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Raising Confident and Competent Girls: Implications of Diversity

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IMPLICATIONS FOR DIVERSITY

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Abstract

The exploratory research described here was designed to examine positive self-evaluations among African American, Caucasian, Chinese American, and Puerto Rican middle school girls. A mixed qualitative-quantitative methodology was used to test two hypotheses: (1) liking one's self, as a young adolescent, can have different meanings depending on the social context of one's life and (2) the dimensions of one's self-esteem can be different among girls from different racial and ethnic groups. Both hypotheses were confirmed. Additionally, the results showed that differences in Caucasian girls' public statements versus written responses regarding the importance of physical appearance suggest they have conflicted attitudes toward being attractive and that middle school girls widely endorse "love and limits" as the child rearing approach most likely to lead to raising a daughter who will grow up to like who she is. Differences in the ways girls from diverse social backgrounds perceived what it means to like one's self underscore the important role played by such social contextual variables as race/ethnicity, level of danger in the neighborhood, family boundaries, recency of immigration, media images of feminine beauty, and cultural attitudes toward physical attractiveness. The general conclusion to be drawn from this exploratory research is that an understanding of the social forces a girl faces is essential for an understanding of what that particular girl needs to like herself. Implications for girls' programming, counseling, and future research are discussed.

In recent years there has been much academic and popular interest in girls' self-esteem, from Making Connections: Relational World of Adolescent Girls at the Emma Willard School (Gilligan, Lyons, & Hanmer, 1990), to Shortchanging Girls, Shortchanging America (AAUW, 1991), to School Girls (Orenstein, 1994), and Reviving Ophelia (Pipher, 1994). High self-esteem has been associated with girls' motivation to achieve (academically and in a career) and confidence in their ability to achieve (AAUW, 1991; Baruch, 1975; Phillips & Zimmerman, 1990). While some research indicates that an adolescent's self-concept generally remains positive (Marsh & Gouvernet, 1989), other research notes a low point in many girls' self-regard beginning in early adolescence (AAUW, 1991; Gilligan et al, 1990). Longitudinal studies have found that a decline in positive self-regard among adolescent girls contrasts not only with boys' experiences, but with younger girls' self-confidence, self-concepts, and optimism about their lives (Brown & Gilligan, 1992; Phillips & Zimmerman, 1990).

Increasingly, being female is being identified as a factor that puts a young person "at risk" (Earle, Roach, & Fraser, 1987), and early adolescence is regarded as a critical time in girls' lives (AAUW, 1991; Brown & Gilligan, 1992). Studies have reported that dissatisfaction with one's body, eating disorders, depression, and thinking about suicide and suicide attempts all occur at higher rates for adolescent girls than for adolescent boys (Gans & Blyth, 1990; Reinherz, Frost, & Pakiz, 1990).

Gilligan and her colleagues (1992) view early adolescence as a "crossroads" for girls. They describe it as a time of crisis when girls become uncertain of what they know and what they can say in public. At this age girls are becoming conscious of growing up in a patriarchal society which undervalues women. Consequently, girls lose confidence in themselves and their public voices become muted (Brown & Gilligan, 1992; Debold, Wilson & Malave, 1993; Gilligan, Rogers & Noel, 1992). Brown and Gilligan (1992) have argued that girls' self-silencing and

“taking their knowledge underground” is a strategy of acquiescence girls employ to remain acceptable to others.

Gilligan and her colleagues' views on girls' declining confidence in early adolescence were originally formulated on the basis of qualitative research primarily carried out with white girls from upper-middle class backgrounds at a private girls' school (Gilligan et al., 1990). Later research which included girls of color (Robinson & Ward, 1991; Sullivan, 1996; Taylor, 1996) has led them to expand the original formulation of self-silencing in order to hold onto relationships to include both overt and covert resistance to societal dictates. However, Gilligan and her colleagues' belief that early adolescence is a time of a “crisis in confidence” for girls has remained largely unchanged.

Recently, Harter (Harter, Waters, & Whitesell, 1997) has examined Gilligan's claim that upon entering adolescence, social factors conspire to cause girls' loss of voice, as manifested in false self behaviors--e.g., not saying what one thinks or believes and not expressing one's true opinions. Harter and her colleagues' results showed that gender role orientation, rather than gender itself, was associated with false self behavior. While they found no evidence that girls, in general, lose their voices during adolescence, a subset of girls who espouse a typically feminine role reported lower levels of voice in public contexts such as in school, talking with teachers or classmates. Androgynous girls, on the other hand, reported high levels of voice in all contexts. These findings were obtained with predominantly white middle class girls. Their generalizability to girls from diverse backgrounds is not known.

Gilligan's formulations coupled with the results of the AAUW survey (1991) which showed older girls having lower self-esteem than younger girls has heightened concern over adolescent girls' development. This concern has coincided with a virtual “cottage industry” which has been decrying the gender gap in self-esteem and offering a variety of strategies to

ameliorate the situation (see Flansburg, 1991; Orenstein, 1994; Pipher, 1994; Steinem, 1992).

Today, one can rarely find a program designed to uplift "at-risk" youth that does not have a self-esteem component.

On the other hand, research has not shown all adolescent girls to lag in self-esteem. Hirsch and Dubois (1991) found no race or gender differences in their two-year longitudinal study of transition from grade school to junior high school. In this research there was also no evidence of marked decline in overall self-esteem upon moving to junior high school, in that 35 percent of the students' self-esteem remained consistently high and 31 percent exhibited a small increase. Only 21 percent could be classified as showing a steep decline while 13 percent were classified as chronically low. A number of other researchers have not found a decline in self-esteem among adolescent girls of color (see, Powell, 1985; Rosenberg & Simmons, 1972; Tashakkori, 1993; Taylor, 1976), while others have reported inconsistent findings with respect to the effects of race and gender on self-esteem (Martinez & Dukes, 1987; Tashakkori & Thompson, 1991; Wade, 1991).

It is not clear from the existing literature whether the drop in self-esteem found by some researchers (but not others) in early to middle adolescence among girls is an artifact of how self-esteem has been operationalized and measured. For example in the results of the AAUW (1991) sponsored nationwide survey of students between grades four and ten, much credence has been placed on giving the response, "always true" to the statement, "I am happy the way I am." The argument for gender differences in self-esteem in adolescence have been based on the fact that whereas 46 percent of high school boys said "always true" to this statement only 29 percent of the girls gave the same response. Moreover, the argument for a decline in girls self-esteem from childhood to adolescence has been based on 60 percent of elementary school girls, 37 percent of middle school girls, and 29 percent of high school girls responding "always true" to this

statement. Alternative explanations of these results are girls' increasing reluctance to boast, and more likely, girls' ability to reflect on themselves realistically which may improve with age. After all, how many adults could honestly say "always true" to the statement, "I am happy with the way I am" or four others similar to it--a five-item general self-esteem scale was used in this survey. In addition, it does appear doubtful that one general notion or measure of satisfaction with self could adequately capture the diverse underpinnings of self-evaluations in different social milieus and across different domains of competence.

The exploratory research described here was designed to examine different components of girls' positive self-evaluations--that is, their views on what it means for a girl to feel good about herself--among middle school students from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds. Our primary hypotheses are: (1) liking one's self, as a young adolescent, can have different meanings depending on the social context of one's life and that (2) the dimensions of self-esteem can be different among girls from different racial and ethnic groups.

Following Harter (1986; 1988a; 1990), we view self-esteem as the evaluation of the self, influenced by both one's self-perceived competencies in important domains (see James, 1892) and feedback and support from significant others (see Cooley, 1902; Mead, 1934). We distinguish between evaluations of specific domains of competence on the one hand, and global self-evaluation on the other (see Harter, 1990; Rosenberg, Schooler, Schoenbach, & Rosenberg, 1995). Rosenberg and his colleagues (1995) concur with Harter that global self-esteem and competence in specific domains cannot serve as surrogates for one another. On the other hand, we make this distinction bearing in mind that it is generally accepted that overall self-esteem and competencies in specific domains are interrelated. As William James (1892) maintained over a century ago, a person's overall sense of self-esteem is derived from self-judged competencies in domains the person views to be important components of the self. For example, a girl who

believes it is important to excel academically and perceives herself to be doing well in school will have a higher overall self-esteem than a classmate who also values academic excellence but judges herself to be an academic failure. However, another girl who is failing in school but does not believe getting good grades is important, may still give herself high global self-esteem ratings if she judges herself to be good on other domains which she views as important, such as physical attractiveness, athletic ability, and/or social acceptance.

Unless otherwise specified, we use the terms self-esteem, self-confidence, self-worth, positive self-regard and feeling good about one's self interchangeably, referring to a global or overall sense of one's worth. Throughout this article we make a distinction between this global sense of self-confidence and self-evaluations on specific dimensions of competence. Dimensions of competence that are relevant to self-esteem are bound by culture and historical time. In the research reported here we have adopted domains proposed by Harter (1988b) based on her interviews with adolescent girls and boys -- these dimensions are described in the Data Collection Instruments section below. It is our belief that the distinction between overall self-esteem and competencies in specific domains is important for an examination of differences in the underpinnings of self-esteem among girls from diverse backgrounds.

Methods

A mixed quantitative-qualitative design integrating both methods was employed (see Maxwell, 1996; Patton, 1990; Tolman & Szalacha, in press) where both quantitative and qualitative methods produced results that contributed to the conclusions. Whereas the majority of research on self-esteem measurement has been quantitative, the need for qualitative data was suggested by fieldwork among diverse groups of middle school girls. Preliminary interviews suggested that words such as "freedom" or "wanting space" may have different meanings among

girls from different backgrounds. The fixed language of standardized instruments used in survey methodology limits researchers' ability to examine differences in meaning and nuance. Therefore, it is crucial to have both qualitative and quantitative data to adequately investigate girls' constructions of their self-worth.

Sample

A total of 164 middle school girls took part in the study. We have complete data available on 161 subjects (3 failed to complete the Harter Self-Perception Profile satisfactorily).

Approximately, one-third of the respondents were in the eighth grade and two-thirds in the seventh grade. Respondents were recruited primarily through seven schools (six public and one private) with the assistance of the school administration, guidance counselors, bilingual education teachers, and secondarily through community contacts. The sample included 33 African Americans, 46 Caucasians, 40 Chinese Americans, 19 Puerto Ricans, and 25 girls from other race/ethnic groups. "Others" included Armenians, Cape Verdians, Jamaicans, non-Puerto Rican Latinas, and girls who reported mixed racial/ethnic heritage. Due to the heterogeneity in the "other" group, the comparative analyses were restricted to the four major racial/ethnic groups.

The participating schools differed not only in terms of racial/ethnic composition but along other dimensions as well. Consequently, our subsamples were not comparable with respect to a number of important demographic variables such as SES. The majority of the African American and Puerto Rican girls were from lower-income inner-city neighborhoods. The majority of Caucasian girls were from middle-class suburbs and lower-middle class satellite cities in the greater Boston area. Most of the Chinese American girls were either from lower-income inner-city neighborhoods or from a lower-middle class satellite city. Also, the majority of Puerto Rican and Chinese American girls were from recent immigrant families where English was not the primary language spoken at home. Moreover, recruitment procedures which involved acquiring

parental permission via letters sent home with each student yielded a volunteer sample of relatively "organized" students who remembered to take the letter home, show it to her parents, bring it back signed and turn it in. Therefore, the volunteer participants constitute convenience samples which cannot be viewed as necessarily representative of their schools or their racial/ethnic group.

Procedure

The data were collected from small groups of girls, homogeneous with respect to race/ethnicity by a same-race/ethnicity interviewer. The groups were convened in the middle schools the girls attended (except for two community groups where the data were collected in a church). The interviewer explained the purpose of the study as a project on girls' views of their growth and development in school and at home. Confidentiality was assured. All girls were provided with a copy of the questionnaire. The interviewer read the questions out loud and the girls marked their answers on the questionnaires. A subset of the girls (20 groups) also participated in a focus group facilitated by the interviewer.

Data Collection Instruments

Quantitative data: Quantitative data were collected by means of a questionnaire which included Harter's Adolescent Self-Perception Profile (1988b). The Self-Perception Profile is a 40-item scale that taps domain-specific judgments of competence in eight separate domains, briefly described below, each measured by a 5-item subscale. There is an additional 5-item scale of Global Self-Worth. The items are rated in a structured format in which the respondent first indicates which of the two types of teenagers she is most like and then whether this likeness is "sort of" or "really" true. The responses are scored on a four-point scale from low to high levels of competence. Harter (1988b) reports adequate internal consistency coefficients for each of the subscales (Cronbach's alpha .79 or higher) based on data from middle school students. The

Scholastic Competence subscale measures an adolescent's perception of her competence in doing class work, how smart or intelligent she feels in school. Social Acceptance taps perceptions of how well she is accepted by peers, and whether she feels popular. Athletic competence taps her perception of her competence in sports and athletic activity. The subscale of Physical Appearance measures an adolescent's satisfaction with her looks, body image, and perceptions of attractiveness. Behavioral Conduct is intended to measure perceptions of individual behavior, such as whether an adolescent likes the way she behaves, does the right thing, acts the way she is supposed to, and avoids getting into trouble. The Close Friendships subscale measures ability to make close friends with whom she can confide and share secrets. Finally, Global Self-Worth is a separate subscale which measures the overall global judgment of an adolescent's personal worth, instead of competence in specific domains. This subscale taps the extent to which an adolescent likes herself as a person, is happy with the way she is leading her life, and her general happiness. Given the grade level of our respondents--seventh and eighth graders--we omitted the Romantic Appeal and Job Competence subscales from the domains we measured. Romantic Appeal contains items about dating and Job Competence about paid employment; in pilot testing we found these two domains to be less relevant to middle school girls' lives.

Table 1 presents the internal consistency estimates (Cronbach's α) of the six subscales of the Self-Perception Profile that were employed in this study. The first column consists of the estimates from one of Harter's samples, her Sample B, the other columns contain data from the four racial/ethnic groups of girls in this study. Harter's sample was composed of 48 girls and 51 boys in the eighth grade, which is the one closest in age to the 7th and 8th grade girls in this study. Harter reports that approximately 90 percent of her samples were Caucasians drawn from primarily lower middle-class to upper-middle class neighborhoods in Colorado (1988b, p. 13).

Our Caucasian sample is the one which is most similar to Harter's Sample B with respect to race/ethnicity, and SES. Indeed, with the exception of the Social Acceptance domain, our Caucasian sample's internal consistency estimates are the most similar to those reported by Harter.

Data from other racial/ethnic groups in our sample did not always yield adequate internal consistency estimates (see Table 1). Because the relatively small size of racial/ethnic subsamples can suppress these scores by limiting variability within, we decided that a Chronbach's α of .65 or above would be evidence of an adequate level of internal consistency for this exploratory study, instead of the more traditional cut-off of .70 (see, DeVellis, 1991; Nunnally, 1978). Even with this low cut-off point of .65, the African American sample had one subscale with an unacceptably low internal consistency (Behavioral Conduct α =.35); the Chinese American sample had two (Social Acceptance, α =.59 and Behavioral Conduct, α =.48) and Puerto Rican sample with the smallest sample size (N=19), had five (Scholastic Competence, α =.52; Social Acceptance, α =.48; Athletic Competence, α =.43; Behavioral Conduct, α =.63; and Close Friendship, α =.57). Subscales with unacceptably low α estimates were eliminated from subsequent statistical analyses.

We suspect that wording of some of the items contained "double negatives" which may have posed a greater problem for girls who were not raised with standard English in their homes. For example, an item from the Behavioral Conduct subscale has the following wording "Some teenagers usually do the right thing BUT Other teenagers often don't do what they know is right." The respondent is asked to pick which type of teenager to whom they are similar and then indicate how true the statement is about them. As one can see, the statement, "Other teenagers

often don't do what they know is right," is a complex construction, disagreement with which creates a confusing double negative.

Qualitative data: The qualitative data were gathered in focus group interviews lasting approximately one hour. A subset of the sample, 93 girls, participated in 20 groups which varied in size from two to nine. The groups were homogeneous with respect to the race/ethnicity of the girls and interviewer.

Field-testing questions for the focus group interview had highlighted the difficulty of using terms such as "self-esteem," "competence," "self-worth," and "positive self-evaluations" with seventh- and eighth-grade students. The blank stares from the girls made it clear that we needed to employ plain English. With input from both middle school girls and our colleagues, we settled on "liking one's self" to capture the essence of positive self-evaluations.

Testing the phrase, "liking one's self," which was elaborated on as being happy with who one is, in several groups revealed that girls did not readily talk about whether they liked themselves but were quite voluble when it came to talking as "experts" on the topic. That is, each girl was reluctant (or unable) to talk about whether she liked herself, but had lots of opinions on the more general topic of a girl who likes herself. Therefore, the focus groups elicited these girls' self-esteem ideology rather than their subjective evaluations of themselves.

Focus group discussions were prompted by the interviewer saying, "Think about a girl who likes herself; what is she like?" This was followed up by "How did she become that way?" and ended with asking advice on how to raise a girl so she'll grow up to like herself. The audio-taped and transcribed interviews were analyzed for emergent themes, which led to the construction of coding categories. Answers to the question about the characteristics of a girl who likes herself were analyzed with respect to the following categories: (1) positive personal qualities, (2) negative personal qualities, (3) physical characteristics, (4) sexuality-related

characteristics, and (5) preferred activities. Responses to the follow-up question of how she got to be that way were coded into (1) family influences, (2) peer influences, and (3) personal attributes. Coding categories for analyzing responses to the third question regarding advice to parents were (1) parents' jurisdiction, (2) child's jurisdiction, (3) reward and punishment - - do's and don'ts, (4) value systems, (5) what girls need, (6) authoritative style of child rearing, (7) communication about sexuality, and (8) safety concerns. Independent coding of 10 percent of the transcript material by three raters yielded inter-coder agreement of 90 percent.

Results

In this exploratory study we have analyzed the results by race and ethnicity as one of the ways of operationalizing social background. The results of the racial/ethnic analyses are intended to be suggestive and illustrative, not definitive, and not solely, or even primarily, attributable to race/ethnicity. This is because the four groups of girls in the study were not randomly selected and differed on other relevant dimensions, such as SES and urbanization, in addition to race and ethnicity. The relatively small size of the subsamples precludes analyses by all relevant dimensions. For this reason, in our data analyses we have refrained from using inferential statistics to avoid a suggestion that the sample means are indicators of the population means. On the other hand, we present quantitative and qualitative descriptions of the samples to provide a context for interpreting observed relationships among variables within each subsample.

Quantitative Analyses

Table 2 presents the mean scores and standard deviations for self-perception domains as measured by Harter's Self-Perception Profile for each racial/ethnic group. The African American subsample had the most positive self-evaluations, Chinese American girls had the least positive

views. Puerto Rican and Caucasian girls fell in between the two extremes. The Global Self-Worth scores followed the same pattern, with African American girls having the highest scores.

The racial/ethnic groups also differed in the areas in which girls gave themselves the highest ratings. African American girls had high scores on the following domains of Self-Perception: Social Acceptance ($\underline{m} = 3.41$), Scholastic Competence ($\underline{m} = 3.20$), Physical Appearance ($\underline{m} = 3.12$). Caucasian girls' ratings were the highest in the domains of Social Acceptance ($\underline{m} = 3.06$), Behavioral Conduct ($\underline{m} = 3.03$), and Close Friendship ($\underline{m} = 3.36$). For Puerto Rican girls the highest self-ratings was on the domain of Physical Appearance ($\underline{m} = 2.65$). For Chinese American girls the domain on which they rated themselves the highest was Close Friendship ($\underline{m} = 2.91$).

An examination of the correlations in Table 3 reveals that, across the four groups, Physical Appearance is the domain closely associated with Global Self-Worth. There were also some noteworthy differences among correlations with Global Self-Worth. For African American girls the strongest correlation was with Scholastic Competence ($\underline{r}=.75$) while for both Caucasian and Puerto Rican girls it was with Physical Appearance ($\underline{r}=.73$). Among Chinese American girls Close Friendship was moderately related to Global Self-Worth ($\underline{r}=.42$).

Qualitative Analyses

Table 4 presents the major themes which emerged from the coding of focus group discussions. For a more detailed presentation of focus group discussions, see Erkut and Marx (1995).

African American Girls. Among African American girls, "a girl who likes herself" was described primarily in terms of interpersonal qualities, which included being a good friend, having friends, giving and getting respect, being a good student, and her physical appearance and attractiveness. How she got to be that way was credited to her family upbringing, having role

models, her personal accomplishments, receiving compliments, as well as being physically attractive.

Advice to parents centered on the major themes of teaching respect, having open communication between parents and their daughter, and showing interest in her education. Having ground rules but not smothering her with too many rules was seen as important. Additionally, African American girls talked about having "freedom" from parental protectiveness. While their comments suggested an acceptance of the limits imposed by parents, they wanted parents to ease up on the controls. Responses additionally touched on providing guidance in relation to violence, drugs, sex education, and racism.

The strong correlation between Competence and Scholastic Global Self-Worth ratings ($r = .75$) was echoed in the focus group discussions on girls' advice to parents to be supportive of their daughter's education. Moreover, African American girls' commented in the focus group discussion on the role of being attractive and getting compliments which corroborates the moderate correlation between Physical Appearance and Global Self-Worth ($r = .47$).

Caucasian Girls. Among Caucasian respondents, "a girl who likes herself" was described primarily in terms of a strong sense of individuality and independence, both of which suggest that Caucasian respondents connected feeling good about one's self to being one's own person. Positive interpersonal qualities, which included how she treats others and is treated by them were secondary themes in the discussion.

How she got to be that way was credited to parents who raised the girl in a supportive and respectful environment. Having good friends, a role model, and someone who will listen to and understand them were also mentioned as positive influences.

Advice to parents included loving the girl, encouraging and supporting her, and trying to understand her. Caucasian respondents wanted parents to foster independence and individuality while maintaining some limits.

For Caucasian girls, the results of the quantitative analyses and themes that emerged in the focus group discussions generally agree with the exception of the issue of physical appearance. While in their discussion Caucasian girls said that a girl who likes herself is too independent to care about what others think about her looks, quantitative data showed that scores on the Physical Appearance domain was very highly correlated with Global Self-Worth.

Chinese American Girls. In focus group interviews, Chinese American respondents described a girl who likes herself as "her own person," meaning immune to criticism, defiant, does what she believes is right, and is able to take care of herself. Paradoxically, this quest for independence was related to having the freedom to form close connections with friends and to have one's own thoughts and "space" for one's own feelings. Thus, the Chinese respondents' view of a girl who likes herself was one who is independent enough to be able to take care of herself as well as others. Additional characteristics mentioned included a girl who was born in the U.S. and speaks English well.

How she got to be that way was described as requiring both "space"(i.e., freedom from close family supervision) and support. The space allows a girl to become her own person in relationship to others beyond her family. Support refers to adults understanding her (i.e., being there for her but also letting her make certain choices for herself), providing access to a good education, and allowing her to explore options and activities which can be fun.

A number of participants spoke of the need for freedom in a girl's life to be with friends and to interact with peers, including male peers, on an informal basis. Thus, the Chinese respondents' view of a girl who likes herself was one who knows how to conduct herself and is

independent enough to be able to take care of herself as well as her friends. This importance attached to friends in focus group discussions was borne out by the quantitative data whereby Global Self-Worth was most closely related to scores on the Close Friendship domain.

Puerto Rican Girls Among Puerto Ricans, a girl who likes herself was described primarily in terms of social/interpersonal qualities, that is, she is popular, has lots of friends, and gets along well with people. A strong, second theme was being well-behaved, including the ability to stay out of trouble. How she got to be that way was credited to how she is treated by family and friends--people treat her well.

Advice to parents centered on teaching the girl right from wrong, being there for her, teaching her to respect herself and others. Another theme was teaching daughters to be street-wise. This included teaching girls about the dangers of drugs, and premature sexual activity, as well as being able to defend oneself physically.

Discussion

Together the results obtained using both qualitative and quantitative methods pointed to four noteworthy conclusions. On the whole, qualitative and quantitative results supported each other. When the two methods produced contradictory results we were able to interpret that as evidence of conflict or ambivalence.

The first conclusion was that, as we hypothesized, girls from different racial/ethnic groups use different standards to judge one's self-worth. The qualitative data from focus group discussions, where girls were asked to take the "expert" position, were informative about the self-esteem ideology of girls from different racial/ethnic groups. Because the focus groups were homogeneous with respect to race/ethnicity and led by a same-race/ethnicity facilitator, values particular to their racial/ethnic subculture were likely to be more salient in the discussions than

other racial/ethnic groups' values. Therefore, the focus group data yielded information about a particular racial/ethnic group of girls' perceptions of what a girl who likes herself ought to be like. In other words, we obtained information on the standards the girls use for evaluating themselves and others.

The results showed that there are some similarities in these standards; for example, all girls talked about the importance of having friends and being well-behaved. However, even these general themes took on different meaning in the discussions. Moreover, there were also notable differences. We interpreted these differences in terms of the social and physical context of the girls' lives.

For example, the Caucasian girls, who in our sample lived in the relative safety of middle-class suburbs or lower-middle-class satellite cities, placed a high emphasis on independence, individualism, being one's own person, and not bowing to peer pressure e.g., "Takes pride in herself, not afraid to wear different clothes; not afraid to be different." In contrast, the African American and Puerto Rican girls, who in our sample lived in lower-income urban environments, did not stress independence in the same way that Caucasian girls did. Instead, their comments suggested a keen awareness of the physical dangers which surround their urban existence as well as the threats posed by racism. As a Puerto Rican girl said, "...the girl's gotta be streetwise." The same sentiment was echoed by an African American girl: "Should raise her with self-defense." Thus, a girl who likes herself was described by African American and Puerto Rican girls as a nice girl who stays out of trouble but is also able to fight to defend herself if needed. As the following quotation from an African American girl illustrates, the "freedom" African American girls wanted was not only about being one's own person; it was as much about freedom from being constantly watched and monitored by parents due to their concern for her

safety: "Trust her, you know. Don't make...don't always try to keep her in the house...because all this violence in here and violence in there."

Chinese American girls also talked about wanting "freedom." Yet the context and the meaning was, again, different. While for African American girls it was a quest for their parents to trust them and to let up on controls, so that they could have more freedom and be more on their own, for Chinese American girls, wanting space appeared to be a quest for freedom to connect with peers and friends outside of their family circles. That is, Chinese American girls did not want to be left alone by their parents simply to be independent. Rather, as this quotation suggests, they wanted the freedom to form connections outside the family to be there for their friends: "She says that she is an anarchist because she believes in herself instead of others and she works hard at a lot of things and tries to, um, make people happy and helps out a lot." Thus, this "anarchist's" goal is to be independent enough to help others.

We have interpreted Chinese American girls' quest for freedom in the context of their acculturation struggles. Many in our sample were recent immigrants, and English was not the first language spoken in most of these girls' homes. It appears that the Chinese American girls experienced a discontinuity between home and the outside world and felt that, as much as they respected their parents and accepted parental values, they needed to find role models and sources of support outside of the family to be able to learn to make their way in mainstream American culture. The high value Chinese American girls placed on acculturation also can be seen in the description of the girl who likes herself as someone who was born in the U.S. and speaks English well. The "space" they sought was permission to make connections with friends and peers who could teach them about how things are done in U.S. mainstream culture and the opportunities and options that are there for them.

The second noteworthy finding, derived from the quantitative data, showed that each racial/ethnic group of girls presented a different profile of self-perceived strengths on Harter's domains of competence. This confirms the second hypothesis that dimensions of self-esteem can be different among girls from different racial and ethnic backgrounds. Our sample of African American girls rated themselves as highly competent--average ratings of 3.12 and above on a four-point scale--in the domains of Social Acceptance, Scholastic Competence, and Physical Appearance. They also had the highest Global Self-Worth ratings of all racial/ethnic groups (3.36 on a four-point scale). These results lend credence to the high global self-esteem found among African American girls in the 1991 AAUW sponsored survey.

Caucasian girls in our sample gave themselves high ratings on the Social Acceptance, Behavioral Conduct, and Close Friendship domains. This pattern of findings suggests that they perceived themselves to be well-liked by their peers and close friends and that they saw themselves as well-behaved. In spite of this, their Global Self-Worth ratings were only moderately high, 2.90 on a four-point scale. It may be that their perceived strengths in being well-liked, good girls were diminished by the relatively low ratings they gave themselves in Physical Appearance (2.28).

Our sample of Chinese American girls gave themselves lower ratings on most of the domains compared to other groups and, also, had the lowest Global Self-Worth scores of all. Close Friendship was the domain on which they rated themselves the highest, but even this was only 2.91 on the four-point scale. Relative to the other groups, it appears that Chinese American girls did not see themselves as measuring up to the standards to which they aspire.

Results from the Puerto Rican girls in our sample cannot be interpreted with any confidence because only their Global Self-Worth and Physical Appearance scores had adequate internal consistency.

The third noteworthy finding was that physical attractiveness appears to be a source of conflict for Caucasian girls. In their focus-group discussion Caucasian girls were vehement in their insistence that a girl who likes herself would not bow to peer pressure in terms of how she looks and dresses. Yet, their ratings on the Physical Appearance domain were very highly correlated with Global Self-Esteem scores, ($r = .82$), which suggest that for Caucasian girls Global Self-Worth is almost the same thing as perceiving one's self as physically appealing. This contradiction points to an ambivalence about the role of being physically attractive among Caucasian girls. In contrast, Puerto Rican girls, among whom Physical Appearance and Global Self-Worth scores also were highly correlated ($r = .73$), showed no ambivalence in their attitude toward being attractive. As the following quotation shows, "...she likes herself. She's popular, she's pretty," Puerto Rican girls mentioned the importance of being attractive in focus-group discussions and generally gave themselves high ratings on Physical Appearance.

Chinese American girls were also consistent in their attitudes toward physical attractiveness. They did not bring it up as part of the discussion of a girl who likes herself; they did not rate themselves highly on this domain, nor did their scores on Physical Appearance correlate strongly with Global Self-Worth.

Our findings on Caucasian girls' ambivalence about physical attractiveness suggests that the majority culture's narrow and unrealistic standards of physical beauty -- e.g., the image captured in caricature in the original Barbie doll--may be most undermining of Caucasian girls' evaluations of their worth. As Wade (1991) points out, media images of feminine beauty ideals have mostly reflected white standards in the U.S., hence are most relevant to Caucasian girls' self-evaluations. In contrast to the narrow Caucasian standard of beauty, until recently, non-white images were scarce in mainstream media, which gave many girls of color more options to choose standards of beauty from the wide range of people in their lives. In the last few decades, non-

white girls have enjoyed the added bonus of seeing themselves depicted in not only a range of skin colors, facial features and hair styles, but also body image (the full figured woman) in magazines such as Ebony and Essence geared to African Americans. The depictions of a wider array of what is attractive --when compared to the narrow Caucasian standard-- may allow non-white adolescents a greater range of self-acceptance in how they view their physical appearance. Parker, Nichter, Nichter, Vuckovic, Sims, and Ritenbaugh's (1995) research with African American and Caucasian adolescents females' on body image and weight concerns confirms our view that African American girls have more flexible standards of beauty compared to the Caucasian girls' more rigid definitions of what is beautiful.

In the last few years however there has been an increase in the number of non-white models depicted by mainstream media and fashion industry. While some of these new models portray a wide range of skin color, hair style and texture and facial features, their body depict the slim Caucasian ideal. Whether this new emphasis on slimness among non-white models will give rise to similar concerns with body image among girls of color remains to be seen.

Alternatively, girls in the Caucasian sample may have been reflecting not their own personal, but rather majority culture's ambivalence about the importance of physical appearance in their focus group discussions. That is, it may be that each girl is not personally conflicted about physical appearance but each girl has learned that placing importance on looks is viewed as superficial. In other words, the girls may simply be giving voice to majority culture's ambivalence to placing a high value on external appearance. The social desirability element which operates in any group discussion is likely to bring to the forefront what group participants perceive as acceptable social values. Among African American and Puerto Rican groups, there appears to be less ambivalence toward placing a value on looking good, which may be why girls

from these racial/ethnic groups asserted that a girl who likes herself is attractive, in addition to having other positive qualities.

The fourth finding was the widespread endorsement of girls' need for support but also for parental limit setting. Seventh- and eighth-grade girls' advice to parents for raising a girl who will grow up to like herself stressed giving her freedom but not too much; trusting her to go out but adhering to a curfew; watching her closely but not all the time. Advice from an African American girl is typical of this sentiment. "Be reasonably strict. Don't smother her: Let her breathe." It appears that, at least during the middle school years, girls believe both love and limits are necessary ingredients for successful child bearing. Love and limits is basically the "authoritative" approach to child rearing which social scientists have identified with positive child and adolescent outcomes (see Baumrind, 1989, 1991; Steinberg, Dornbusch, & Brown, 1992). It appears that middle school girls' and social scientists' advice to parents is similar. The limits imposed by loving parents create a safe environment for the developing adolescents' exploration of new freedoms.

Conclusions and Implications

The findings of this research are that (1) girls from different racial and ethnic groups use different standards to judge self-worth; (2) girls from different racial and ethnic groups identify different strengths; (3) the differences between Caucasian girls' public statements and written responses suggest they have the most conflicted attitudes toward the importance of physical appearance in determining one's self-worth; and (4) middle school girls widely endorse "love and limits" as the best child-rearing approach for raising daughters who will grow up to like themselves. Differences we have highlighted in the ways girls from diverse social backgrounds perceive what it means to like one's self underscore the important role played by contextual

variables. The results have led us to postulate that not only race/ethnicity, but also the level of danger in the neighborhood, the nature of family boundaries, recency of immigration, media images of feminine beauty, and cultural attitudes toward physical attractiveness can play a role in the composition of self-evaluations. The general conclusion to be drawn from this exploratory research is that an understanding of the social forces a girl faces is essential for an understanding of what that particular girl needs in order to like herself.

Because our sub-samples were relatively small and not comparable with respect to many relevant variables such as family composition, social class, and urbanization of residence, the pattern of findings discussed cannot be solely or primarily attributed to racial/ethnic differences. We recommend that future research employ larger representative samples to more accurately assess the meaning and determinants of middle school-aged girls' positive self-evaluations.

We believe documenting the diversity in girls' conceptions of positive self-regard has significant consequences for understanding girls from diverse backgrounds because what may appear on the surface to be similar phenomena may, on closer inspection, reveal subtle but important differences (see Erkut, Fields, Sing, & Marx, 1996). Therefore, it is important to arrive at a more differentiated understanding of the diversity in girls' lives and subsequent conceptions of positive self-regard.

Middle school girls seem to agree that parents should provide both support and freedom for a daughter if they want her to grow up liking herself. Almost in the same breath, they add that the freedom should be within limits. Thus, middle school girls' advice to parents for raising confident and competent girls is the "love and limits" approach to child rearing. The basic finding of this study is that what constitutes loving support and limited freedom for a given girl depends on the social realities of her life. The particular pattern of differences we found in this research may be unique to the samples studied and not generalizable beyond the characteristics of

the girls studied. Nevertheless, in view of the multiple and varying underpinnings of self-esteem in girls from different backgrounds, the findings underscore the weaknesses of an essentialist approach to girls' self-esteem. The concern over a decline in girls' self-esteem in early adolescence is then turned into a need to examine the relative stability of global self-evaluation throughout adolescence among different groups of girls as well as to determine which domains of competence are sources of strength during early, middle, and late adolescence.

The results have implications for girls' programming. One of the practical outcomes of a clearer understanding of the underpinnings of self-evaluations among adolescent girls will be a rethinking of current prevention and intervention programs for bolstering girls' self-esteem. It may well be that, when measured using context-sensitive definitions and instruments, many girls from backgrounds other than white, middle-class already have an adequate level of self-esteem and may not benefit from intervention programs designed on the basis of knowledge obtained from white middle-class girls. Also, given that there are multiple configurations of self-esteem in diverse groups, programs that work from a single notion of what it means to like one's self may be, in fact, ineffective for girls from different backgrounds. Any program designed to bolster self-esteem should explicitly define what are considered important dimensions of competence for its target population. Finally, to the extent that self-esteem is both global and also has specific domains, interventions can be designed to be specific to the domains of interest. For example, in our sample of African American girls, Global Self-Worth was most highly correlated with the domain of Scholastic Achievement. This finding suggests that for a sample with a similar profile, an academic enrichment program is likely to yield the most return in terms of boosting global self-esteem. On the other hand, in the Caucasian sample, the highest correlation was between Global Self-worth and Physical Appearance. In a sample with this particular profile, most gains

in overall self-esteem are likely to be attained by addressing controversies surrounding physical attractiveness rather than by providing academic enhancement.

There are also several implications for counseling. First, counselors of middle school girls should not assume that all, or even most, young adolescents will exhibit low self-esteem or “lose their voice.” Some girls may actively resist such an impulse and develop a positive self image around being a “resistor.” Many others will likely have a more mundane basis for their self-confidence than one motivated by resisting perceived oppression. Their self-worth will be grounded in competencies they view as important. As Harter and her colleagues’ recent research (in press) shows, “loss of voice” is more likely for girls who espouse a traditional view of female gender roles. Indeed, their finding suggests that girls who aspire to a more feminine ideology may benefit from a psycho-educational approach to counseling which emphasizes the variety of educational, career, and social role options open to women today.

Second, the multidimensional model of self-esteem employed here, which predicts that general self-worth reflects one’s competencies in domains one deems important, dovetails with standard counseling practice of working with a client’s strengths. Our results show that girls from different backgrounds have self-perceived competencies in different domains that they may or may not view as an important competency in which to excel. Bolstering the importance of domains in which an adolescent already feels competent is likely to increase her overall self-esteem.

Third, when working with clients from diverse backgrounds, counselors need to be cognizant that domains of self-concept and how an adolescent girl perceives her competence on these domains is, in large part, a function of the social, cultural, and physical circumstances of her life. These perceptions represent adaptive responses to the demands of their daily living. For example, we found that girls who live in environments where they feared for their physical safety

said that it was important for a girl to be street-wise and to be able to defend herself. The counselor can help a girl assess if she is perceiving her environment accurately, to examine alternative ways she can meet the environmental demands, decide on what competencies she needs to acquire to meet these demands, and develop accurate and realistic standards to judge her performance.

Results of the current study also have several implications for future research on girl's self-esteem. First, there is a need for psychometrically sound measurement tools that are valid and reliable for use with diverse populations. Secondly, it is necessary to tease out the separate effects of such demographic variables as race/ethnicity, SES, immigration, and urbanization of residence which we touched on in the research reported here. Future research should additionally explore the role played by gender roles, sexual orientation, and being physically and/or mentally disabled. Thirdly, longitudinal studies are needed to document the relative stability or instability of global self-worth throughout adolescence, as well as to examine which domains are the sources of strength for which groups of girls during early, middle, and late adolescence. Finally, the very same research questions can be asked about boys' self-esteem because adolescent boys are no more a monolithic group than are girls. Future research needs to examine the developmental trajectory of global self-esteem as well as its specific underpinnings among girls as well as boys from diverse backgrounds.

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