What Difference Does Difference Make?

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PROJECT TITLE: What's Difference Does Difference Make?

I have reviewed this completed senior honors thesis with this student and certify that it is a project commensurate with honors level undergraduate research in this field.

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What Difference Does Difference Make?: Investigating the Connection Between Self-Esteem and Discrimination

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Spring 2005
Introduction of Project

The proceeding pages are an attempt to offer insight into the relationship between self-esteem and discrimination. Little research has been conducted in this area, although it would seem that given the racially traumatic history of this country, the field would have garnered more merit. According to one statistic, in the United States, nearly eighty percent of minorities have experienced racial discrimination at some time in their lives. For this reason, I have chosen to loosely examine the concepts of self-esteem, both collective and personal, and discrimination. The following pages merely scratch the surface of the interaction between these two hypothetical constructs and its application.
Psychologists have long been interested in the mysteries of the human mind. Much research has been done regarding mental illnesses, personality disorders, and other degenerative conditions such as memory loss. However, little research has been directed at discovering how those hypothetical constructs, which are not dysfunctional, develop. In particular, I am interested in only two of these intangible ideas, self-esteem and discrimination.

American history has been spotted with numerous incidents of mass racial, gender, and sexual tension. Therefore, it would seem that psychologists would be eager to learn how hatred progresses from the brain to the body in an outpouring of either phrases or deeds. Is discrimination learned or is it innate? Is there a discriminate factor in determining the targets of one’s prejudice? What role does self-esteem play in the development and expression of discrimination? And can psychotherapy help eliminate racism, sexism, and homophobia altogether? All of these questions have yet to be researched thoroughly.

This paper will attempt to define both the concept of self-esteem in a concrete manner and the concept of discrimination in a similar way as a basis for examining the relationship between the two. Studies regarding their interaction will be incorporated in lieu of conducting a new experiment, although an idea for an experiment regarding these two principles will be included. Finally, this information will be examined carefully and thought about critically in order to offer suggests about how the relationship between
Another division in the self-concept is that of the individual self vs. the collective self. This simply means that an individual is capable of feeling one way about himself as an individual, but feeling completely different about himself when being assessed as a member of a particular group (Baron, 165). These two self-evaluations can differ greatly. For example, a minority student may have a fairly positive evaluation of himself as individual, but if he is doing poorly in one of his classes, his evaluation of himself may be slightly more negative when he is identifying himself with others in the class who are receiving higher grades. This is just to say that personal self-esteem and collective self-esteem are related in nature, but are independent of each other.

In a study done by several psychologists regarding perceived discrimination and psychological distress, researchers simplified this idea by stating, "Personal identity refers to the self as a unique individual, whereas social identity refers to the self as a group member. Another study conducted by Crocker, Luhtanen, Blaine, and Broadnax (1994) administered measures of ethnic self-esteem, personal self-esteem, and psychological adjustment to White, Black, and Asian students. Findings suggested that ethnic self-esteem is a far better indicator of psychological adjustment beyond the effects attributed to personal self-esteem. Therefore, it is important to consider the implications of belonging to a particular social group and the subject’s evaluations of that social group in order to develop a comprehensive understanding of mental heal outcomes in minority groups (Cassidy, 330).

How Should Discrimination be Defined?
racism is built into society and does not require pervasive negative stereotype to perpetuate racial oppression (Robinson, 20).

Now, let's turn our attention to how discrimination develops. According to Baron, prejudice is based on two underlying factors. First, the underlying schema about the particular target group is responsible for the ways in which one processes information about the group he or she dislikes. Information that is relevant to that particular group is usually attended to more than information, which is irrelevant. For example, if a person who hates homosexuals sees a news story commenting on a gay man who murdered one person, he is more likely to attend to and remember that information than a proceeding story commenting on a heterosexual serial killer responsible for the deaths of fifty people.

The second underlying factor is a parallel evaluation system. This means that not only is the person negatively evaluating the target group, but he is also negatively evaluating the feelings or emotions experienced when they are in the presence of, or merely think about members of the disliked group (Baron, 212).

Little is known about the origins of discrimination, although there are several conflicting, unsubstantiated theories. One of the most common is that of competition. This theory suggests that groups are in constant competition with one another for resources and that this competition breeds an innate dislike towards outlying groups. (Baron, 219) It is my personal opinion that this theory is no more than an evolutionary justification for racism. It is beyond me to understand that only some groups dislike other groups instead of worldwide hatred, if all groups are constantly warring for survival with all other groups.
predecessor of perpetrating acts of hate. I shall clearly deduct my line of reasoning in the following paragraph.

It is human nature to identify with those who are most like us. Evolutionarily, this afforded humans a feeling of safety, camaraderie, and the best chance at survival. Therefore, it is natural to self-identify with a particular group. It is my opinion that when members of a particular group are unsure about their solidified place in that group or suffering from low collective self-esteem, that individual begins to target outlying groups in order to secure his own group’s supremacy. This discrimination has nothing to do directly with competition for resources, but instead is the product of a falsely fabricated threat posed by the disliked group. For this reason, discrimination in recent years has been de-institutionalized and instead has returned to its individualized nature.

It is also my opinion that targets of discrimination do not suffer from low self-esteem, but instead have higher self-esteem than members of untargeted groups. This would explain how the majority of targeted groups are able to withstand discrimination without presenting any detrimental psychological effects. It is this high self-esteem, both collective and personal, that allows the victims to cope with oppression and resentment. Therefore, it could be logically deducted that in the majority of cases, exposure to hatred perpetuates a healthier sense of self, providing that a positive self-image existed prior to exposure.

Members of academia have not sufficiently researched the correlation between self-esteem and discrimination, but we will examine a few of the studies done in this area to determine whether on not an intellectual conclusion can be drawn from these experiments. First, we will discuss Fein and Spencer’s experiment conducted in 1997, as
tend to disparage groups toward whom they are prejudiced, and that in turn boosts their self-esteem (Baron, 213).

Another study, performed by Cassidy, O’Connor, Howe, and Warden, involved the examination of mental health dysfunction as a consequence of perceived ethnic discrimination. There were two theories being investigated in this study: the self-esteem theory of depression and the transactional stress model. The former suggests that self-esteem acts as a moderator of the impact that negative events have on depression. Lower levels of self-esteem present greater susceptibility to depression, while high self-esteem has a protectorate function by making the individual more resilient.

So far, the evidence for this theory has suffered from mixed results. One researcher found conclusive support for the theory in some of the participants in her study on perceived gender discrimination, but results were incomplete in others. Another pair of researchers found that self-esteem did in fact act as a moderator between discrimination and distress, but contrasted the gender discrimination findings in that high self-esteem did not make participants less vulnerable to experiences of discrimination. Instead, it has opposite effects (330, 2).

The second model, the transactional model of stress and coping, focuses on the ways in which discrimination is processed by the target and what coping strategies the target uses to deal with discrimination that is appraised as stressful.

Self-esteem within the transactional model can be conceptualized as a moderator variable, a psychological characteristic of the individual that determines whether a negative event is appraised as stressful and, consequently, whether increased levels of psychological distress are experienced (Cassidy, 330).
in this particular study, although in similar studies scientists have claimed that women define themselves more empathetically than men, which is reflected in different levels of social connectedness between genders (Cassidy, 337).

The final study we will examine is that of Fischer and Shaw (1999). In this study, researchers investigated the effects of three theoretically relevant variables on the perceived racism-mental health relation. Those four variables were racial socialization, self-esteem, and the proportion of African-Americans in social networks,

Fischer and Shaw made several hypotheses regarding the connection between mental health and perceived ethnic discrimination. The first was that perceptions of racist discrimination would be significantly negatively related to global self-reported mental health or more simply stated, perceptions of more discrimination would predict poorer mental health. The second hypothesis was that racial socialization experience and beliefs would moderate the link between perceived discrimination and mental health, such that the link will be weaker for participants with higher levels of racial socialization. The final hypothesis suggested that self-esteem would also moderate the link, such that it would be weaker for participants with higher levels of self-esteem (Fischer, 398).

119 African-American college students (56 men, 62 women, 1 unidentified) were given questionnaire packets including several psychological instruments. The first was the SRE, a self-report that measures the frequency of African-Americans' experience of racism in the past year, the entire lifetime, and also how stressful the events were. Participants also had to complete the Mental Health Inventory, which measures well being and psychological distress for the general population. The Scale of Racial Socialization for Adolescents (SORS-A) was administered to assess views of racial
Participants can be college students, but the researcher will need to be sure that the sample demographically representative of several different ethnic groups. It seems that this experiment would be most easily conducted in a structured classroom, therefore it would be wise to utilize a professor as a co-investigator. This will hopefully also allow for a geographically diverse population.

The experiment is to be conducted in three parts, the first and third parts being identical. Part one consists of the student completing a self-esteem inventory to establish a control group. It is important that the investigators denote some method of identifying the student without jeopardizing anonymity. It is my suggestion that the participants be identified by the last five digits of their social security number or some other unfluctuating marker. It will also be necessary to include some demographical information on this initial inventory such as race, gender, and age.

The second part of the experiment will involve the professor’s help. The investigators should select two films, one including racially hostile content and the other being neutral. The professor will then instruct the students, or in this case the participants, that they will sign up to watch a film for the class, depending on which day will be more desirable to their schedule. This allows for random assignment and also creates a double blind test.

Students will then watch their selected film, the participants watching the hostile film serving as the variable and the ones viewing the neutral film as a control. Immediately following the film, the same self-esteem inventory will be completed. It is imperative that the identification process be exercised without flaw and also that the investigators keep the two groups separate. It is worth noting that the cooperation of the
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