

A Review of the Intersectionality of Stress, Relationship Disharmony, and Self-care Among African American Women

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Abstract

Stress can affect everyone in different ways, but some people and communities are more impacted than others, such as the African American community. Research studies have documented the effects of stress on African American women's health outcomes. One of the primary indicators of stress is a person's socioeconomic status. Other stress indicators examined in this review include educational attainment, employment, and social support. This review aims to examine how stress, relationship disharmony, socioeconomic status, educational attainment, employment, and social support can affect African American women's self-care habits. We will briefly review each indicator and how these stressors affect African American women. This review emphasizes the importance of current self-care practices and their impact on health.

Keywords: African American community, Stress, Health outcomes, Socioeconomic status, Educational attainment, Employment, Social support, Self-care habits

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Introduction

Stress in the African American community is well-documented throughout research studies and has highlighted several factors that serve as determinants of stress [1]. One of the indicators of stress is a person's socioeconomic status [2]. Having low income is well-documented as a stressor for individuals living with limited resources, who might be experiencing financial difficulty and needing to sacrifice needs for other needs [1]. Another indicator of stress is educational attainment.

Educational attainment is correlated with comprehension and literacy, including health literacy [3]. Having a lack of understanding or comprehension can increase stress in individuals attempting to navigate personal or health issues without the required knowledge, skills, or understanding of how to navigate those issues successfully, which can increase the stress a person deals with [4]. Another indicator of stress is a person's employment status. Job insecurity or experiencing unemployment contributes to a person not knowing how or if they will be able to pay bills, purchase or pay for necessities such as food, clothing, and shelter [5]. Furthermore, job insecurities also increase the risk of having negative work experiences or working in negative work environments to pay for food, shelter, and clothing [6]. Recently, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention declared that racism is a social determinant of stress and health and is a deciding factor of whether or not a person will be discriminated against or experience bias simply because of their race and ethnicity [7]. Furthermore, housing conditions, if poor or if the condition is overcrowded, will also increase stress as privacy and resources become limited [8]. Other indicators of

stress include the amount of social support received, relationship status, environmental conditions, and access to healthcare, which can influence the amount of stress in a person's life, ultimately increasing the risk for adverse conditions [8]. This review of research attempts to examine how the intersectionality of stress, relationship disharmony, and the previously mentioned indicators affect African American women and their self-care habits. A brief review of each indicator in more detail and how these stressors are often presented to African American women will be addressed.

Socioeconomic Status and the African American Woman's Plight

When examining socioeconomic status by race, ethnicity, and biological sex assignment, the Census Bureau [9] reports that African American women have the highest poverty rates of any other racial group in the United States (US), at 21%. In comparison, the poverty rate for all women was only 12.9% in 2019. This is believed to be due to salary data, which shows that the American Community Survey in 2019 identified the median household income for African American women at \$37,187, which was about \$5,000 less than that of African American men, \$32,000 less than for White women, and about \$41,000 less than that of White men. These income disparities highlight significant racial disparities in salary. However, when examining employment and discrimination data, African American women have identified several forms of bias that contribute to lower salaries. For instance, for African-American women in higher education roles, are the most educated and yet are less likely to be hired for a leadership role.



Furthermore, these same women are more likely to live in marginalized communities, because of lack of income and employment opportunities and are more likely to be the head of household. Thus, African American women with lower socioeconomic status also describe more experiences with lack of support systems, having more experiences with negative relationships, and feelings of vulnerability [10].

Disharmonious Relationships and Feelings of Unprotectedness

It has often been stated that African American women are the least protected and most vulnerable compared to women of other races and ethnicities within the US, and some argue that this statement holds true worldwide. There is evidence to support this claim; for instance, African American women are more likely to experience abuse in all its forms, with some of the highest rates of physical, emotional, and sexual assault in relationships. These negative experiences often occur within intraracial heterosexual relationships and often go unreported, without seeking professional help. A 2015 study by Finfgeld-Connett [11] examined intimate partner violence often perpetuated by religious-based norms, which is commonly seen in heterosexual relationships. The study suggests that fear and negative cultural perceptions around mental health prevent many women from seeking help or leaving these relationships. These cultural perceptions often lead to a lack of trust in social services, negative experiences with law enforcement, and experiences with racism. Another study by Taylor et al. [12] examined the relationship that many African Americans have with religious organizations within their communities. The study found that African American women attend these religious organizations more frequently than African American men and receive higher levels of support and negative interactions within these religious institutions compared to non-Hispanic Whites and Mexican Americans. According to the National Domestic Violence Hotline, African American women also experience more deadly outcomes, suggesting that more needs to be done to support African American women, as many of their complaints often go ignored, as noted in media treatment of missing cases for African American women [12, 13].

Other forms of trauma that African American women experience come in the form of workplace abuse and discrimination. These experiences are often introduced at the very onset of the employment process, from discrimination during the recruitment process down to exclusion from leadership positions and company decisions to bias in wages and promotions. Other forms of workplace abuse come in the form of sexual violence, and the lack of support and/or belief of an African American woman when a complaint is filed due to sexual harassment or acts of sexual violence [14, 15].

It is believed that many of these biases stem from the stereotypes that were created during slavery, which pushed the narrative of promiscuity among African American women. These stereotypes continue to be perpetuated in various forms of media, including television shows, movies, and music. As a result, African American women are left vulnerable to these negative perceptions in society. Recently, Motro et al. [16] conducted a study which revealed that African American women are more likely to experience microaggressions and verbal attacks, be regarded as difficult, and face negative consequences in the workplace in comparison to their white counterparts. The American Psychological Association [17] conducted research which found that African American women are often not associated with the concept of a “typical woman” and are viewed as more similar to Black men than to White women. This perception may lead to some antiracist and feminist movements failing to advocate for the rights of Black women. The study

also suggests that movements that are supposed to help Black women may be contributing to their marginalization, a phenomenon called ‘intersectional invisibility’. It is important to note that White feminists do not always support issues that affect African American women and tend to center their issues around those directly impacting White women. Therefore, African American women have started to uplift each other by promoting self-care and participating more in affinity groups to decenter men.

Self-care Priorities Among African American Women and the Choice to Decenter Men

Affinity groups are support groups created for individuals who share experiences, whether it be culturally, racially, or through a common experience. These groups are often established in communities or workplaces to serve as a space for solidarity, where marginalized groups can have a voice to discuss common issues and share experiences. Many African American women are creating these spaces for themselves as an outlet to share experiences and to understand that their experiences are real, validated, and not isolated but a common theme in the US and sometimes abroad [18]. Affinity groups are being formed on college campuses for students, at the workplace for employees, in communities for support and friendship and online to find people living and breathing common experiences [18]. These groups also serve as therapeutic spaces to heal from the many forms of oppression African American women experience daily at work, in social settings and in relationships [18-20]. A study by Woods-Giscombe and Lobel [21] revealed that African American women who participated in affinity groups were able to improve their mental health through support and building a sense of community with people who had similar experiences. More importantly, they were able to reduce stress and develop a sense of self-care and healing trauma [19].

In addition to participation in affinity groups, African American women are prioritizing self-care and focusing on mental and physical health and work-life balance. Some self-care practices include working on healthier nutrition, increasing exercise and meditation, and journaling. Another study by Adkins-Jackson et al. [22] found that African American women who actively participated in self-care practices had increased resilience and greater reduction of stress than those who did not take an active approach.

Another approach African American women are engaging in is decentering men to explore the intersectional oppressions they have experienced interculturally and externally [23]. Traditionally, African American women have focused on the experiences and discriminatory practices African American men face. However, many African American women note the importance of advocating for their immediate needs first, which have often gone unmet, and choose to focus on the rights of African American women as many have felt abandoned and unprotected across cultures and intracultural settings [23]. Thus, they hope to achieve a voice, healing, equity, and inclusion in removing barriers and injustices directly impacting African American women.

Conclusion

African American women have taken a natural stand to participate in affinity groups to promote and actively engage in self-care practices, as well as taking a stand against discrimination and intimate partner violence and negative experiences in heterosexual relationships. Using virtual and physical affinity groups, African American women are attempting to change the narrative and stereotypes placed against them through society and intracultural barriers to demand respect and fair and equitable treatment in all settings and relationships.



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Conflict of Interest

None.

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