

Ethnic pride key to black teen mental health

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Ethnic pride may be as important as self-esteem to the mental health of young African-American adolescents, according to a new study in the Nov/Dec issue of the journal *Child Development*.

The empirical study is one of the first to look at the effects of self-esteem and of racial identity and to separately explore their effects by gender. The study specifically measures racial identity in terms of ethnic pride.

"Our findings indicate that -- regardless of self-esteem -- as feelings of ethnic pride go up, mental health tends to increase as well," said psychologist Jelani Mandara, associate professor at Northwestern University [School of Education](#) and Social Policy. "That suggests that efforts to enhance youngsters' sense of ethnic pride at home, in the classroom and in mental health settings are not just appropriate but important to their mental health."

Mandara is co-author with Maryse H. Richards and Noni Gaylord-Harden (Loyola University Chicago) and Brian Ragsdale (Walden University) of "The Effects of Changes in Racial Identity and Self-Esteem on Changes in African American Adolescents' Mental Health."

In their study, the researchers viewed self-esteem as the way adolescents feel about themselves as individuals, and ethnic pride as the way they feel about their ethnic group. Previous research generally has considered racial identity a proxy or sub-set of self-esteem.

The new study speaks to the importance of ethnic pride separate and apart from self-esteem. "Psychologists have been theorizing about this for years," Mandara said. "Our empirical evidence indicates that we'll see African-American teens with fewer depressive symptoms if we pay more attention to building ethnic pride."

It's easier to build ethnic pride than it is to influence self-esteem, he added.

Using standard self-report measures, the authors assessed 259 African-American youths from six Chicago public schools when they were in the seventh grade and again a year later in the eighth grade.

In measuring racial identity, they focused on issues of ethnic pride and replaced phrases such as "I have a lot of pride in my ethnic group" with "I have a lot of pride in Black people." They did not address issues of culture or of "public regard" -- how others look at race -- in assessing ethnic identity.

The researchers found that both male and female students showed fewer depressive symptoms if their feelings of ethnic pride rose between seventh and eighth grade whether or not their self-esteem increased.

"The importance of self-esteem to adolescent mental health is well known and accepted," Mandara said. "But it is not uncommon for individuals to have high self-esteem and at the same time exhibit depressive symptoms. Research has long shown that African-American girls have higher self-esteem compared to other girls but also have more depressive symptoms."

The study found that the higher girls' self-esteem was, the more likely they were to report [depressive symptoms](#). Mandara suggested that could be because African American girls often are charged with adult family

responsibilities that make them feel competent but also cause them stress.

To the researchers' surprise, self-esteem did not correlate with mental health for males after controlling for ethnic pride.

"A rising sense of ethnic pride appears to be particularly helpful to boys in buffering against symptoms of depression," said Mandara. "It may be that race is a more salient issue for boys in this age group than it is for girls.

The study suggests that strategies at home, in the classroom and in mental health settings can boost both ethnic identity and assist adolescents in reconciling their group- and self-identities.

"These children are bombarded with negative images of African Americans in the media," Mandara said. "They need exposure to African Americans who are doing well to minimize the derogatory images they see."

Source: Northwestern University ([news](#) : [web](#))

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