

## RACE, CLASS, AND THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF SELF-RESPECT

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### INTRODUCTION

In the mid-1950s, when Kenneth Clark first investigated the influence of racial prejudice on children, discrimination appeared to pose a serious threat to the self-conception of many Black American children.<sup>1</sup> Clark's famous "doll study" of racial preferences in children tested black and white children in several age groups to determine which of two dolls—black or white—they preferred. A majority of Black children in every age group studied expressed a preference for the white doll and rejected the black doll. Of course, not every child who grew up during this period would have displayed such a response, but the self-conceptions of those who did seemed to have been distorted by the complex consequences of discrimination. Many social theorists hoped that social reforms of the 1960s might help remedy the problem. Yet when the study was recently repeated, the results were surprisingly similar to Clark's original findings: a majority of the Black children studied expressed the same kind of racial preferences as those of similar children in the 1950s.<sup>2</sup>

Anecdotal accounts suggest that the increasing economic isolation of some Black children in American cities may compound the effects of discrimination. A public teacher in a major American city recently reported a disturbing conversation with a ten-year-old Black child who was asked to explain his disruptive classroom behavior. When this student was cautioned that he was preventing his classmates (all of whom were Black) from learning, he replied that it didn't matter, since they were "nothing." Reminded that he was disrupting his own education, he answered that he, too, was "nothing," and added "my mother told me I ain't nothing."<sup>3</sup>

This article describes and defends a new way of understanding the notion of self-respect, as a contribution to philosophical psychology and as an attempt to understand why the relevant social reforms seem to have failed the child in my

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example—and others like him. The first section defines and describes the two distinct components of self-respect and discusses the influence of social conditions on each component. I also distinguish self-respect from self-esteem and discuss the complicated relation between the two phenomena. The second section shows how socially developed expectations about persons and their capacities help shape self-conceptions and ultimately influence the ability to have and affirm self-respect and self-esteem. I show, further, how socially developed expectations—especially those bound up with class and race—sometimes undermine the capacity to develop a *robust* sense of self-respect. Finally, the third section discusses the most important social bases of self-respect. Social reforms may be a necessary component of any effort to ensure the socially widespread emergence of robust self-respect. Yet we can restore the social bases of self-respect only if we also seek to revise destructive expectations about persons and their characteristics—including many self-regarding expectations—that have supported unreformed social practices.

#### WHAT IS SELF-RESPECT?

Self-respect, or due respect for one's own worth, has two fundamental components. The first, more fundamental, component involves the conviction that one best affirms one's own value by using one's abilities and talents to contribute to one's survival. One who fails to act on this conviction fails to affirm self-respect, while one who lacks the conviction fails to have self-respect. Yet the conviction and the readiness, together, are just the minimum content of self-respect; a *robust* sense of self-respect is far more than simply a concern to use one's talents in the interest of self-preservation. Further, even the minimum content of self-respect is itself more than simply a concern for one's survival. A person might care about her own survival and yet be unwilling to try to contribute to it: such a person places some value on her own existence but lacks the attitude properly called self-respect. A person has self-respect only when the value she places on her own survival is sufficient to make her willing to contribute to it.

What constitutes contributing to one's survival will always be relative to the specific circumstances of an individual life. For instance, what might be a significant affirmation of the minimum content of self-respect for a hostage bound and gagged in a dark cell would be relatively insignificant for a person not confined in this way.<sup>4</sup> But virtually no human beings who are capable of consciousness and reflection are incapable of having and actively affirming the minimum content of self-respect. A mentally handicapped person who seeks employment, a young child who wants to be allowed to choose what to wear to school, even a person wishing to end some addictive behavior by first acknowledging a need for the assistance of others—all of these people affirm their

possession of the minimum content of self-respect. Finally, most people have a tenacious and regularly observable tendency to seek, and to try to protect, the minimum content of self-respect. As I suggest below, even people who have suffered severe economic and social deprivation typically bear out this observation.

The second component of self-respect is a willingness to do whatever is within one's power to enhance or develop one's abilities and talents. A person who must travel long distances to work, for instance, might need to learn to drive if she cannot take public transport to work. The willingness to develop one's talents initially emerges because, usually, one can best exercise one's abilities when these abilities have been adequately developed.

The relation between the two aspects of self-respect is typically unproblematic—it is generally easy to reconcile concerns that might be generated by the two aspects of self-respect. However, certain circumstances may complicate the relation between the two components of self-respect, making it difficult to reconcile their demands. The first complication arises because human beings have the capacity to place intrinsic value on the development and exercise of some kinds of abilities—such as artistic abilities and moral capacities. Concerns generated by the development and exercise of such abilities may even take priority over concerns associated with the minimum content of self-respect. When this happens, self-forgetfulness and even self-sacrifice can be transformed into manifestations of self-respect.<sup>5</sup> A great writer who works to exhaustion to complete her book, or a lifeguard who risks his life to save a child from drowning, both illustrate this kind of transformation.

But a second, very different kind of complication arises when a person is consistently thwarted in her efforts to develop or exercise her talents and abilities. Such a person may begin to mistrust her abilities; severe frustration and disappointment can make the exercise of one's abilities and talents seem antithetical to self-preservation. One may even come to believe that one's misfortune and unhappiness actually result from the exercise of one's talents and abilities—even when, as a matter of fact, one is not responsible for the unhappiness suffered. Thus children who suffer extreme abuse, for example, can come to hate the exercise of their distinctive talents and abilities—with dire consequences for their sense of self-respect.

Of course the relation between the two components of self-respect can be more harmonious: indeed, a robust sense of self-respect must comfortably combine the two components (to some degree) over a lifetime. Moreover, a robust sense of self-respect is a central ingredient of a satisfying life. To see why, we must understand, first, that the two components of self-respect are often mutually reinforcing. The satisfaction that often accompanies the development of one's distinctive talents and abilities typically increases one's enjoyment of life. This

increase may in turn strengthen one's conviction of the importance to one's self-respect of using and developing those abilities. Second, a robust sense of self-respect typically generates a wish to formulate and pursue an effective life plan rather than to seek self-preservation merely by means of ad hoc reactions to circumstances. One is likely to lead a better life in virtue of having and acting upon such a wish than if one never developed, or acted upon, such a wish. Thus John Rawls is right to view self-respect as a good that any rational person will want, whatever else she might want.<sup>6</sup> Finally, a robust sense of self-respect generally makes one better able, and more willing, to engage in the social cooperation that makes possible the rational pursuit of life plans. Since it is in general rational to want to encourage such cooperation, it is also rational to want every member of one's society to be given the fullest possible chance to develop a robust sense of self-respect.<sup>7</sup>

I distinguish self-respect from self-esteem. My account thus departs substantially from Rawls's claims about the content of self-respect. Rawls contends that "a person's sense of his own value" is equivalent to that person's "secure conviction that his conception of his good, his plan of life, is worth carrying out" (TJ 440). Rawls also claims that "self-respect implies a confidence in one's ability, so far as it is within one's power, to fulfill one's intentions" (TJ 440). Like other critics of this claim, I think that what Rawls describes here is not self-respect but the phenomenon of self-esteem.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, the distinction between self-esteem and self-respect is crucial. How else can we understand that a person might lose confidence in the worth of some particular life plan without at the same time questioning her value as a person?<sup>9</sup> People can sometimes refine, revise, or relinquish a life plan (or some portion of it) should circumstances require them to do so. This is because self-respect is both more fundamental, and less fragile, than self-esteem.

But while self-esteem—confidence in one's life plan—is distinct from self-respect—a due sense of one's own worth—severe diminutions in self-esteem may nonetheless have devastating effects on self-respect. Such effects are most likely when a loss of confidence in one's plans causes a further loss of confidence in one's abilities to attend to one's own preservation. For instance, a person might attribute some drastic failure of his plans to his own mistakes (correctly or incorrectly) rather than to bad fortune or human malevolence. Should such a belief diminish his confidence in his abilities—and, especially if the failure is extreme enough—his self-respect will be severely diminished. In a very different sort of case, a person's response to misfortune (rather than to her own mistakes) might diminish her self-esteem so severely as eventually to diminish her confidence in her abilities and talents. Repeated or extreme bad fortune forges a particularly close link between the fragility of self-esteem and the fragility of

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self-respect. To be sure, we can neither insulate people from all imaginable misfortune nor prevent them from making mistakes. Yet we can support a socially sanctioned scheme of education that teaches people how to avoid those mistakes most likely to undermine self-respect. We can also try to remedy at least some accidents of fortune that pose the gravest danger to self-esteem and hence to self-respect. But once we have sought the appropriate remedies, we must leave people free to make mistakes. A robust sense of self-respect develops only if one is allowed to learn the extent and the limits of one's own powers; here, experience is the best teacher.

While some circumstances threaten self-respect indirectly through self-esteem, a variety of circumstances can pose a *direct* threat to self-respect. Every society gradually develops a set of mechanisms—social, political, and economic institutions and practices—through which its members typically learn to seek constructive affirmations of self-respect. Yet one's access to mechanisms for the constructive affirmation of self-respect can be artificially limited. For instance, societies with a tradition of discrimination (*de jure* or *de facto*) against some groups of people may effectively exclude those people from the typical mechanisms for affirming self-respect. The mere fact of discrimination alone (however arbitrary or unjust its basis) is unlikely to pose a direct threat to the self-respect of its victims. Self-respect is rarely so fragile. But when a scheme of discrimination is rooted in a complex network of degrading and dehumanizing fictions about its victims it can become truly dangerous to self-respect. The more entrenched this network of fictions, the more likely discrimination is to pose a threat to the self-respect of those subjected to it.

Such a scheme demands of those whose choices it restricts that they learn to reconcile two conflicting messages: (1) that self-respect is affirmed and experienced through participation in a particular set of social practices, but (2) that one is nonetheless effectively excluded from these practices. Some who are affected by such a scheme may also fail to discover alternative constructive means to affirm their worth, and they may not recognize the destructive cultural fictions as fictions. For such people, social exclusion is almost certain to weaken self-respect. Moreover, the responses of those who are continually excluded may have powerfully damaging consequences for themselves and their societies. Of course, we cannot ensure that all those who are able to participate in constructive social practices will actually choose to do so; it would be wrong to try if we are to protect the personal liberty that is central to self-respect. Yet we can identify those lingering effects of discrimination that continue to prevent people from choosing to accept or reject the relevant mechanisms. Though these effects are more complex than is often acknowledged, they can be remedied once we understand them.

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I have so far assumed that the ability to have and affirm a robust sense of self-respect is greatly influenced by social circumstances. Important facts about the contexts in which people initially develop self-conceptions support this assumption. First, the vocabulary in which one learns to give expression to one's self-conception, and even the concepts that initially shape that self-conception, are products of the linguistic conventions of a given community. These conventions embody that community's normative expectations about emotion, thought, and action, and as these expectations change or become more complex so, too, will the self-conceptions of the members of that community. For instance, changes in the way American society views women's choices about work and marriage have changed the way women view themselves and have produced a variety of new and complex expectations about women and their sense of self-worth. Second, a society's normative expectations about emotion, thought, and action have an especially powerful influence on the development of self-respect. Every society gradually develops intricate patterns of normative expectations about what talents and abilities one ought to use in the service of self-preservation—even about what really constitutes survival or self-preservation. A complex society will produce intricate and overlapping patterns of such expectations. Further, self-contained communities within complex societies sometimes produce their own self-contained expectations about selves and self-respect. The self-conceptions of those in such communities will overlap very little with the self-conceptions of those outside such groups. Consider, for instance, the self-contained expectations that shape life in America's Old Order Amish communities.<sup>10</sup>

Socially developed patterns of expectations about self-preservation, and about the acceptable means to that end, constitute what I call the *social construction of self-respect*. The social construction of self-respect is so important because it sets down the parameters within which we initially learn to evaluate our own worth. In twentieth-century America, for example, a powerful set of normative expectations encourages Americans to link their worth as persons to the kind of work they do. As we might expect, people who conform to such expectations find that their self-respect tends to rise and fall with the character of their employment prospects. But complex societies produce overlapping patterns of expectations governing self-worth. Thus some Americans are more influenced by expectations linking self-worth with material possessions than with honest and productive work. In this regard, the Wall Street stockbroker whose bumper sticker announces that "Whoever dies with the most toys wins" bears important similarities to the urban high-school student preoccupied with getting the latest running shoes or a bigger piece of gold jewelry. Finally, the overlapping patterns of expectations that gradually evolve in complex societies—especially in their

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coarser adaptations—may conflict with each other. Contemporary American society provides striking examples of the very common conflict between the pursuit of honest work and the pursuit of material possessions. The stockbroker who turns to insider trading in pursuit of his “toys”—and the urban high-school student who sells drugs in pursuit of his—reveal the complexity of the social construction of self-respect in America.

One's ability to conform to any pattern of expectations about appropriate ways to affirm self-respect will be affected by one's social, political, and economic circumstances. A variety of circumstances can be relevant—including geographical location, religion, or native language, as well as class and race. The relevance of any particular circumstance is a function of each society's history and traditions. In a society with a long history of relative ethnic and racial homogeneity, for instance, one's class position may be the most important such circumstance. But in many societies, including American society, there are two such circumstances: class position and membership in a particular racial, ethnic, or religious group. Moreover, in such a society the influence of class position is usually registered most directly on the phenomenon of self-esteem—affecting one's confidence in the worth and attainability of one's life plans. In contrast, the influence of race designations (like that of ethnic or religious group membership) is typically registered most directly on self-respect.

The influence of class is due partly to the typically close connection between life plans and economic resources, but its influence also depends upon each person's understanding of how this connection affects her own life. Awareness of one's class position tends to have the most immediate effects on self-esteem, particularly on one's confidence in one's ability actually to carry out one's life plans. This awareness often determines a young person's sense of what *sort* of life plan she ought to pursue. Indeed, a young person's conviction of severe economic limitations on her life plans may even diminish her confidence in the worth of her most valued plans. Such a loss of confidence, as Rawls has suggested, can have devastating consequences—including apathy and cynicism about the worth of pursuing any constructive projects (TJ 440). Finally, the effects of class on self-esteem and motivation may be compounded by geographical isolation or by membership in a historically disfavored racial group—as the lives of some people in America's Appalachian region, and of some in America's urban underclass, reveal.<sup>11</sup>

Though the loss of self-esteem need not diminish self-respect, those who believe themselves confined in an unfavorable class position may find that circumstances directly affecting self-esteem ultimately pose a threat to their self-respect. The experience of one who believes himself economically confined may even be *phenomenologically* like the experience of legally enforced discrimination: it may be felt as exclusion from accepted social mechanisms for affirming

self-respect. To be sure, families can sometimes mitigate the potentially destructive effects of economic limitations. Thus many political philosophers—especially in the liberal tradition—view the family as a private buffer against an array of potential assaults on self-esteem and self-respect.<sup>12</sup> But even in societies where laws protect the internal operations of the family as private, the family is a social and economic institution that registers the effects of social and economic isolation. The strain of membership in economically marginal positions may take a severe toll on the structure and well-being of the family itself. When social and economic marginality persist for several generations of one family, the family may even be the principal vehicle for conveying the belief that social isolation is a permanent fact of experience. As in my example of the child whose mother believes that he is “nothing,” the economic isolation of a family may reinforce the tendency for diminutions in self-esteem to be transformed into challenges to self-respect.

The direct influence of racial designations—of “race”—on self-conceptions is registered in different and somewhat more complex ways. Not surprisingly, these designations can have especially damaging effects if a society has ever given explicit legal protection (and implicit social support) to racial discrimination. In such a society, merely outlawing discrimination will be unlikely to immediately undo its effects. For in a country not subject to authoritarian rule, legal rules persist for several generations only if there is relatively widespread acceptance of those rules. In order to understand obedience to law as something more than mere observable regularities in behavior, we must acknowledge the existence of what H. L. A. Hart has called an “internal perspective” on the rules of a legal system.<sup>13</sup> According to Hart, an adequate account of a legal system must recognize the existence of a perspective from which agents subject to legal rules take demands for conformity to the rules, and criticisms of breaches of the rules, to be justified. But if we accept Hart’s view, as I think we should, we shall have to relinquish the notion that changing discriminatory laws might automatically eliminate discrimination—or its lingering structural consequences.

Yet accepting the plausibility of this view commits us to two important conclusions about discrimination in America. First, we must acknowledge the existence of a complex internal perspective on the legally supported exclusion of Black people from the social mechanisms for affirming self-respect. A complex set of beliefs and attitudes, transmitted from one generation to another for at least three hundred years, helped shore up the institution of American slavery, and the legally protected discrimination of subsequent periods. Second, it is simply implausible that this internal perspective on the exclusion of Black Americans might have magically ceased to exist with the bitterly contested end of legally-sanctioned discrimination in America.<sup>14</sup> In the “Letter from Birmingham Jail,” Martin Luther King vividly described some of the ways in which legally enforced



segregation "distorts the soul and degrades human personality" for both the segregator and those subjected to segregation.<sup>15</sup> I contend that many of the relevant distortions will still be transmitted from one generation to another, as part of the social construction of self-respect, long after the "official" end of segregation.

Thus I claim that, in America, the social construction of self-respect continues to bear the complex and often unacknowledged stamp of racial discrimination. What does it mean to claim this? First, in subtle—and sometimes blatant—ways, any group that has been legally excluded from American mechanisms for affirming self-respect will remain a disfavored group for some time. The "conceptual space" that a society historically marks out for a disfavored group places very definite boundaries on what those not in that group will think of them. Changing laws will not automatically alter these boundaries, and many people will unreflectively continue to accept the conceptual boundaries that have been imposed upon the disfavored group. In such a context, even some who actively try not to be "racists" may nonetheless perpetuate the very distortions used to justify discrimination. One of the most dangerous—and least questioned—distortions is the notion that the disfavored group has some psychological and behavioral "essence" that is allegedly genetically transmitted and inescapably possessed by all members of the group.<sup>16</sup> Moreover, beliefs about the alleged essence of some group need not be primarily negative in order to have destructive consequences. For the notion is destructive principally in the way it blinds those who believe in it to the obvious diversity to be found within each group. The Asian American student who neither likes nor excels at mathematics, and the Black American student who prefers physics to basketball alike suffer from the notion of racial essence. Nor is this notion any less destructive when it is unreflectively accepted by the disfavored group themselves as a self-conception. It is particularly destructive when they unreflectively accept a notion of their own "essence" that remains entangled in distortions bound up with the tradition of discrimination. Indeed, to accept such a notion, as I show below, is to participate in one's own victimization.

But the social construction of self-respect typically sustains discriminatory attitudes in yet a second way. For the social transmission of norms of self-respect continues to encourage many people to believe that they must measure their worth primarily by *comparison* with those in the disfavored group. In particular, some social norms governing self-respect lead many persons to believe that preserving their sense of self-respect depends upon being able to prove that they are "superior" to members of some disfavored group. The more precarious the class position of such people, the more they will learn to fear any changes in the "inferior" status of the disfavored group as challenges to the alleged certainties that shore up their sense of self-respect. This phenomenon obviously informs

much recent racial discord in the urban centers of America. The more complex the hierarchies of class and ethnicity in a community—and the greater the sense of economic uncertainty there—the more complicated these fears and the resultant conflicts become.

Yet the distorting lessons of discrimination and exclusion are not always manifested in violent conflict: they continually deform and distort the most ordinary social interactions. Consider a college mathematics professor who unreflectively continues to accept unfounded preconceptions about the intellectual capacities of Black students. How might such a professor respond to a Black student's expression of confusion on some point in her class lecture? Coming from a white student, such a confusion would probably be viewed as a simple error, or even as a request for help. But this professor is likely to interpret the Black student's comment as though it were evidence of basic intellectual weakness. If the Black student has expressed confusion on previous occasions, his comments may then become evidence that Black students in general can't "keep up," or even won't try—that they are, in short, "inferior." Similar conduct from a white student would not be taken to support any analogous generalization about all white students. It would simply be a sign that this individual student can't, or even won't, keep up with the class. Moreover, the professor's preconceptions imply that the Black student who has in fact excelled is somehow suspect. Because this professor expects Black students to be weak at mathematics, she will regard a Black student's mathematical success as somehow a "fluke"—she may even question the student's honesty. Crucial social interactions can thus be shaped—one might say deformed—by discriminatory attitudes that commit those who hold them to profoundly *irrational* judgments about the abilities of those in some disfavored group.

Such distortions have consequences that transcend any single social interaction. To understand these consequences, we must take note of two important phenomena identified by social scientists. Robert Merton has described the phenomenon of the "self-fulfilling prophecy" whereby expectations of certain behavior in others often tend to evoke that very behavior.<sup>17</sup> For instance, a Black student might cease to put effort into a class taught by a professor who expects him to be inferior; the student may well presume (correctly) that his effort won't be taken seriously. Of course, he would then do poorly or even fail, thereby seeming to bear out the professor's prediction of failure. But this phenomenon calls attention to a second, described by Gordon Allport as the "reciprocal conduct of human beings in interaction."<sup>18</sup> Allport notes that in social interactions our expectations of others, and the behavior they then tend to display, will constantly reinforce each other in a complex reciprocal fashion. To be sure, sometimes the effects of this reciprocal process are benign or even beneficial. But when the process begins either with racial exclusion, or with open expression

of hatred based on ethnic or religious group membership, dangerous consequences may follow. The experience of hatred and exclusion will sometimes produce extreme anger and bitterness in its victims. Further, those who—for various reasons—come to believe that there is nothing to be gained by restraining their anger may openly display such feelings. But of course, behavioral manifestations of these feelings may then be taken by those not in the disfavored group to “confirm” the culture’s reasons for hate and exclusion. Racial and ethnic hatred and exclusion thus initiate processes that distort and deform social interactions by generating mistrust and suspicion, and sometimes violent conflict.

I have so far discussed attitudes that devalue the *abilities* of those in the disfavored group. Yet in many contexts discrimination embodies an effort to devalue, degrade, or discount the worth of persons themselves—not just their talents and abilities. Consider the following example. A dispatcher in an urban police station who has been taught to believe that Black people are not fully human will very likely treat Black victims of crime with less seriousness than victims who are not Black. For instance, he may view a Black person’s call for emergency police assistance as relatively unimportant, with potentially disastrous consequences for those who seek that assistance. He may even attempt to rationalize the low priority he gives to emergency calls from Black callers: he might claim that statistics about violence in the caller’s neighborhood support his belief that Black people “don’t really care” about violence or that giving the call greater priority “won’t do any good.” The prevalence of such rationalizations, in turn, will have destructive reciprocal effects. People who expect to be viewed with less seriousness when they are victims of crime will learn to mistrust the institutions that view them in this way, and their mistrust can have devastating effects.

Yet the distorting effects of discrimination do not simply shape the attitudes of “outsiders” toward the disfavored group or vice-versa. Discrimination may also have a profound influence on the self-conceptions, and the sense of self-respect, of some within the disfavored group. Of course, even in the face of the cruellest racism, many people are able to affirm a robust sense of their own worth—and of any group with which they identify—in a variety of satisfying ways. Understanding their success, as I suggest below, yields invaluable lessons about the social bases of self-respect. Yet, like King and Clark, I contend that segregation can distort the self-conception of the segregated as well as of the segregator. The analysis of self-respect introduced in the first section allows me to show *how* some of these distortions take place. The principal distortions of self-respect take two forms: (1) the mutually reinforcing relation between the two components of self-respect may be undermined, or (2) the minimum content of self-respect may itself be distorted. Ironically, the most important distortions reveal just how

valiantly people will fight to retain a minimum degree of self-respect, even in the face of challenges to their sense of self-worth.

The first kind of distortion occurs when one's wish to preserve oneself is somehow pried apart from the willingness to develop one's abilities and talents. This separation most often takes place when a person experiences severe disappointment and frustration in the exercise of her abilities. Surprisingly, this process begins as a perfectly ordinary tendency to risk-aversion: in particular, it starts as an aversion to the psychological discomfort of severe disappointment. People with weak voices, for instance, seldom like to sing in public. But what starts as fairly ordinary risk-aversion can develop into extreme self-mistrust, and it may then take on a markedly self-destructive character. Familiar, but distressing, examples of this self-destructive process are common in settings where social and economic isolation compounds the lingering effects of discrimination.

The two components of self-respect are strikingly separated in the tendency of some Black school-aged children in poor urban areas to gradually lower their expectations of themselves, until they effectively relinquish any ambitions of academic success. Hence, the high drop-out rate in these areas. Of course, some students who drop out may have lowered expectations not of themselves but of the society that they believe excludes them. They may simply lose confidence that it is prudent for them to continue in school. Still others may drop out principally because they mistrust the facilities available to them. But caring and hardworking teachers—many of whom are also Black—conclude that many Black students who drop out have learned to mistrust *themselves* because they have gradually internalized prejudicial assumptions that they cannot succeed. Such students provide distressing evidence of the pervasiveness of the self-fulfilling prophecy: the student who believes that he shouldn't even try certainly will not succeed. Moreover, such a student is liable to mistrust students who excel (or simply try to excel), branding them with the label of what he mistrusts most: they are "trying to be white." Students who make such comments are reluctant to identify successful students as "really Black" because they have come to identify being Black with failure. They have thus internalized the very preconceptions that historically have been used to exclude Black Americans from constructive affirmations of self-respect.

But accepting a view of oneself as intrinsically bound for failure can wreak havoc even on the *minimum content* of self-respect. The student who claims to believe that he is "nothing" provides unfortunate evidence of this second kind of distortion of self-respect. Now it is unlikely that this student consistently believes that he really is "nothing." Rather, his efforts to understand his experience lead him to suffer moments of extreme self-doubt and self-mistrust. Yet few children who experience this degree of self-mistrust could emerge with the

minimum content of their sense of self-respect untouched. As I suggested earlier, we are unlikely to find any person totally lacking in self-respect. But one can certainly become unable to distinguish self-destructive behavior from behavior that actually promotes one's well-being. Such a confusion between self-destructive and self-preserving behavior is manifested in the disruptive and ultimately self-destructive classroom behavior of the young boy in my example. His behavior prevents him from learning how to read well or how to manipulate the mathematical concepts he requires to survive economically.

As he develops into a young man, he will become increasingly aware of a set of expectations about selves and self-respect that govern much of his daily life. Some of these expectations will differ very little from those in the larger society: a Wall Street stockbroker and an inner city youth alike may be tempted to measure self-worth by means of their possessions. A second group of expectations will differ radically from those of the larger social group—insofar as they embody a rejection of some of the discriminatory attitudes toward Black Americans. But often, a third category of expectations unintentionally incorporates the exclusion and marginalization that most people in his community would, on reflection, obviously prefer to reject. Familiar patterns of behavior manifest the relevant structure of expectations: membership in youth gangs that promise as great a risk of death as they do protection and camaraderie, drug abuse, and various kinds of violent crime. These patterns of behavior are rooted in dangerous and destructive expectations concerning selves and self-respect.

But the appeal to a Black American teenager of membership in an urban street gang provides an important lesson. For as Rawls once argued, one's sense of one's worth is often bound up with one's sense that one is valued by others; ties of membership in associations and communities typically encourage and support one's sense of self-respect (TJ 440-42). The distressing irony of the urban street gang is that instead of providing a real remedy for the social isolation and exclusion of its members—as a college fraternity, for instance, might—it actually *intensifies* that isolation. Like the young Black student who identifies "Black" with "failure," an older gang member comes to identify "Black" with "marginal." But in viewing his membership in a gang as an affirmation of self-respect, the gang member reveals just how completely he has internalized society's effort to marginalize him. For he has come to see himself precisely as he is seen by those who wish to exclude him: as essentially a threatening "outlaw," a permanent possibility of danger. Moreover, he will sometimes act on that self-conception in a self-destructive fashion and will often wreak havoc on his community in the process. The gang member's self-conception provides a powerful example of the way in which—even in an effort at self-assertion—one can accept a vision of oneself that remains too entangled in a tradition of discrimination and exclusion to be a constructive category for self-reflection.

## THE SOCIAL BASES OF SELF-RESPECT

But how might a young child who claims to think that he is "nothing" learn to seek more constructive categories for self-reflection and self-understanding? An important part of the answer requires reflection on the experience of Black Americans who have been able to disentangle their self-conceptions from a conceptual scheme that threatens to confine them to marginality and failure. Such people have relied upon two principal vehicles to disentangle their sense of self-worth from the legacy of discrimination. First, their experience has typically included membership in various communities and associations that *constructively* affirm their worth as persons. For many, of course, the most important such community has been the family. But associative ties outside of a family may supplement the family's influence—or sometimes even remedy the effects of a damaged family.<sup>19</sup> Second, the sense of self-worth of many Black Americans has been sustained by a sense of history and social traditions. Of course, one consequence of American slavery is that many Black Americans have no detailed or particular knowledge of the national (as opposed to continental and geographical) origins of their families. Moreover, discriminatory policies bound up with slavery—and its long aftermath—have often made it difficult, if not impossible, for Black Americans to have access to written history. But the kind of oral history that is seldom preserved in formal educational institutions (for any group) was often an important and constructive alternative. Black Americans who, for many years, managed to develop constructive means for affirming self-respect—often in spite of great hardship—were once a prominent presence in Black communities. Their successes and their failures were an important source of knowledge of how one might preserve one's self-respect—not just in response to exclusion and discrimination but in spite of it. The greater mobility of some Black Americans thus unwittingly deprives other Black people of access to those parts of their history that they may need most.<sup>20</sup> Further, as successful Black residents leave Black communities, many of the communal associations that provided constructive ties of membership leave with them or die off altogether. To be cut off from membership in associations that constructively affirm one's value and to be cut off from an appreciation of how others have found constructive categories for self-reflection and choice in spite of hardship is to be cut off from the two most important social bases of self-respect. Finding ways to develop the social bases of self-respect in communities set apart by class and race will surely require the participation of Black people who have learned to resist internalizing assumptions about marginality and failure. Even small-scale social programs that vividly display the concern of "successful" Black Americans might help provide models of constructive affirmations of self-respect—even if only as an incentive to seek altogether new models.<sup>21</sup>

But no social order can command the respect of people whom it continually

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fails to respect and for whom (as a consequence) both self-mistrust and widespread mistrust of social institutions come to seem a rational adaptation to circumstances. The possibility of social cooperation thus also imposes an *obligation* on those not in the disfavored group to relinquish the discriminatory attitudes that persist. As I have shown, this requires far more self-scrutiny—and, ultimately, a more serious revision of self-conceptions—than is acknowledged in most discussions of social reform. The police dispatcher who encourages mistrust of the police, and the professor who encourages mistrust of her students' abilities, both endanger the complex social cooperation that underwrites the pursuit of rational life plans for everyone. Still further, restoring the social bases of self-respect will require social policies that recognize the important fact that no human being is ever *simply* a victim. Even a victim retains the fundamental human need to exercise and develop his own abilities and talents in the effort to help remedy his suffering. One develops the self-trust that is fundamental to a robust sense of self-respect only by means of experiences that also require that one take responsibility for the consequences of one's choices—to an extent compatible with one's knowledge and experience. Some social "reforms" of recent years have treated the recipients of assistance simply as victims, thus encouraging the reformers, and those people whom they sought to aid, to ignore important facts about the nature of self-respect.<sup>22</sup>

Finally, as William Julius Wilson has suggested, efforts to encourage a robust sense of self-respect can succeed only alongside efforts to remedy the structural causes of economic and social isolation that seriously endanger self-respect (TD 1987). I have argued that some of the people who most need the benefits of economic reform have become deeply mistrustful of social institutions and—even worse—sometimes, of themselves. Their lack of trust may well hinder their capacity to take advantage of opportunities that might arise with structural changes in the economy. Finding the remedy for this mistrust will require a concerted effort to reshape the social construction of self-respect—not just for the disadvantaged but for any group whose sense of self-worth seems to "require" them to accept the isolation of the truly disadvantaged (of any race or ethnic group) as an unrevisable fact of experience.

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## NOTES

\* An earlier version of this paper was read at a conference at Brown University. Helpful comments on that version were provided by Howard McGary, Lucius Outlaw, and Laurence Thomas.

1 Kenneth B. Clark, *Prejudice and Your Child* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1963).

2 Daniel Goleman, "Black Child's Self-View Is Still Low, Study Finds," *New York Times*, Aug. 31, 1987, p. A 13.

3 I am indebted to Shirley Moody for this example.

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- 4 A hostage might vigorously attempt to protect her sanity, or her memory of the past, or even simply to keep track of the passage of time—thus exercising, relatively speaking, a significant degree of control over the conditions of her own survival.
- 5 On some understandings of the self—say, on which one's identity is partly constituted by one's membership in a group—a willingness to sacrifice one's physical body might be required to reveal one's self-respect. See Karl Duncker, "Ethical Relativity? (An Enquiry Into the Psychology of Ethics)," *Mind*, vol. 48: 39–57, for a discussion of the moral consequences of this view of the self.
- 6 John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1971), p. 440 (hereafter abbreviated TJ).
- 7 Many important human ends and purposes can be fulfilled only in a context of social cooperation. Thus I reject the libertarian notion that social cooperation is somehow incidental to self-preservation.
- 8 See Bernard Boxill, *Blacks and Social Justice* (Totowa, N.J.: Rowman and Allenheld, 1984), p. 189.
- 9 Rawls's analysis thus encourages ambiguity: he sometimes treats "self-respect" and "self-esteem" as equivalent expressions (TJ 440–42).
- 10 For an intriguing discussion of an Old Order Amish community, see Donald Kraybill, *The Riddle of Amish Culture* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989).
- 11 See David Loeff, *Appalachia's Children* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1971); Douglas Glasgow, *The Black Underclass: Poverty, Unemployment and Entrapment of Ghetto Youth* (New York: Vintage Books, 1980); and William Julius Wilson, *The Truly Disadvantaged: The Inner City, The Underclass and Public Policy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987) (hereafter abbreviated TD).
- 12 See James Fishkin, *Justice, Equal Opportunity and the Family* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1983), for discussion of some problematic consequences of this view for liberal theorists.
- 13 H. L. A. Hart, *The Concept of Law* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1961).
- 14 Even the Austinian or Benthamite legal positivist must explain the persistence of legally protected segregation in America. This theorist may appeal to the notion of entrenched "habits of obedience"—but *entrenched* habits, as we all know, do not magically disappear.
- 15 Martin Luther King, "Letter from Birmingham Jail," in King, *Why We Can't Wait* (New York: Mentor Books, 1964), p. 82.
- 16 This and other difficulties with the genetic notion of race are discussed in several of the essays in Ashley Montagu, ed., *The Concept of Race* (New York: The Free Press, 1964).
- 17 Robert Merton, "The Self-Fulfilling Prophecy," *The Antioch Review*, vol. 8: 193–210.
- 18 Gordon Allport, *The Nature of Prejudice* (Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley, 1954).
- 19 As a matter of historical fact, Black churches and their associated organizations (choirs, youth groups, and so forth) have often been a powerful force in the lives of many Black Americans. Though an organization need not be rooted in shared religious beliefs in order to successfully underwrite self-respect, the experience of the Old Order Amish provides interesting reflection. When a community is largely self-contained (whether as a result of unchosen external forces, or—as in the case of the Amish—as a result of choice), shared religious beliefs often provide a more coherent and more constructive self-conception than any other phenomenon.
- 20 Critics of W. J. Wilson's stance in *The Truly Disadvantaged* would do well to consider this fact.
- 21 Douglas Glasgow (1980) urged similar participation by Black Americans.
- 22 I discuss the topic of responsibility and victims of economic and social deprivation in M. M. Moody-Adams, "On the Old Saw That Character Is Destiny," in O. Flanagan and A. O. Rorty, ed., *Identity, Character and Morality: Essays in Moral Psychology* (Cambridge, Mass.: Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, 1990).