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# Contingent Self-Esteem and Race: Implications for the Black Self-Esteem Advantage

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*Previous research has found that despite being aware of negative stereotypes about their group and experiencing prejudice and discrimination, Blacks tend to report higher levels of self-esteem than Whites. Despite the robust nature of the Black self-esteem advantage, an adequate explanation for the higher self-esteem of Blacks relative to Whites has yet to be offered. The present studies examine whether Blacks and Whites differ in the domains on which their self-esteem is based and whether these differences mediate the relationship between race and self-esteem. The present studies found that Blacks and Whites tend to base their self-esteem on different domains and that the tendency of Whites to base their self-esteem on the approval of others provides a partial explanation for the Black self-esteem advantage. These findings are discussed in terms of their relevance to racial differences in self-esteem.*

**Keywords:** *self-esteem; race; contingent self-esteem; fragile self-esteem*

During the past 60 years, a large number of studies have examined self-esteem differences between various racial groups. The majority of research in this area has focused on differences between Blacks (i.e., African Americans of a sub-Saharan biological ancestry) and Whites (i.e., non-Hispanic Caucasians of a European heritage) with the assumption that Blacks would report negative psychological outcomes relative to Whites (Allport, 1954; Cartwright, 1950; Clark, 1965; Clark & Clark, 1950; Erikson, 1956; Grier & Cobbs, 1968; Johnson, 1957; Kardiner & Ovesey, 1962; Pettigrew, 1964;

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Simmons, 1978). This assumption appeared warranted given both the historical factors (e.g., slavery, legalized segregation) and current experiences of Blacks (e.g., negative stereotypes, prejudice, discrimination). That is, it was generally believed that the experiences of oppression, discrimination, and segregation would have a devastating impact on Blacks resulting, at the very least, in low self-esteem. This assumption was consistent with the looking-glass self hypothesis (Cooley, 1902; Mead, 1934), which proposed that the members of racial minority groups would develop low self-esteem as a result of internalizing the relatively negative views held about their group by the culturally dominant group (for extended discussions, see Crocker & Major, 1989; Twenge & Crocker, 2002).

Despite the appeal of the explanation offered by the internalization of stigma perspective, it has often been challenged (e.g., Baldwin, 1979; Nobles, 1976). Consistent with these early challenges, racial differences in self-esteem have frequently emerged that are in the "opposite direction" of that predicted by the internalization of stigma perspective. That is, Blacks consistently report higher levels of self-esteem than Whites (e.g., Gray-Little & Hafdahl, 2000; Twenge & Crocker, 2002). The exception to this is that Whites often report higher levels of self-esteem than Blacks among children younger than 10 years of age. This pattern reverses itself past age 10 such that Blacks report higher self-esteem levels than Whites in all other age groups. It is important to note that the general pattern of self-esteem development is similar for Blacks and Whites. That is, the self-esteem of both Blacks and Whites tends to be high during childhood, drops dramatically throughout adolescence, rises slowly throughout adulthood, and drops very sharply during old age (Robins, Trzesniewski, Tracy, Gosling, & Potter, 2002). This pattern is consistent with the developmental trends noted by previous researchers (e.g., Harter, 1998; Marsh, Barnes, Cairns, & Tidman, 1984; Marsh, Parker, & Barnes, 1985). From a historical perspective, the self-esteem of Blacks began to rise during the civil rights and Black power movements of the 1960s and surpassed that of Whites during the early 1980s (see Twenge & Crocker, 2002, for a review). Despite its robust nature, an adequate explanation for the higher self-esteem of Blacks relative to Whites has yet to be developed.

In an effort to better understand the Black self-esteem advantage, Twenge and Crocker (2002) examined three potential explanations for racial differences in self-esteem. The first of these explanations was that the self-protective properties provided by membership in a stigmatized group may account for the Black self-esteem advantage (e.g., Crocker & Major, 1989; McCarthy & Yancey, 1971). For example, Blacks may be able to establish and maintain high levels of self-esteem by comparing their outcomes against other

members of their group, attributing personal failures to prejudice, or valuing only those domains in which their group does well. Although the high self-esteem observed among Blacks was consistent with the stigma as self-protection explanation, the self-esteem levels among other racial minority groups reported by Twenge and Crocker (i.e., Hispanics, Asians, and American Indians) were not consistent with this explanation. Rather, individuals from these groups tend to have much lower self-esteem than Whites despite their membership in stigmatized racial groups. Thus, the stigma as self-protection explanation does not appear to provide a comprehensive explanation of racial differences in self-esteem. The second potential explanation for the Black self-esteem advantage examined by Twenge and Crocker was that the positivity of racial identity may be the cause of observed racial differences in self-esteem. Although this explanation was consistent with the Black self-esteem advantage, it fails to account for the relatively low levels of self-esteem found among Asians and Hispanics who possess racial identities that are as positive as that of Blacks (e.g., Phinney, Ferguson, & Tate, 1997). The third potential explanation for the Black self-esteem advantage examined by Twenge and Crocker was that cultural differences in the self-concept may lead to racial differences in self-esteem. This explanation appeared to have the most support across multiple racial categories in their meta-analysis. More specifically, it was found that cultural differences in individualism—which was defined as a view of people as independent as well as referring to a focus on personal goals, uniqueness, and control—paralleled the differences in self-esteem between the groups. However, Twenge and Crocker pointed out that there are certainly limitations as to how well this explanation maps onto existing data. For example, Southern Blacks—for whom the Black self-esteem advantage is especially strong—would need to have higher levels of individualism than Northern Blacks.

Although considerable attention has been paid to racial differences in the level of self-esteem between Blacks and Whites (e.g., Gray-Little & Hafdahl, 2000; Twenge & Crocker, 2002), previous research has not yet examined racial differences in other aspects of self-esteem. Some aspects of self-esteem—other than its level—that have been found to be important predictors of behavior and psychological adjustment include the temporal stability of state self-esteem (Kernis, Grannemann, & Barclay, 1989), discrepancies between explicit (conscious feelings of self-liking, self-worth, and acceptance) and implicit (nonconscious, automatic, and overlearned self-evaluations) self-esteem (Bosson, Brown, Zeigler-Hill, & Swann, 2003; Zeigler-Hill, 2006b), and the degree to which an individual's self-esteem is contingent on meeting certain standards (Crocker & Wolfe, 2001; Deci & Ryan, 1995).

Broadening the scope of racial differences in self-esteem may be especially important given that researchers have recently argued that the importance of self-esteem extends beyond whether or not individuals tend to be characterized by high or low levels of self-esteem. For example, Crocker and Park (2004) proposed that the pursuit of self-esteem—which may be characterized as how individuals go about attaining increases in their state self-esteem while avoiding decreases—may have important motivational consequences. Furthermore, these consequences should be most pronounced in the domains on which individuals base their self-esteem such that individuals would attempt to validate their abilities or characteristics in these domains and as a result maintain or enhance their self-esteem (Crocker & Wolfe, 2001). This model of contingent self-esteem has been supported by previous research which found that college students who base their self-esteem on academic competence reported greater changes in state self-esteem after receiving good (or bad) grades (Crocker, Karpinski, Quinn, & Chase, 2003) and letters of acceptance (or rejection) from graduate programs (Crocker, Sommers, & Luhtanen, 2002). Contingent self-esteem has also been shown to predict the time that college freshmen spend in various activities (e.g., studying, socializing, and grooming; Crocker, Luhtanen, Cooper, & Bouvrette, 2003) and the problems they encounter (e.g., academic and financial problems; Crocker & Luhtanen, 2003). Additional research has linked contingent self-esteem with attachment style (Park, Crocker, & Mickelson, 2004), interpersonal style (Zeigler-Hill, 2006a), alcohol use (Luhtanen & Crocker, 2005), and narcissistic subtypes (Zeigler-Hill, Clark, & Pickard, 2006).

Despite the fact that racial differences in contingent self-esteem have not been the focus of previous research, differences in the domains on which Blacks and Whites base their self-esteem have been noted (e.g., Crocker, Luhtanen, et al., 2003). In general, Whites have been found to report levels of contingent self-esteem that were greater than or equal to the levels reported by Blacks in all areas except for religiosity in which Blacks tend to report higher levels of self-esteem contingency than Whites. In fact, Crocker and Wolfe (2001) proposed that the relatively low levels of contingent self-esteem among Blacks may provide a partial explanation of the Black self-esteem advantage. Unfortunately, this interesting hypothesis has been largely ignored in previous research. Thus, the present research is believed to be one of the earliest attempts to examine the hypothesis initially proposed by Crocker and Wolfe (2001).

Crocker and her colleagues (e.g., Crocker, Luhtanen, et al., 2003) identified seven domains on which college students are likely to base their self-esteem: family love and support, outdoing others in competition, physical appearance, God's love, academic competence, being a virtuous or moral

person, and others' approval. Although it is possible that any of these contingencies of self-worth (CSWs) may mediate the relationship between race and level of self-esteem, the most plausible mediators would appear to be the God's love and others' approval CSWs. The God's love CSW measures the degree to which individuals base their self-esteem on certain aspects of their religiosity such as how loved and valued they are in the eyes of God. The God's love CSW seems like a viable candidate for mediating the link between race and self-esteem because previous research has found that self-esteem is more strongly correlated with religiosity among Blacks than among Whites (Blaine & Crocker, 1995). In addition, religion has been conceptualized as a coping mechanism that may provide a means for understanding events and promoting social identification, especially among racial minority groups (Hathaway & Pargament, 1990, 1991). Thus, it is possible that religiosity may enhance the self-esteem of Blacks and protect it against negative outside influences.

The others' approval CSW measures the extent to which individuals base their self-esteem on the approval and acceptance of other individuals. The acceptance and approval of others has frequently been considered to be an important determinant of self-esteem (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Cooley, 1902; Harter, 1986; Mead, 1934). However, the role that the approval (or disapproval) of others may play in the development of self-esteem among Blacks may not be quite so straightforward. Racial minority groups have developed a number of strategies for coping with racism, and these strategies have been incorporated into the socialization of their children (Boykin & Toms, 1985). One strategy that Black parents often use to protect their children from racism is to teach their children not to allow the opinions of others to affect their self-esteem (e.g., Collins, 2002; Hughes & Chen, 1997; Phinney & Chavira, 1995; Stevenson, 1995; Thomas & Speight, 1999). This strategy is often viewed by Black parents as a means to prepare their children for coping with the bias they are likely to encounter during their lives. Thus, Black parents often actively dissuade their children from basing their self-esteem on the opinions of others or at least from basing it on the opinions of Whites. This may provide a partial explanation for the Black self-esteem advantage because self-esteem is often negatively correlated with basing self-esteem on the approval of others (Crocker et al., 2002; Crocker & Luhtanen, 2003).

## STUDY 1

The purpose of the present study is to examine racial differences in both the level of self-esteem and the domains on which self-esteem is based. Furthermore, the present study will extend previous research by examining

whether contingent self-esteem mediates the relationship between race and level of self-esteem.

## METHOD

### Participants and Procedure

Participants were 371 undergraduates at a large university in the Southern region of the United States. Participants were enrolled in introductory psychology and participated in return for partial fulfillment of a research participation requirement. Because the present study was concerned with the self-esteem of Black and White individuals, 17 participants who did not identify themselves as either Black or White were excluded from the study. Of these 17 participants, 7 failed to indicate their race, and 10 claimed membership in a group other than Black or White (5 multiethnic, 3 Hispanic, 1 Asian, and 1 Native American). Of the remaining 354 participants, 196 were White (44 men and 152 women) and 158 were Black (26 men and 132 women). The mean age of participants was 20.83 years ( $SD = 4.45$ ). Participants completed demographic information (e.g., gender and parental income) as well as measures of self-esteem level and contingent self-esteem.

### Measures

*Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale.* Participants completed the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSES; Rosenberg, 1965), a well-validated measure of global self-regard (Blaskovich & Tomaka, 1991; Demo, 1985). The RSES consists of 10 items to which participants provide ratings of agreement on scales ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). Participants were instructed to complete the scale according to how they typically or generally feel about themselves. Test-retest correlations greater than .80 have previously been reported (Rosenberg, 1965; Silber & Tippett, 1965). For the present sample, the internal consistency of the RSES was .83.

*Contingencies of Self-Worth Scale.* Contingent self-esteem was measured with the Contingencies of Self-Worth Scale (CSWS; Crocker, Luhtanen, et al., 2003). The CSWS consists of 35 items to which participants provide ratings of agreement on scales ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). The CSWS assesses the following seven domains on which college students might base their self-esteem: family love and support (e.g., "When my family members are proud of me, my sense of self-worth increases;"  $\alpha = .74$ ), outdoing others in competition (e.g., "Doing better than others gives me a sense of self-respect;"  $\alpha = .88$ ),

physical appearance (e.g., “When I think I look attractive, I feel good about myself;”  $\alpha = .71$ ), God’s love (e.g., “My self-worth is based on God’s love;”  $\alpha = .91$ ), academic competence (e.g., “My self-esteem is influenced by my academic performance;”  $\alpha = .76$ ), being a virtuous or moral person (e.g., “I couldn’t respect myself if I didn’t live up to a moral code;”  $\alpha = .72$ ), and others’ approval (e.g., “I can’t respect myself if others don’t respect me;”  $\alpha = .82$ ). Each of the subscales of the CSWS has been found to possess good test-retest reliability and correlate in the expected direction with other personality variables (e.g., Crocker, Luhtanen, et al., 2003).

## RESULTS

### Descriptive Statistics

Table 1 presents the means, standard deviations, and intercorrelations for the contingencies of self-worth and self-esteem level. Among the CSWs, the highest correlations were obtained between academic competence and family support ( $r = .49, p < .001$ ) and between physical appearance and others’ approval ( $r = .50, p < .001$ ). God’s love was not significantly correlated with outdoing others in competition, physical appearance, or academic competence. The moderate correlations among most of the CSWs suggest that these scales do not measure the same construct (e.g., global contingent self-esteem). The following CSWs were significantly correlated with level of self-esteem: God’s love, virtue, physical appearance, and others’ approval. However, these correlations were not very strong. In fact, the strongest correlation was between self-esteem level and others’ approval ( $r = -.32, p < .001$ ). In addition, two of the CSWs were positively correlated with self-esteem (i.e., God’s love and virtue), whereas the other two CSWs were negatively correlated with self-esteem (i.e., physical appearance and others’ approval).

### Race Differences in Self-Esteem and Contingencies of Self-Worth

The present analyses examined whether Black and White participants differed in their levels of self-esteem and the domains on which they base their self-esteem. Consistent with previous research (e.g., Gray-Little & Hafdahl, 2000; Twenge & Crocker, 2002), Black participants reported significantly higher levels of self-esteem ( $M = 4.31, SD = .58$ ) than Whites ( $M = 4.00, SD = .67$ ),  $t(352) = -4.56, p < .001$ . Whites reported higher scores than Blacks on five of the seven CSWs: family love and support ( $M_{\text{White}} = 5.72, M_{\text{Black}} = 5.46$ ), outdoing others in competition ( $M_{\text{White}} = 4.98, M_{\text{Black}} = 4.41$ ), physical appearance ( $M_{\text{White}} = 5.04, M_{\text{Black}} = 4.52$ ), virtue ( $M_{\text{White}} = 5.44, M_{\text{Black}} = 5.11$ ), and

**TABLE 1**  
**Study 1: Intercorrelations and Descriptive Statistics for**  
**Level of Self-Esteem and the Contingencies of Self-Worth**

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Self-Esteem Level	—							
2. Family Support	.08	—						
3. Competition	-.08	.25***	—					
4. Physical Appearance	-.29***	.26***	.38***	—				
5. God's Love	.25***	.21***	-.10†	-.08	—			
6. Academic Competence	.05	.49***	.36***	.35***	.08†	—		
7. Virtue	.12*	.34***	.20***	.16**	.26***	.38***	—	
8. Others' Approval	-.32***	.22***	.25***	.50***	-.19***	.19***	.13*	—
<i>M</i>	4.14	5.60	4.73	4.81	5.80	5.60	5.29	3.77
<i>SD</i>	.65	1.03	1.27	1.11	1.32	1.00	1.00	1.43

† $p < .10$ ; \* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ ; \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

others' approval ( $M_{\text{White}} = 4.30$ ,  $M_{\text{Black}} = 3.11$ ),  $t(352) > 2.37$ ,  $ps < .02$ . In contrast, Blacks reported higher scores on the God's love CSW ( $M_{\text{Black}} = 6.31$ ,  $M_{\text{White}} = 5.38$ ),  $t(352) = -7.01$ ,  $p < .001$ . No difference emerged between Black and White participants on the academic competence CSW,  $t(352) = 1.56$ , *ns*.

### Approach to Data Analysis

A mediational analysis was conducted to examine whether contingent self-esteem could explain the association between race and level of self-esteem. In the present study, the mediational analysis was based on the approach developed by Kenny and his colleagues (Baron & Kenny, 1986; Judd & Kenny, 1981; Kenny, Kashy, & Bolger, 1998). The procedure for establishing mediation requires that criteria be satisfied at each of four steps:

- Step 1. The predictor variable (i.e., race) must be significantly associated with the criterion variable (i.e., level of self-esteem).
- Step 2. The predictor variable must be significantly associated with the potential mediating variable (i.e., the CSWs).
- Step 3. A simultaneous multiple regression analysis is conducted. The criterion variable is regressed onto both the predictor variable and the potential

mediating variable. In order for a mediational relationship to be present, the potential mediator must be associated with the criterion variable and the association between the predictor variable and the criterion variable should be reduced.

- Step 4. The regression coefficient for the predictor variable in Step 3 must be significantly smaller than the regression coefficient for the predictor variable in Step 1. This difference is tested with a  $z$  test (Goodman, 1960; Sobel, 1982) and provides a means for establishing whether the regression coefficient for the predictor variable in Step 3 is significantly reduced from the Step 1 regression coefficient.<sup>1</sup> The association between the predictor and criterion variables should be either significantly reduced (i.e., partial mediation) or completely disappear (i.e., full mediation) when the potential mediating variable is included in the regression equation.

If the criteria for all four steps are met, there is evidence of either partial or full mediation.

### **Step 1: Association Between Race and Self-Esteem**

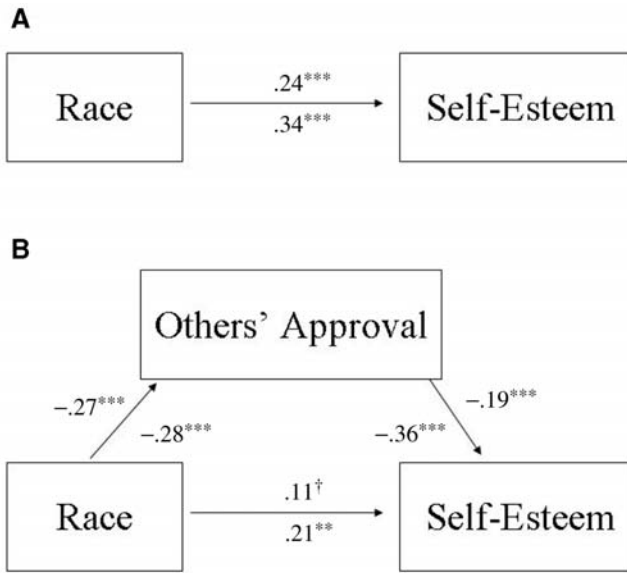
An association emerged between race and self-esteem such that Blacks typically reported higher self-esteem than Whites,  $\beta = .24, p < .001$ .

### **Step 2: Association Between Race and Potential Mediating Variables (Contingencies of Self-Worth)**

The goal of the present set of analyses was to determine whether race was associated with each of the contingencies of self-worth. However, as in previous studies (e.g., Crocker & Luhtanen, 2003), many of the CSWs were significantly correlated. Consequently, to examine the unique relationship between race and each CSW, each of the present multiple regression analyses controls for the remaining CSWs. Race was significantly associated with the following three CSWs: God's love ( $\beta = .36, p < .001$ ), virtue ( $\beta = -.22, p < .001$ ), and others' approval ( $\beta = -.27, p < .001$ ). Thus, only the God's love, virtue, and others' approval CSWs were retained as potential mediators in the subsequent steps.

### **Step 3: Self-Esteem Regressed on Race and the Contingencies of Self-Worth**

To examine the mediating role of the God's love, virtue, and others' approval CSWs, a multiple regression analysis was conducted that regressed



**Figure 1: The Others' Approval Contingency of Self-Worth as a Mediator of the Relationship Between Race and Level of Self-Esteem**

Panel A is the unmediated model and Panel B is the mediated model. Study 1 path coefficients are above the arrows; Study 2 path coefficients are below the arrows. All path coefficients are standardized. † $p < .10$ . \*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

self-esteem on race and each of the CSWs. Step 3 of the procedure requires that the relationship between the predictor variable and the criterion variable be reduced and the potential mediating variable (i.e., God's love, virtue, or others' approval) be a significant predictor of the criterion variable (i.e., level of self-esteem). The association between race and self-esteem was reduced such that race was no longer a significant predictor of self-esteem,  $\beta = .11, p < .07$ . The standardized regression coefficients indicate that the association between the virtue CSW and level of self-esteem is positive ( $\beta = .11, p < .05$ ), whereas the association between the others' approval CSW and level of self-esteem is negative ( $\beta = -.19, p < .001$ ). Thus, these two potential mediators were retained for Step 4. God's love was not retained because it failed to reach conventional levels of significance,  $\beta = .10, ns$ .

#### Step 4: Decrease in the Regression Coefficient for Race

The present analyses concern the  $z$  test (Goodman, 1960; Sobel, 1982) for the difference in the size of the standardized regression coefficients associated with race in Step 3 versus Step 1 of the mediation analysis. This test was significant for the others' approval CSW ( $z = 2.81, p < .01$ ) but failed to reach conventional levels of significance for the virtue CSW ( $z = -1.87, ns$ ). Thus, the others' approval CSW was the only potential mediator to meet the criteria for all of the steps of the mediational analysis (Baron & Kenny, 1986).<sup>2</sup> Figure 1 illustrates the mediational model examined in the present study. Additional analyses examined whether these results could be explained by additional demographic factors; however, a similar mediational effect emerged for the others' approval CSW when gender and parental income were controlled,  $z = 3.54, p < .001$ .

#### DISCUSSION

Consistent with previous research, the present study found that Blacks report significantly higher levels of self-esteem than Whites. Relative to Whites, Blacks also reported possessing self-esteem that was less contingent on the approval of others, physical appearance, family love and support, out-doing others in competition, and virtue. The present study extended previous research by examining whether contingent self-esteem mediated the relationship between race and levels of self-esteem. As hypothesized, basing one's self-esteem on the approval of others partially mediated the relationship between race and level of self-esteem. Thus, the present study suggests that the Black self-esteem advantage may be due—at least in part—to the different domains on which Blacks and Whites base their self-esteem. More specifically, it suggests that the tendency among Blacks to refrain from basing their self-esteem on the approval of others, which requires that other individuals accept and provide validation for the individual, may be partly responsible for their high levels of self-esteem relative to Whites.

#### STUDY 2

The results of Study 1 found that Blacks and Whites differ in both their level of self-esteem and the domains on which their self-esteem is based. Furthermore, basing one's self-esteem on the approval of others partially explains the Black self-esteem advantage. Thus, the primary goal of the present study is to replicate the mediational analysis from Study 1.

## METHOD

**Participants and Procedure**

Participants were 218 undergraduates at a large university in the Southern region of the United States. Participants were enrolled in introductory psychology and participated in return for partial fulfillment of a research participation requirement. Because the present study was concerned with the self-esteem of Black and White individuals, 8 participants were excluded for failing to indicate their race, and 9 were excluded for identifying themselves as a member of a racial group other than Black or White (6 multiethnic, 2 Hispanic, and 1 Native American). Of the 201 remaining participants, 92 were White (27 men and 65 women) and 109 were Black (23 men and 86 women). The mean age of participants was 20.90 years ( $SD = 3.64$ ).

**Measures**

As in Study 1, the RSES served as the measure of self-esteem and the CSWS served as the measure of contingent self-esteem. For the present sample, the internal consistency of the RSES was .83, and the internal consistency for the CSWs ranged from .70 to .89.

## RESULTS

**Descriptive Statistics**

Table 2 presents the means, standard deviations, and intercorrelations for self-esteem level and the CSWs. The correlations among the CSWs were similar to those reported in Study 1. The following CSWs were significantly correlated with level of self-esteem: God's love, physical appearance, and others' approval.

**Race Differences in Level of Self-Esteem and Contingencies of Self-Worth**

The present analyses examined whether Black and White participants differed in their levels of self-esteem and the domains on which they base their self-esteem. Study 2 clearly replicated the race differences in level of self-esteem and contingent self-esteem that were observed in Study 1. Black participants reported significantly higher levels of self-esteem ( $M = 4.35$ ,  $SD = .56$ ) than Whites ( $M = 3.91$ ,  $SD = .63$ ),  $t(199) = -5.13$ ,  $p < .001$ .

**TABLE 2**  
**Study 2: Intercorrelations and Descriptive Statistics for**  
**Level of Self-Esteem and the Contingencies of Self-Worth**

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Self-Esteem Level	—							
2. Family Support	.00	—						
3. Competition	-.02	.31***	—					
4. Physical Appearance	-.21**	.32***	.41***	—				
5. God's Love	.25**	.18**	.10	.01	—			
6. Academic Competence	.02	.48***	.40***	.37***	.23***	—		
7. Virtue	.03	.41***	.21***	.22***	.24***	.42***	—	
8. Others' Approval	-.44***	.20**	.14*	.45***	-.12	.14†	.22**	—
<i>M</i>	4.15	5.47	4.70	4.62	5.57	5.48	4.86	3.54
<i>SD</i>	.63	1.00	1.22	1.23	1.51	1.08	1.17	1.41

† $p < .10$ ; \* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ ; \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

White participants reported higher scores than Black participants on the same five CSWs as in Study 1: family love and support ( $M_{\text{White}} = 5.65$ ,  $M_{\text{Black}} = 5.32$ ), outdoing others in competition ( $M_{\text{White}} = 4.90$ ,  $M_{\text{Black}} = 4.53$ ), physical appearance ( $M_{\text{White}} = 4.90$ ,  $M_{\text{Black}} = 4.38$ ), virtue ( $M_{\text{White}} = 5.11$ ,  $M_{\text{Black}} = 4.65$ ), and others' approval ( $M_{\text{White}} = 4.15$ ,  $M_{\text{Black}} = 3.03$ ),  $t(199) > 2.12$ ,  $ps < .04$ . Black participants reported higher scores on the God's love CSW ( $M_{\text{Black}} = 6.05$ ,  $M_{\text{White}} = 5.00$ ),  $t(199) = -5.20$ ,  $p < .001$ . No difference emerged between Black and White participants on the academic competence CSW,  $t(199) = .45$ , *ns*.

### Does Contingent Self-Esteem Mediate the Association Between Race and Self-Esteem Level?

The present study employed the same means for establishing whether the CSWs mediated the relationship between race and self-esteem as outlined in Study 1. First, race was a significant predictor of self-esteem level,  $\beta = .34$ ,  $p < .001$ . Second, race was a unique predictor of the following CSWs: God's love ( $\beta = .40$ ,  $p < .001$ ), virtue ( $\beta = -.20$ ,  $p < .01$ ), and others' approval ( $\beta = -.28$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Thus, as in Study 1, only the God's love, virtue, and others'

approval CSWs were retained as potential mediators in the subsequent steps. Third, the only potential mediator that was a unique predictor of self-esteem level was the others' approval CSW,  $\beta = -.36, p < .001$ . Although the association between race and self-esteem was reduced, race remained a significant predictor of self-esteem,  $\beta = .21, p < .01$ . Finally, a  $z$  test indicated that the others' approval CSW partially mediated the relationship between race and self-esteem level,  $z = 3.16, p < .01$  (see Figure 1).<sup>3</sup> As in Study 1, additional analyses found that the others' approval CSW continued to mediate the relationship between race and self-esteem when sex and parental income were controlled,  $z = 3.00, p < .01$ .

## DISCUSSION

The present study replicated the mediational findings from Study 1. More specifically, the others' approval CSW was found to partially mediate the relationship between race and the level of self-esteem. This replication provides additional support for the hypothesis that differences in the domains on which self-esteem is based may provide a partial explanation for the Black self-esteem advantage.

## STUDY 3

The results of Studies 1 and 2 found that the tendency for Whites to base their self-esteem on the approval of others partially explains the Black self-esteem advantage. However, it is unclear who participants were using as the reference group for the others' approval CSW in the previous studies because this "other" was not specified. That is, it is quite possible that Blacks and Whites may have used different reference groups when responding to these items. For example, it is possible that Whites responded with regard to members of their in-group (i.e., other Whites), whereas Blacks may have assumed that "others" referred to individuals outside of their racial group. As a consequence of this ambiguity, it is difficult to discern whether it is the tendency for Blacks to refrain from basing their self-esteem on the approval of anyone—including other Blacks—or if they only avoid basing their self-esteem on the approval of Whites. Therefore, it is important to examine whether similar results emerge when the reference group is specified (i.e., Blacks or Whites). The primary goal of the present study is to replicate the mediational analyses from the previous studies with additional measures concerning the extent to which one's self-esteem is based on the approval of Blacks and Whites.

## METHOD

### Participants and Procedure

Participants were 169 undergraduates at a large Southern university. Participants were enrolled in introductory psychology and participated in return for partial fulfillment of a research participation requirement. Because the present study was concerned with the self-esteem of Black and White individuals, 9 participants were excluded for identifying themselves as a member of a racial group other than Black or White (4 multiethnic, 3 Asian, 1 Hispanic, and 1 Native American). Of the 160 remaining participants, 113 were White (35 men and 78 women) and 47 were Black (9 men and 38 women). The mean age of participants was 20.38 years ( $SD = 2.72$ ).

### Measures

As in the previous studies, the RSES served as the measure of self-esteem and the CSWS served as the measure of contingent self-esteem. For the present sample, the internal consistency of the RSES was .87 and the internal consistency for the CSWs ranged from .68 to .93. Two additional measures were added to the present study. These measures altered the wording of the others' approval CSW to specify the reference group participants should consider. In addition to the standard others' approval CSW, each participant completed two alternate versions of the others' approval CSW. One of the alternate versions specified Whites as the reference group (e.g., "My self-esteem depends on the opinions that White people hold of me;"  $\alpha = .84$ ), whereas the other version used Blacks as the reference group (e.g., "My self-esteem depends on the opinions that Black people hold of me;"  $\alpha = .79$ ).

## RESULTS

### Descriptive Statistics

Table 3 presents the means, standard deviations, and intercorrelations for self-esteem level and the CSWs. The correlations among the CSWs were similar to those reported in Studies 1 and 2. As in the previous studies, the God's love, physical appearance, and others' approval CSWs were significantly associated with self-esteem level. In addition, the others' approval-White and others' approval-Black CSWs were also associated with self-esteem level.

**TABLE 3**  
**Study 3: Intercorrelations and Descriptive Statistics for**  
**Level of Self-Esteem and the Contingencies of Self-Worth**

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1. Self-Esteem Level	—									
2. Family Support	.12	—								
3. Competition	-.04	.21**	—							
4. Physical Appearance	-.24**	.10	.39***	—						
5. God's Love	.27***	.31***	-.16*	-.10	—					
6. Academic Competence	-.04	.46***	.41***	.34***	.09	—				
7. Virtue	.08	.35***	.14†	.09	.32***	.34***	—			
8. Others' Approval	-.42***	.15†	.22**	.52***	-.13†	.20*	.20**	—		
9. Others' Approval-White	-.37***	.04	.21**	.42***	-.10	.11	.17*	.65***	—	
10. Others' Approval-Black	-.35***	-.02	.12	.27***	-.01	.06	.20**	.55***	.72***	—
<i>M</i>	4.07	5.72	5.18	5.03	5.49	5.71	5.28	3.95	3.03	2.76
<i>SD</i>	.67	.90	1.25	1.02	1.54	.93	.94	1.47	1.58	1.39

† $p < .10$ ; \* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ ; \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

### Race Differences in Level of Self-Esteem and Contingencies of Self-Worth

The present analyses examined whether Black and White participants differed in their levels of self-esteem and the domains on which they base their self-esteem. As in the previous studies, Black participants reported significantly higher levels of self-esteem ( $M = 4.29$ ,  $SD = .45$ ) than Whites ( $M = 4.03$ ,  $SD = .69$ ),  $t(158) = -2.35$ ,  $p < .05$ . White participants reported higher scores than Black participants on the same five CSWs as in the previous studies: family love and support ( $M_{\text{White}} = 5.83$ ,  $M_{\text{Black}} = 5.53$ ),  $t(158) = 1.94$ ,  $p < .06$ ; outdoing others in competition ( $M_{\text{White}} = 5.29$ ,  $M_{\text{Black}} = 4.88$ ),  $t(158) = 1.87$ ,  $p < .07$ ; physical appearance ( $M_{\text{White}} = 5.22$ ,  $M_{\text{Black}} = 4.54$ ),  $t(158) = 4.03$ ,  $p < .001$ ; virtue ( $M_{\text{White}} = 5.39$ ,  $M_{\text{Black}} = 5.03$ ),  $t(158) = 2.20$ ,  $p < .05$ ; and others' approval ( $M_{\text{White}} = 4.39$ ,  $M_{\text{Black}} = 2.86$ ),  $t(158) = 6.66$ ,  $p < .001$ . Consistent

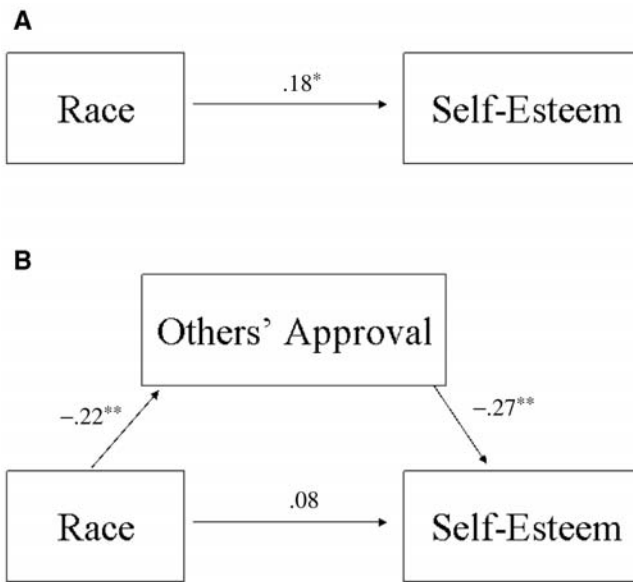
with the finding that Whites reported basing more of their self-esteem on the approval of others, Whites reported significantly higher scores on the others' approval-White CSW ( $M_{\text{White}} = 3.47$ ,  $M_{\text{Black}} = 2.08$ ),  $t(158) = 5.56$ ,  $p < .001$ , and marginally higher scores on the others' approval-Black CSW ( $M_{\text{White}} = 2.89$ ,  $M_{\text{Black}} = 2.44$ ),  $t(158) = 1.88$ ,  $p < .07$ , than Blacks. Black participants reported higher scores on the God's love CSW ( $M_{\text{Black}} = 6.33$ ,  $M_{\text{White}} = 5.22$ ),  $t(158) = -4.36$ ,  $p < .001$ . No difference emerged between Black and White participants on the academic competence CSW,  $t(158) = 1.32$ , *ns*.

### **Does Contingent Self-Esteem Mediate the Association Between Race and Self-Esteem Level?**

The present study employed the same means for establishing whether the CSWs mediated the relationship between race and self-esteem as outlined in the previous studies. First, race was a significant predictor of the level of self-esteem,  $\beta = .18$ ,  $p < .02$ . Second, race was a unique predictor of the following CSWs: God's love ( $\beta = .40$ ,  $p < .001$ ), virtue ( $\beta = -.20$ ,  $p < .05$ ), others' approval ( $\beta = -.22$ ,  $p < .01$ ), others' approval-White ( $\beta = -.19$ ,  $p < .01$ ), and others' approval-Black ( $\beta = .19$ ,  $p < .02$ ). As a result, only these CSWs (i.e., God's love, virtue, others' approval, others' approval-White, and others' approval-Black) were retained as potential mediators in the subsequent steps. Third, the only potential mediator that was a unique predictor of self-esteem level was the others' approval CSW,  $\beta = -.27$ ,  $p < .01$ . In the present study, the association between race and self-esteem was reduced such that it failed to approach conventional levels of significance,  $\beta = -.08$ , *ns*. Finally, a  $z$  test indicated that the others' approval CSW fully mediated the relationship between race and self-esteem level,  $z = 2.05$ ,  $p < .04$  (see Figure 2).<sup>4</sup>

### **DISCUSSION**

The present study replicated the mediational findings from Studies 1 and 2. More specifically, the others' approval CSW fully mediated the relationship between race and the level of self-esteem even when controlling the reference group by including additional CSWs referring to the approval of Whites and Blacks separately. The results of the present study suggest that the Black self-esteem advantage is at least partially explained by the tendency among Whites to base their self-esteem on the approval of others. This study provides additional support for the hypothesis that differences in the domains on which self-esteem is based may provide a partial explanation for the Black self-esteem advantage.



**Figure 2: The Others' Approval Contingency of Self-Worth as a Mediator of the Relationship Between Race and Level of Self-Esteem in Study 3**

NOTE: Panel A is the unmediated model, and Panel B is the mediated model. All path coefficients are standardized. \* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ .

## GENERAL DISCUSSION

Previous studies have revealed that Blacks tend to report higher self-esteem than Whites (e.g., Gray-Little & Hafdahl, 2000; Twenge & Crocker, 2002). Although a variety of possible explanations have been offered to explain the Black self-esteem advantage, each of these explanations has limitations. The present study examined whether differences in the domains on which self-esteem is based would provide at least a partial explanation for the relationship between race and self-esteem. Across these studies, Blacks were found to base their self-esteem on domains such as the approval of others to a lesser degree than Whites. Perhaps more important, in each of these studies, basing one's self-esteem on the approval of others was found to mediate the relationship between race and self-esteem. The reluctance among Blacks to base their self-esteem on the approval of others may be a defensive strategy intended to protect them from racial prejudice and

discrimination. The results of the present studies suggest that this reluctance to depend on the evaluations of others for validation does protect and enhance their level of self-esteem.

Although the God's love CSW was originally considered to be one of the most likely CSWs to mediate the relationship between race and self-esteem, this hypothesis did not receive any support in the present studies. Rather, the God's love CSW was associated with both race and self-esteem level but failed to explain a significant amount of variance in self-esteem level when race was controlled.

The relationship between contingent self-esteem and psychological adjustment remains unclear. For example, the reluctance of Blacks to base their self-esteem on the approval of others may protect their self-esteem, but it may also lead to negative consequences such as a hyposensitivity in response to social feedback, a reduction in motivation, or dismissal of potentially helpful feedback following negative evaluations (Banks, Stitt, & Curtis, 1977; Cohen, Steele, & Ross, 1999; Crocker & Major, 1989). However, hypersensitivity to the approval of others—which may characterize Whites—would also be less than optimal. In contrast to the idea that optimal self-esteem is noncontingent (Kernis, 2003), it has been proposed that the optimal condition for self-esteem may result from finding an appropriate level of contingency that allows the individual to be stable but not completely immune to the feedback they receive from others (Tafarodi & Ho, 2003).

The fact that Blacks tend to have higher self-esteem than Whites could be viewed as support for the notion that the racism that many Blacks experience simply does not have a detrimental effect on their self-esteem. Even though Blacks have managed to maintain levels of self-esteem that are even higher than those of Whites, it is difficult to believe that being aware of negative stereotypes about one's group, being exposed to prejudice, and experiencing discrimination would not have some adverse impact on one's self-esteem. For example, membership in a stigmatized group may lead to the development of self-esteem that is high but extremely vulnerable to challenge (i.e., fragile high self-esteem). Thus, future research should examine racial differences in other aspects of self-esteem such as discrepancies between implicit and explicit self-esteem (Bosson et al., 2003) and the temporal stability of state self-esteem over time (Kernis et al., 1989).

Although the present studies extend our knowledge of the Black self-esteem advantage, there are limitations associated with these studies. First, the data for the present studies were collected at a public university in the Southern United States. This is relevant given that previous research has noted that the Black self-esteem advantage tends to be greater in the

Southern United States where the percentage of Blacks is higher (Twenge & Crocker, 2002). In fact, 54% of all Blacks live in the South, and the six states that are more than 25% Black are all located in the South (i.e., Mississippi, Louisiana, South Carolina, Georgia, Maryland, and Alabama; U.S. Census Bureau, 2001). Although the reason for the larger Black self-esteem advantage in the South remains unclear, it may involve the frequency of same-race contact. Future research should examine whether this mediational effect can be replicated in other regions of the United States.

The second limitation of the present studies is that only data from Black and White individuals were analyzed. This choice was made for two primary reasons. The first reason was that the primary hypotheses were concerned with racial differences in self-esteem between Black and White participants. It is unclear what role, if any, contingent self-esteem may play in the development of self-esteem for other racial groups. The second reason was a practical problem of locating and recruiting sufficient numbers of individuals from other racial groups in the Southern United States. For example, the vast majority of participants in these studies were either White or Black (95% in Study 1, 92% in Study 2, and 95% in Study 3). Future research should examine differences in self-esteem level and contingent self-esteem among a variety of racial groups (e.g., Asians, Hispanics, and Native Americans) to determine whether differences in contingent self-esteem may provide a more robust explanation of racial/ethnic differences in self-esteem. Furthermore, the inclusion of community samples from across the life span would aid researchers in understanding any developmental changes that may influence the ability of contingent self-esteem to explain racial/ethnic differences in self-esteem.

## CONCLUSION

The present studies found that Blacks and Whites differ in the domains on which they base their self-esteem. More specifically, Whites based more of their self-esteem on the support of their family, competition, physical appearance, virtue, and others' approval than Blacks. The only domain on which Blacks based more of their self-esteem than Whites was in the area of God's love. Furthermore, the relationship between race and self-esteem was partially mediated by the degree to which these individuals based their self-esteem on the approval of others. The present studies are the first to provide empirical support for the notion that the Black self-esteem advantage is due in part to racial differences in the basis of self-esteem. That is, part of the reason that Blacks have higher self-esteem than Whites is because they are less willing to base their self-esteem on whether others approve of them.

## NOTES

1. The Goodman (1960) version of the Sobel (1982) test was used to determine whether the regression coefficient was significantly reduced from Step 1 to Step 3. The Goodman test equation is as follows:

$$Z = \frac{ab}{\sqrt{b^2s_a^2 + a^2s_b^2 - s_a^2s_b^2}}$$

where  $b$  is the unstandardized regression coefficient for the association between the mediator and the criterion variable in Step 3,  $s_b$  is the standard error for  $b$ ,  $a$  is the unstandardized regression coefficient for the association between the predictor variable and the mediator variable from Step 2, and  $s_a$  is the standard error for  $a$ .

2. Although entering all seven contingencies of self-worth (CSWs) simultaneously provides a conservative test of the mediational hypothesis, it may be misleading if statistical suppression occurs. To rule out this possibility, the mediational analysis for the others' approval CSW was repeated without controlling for the remaining CSWs. The results of this analysis also found evidence that the others' approval CSW partially mediated the relationship between race and self-esteem,  $z = 4.21$ ,  $p < .001$ .

3. Evidence for partial mediation also emerged when the other CSWs were not controlled,  $z = 3.99$ ,  $p < .001$ .

4. Similar results emerged when the other CSWs were not controlled,  $z = 2.30$ ,  $p < .05$ .

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