

THE REFLECTED APPRAISAL PROCESS IN BLACK AMERICANS

by

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Abstract

The present study investigated the association between self-esteem and private and public regard among Black American-born individuals. Participants ($N = 21$) completed subscales of the Collective Self-Esteem Scale to assess how they feel about the racial group that they belong to, how they perceive American-born White individuals feel about their racial group (i.e., White public regard), and how they perceive other Black individuals feel about their racial group (i.e., Black public regard). They also completed the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale to assess how they feel about themselves as an individual and answered demographic questions. Consistent with past research, we hypothesized that participants would demonstrate a positive association between perceived evaluations of their group from both Black and White individuals with their self-esteem. Also consistent with past research, we hypothesized a positive association between Black public regard and private regard. However, for White public regard and private regard, we would expect no association based on past research, or a positive association if Black individuals no longer separate public regard from private regard due to changes in Black representation in the world today and modern social movements. The results found support for reflected appraisal processes only from other Black individuals (i.e., Black public regard) and not from White individuals.

The Reflected Appraisal Process in Black Americans

Human beings often develop perceptions of themselves and others. According to Cooley (1956), people internalize how they imagine others see them and view themselves based off that imagination. Cooley (1956) states that this happens even more when a person feels that the person observing them is of high importance. Research suggests that individuals perceive themselves and their group the same way that they perceive others to view them and their group (Cooley 1956; Crocker et al., 1994). These ideas broadly capture “the looking glass self” and “reflected appraisal” theories. In addition to affecting one’s views of their group, others’ views of the group can also relate to an individual’s self-esteem (e.g., Perkins et al., 2014). Self-esteem is a leading feature of psychological well-being and is defined as self-worth and self-respect for oneself (Crocker et al., 1994). Consequently, the current study aims to examine the association between perceived appraisal from American-born Whites and from American-born Blacks on private regard and self-esteem using an American-born Black sample.

Subsequent work has mainly provided empirical evidence of the reflected appraisal process, which includes the degree that one’s own views of their group corresponds with their perception of how others view their group. Contemporary work has also expanded the inquiry of reflected appraisal to people’s ethnic group membership (Crocker et al., 1994; Perkins et al., 2014; Wiley et al., 2008). Recent investigations of reflected appraisal have been explored through the use of the Collective Self-Esteem Scale and two of its subscales are a direct examination of the reflected appraisal theory. The private regard subscale measures how one perceives their group. The public regard subscale measures how one perceives their group based off what they perceive others to think about their group.

Using the Collective Self-Esteem Scale as a measure of reflected appraisal, research has shown strong evidence of the reflected appraisal theory among some groups, but not all. For example, in the study by Crocker et al. (1994) White, Black, and Asian participants answered demographic questions and completed the Collective Self-Esteem Scale that examined how they felt about their group (private regard) and how they perceived others to feel about their group (public regard). The results showed that private and public regard was strongly correlated among White and Asian individuals. However, the study also revealed that there was no correlation between private and public regard for Black individuals. The reflected appraisal theory is demonstrated among White and Asian participants in this study, but not among Black participants.

Crocker and colleagues (1994) theorized that Black individuals have learned to compartmentalize how they view their ethnic group from how they believe others view their group due to the prejudicial realities that the Black community has experienced. Previous research has shown that American society holds negative perceptions of Black men and women. For example, the study conducted by Harper (2015) suggests that Black males are perceived by society as uneducated individuals who are highly involved with drugs, listen to a lot of rap music, and only have strong athletic capabilities. Similar implications were also revealed for Black women in the study conducted by Donovan (2011), suggesting that society perceives Black women as more aggressive, masculine, and less favorable than White women. In order to maintain a positive view of their group, Black Americans must separate their personal views from the views of society.

In addition, Wiley et al. (2008) provides further evidence of inconsistency of the reflected appraisal process among Black individuals. The study by Wiley et al. (2008) had participants who were first and second-generation West Indian immigrants complete a questionnaire that included the Collective Self-Esteem Scale. Wiley et al. (2008) found a correspondence between public and private regard in first-generation immigrants, but not in second-generation immigrants. This study revealed that reflected appraisal held for first-generation West Indian immigrants, but not second-generation West Indian immigrants. First-generation immigrants viewed their group in accord to how they perceived others to view their group, but second-generation immigrants did not demonstrate this method of self-concept because it is believed that second-generation immigrants perceive others to view their group the same way that Black Americans perceive others to view their group. Second-generation immigrants are born in the United States, which makes their understanding of the views of their ethnic group by others to be very similar to Black Americans' views of how they perceive others to view them. Therefore, they know to make the distinction between their own views of their group and how they believe others to view their group.

Although past research has shown that individuals may sometimes show a separation between their private regard and public regard, it is possible that they may still show reflected appraisal from the in-group, specifically. To examine this, Perkins et al. (2014) had participants report both perceived appraisal from native-born White individuals (White public regard) and perceived appraisal from members of the heritage culture. The study included first and second-generation immigrant students of color. Participants answered a questionnaire about how much their ethnic group and native-born White Americans publicly regard their group, private regard for their ethnic group, and their individual self-esteem. Importantly, for both first- and second-

generation immigrants, public regard from within their own ethnic group was linked to both private regard and self-esteem, suggesting reflected appraisal does occur from the in-group. However, perceived public regard from White Americans did not relate to private regard and was only weakly related to self-esteem, suggesting that the immigrants were showing reflected appraisal mainly from within their ethnic group.

The present study extends prior research on immigrants of color using an American-born Black sample. It was hypothesized that Black participants' private regard would be positively associated with their ethnic group public regard, as was found by Perkins and colleagues (2014). It was also hypothesized that Black participants' self-esteem would be positively associated with their ethnic group public regard, consistent with Perkins and colleagues' findings (2014).

Also consistent with Perkins and colleagues (2014), we additionally hypothesized that Black participants' self-esteem would be positively associated with White public regard. Based on past research showing a separation of public from private regard, we would predict that there would be no association between White public regard and private regard. However, if modern changes such as increased representation of Black individuals in positions of prominence or other social movements have reduced the perceived need for individuals to show a separation between public and private regard, then we may instead find a positive association between White public regard and private regard.

Method

Participants

There were twenty-one participants in the study. The gender distribution was 5% non-binary, 24% male, 62% female, 5% preferred not to say, and one person did not provide an answer to the question because they did not complete the entire survey. The distribution of race

was 67% Black or African American, 24% Black or African American and Latinx, 5% indicated as another self-described race (“Melanated Being”), and one person did not provide an answer to the question because they did not complete the entirety of the survey. Participants were recruited from the Introduction to Psychology class and online with the use of the recruitment advertisement posted to Facebook groups, which indicated that participants must be American-born and identify as Black or African American.

Materials & Procedure

Participants were provided with a link to a Qualtrics survey that redirected them to an informed consent form where they indicated their consent to participate in the study. Next, they specified if they identified as a Black American-born individual. Then, eligible participants completed the Collective Self-Esteem Scale that included twelve questions with a private regard subscale that assessed their evaluations of their ethnic group and a public regard subscale with two versions that specified how they perceived American-born Whites to view their group and how they perceived other Blacks to view their group. These questions were based on a 7-point Likert scale of 1 (Strongly disagree) to 7 (Strongly agree). Responses were reverse-coded where necessary and averaged into measures of private regard, Black public regard, and White public regard (See Table 1 for reliability information).

Participants also completed the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale that included ten questions based on a 4-point Likert scale of 1 (Strongly disagree) to 4 (Strongly agree). Responses were reverse-coded where necessary and averaged into an overall measure of self-esteem. Next, they answered demographic questions that indicated their age, gender, and race. Lastly, participants were thanked for participating, debriefed on the purpose of the study, and specified if they were in the Introduction to Psychology class to receive credit. One participant did not provide answers

to the questions following the Collective Self-Esteem Scale and is not included in the analyses relating to self-esteem.

Results

A correlation tested the relationship between self-esteem and private regard, as well as self-esteem and White and Black public regard. Somewhat in line with H1, the analysis revealed a significant positive relationship between Black public regard and private regard, $r(19) = 0.66$, $p < 0.001$, but no significant relationship between Black public regard and self-esteem, $r(18) = 0.37$, $p = 0.111$. No significant relationship was found between White public regard and private regard, $r(19) = -0.07$, $p = 0.779$, or White public regard and self-esteem, $r(19) = 0.13$, $p = 0.572$. For descriptive information, see Table 1.

Discussion

Much research has been done on the theory of self-perception, which is known as, “the looking glass self” or “reflected appraisal.” However, there is a lack of research that supports this theory among Black individuals. The present study set out to find if the self-esteem and private regard of American-born Black individuals is influenced by public regard of other American-born Black individuals and public regard of American-born White individuals. In other words, it was hypothesized that Black participants’ self-esteem and private regard would be positively associated with their ethnic group public regard. Also, it was hypothesized that Black participants’ self-esteem and private regard would be positively associated with American-born White public regard.

The significant findings of the study were the positive relationship between private regard and self-esteem and the positive relationship between Black public regard and private regard. Conversely, no significant relationship was found between Black public regard and self-esteem

or between White public regard and private regard, and White public regard and self-esteem. The relationship between self-esteem and private regard, and Black public regard and private regard replicates the study conducted by Perkins and colleagues because Perkins et al. (2014) found a relationship between Black public regard and private regard among first- and second-generation immigrants of color, which partially supports the notion of reflected appraisal from within the in-group.

Also consistent with past research (Perkins et al., 2014), no relationship was found between White public regard and private regard, or with self-esteem. The results of the present study indicate that the negative stereotypes of Black men and women in society do not hold a relationship with Black Americans' self-esteem. Rather, their self-esteem is related to how they themselves perceive their ethnic group, which is related to how they perceive other Black Americans to think of their group. This could mean that Black individuals know that these negative stereotypes about them are not true and do not internalize them. Black individuals choose to internalize what others in their group think about each other because they may view the thoughts and opinions of other Black Americans about Black individuals to be more realistic. These results may also indicate that self-esteem is developed upon a different factor than perceptions of one's ethnic group.

A major limitation of this study is the small sample size. Being that this study was ran during a pandemic, it was much harder to recruit participants. Participants were solely recruited using online social media platforms, which is a limitation because not everyone is on social media. Another limitation is the lack of representation of all genders in the study. Many of the participants identified as female; therefore, the data did not include much insight to the reflected appraisal process in American-born Black men. This study does not have good generalizability

because it only included twenty-one participants who were mostly females in their early twenties, which does not represent the entire population of American-born Blacks in the United States. Despite the limitations, what is important about this study is that it reveals that negative stereotypes about Black individuals are not related to their self-esteem. This is important to know because it suggests that Black individuals do not internalize these stereotypes in a way that produces a relationship with their self-esteem. Even though the negative perceptions of Black individuals often made by White individuals have negative impacts on the lives of Black Americans, these negative perceptions are not related to how Black individuals feel about themselves as a person or how they feel about others who belong to the Black community. Another factor that makes this study important is that it reveals that the self-esteem of Black individuals is related to how they perceive their own racial group. This is important because knowing this gives people the knowledge to show younger Black children positive images of Black people and to teach them positive affirmations about Black individuals to instill good perceptions of their racial group at a young age, which will enable Black children to develop high self-esteem.

Based off the data of this study, some implications for future research are to examine the effects of gender and age on self-esteem and reflected appraisal and the relationship between location in the United States, self-esteem, and reflected appraisal among Black individuals. The present study was mainly representative of females in their early twenties. A replicated study representative of all genders and age groups may or may not show effects of these factors on self-esteem and reflected appraisal because individuals from different age groups have experienced different times in history, like segregation and Jim Crow laws that can have different effects on how they perceive White Americans to view Black Americans or how they

view their own ethnic group compared to White Americans. Similarly, a study that examines the relationship between the region in the United States that Black individuals live and their self-esteem and reflected appraisal could reveal a relationship between self-esteem and White public regard among those who live in one region of the United States opposed to those who live in another region who do not show this relationship. For example, individuals that live in the southeast region of the United States may show a relationship between self-esteem and public regard from Whites because of the conservative history of states in the south that has lead minorities in the south to internalize the perception of themselves as less favorable than Whites through the use of certain laws that were present in these states and not in states in the north. In contrast, individuals that live in the northeast region of the United States may not show support of that relationship because of the less conservative history of these states that eventually abolished racist laws before states in the south.

The present research demonstrates the importance of evaluating public regard separately from both the in-group and out-group. Most importantly, the present research adds additional evidence for the relationship between self-esteem and feelings towards one's own ethnic group along with consistency of the lack of support for a relationship between self-esteem and perceived appraisal from Whites among the Black population.

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Table 1.*Descriptive Statistics of the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale and Collective Self-Esteem Subscales*

| | Mean | Standard Deviation | Cronbach's α |
|----------------------------|-------------|---------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| Self-Esteem | 3.06 | 0.66 | 0.918 |
| Private Regard | 6.10 | 1.06 | 0.769 |
| Black Public Regard | 4.95 | 1.11 | 0.703 |
| White Public Regard | 2.56 | 1.08 | 0.680 |