The modern history of studies of the self-esteem of inferiorized groups is examined. Three very different phases in this history are traced to a subterranean dialogue which has linked research foci and findings to single sets of interpretations. The paper argues that important, original issues have been elided by later conceptualizations of the “self-esteem” problem.

The investigation of “self-esteem” in inferiorized groups displays a highly unstable history. In the postwar period alone, both conceptualization and findings of self-esteem studies, as well as their interpretations, have shown remarkable shifts tantamount to paradigm changes. The confluence of academic trends with trends in the rapidly changing perspectives of the groups themselves has produced a volatile mix. The model of linear progress in scientific knowledge renders the career of self-esteem studies incomprehensible. A closer examination of the hidden dialogue lying behind this evolution reveals important research issues overlaid by partisan positions.

The Historical Context

The “classical” position grew out of the work of Lasker (1929) and the Clarks (1939:591; 1950:40), whose psychological testing of black children revealed a higher moral valuation of whites over blacks as “nice” people or preferred playmates. A rapid proliferation of child-studies followed, modeled for the most part on the Clarks’ (1950) example. Researchers such as Radke et al. (1949), Goff (1949), Landreth and Johnson (1953), Stevenson and Stewart (1958), Morland (1962), Butts (1963), Greenwald and Oppenheim (1968), and Porter (1971) all confirmed the basic discovery of lowered self-esteem in black children. The findings appeared to hold for the Northern and Southern states and for integrated and segregated schools. This conclusion was buttressed by interpretive studies conducted at both the societal and case-study levels. Such celebrated works as Myrdal’s (1944) The American Dilemma, Kardiner and Ovsey’s (1951) The Mark of Oppression, and Grier and Cobb’s (1968) Black Rage, as well as Klineberg (1944), Dai (1946), Goodman (1952), and Ausubel (1956), provided interpretive underpinnings affirming the thesis that demonstrable psychological “damage” was present in American blacks caught in a racist society. The Clarks’ study (and, indeed, this tradition as a whole) was canonized by the 1954 United States Supreme Court decision in Brown vs. the Board of Education, which ordered school desegregation.

The early postwar scholarly milieu was further influenced by Jewish reflection upon the Holocaust. The issue of the Jewish response to Nazi oppression was debated by such writers as Orlansky (1946), Golomb (1946), Pelcovits (1947), Forer (1947), Riesman (1948), Rosenberg (1949), Hook (1949), and Greenburg (1950). The pages of Commentary echo with agonized meditations over the lack of preparedness among Jews before the Nazi onslaught. Clearly the ways of getting by that had once assured their survival, rendered them defenseless before systematic persecution. What lessons were to be learned?

Both Anti-Semite and Jew (Sartre, 1948) and “Self-Hatred Among Jews” (in Lewin, 1948) appeared at this time, focusing upon the behavior of Jews in their everyday lives and in organizations. These seminal works, along with a spate of others, generally developed a theme decrying “Uncle Tom”-ism and probing...
the inadequate group consciousness which might have brought about more cohesive, and thus more solidary, defensive organization. Lack of preparedness could itself be viewed as part of the damage wrought by a society which disabled the freedom of Jews in many ways. The issue tended to devolve upon Jewish self-esteem, i.e., the degree to which Jews, behaviorally and sometimes intellectually, accepted their socially purveyed negative image. By functioning within the confines provided by Nazi society, they could not but facilitate the work of their oppressors.

American soil assimilated the Jewish self-esteem problem to the larger experimentalist tradition. Whereas the issue of Jewish self-esteem had been understood as a specific, historically produced problem, black self-esteem entered the ahistorical realm of psychological personality theory. Where self-esteem had been understood as a gloss for behavior strategies which resisted, neutralized, or permitted Fascist oppression, it came to represent an entity characterizing the psyche. Transmuted into the objectivized categories of experimental social science and shorn of the political context in which the phenomenon arises, the question reappeared as the measurement of self-esteem in minority groups. Translation into questionnaires spawned a new scientific reification viewed as a personality construct. Methods by which people deal with subordination evolved, in the scientific literature, into a hypostatized syndrome of ideas and attitudes.

The 1970s overturned the tradition epitomized by the Clarks. Demonstrations of differences in black-white self-esteem rapidly gave way to demonstrations of no "significant" differences (Hrab and Grant, 1970:400; Baughman, 1971; Fish and Larr, 1972:421; Ward and Braun, 1972:646; Heiss and Owens, 1972; Crain and Weisman, 1972; Brigham, 1974:144; Lerner and Buehrig, 1975). The psychometry inspired by the Clarks became rapidly unfashionable; self-esteem studies, once viewed as a lever in the struggle for black civil rights, increasingly acquired the taint of racism. What had happened?

*The Hidden Dialogue*

The postwar evolution of self-esteem studies conceals a subterranean dialogue not immediately evident from the studies themselves. Specific research questions came to be identified with partisan positions in the struggle of minorities for emancipation. Finding something wrong with minorities began to look reactionary as research operationalizing slid out of the dialectic of subordinated subject and oppressive society and into the language of pathology. Whereas lower "self-esteem" once indicated the effects of oppression under the Nazi state, it came increasingly to appear as an inherent component of inferiorized persons.

The slavery debate in historiography posed the same issues. Elkins (1975) draws on another analogy to characterize this debate:

Beneath the debate that has been going on among English scholars over the state of the working classes during the Industrial Revolution lies a painful dilemma. One aspect of the question is all bound up with 'immiseration': the demoralization and brutalizing consequences of exploitation under the emerging industrial system. The other aspect is that of resistance to the exploitation and its consequences: creative energy, the development of a distinctive cultural identity, a radical working-class literature and tradition. The dilemma, of course, is how you can emphasize vitality and achievement while you are also emphasizing decline and degradation... Although powerlessness corrupts, just as surely in its way as does power, our sympathy for the powerless puts limits on our tolerance of what their condition has done to them, and upon our willingness to survey the whole damage. [Elkins, 1975:40.]

The "neo-abolitionist" position represented by Elkins and Stampp focused on the "demoralizing and brutalizing consequences" of the "peculiar institution," demonstrating a thesis parallel to the Clarks' in reference to modern black children. The subsequent movement in historiography tends, as does the change in social psychology, toward minimizing the personal consequences of oppression in favor of signs of resistance. Oliver (1976) notes in his reviews of Fogel and
Engerman and of Genovese that they converge in their images of strong (not disorganized) black family systems, moral integrity, and productive (not recalcitrant) workers.

In the early 1970s, when black militancy becomes a reality that cannot be ignored, unflinching analysis of what Elkins (1975) calls the "damage" inflicted by an oppressive society begins to look like a "defamation" of a people which is moving collectively against its oppressors. Memmi (1966:13; cf. Memmi, 1968:88), in his examination of colonial peoples, remarks:

The oppressed find the description of their servitude even less bearable, as if the description itself increased their anguish. If necessary they will allow themselves to be pitted, they will allow others to lament with them, but only on the condition that the others pretend to believe them proud and irreproachable; in that way, the inevitable results of their long oppression—their wounds, their inner deformities and destruction—are not too closely revealed.

In social situations where the only options were complicity or annihilation, complicity was clearly preferred. Only in hindsight, when passive or active resistance has become a potentially successful strategy, does complicity as a survival strategy begin to look like "Tomism". Strategies for coping with subordination—such as obsequiousness, acting out the stereotypical role assigned by the dominant society, and, in general, conformity to the demands of the oppressive system—acquire the aspect of moral failure in the eyes of subsequent generations who have begun to resist. It is as if mention of the "demoralizing and brutalizing consequences of exploitation" (of which the lowered self-esteem finding is a part) somehow impugns the humanity of its sufferers. The no-difference-in-self-esteem defenders argue as though such a finding contributes to the "readmission" of the group to the ranks of humanity.

By the 1970s, the American Journal of Sociology was publishing articles as a form of obituary on the question of "self worth" among black people. Yancey et al. (1972:338; cf. McCarthy and Yancey, 1971a:648) use Rosenberg's "self-esteem" scale to demonstrate no significant differences between black and white self-esteem. They describe their objectives as "putting to rest" (McCarthy and Yancey, 1971b:591) the lower-self-esteem-in-blacks tradition. "Discrediting this tradition is, we believe, necessary," they add. They conclude that whites are not significant others for blacks; that the insulation provided by segregation permits development of adequate self-esteem in a black milieu.

By now, however, we no longer know what is going on under the "self-esteem" label. Once an indicator of the way people deal with restricted life-chances, this sort of survey tells us nothing of how blacks do cope with white hegemony in earning a living, going to school, reading or watching television, consuming, etc. Self-esteem has become a psychological abstraction which allows the effects of a racist social structure simply to fade away.

Sympathy with minority members, and a desire to free them from the stigma of low self-esteem, has led not to the deaffirmation of the issue, but to attempts to deny its existence completely. Postwar Jewish studies used "self-esteem" or "self-hatred" as a gloss or reference to certain clearly defined practices on the part of the subordinated which impeded or facilitated the implementation of oppression. Analysis here becomes arrested in an ill-defined psychological state divorced from the original problematic and abstracted from the political context which made it meaningful. This obliteration of the problem ironically lends itself to the modern "benign neglect" policy toward black problems and to the rationale undermining "affirmative action."

The Social Psychological Construct

We might identify, then, three manifestations of the self-esteem problem. The phenomenological use of the self-esteem concept was rooted in a historical situation, retaining its referent to a set of behaviors to cope with delimited life-chances. The abstraction of self-esteem
through psychological scales transformed the referent from a set of active, meaningful strategies employed by people to carve a social space for themselves in an inhospitable social environment, to a postulated entity residing in the personalities of subordinated people. This reification of one phase of a dialectical movement gave the new self-esteem something of the aura of a homunculus operating behind the backs of the inferiorized, determining their inadequate or pathological behavior. The third moment in the evolution of self-esteem studies sees attempts to reject the implications of the deterministic reframing of the initial problem. The reified concept becomes too easily assimilated into the perspective of blaming the victim. The response, in this hidden dialogue, is scholarly “exoneration” of subordinated people from the lower-self-esteem thesis. The dialogue which is obscured in black studies can be compared to the clarity with which it presents itself in the study of gay people. Where open hostility toward its subjects has until recently been expressed in scholarly studies with little trepidation, the symbology of lower self-esteem as a gloss for blaming the victim springs clear. The psychological damage wrought by an anti-homosexual society has been traditionally characterized as evidence of the inherent pathology of the homosexual personality. An oppressive social structure has thereby been absolved of responsibility in the problems experienced by gay people. “Exoneration” of the humanity of gay people has taken a similar tack. Demonstration of “no-difference” in the psychological profiles of homosexual and heterosexual people has been interpreted as evidence of the “no-pathology” thesis (cf. Chang and Block, 1960; Dean and Richardson, 1964; Evans, 1970; Thompson et al., 1971; Greenberg, 1973; Weinberg and Williams, 1974:200). Yet again, parallel to the hidden dialogue in studies of black self-esteem, the obliteration of difference once again absolves the larger society of any need to evaluate persecutory practices or opportunity structures.

To recapitulate, “self-esteem” studies of inferiorized peoples exhibit certain problems:

1. Modern studies refuting the lower-self-esteem finding frequently rely on measures that have become far removed from the original problem. Yancey et al. (1972), Rosenberg and Simmons (1972), Greenberg (1973), and Weinberg and Williams (1974), for example, employ the Rosenberg scale which the authors explicitly disassociate from inferiorized status: “our measures carefully seek to exclude judgments about any specific characteristics of the self; race, for example, is not made salient.” (Rosenberg and Simmons, 1972:10) The scale poses such items as: “I find that I have a number of good qualities,” “I am able to do things as well as most other people,” “At times I think I am no good at all.” Crain and Weisman (1972) and Heiss and Owens (1972:364) measure self-esteem with, for example: “Now I would like you to rate yourself as above average, about average or below average, on some things that you do and some things that you are. First, would you say that as a son (daughter) you were [sic] above average, about average or below average?” Dean and Richardson (1964), Evans (1970), and Baughman (1971) use similar formalized psychological tests. This contrasts with both the Clark’s forced-choice model for examining racial preference and the interpretive studies, which made up the pre-1970 scholarly literature. The formalized tests explicitly avoid the racial context from which the earlier work arose, and may simply articulate what Porter (1971) found in her recent, sophisticated replication of the Clark’s, viz., a degree of disjunction between personal self-esteem and racial self-esteem. The original problem—how do inferiorized people cope with their situations—remains.

2. This problem tends to be obliterated as well when preconditioned by a conceptual frame which links personality differences with personality “pathologies” in subordinated groups and, conversely, findings of “no differences” with “no problem.” Once again, questions about the effects of subordination upon people, and about their strategies for dealing with subordination (the questions compelling the earlier Jewish and black studies), become forgotten.

3. Clearly, testing blacks after the militant 1960s and in regions where soli-
dary organizations have developed is likely to reveal real historical changes in the way subordination is dealt with. Hraba and Grant (1970) and Ward and Braun (1972), who continue the Clark's paradigm [and others, such as Fish and Larr (1972), and Brigham (1974), who measure racial preference in other ways], do not confirm the lower-self-esteem finding. "Nonsignificant" differences may appear where subordination produces both complaint and militant behavior strategies, as if the self-esteem of both dominant and subordinate group members were the same. Crain and Weisman (1972:74) found two modes of either low or high measures in the inferiorized group. "There is more 'spread' in the distribution of self-esteem scores for blacks, and blacks tend to have either very low or very high self-esteem." This raises the interesting issue of how people "leap" from one mode of coping to another, i.e., how and why people who once relied on "low-profile," accommodative means of getting by, develop rebellious, innovative actions aimed toward change.

(4) Finally, we cannot ignore the situationality of the phenomenon. Porter's (1971:160) suggestion of a degree of disjuncture between personal self-esteem and racial self-esteem demands a re-rooting of the problem in the everyday life-situations of those who experience inferiorization. Orientations toward the life-world are, in practice, particularized by time and place. The historical embeddedness of every social interaction permits inconsistency between "general" and specific response-strategies to domination, according to how salient group identification is to the conflict. Sense of personal efficacy (an element in the self-esteem construct) varies with the social situation. Meaning-structures develop autonomously as a complex of "sedimented and situationally conditioned explanations which are composed in part from individual and in part from socially transmitted 'traditional solutions of problems'" (Schutz and Luckmann, 1973:14). Individuals may draw from a repertoire of logically nonintegrated acquiescent and resisting behavior-strategies. Historical events in the conflict between own and other groups, as well as personal confrontations may explode some orientations forcing reliance upon heretofore "latent" structures. Heightened conflict, similarity of response among group members, etc., may provoke greater consistency in orientation toward subordination. Conflict between disparate meaning-structures "only occurs if it turns out that those elements in a situation that have been taken to be relevant in a taken-for-granted way up to now do not suffice for mastery of the situation, thus making it necessary for such elements as until now appeared as 'less' relevant to be drawn on" (Schutz and Luckmann, 1973:154). The fixed-question method of tapping self-esteem is unlikely to reach into latent attitudes or actual practices that rapidly manifest themselves in changing circumstances or social crisis. One need not postulate universal moroseness (which some self-esteem measures may demand) to raise the question of what people do when their subordination is a relevant element of social interaction.

Conclusion

We have surveyed the transformations of the self-esteem concept from its original orientation toward coping strategies to inferiorization, to its derailment in the political conflicts of minority emancipation. Yet the fundamental problem raised by the early writers, of the production and reproduction of social order, has been side-stepped and ultimately obscured by the redefinition of the self-esteem concept over time. Still of interest remains the problem of how subordinated people learn to cope with their restricted life-chances, and in so doing, act to alter or unwittingly reinforce the social system which works to their disadvantage. This question (which motivates, for example, Sartre's (1948) discourse in Anti-Semite and Jew) inspired some early developments in self-esteem studies. Ironically, subsequent development lost sight of this original telos, abstracting the phenomenon from its historical context, obliterating the intentionality of the subject, and reifying it as an entity within the personality. This new self-esteem came to be seen as a distortion of reality, provoking a swing to an opposing focus beset with difficulties of its own. Where once a litany of psychological damages dominated the social scientific literature, there now appear attempts to
paper over or discount the very real problems of inferiorization. Some researchers seem bent on rescuing their subjects from defamation by ignoring the problems of defeatism and implicit self-destruction. The avoidance of any dispiriting reflection upon the day-to-day practices of dominated people appears to spring from a desire to "enhance" the status of the dominated and magically relieve them of their plight.

The stance is understandable in face of the language of "deviance" and "pathology" which easily falls into the syndrome of blaming the victim. Even "disease" terminology, however, when conceptualized correctly, can avoid this trap: "Diseases are not entities: the classification of diseases is purely a matter of convenience: what are known as diseases are the results of what happens when the organism comes in contact with inimical agents" (White, 1926:171). In the words of Grier and Cobbs (1968:179):

To regard the Black Norm as pathological and attempt to remove such traits by treatment would be akin to analyzing away a hunter's cunning or a banker's prudence. This is a body of characteristics essential to life for black men in America.

An adequate phenomenology of subordination must address itself to the life-world of the person subject to the rationality of an oppressive social system. How does the subordinated social member deal with the construction of reality purveyed by dominating institutions? How do social systems reproduce social order through objectifying or delegitimizing their members? How is legitimacy of the existing opportunity structure produced for disfranchised members? Revitalization of self-esteem studies will require putting back into context the mechanisms by which dominating groups preserve inequality and reproduce behavior functional to the status quo.

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Social structure and homosexuality: a theoretical appraisal

I

Until very recently sociologists have shown a marked lack of systematic or theoretically oriented interest in patterns of homosexual behaviour. As a form of 'deviant behaviour' homosexuality has attracted attention in the literature on social problems; but in that literature it is singularly lacking in the sort of theoretical attention which has been devoted to, for example, delinquency.¹ A recent, and much quoted, book such as that of Schofield confined its explicitly sociological attention to the value relevant distinction between 'nonconformist' and 'aberrant' in the writings of Merton.² More recently, in a strong plea for the application of sociological concepts in this area, Simon and Gagnon open up fruitful perspectives through the application of role theory; and consideration of how the commitment of the individual to the homosexual role interacts, through each stage of his career, with the complex of his other roles, occupational, familial, religious, etc.³ McCaghy and Skipper commend this approach, and suggest a complementary perspective in which consideration is given to social structural factors which may be conducive towards homosexual behaviour, developing this theme through an examination of the occupational structure of the striptease profession in the eastern U.S.A., and its relationship with lesbianism.⁴

In this paper we are concerned to extend and generalize this insight into the significance of social structural considerations for the understanding of homosexuality: we attempt to isolate and describe some specifically social determinants of the incidence of homosexual behaviour among both men and women. Lest we be misunderstood, however, we

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