 1979 and between \$250 and \$130,000 in 1992; marital status was four dichotomized variables: divorced, separated, widowed, and never married, with currently married as the omitted category; and region of residence was categorized as three dichotomized variables: northeast, north central, and west, with south as the omitted category.

RESULTS

Table 2 displays the mean self-esteem levels for Black women over a 14-year period. As illustrated, Black women's self-esteem remains very high throughout the 14-year period. Nevertheless, the difference-of-means tests between the base year and each successive wave of the panel reveals significant differences between 1979 and 1987, 1979 and 1989, and 1979 and 1992. This indicates that the means for 1987 ($M = 3.43$), 1989 ($M = 3.50$), and 1992 ($M = 3.48$) are significantly lower than the mean for 1979 ($M = 3.56$), despite the maintenance of a consistently high level of self-esteem for these women. One reason why the mean self-esteem may have declined over the 14-year period is the aging process. However, until we examine the impact of age on self-esteem in a more comprehensive regression analysis (Table 3), speculation on the relationship between these two variables will not be made.

Because it has been established that the Black women in this study maintain high self-esteem over a 14-year period, it becomes even more essential to find out the influences on their self-esteem over this period. Table 3 displays the multiple regression analyses of self-esteem on various variables for 2 years, 1979 and 1992. As was hypothesized, achievement outcomes, support networks, and racial esteem all positively affected self-esteem for Black women in 1979 and 1992.

TABLE 2
Mean Difference in Self-Esteem for African American Women,
1979 through 1992

<i>NSBA Panel Year</i>	<i>Mean Self-Esteem</i>	<i>Difference From Base Year</i>
1979 (<i>N</i> = 426)	3.56	—
1987 (<i>N</i> = 421)	3.43	-.13***
1989 (<i>N</i> = 427)	3.50	-.06*
1992 (<i>N</i> = 425)	3.48	-.08***

NOTE: Scores on the self-esteem measure range from 1 to 4, with higher scores indicating higher levels of self-esteem.

* $p < .05$. *** $p < .001$ (all two-tailed tests).

TABLE 3
Multiple Regression Analysis: Self-esteem by Demographic Variables,
Achievement Outcomes, Social Networks, and Racial Esteem^a

	<i>1979 Coefficient</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>1992 Coefficient</i>	<i>SE</i>
Age	.002	.002	-.006***	.002
Education	.034	.020	NA	NA
Income	6.13**	.000	3.03***	.000
Never married	.052	.058	-.016	.072
Separated	.131*	.064	.055	.086
Divorced	.068	.057	.113*	.057
Widowed	.102	.062	.017	.062
Northeast	-.093	.050	-.020	.055
North central	-.019	.044	.053	.050
West	.102	.092	.101	.103
Achievement outcomes				
How well cared for family	-.107**	.037	-.099***	.022
Got what hoped for in life	.167***	.039	NA	NA
How successful in life	NA	NA	-.054*	.028
Support networks				
Family satisfaction	-.120***	.029	-.064*	.032
Contact with friends	-.027*	.014	-.043**	.016
Friends to tell problems	.029	.027	.024	.031
Racial esteem	.063**	.021	NA	NA
Intercept	3.344***	4.106***		
R^2	.23		.19	

NOTE: $N = 428$. There was no success variable in 1979. There were no measurements on education, racial esteem, or the *hoped for* variable in 1992.

a. Omitted categories: For Marital Status, married was omitted; for Region, south was omitted.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$ (all two-tailed tests).

How well these women evaluate their own achievements in family and life also positively affects their self-esteem. The more highly they evaluated how they cared for their families, the higher their self-esteem was in both 1979 and 1992. In 1979, the only variable that measured generally how well the respondents did in life was the *hoped for* variable, which asked them if they got what they hoped for out of life. Those whose life turned out the way they had hoped for had higher self-esteem than those whose lives were less than what they had hoped. This was the most important variable to the self-esteem of Black women in 1979, based on the standardized beta of .208. In 1992, there was a question that asked respondents to rate how successful they were in life. The more successful they perceived themselves to be, the higher their self-esteem. Thus, consistent with findings in the general population, the experience of effectively performing or achieving, generally in life or specifically in a domain such as the family, has a positive impact on the self-esteem of African American women.

The support network variables also had an influence in Black women's self-esteem. Family satisfaction was significant to African American women's self-esteem in 1979 and moderately significant in 1992. In fact, based on the beta coefficient (-.206), family satisfaction had the second greatest influence on self-esteem for Black women in 1979. In addition, the more contact with friends these women had in each year (1979 and 1992), the higher their self-esteem was in each year.

The significance of social support to Black women is highlighted repeatedly in the literature dealing with self-esteem (Boyd, 1993; Collins, 1987, 1990; DeFrancisco & Chatham-Carpenter, 2000; Gibbs & Fuery, 1994; Myers, 1975, 1980). Black women validate each other within their social networks. Consequently, the bonds they form within these networks partially function to build up in themselves what the dominant culture attempts to destroy. These findings also support the notion that the Black self is built on the collective. DeFrancisco and Chatham-Carpenter (2000) found that the Black women in their study emphasized that their connection with others and their independence were mutually supporting and central to their self-esteem and well-being. In effect, their self-esteem, as part of their overall self-concept, was enhanced by group ties and interaction (Mead, 1934). The maintenance of kin and friendship relationships, then, is of utmost importance to African American women.

The participants' score on the racial esteem index was not correlated with any of the other individual-level variables. Unfortunately, no racial esteem questions were asked in 1992, but the findings for 1979 are highly significant and do support the hypothesis that positive feelings about being Black positively affect self-esteem in Black women. Black women not only develop

self-esteem, but they also learn to appreciate the distinctiveness of being Black, and this, in turn, facilitates the building up of self.

Some other significant correlations are also worth noting. Income, for both years, was significantly correlated to self-esteem, with higher levels of income related to higher levels of self-esteem. This finding might be related to the achievement hypothesis. Black women may associate higher incomes with achieving success, and this association may function to build their self-esteem. Or this relationship may simply reflect the reality that higher income enables one to attain a better quality of life.

Another important finding was the significance and direction of the age variable in 1992. Age was not significant at all in 1979, a finding that is consistent with prior cross-sectional research findings (Allen, 2001). However, in 1992, age explains more of the variance in self-esteem than any other variable (standardized $\beta = -.219$), and it is inversely related to self-esteem. This suggests that the older Black women get, the lower their self-esteem goes. This finding must be viewed with some caution because, as noted earlier, the self-esteem average fell only slightly in 1992 and is still very high. But the age coefficient is extremely high in a negative direction, alerting us that self-esteem begins to slip in older age. This is definitely a revelation worthy of further study. It may be that as Black women age and start to lose those close to them, they no longer have the positive reinforcements that bolstered positive feelings about themselves. This reemphasizes the importance of these support networks for Black women.

DISCUSSION

As indicated by these findings, African American women maintained high levels of self-esteem over a 14-year period. In addition, the successful care of family as well as family and friendship support networks were the most consistent predictors of self-esteem in both 1979 and 1992. These findings call into question the conceptualization of self-esteem, especially where Black women are concerned. DeFrancisco and Chatham-Carpenter (2000) are clearly on the right track in this vein when they question prior assumptions of self-esteem referring to a woman's assessment of herself as an individual. They found that for Black women, the concept of self-esteem is fundamentally community based. The very reason the women in their study were able to thrive in the face of a predominantly racist culture was by internalizing community lessons of self-reliance, social support, pride, respect,

and optimism (DeFrancisco & Chatham-Carpenter, 2000). These are qualities that are vital to the mental health of Black women.

One of the most remarkable features of Black women's communities is the deliberate process of building the self-esteem of community members—particularly young Black girls. This process was necessary more than a century ago to give young slave girls dignity in the face of inhumanity (Sterling, 1984; Stevenson, 1996), and it endures today as members of African American women's support networks seek to build their self-worth in a society that devalues them. Thus, the self-esteem they develop from being supported by similar others anchors them and enables them to resist not only demeaning images of their group but the devaluation of themselves as substandard.

The significance of this research is the different lens it uses to examine the self-esteem of a subjugated group that experiences multiple forms of oppression in society. However, the Black feminist perspective, while recognizing oppression in its varied forms, also recognizes the agency of women to create and define their own lives (Collins, 1990; Franz & Stewart, 1994). What has been missing from the literature is the recognition that Black women resist oppression in ways that empower them (Byng, 1998; Collins, 1990; Stewart, 1994). This study sought to remedy that gap by acknowledging that oppression is characterized by domination—and resistance (Dill, 1979; King, 1988). These findings reveal that this was true for these women in both 1979 and 1992.

The robustness of self-esteem over the years partially reflects that it is derived from a collectively identified community of similar others who place importance on the development of self-esteem, especially in young Black girls (DeFrancisco & Chatham-Carpenter, 2000). The continued maintenance of self-esteem by Black women goes against the very ideology of a racist, patriarchal system, one that values Whiteness and manhood. Therefore, members of subjugated groups that are able to affirm their self-worth should also be able to withstand the assault of racial discrimination and other forms of inequality. This is significant as it speaks to the importance of further research into the maintenance of mental health over the life course, especially for members of marginalized groups.

Finally, the previous point reinforces the importance of research on African Americans using longitudinal data. The ability to examine the self-esteem of Black women over 14 years and at two different points in time enhanced the research and strengthened the findings. It is no question that these women were able to maintain high levels of self-esteem primarily because they also sustained favorable family and friendship ties over 14 years and because they continued to achieve success generally in their lives and in caring for their families. It is important to note, however, that when analyzing

the same people at different points in time, other factors may partly influence the outcomes—especially when looking at a time span as large as 14 years. Aging over the life course is an issue in any panel study. In 1992, these Black women were 14 years older, and that fact alone is bound to have an influence on the findings. In addition, aging gives people different perspectives and outlooks that must be taken into consideration when interpreting the data (Jackson, Chatters, & Taylor, 1993). In this study, aging in particular was significant because it was revealed that as these women aged, their self-esteem started to diminish—although they still maintained very high levels of self-esteem. Other research on African Americans found that some of their support networks also diminish with age (Taylor et al., 1997); thus, it would be beneficial to examine the relationships among these variables over time.

The results of this study should alert others that further research is warranted in the study of self-esteem and Black women. Although this work focuses specifically on the maintenance and determinants of self-esteem for Black women, future research should expand this focus and include Black men. Although the reason for focusing this study on Black women was because of their unique status at the center of multiple oppressions, the inclusion of Black men might reveal specific gender differences. For one, the coping mechanisms that Black men employ to deal with varying oppressions may vary. Additionally, different aspects of African American men's lives may affect their self-esteem and whether they are able to maintain it at the same levels that Black women do. Therefore, a thorough analysis of Black men would have to be based on a somewhat different set of assumptions.

In sum, this study set out to assess whether Black women, a group defined as victims of a trilogy of oppression (Gordon, 1987), could maintain their self-esteem over a 14-year time span. Several scholars contend that the three-pronged attack of racism, sexism, and economic exploitation of Black women results in a survival mentality and a multiple consciousness (Byng, 1998; Collins, 1990; Gordon, 1987; King, 1988). However, this consciousness can either lead to increasing oppression or to the will to oppose it (Asante, 1988; King, 1988). A significant portion of the literature dealing with these issues tends to lean toward increasing oppression based on a victimization thesis—a thesis that removes all agency from the oppressed. This study focused on an emancipatory thesis, stressing how various aspects present in African American women's lives empower them to maintain high levels of self-esteem. What this reveals is the importance of the social function as a coping mechanism for African American women. Family and friendship networks contribute to the building and maintenance of their self-esteem. Thus, it is self in community that enables Black women to sustain their self-esteem over the years.

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