

Marital status and family income sociology essay



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The purpose of this study is to examine whether a relationship exists between marital status and African American mothers' self-esteem and if it is mediated by family income. Over the past several decades there has been a substantial increase in the rates of single motherhood, especially for African American women. Ever since the 1940s the number of single mothers has doubled in number (Tucker & Mitchell-Kernan 1995). This high rate of single parent households could be attributed to the ethnic, racial and social class differences. A change in the norms and values about family formation may also be occurring. Women with previous experience with men who are unwilling to take responsibility for the care of their child may find it more desirable to raise their children alone without the fathers' help. However, not having the financial and emotional support a husband can provide may lead to a negative emotional state which has lasting effects on a woman's self-esteem. Research on this topic portrayed that the support of a nuclear family is important but that financial stability overrides social norms to impact self-esteem.

But does self-esteem really matter? The answer, studies show, is yes. Self-esteem was studied because it is an important component to an individual's mental health. Having a healthy mindset is a valuable aid to mothers.

Mothers with high self-esteem tend to cope with stressful situations better and are more optimistic as compared to low self-esteem mothers. A limitation of the study is that the effects of marital status and family income on the self-esteem of African American mothers have not been adequately researched as compared to that of their European American counterparts (Hope, Power, & Rodgers 1999). More research is necessary to come up with

defined answers to this question of whether it is family income or marital status that affects the self-esteem of African American single mothers.

It is a fact that married mothers have higher psychological health than unmarried mothers (Diener, Gohm, Suh, & Oishi 2000). Married mothers deal better with stressful situations compared to single mothers, and this is not due to different levels of psychological health before marriage. We can see clear differences in psychological health of mothers based on marital status. This is true for a study of African American mothers which found that if they have their first child when they were still unmarried it led to high depression, regardless of socioeconomic status and age of the mother (Kalil & Kunz 2002). Being married provides a support system as well as additional financial support, which single mothers lack.

The suggestion that husbands offer mothers more than simply financial support can be clearly depicted with married couples (Popenoe, 2004). This outlook, that husbands provide more than just financial support, predicts that even with relatively equal income, married mothers will have higher self-esteem than unmarried mothers. However, this assumption has been criticized for ignoring the adaptive qualities of nontraditional family structures that have formed over the past decades especially those of African American families (Dickerson, 1995). So, even if family income accounts for some of these effects, this model predicts that marital status will affect the self-esteem of African American mothers regardless of their financial incomes.

The cultural equivalent perspective suggests that like any other unmarried mothers, African American mothers are at risk of psychological problems, but the effects are mainly related to the clear differences in family income between married and unmarried mothers. For example, in 2004, 28% of single-mother families in America lived below the poverty line compared to only 5% of married families (DeNavas, 2005). Therefore, one can conclude that marriage is vital because it keeps families financially stable. This mindset argues that family income leads to the effects others attribute to marital status. In one study of 156 African American women who lacked adequate family income, it showed that their financial burdens gradually led to higher depression and lower self-esteem. Some had to seek medication to suppress these effects. Ultimately these studies suggested that it is mainly financial resources that impact mental health, and marital status has a far smaller effect.

The cultural variant perspective suggests that African American households do not follow the structures and cultural norms of nuclear family units as ethnic majorities often do. They may be influenced by a different set of social issues attributed to their different cultural background than that of European American mothers. Marriage, regardless of financial resources may have a different meaning and significance to African American women. For example, Rank and Davis (1996) found that married African American mothers would rather be outside of marriage as compared to married European American women who preferred to raise their children in a nuclear family setting. Married European American women would rather live according to the social norm of society, which is the life style of a nuclear family. This allows for

adequate income to live a comfortable life. Furthermore, the large extended family of African American mothers showed an option for seeking social support from avenues other than marriage. This different mentality about marriage may reduce the supposed negative psychological effects of being unmarried.

Studies indicated that most African American mothers are unmarried, and this has been the case for the past few decades. This has led to adjustment to single motherhood. These high rates of single parent families have led to less stigmatization in African American communities. This has in turn led to the perspective that suggests that marital status does not affect African American mothers' self-esteem, regardless of family income. Unmarried African American mothers who successfully control their family income may partially mediate the effect of lower self-esteem, but it will not reduce the effects of marital status for low income African American mothers. This is because feelings of security and financial support that a marriage partner offers are still unavailable to single mothers. Moreover for lower income single mothers living in relatively dangerous urban environments, the probability that they or their children will be victims of violent crimes is a constant fear and source of high anxiety and stress. This stress and fear can build up over time to affect their self-esteem and overall mental health. Financial resources will undoubtedly allow the low income mothers to live in relatively safer neighborhoods, which may reduce the anxiety and safety concerns that many lower income African American mothers face.

The studies continue to reveal that higher income unmarried mothers have been found to have much higher self-esteem than lower income unmarried

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mothers. The stress and feelings of incompetence associated with low income can have vast effects on the psychological health of both women and men irrespective of their marital status (Cairney et al., 2003). The results of this study suggested that lower income unmarried African American mothers, who have the added responsibility of taking care of children without a husband, have to endure the effects of lack of adequate resources in the household. This can increase the burdens associated with raising children which can undoubtedly be significantly reduced with enough financial resources.

Being a higher income unmarried mother has its benefits. Those who have achieved social status based on their own accomplishments are more highly regarded and associated with higher self-esteem than obtaining high social status based on the accomplishments of others. The fact that these mothers are high income earners, in spite of having to raise children primarily by themselves, could boost their self-esteem and also their sense of accomplishment. This may be especially true for single African American women, because of the negative social barriers which they all too often have to face in their daily lives (Dickerson, 1995). This shows that marital status does not necessarily need to affect the self-esteem of an unmarried mother to the same extent that income does.

I found the findings of African American mother's self-esteem unique compared to those of their European American counterparts. The relation between having a marriage partner and higher income did not result in higher self-esteem due to differences between an achieved and ascribed social status. High income married mothers had the same self-esteem as

lower income married mothers and high income unmarried mothers. These findings may also be related to social variables if the income is based on the mother's accomplishment, which may boost her self-esteem especially for unmarried mothers. Although there is no clear interaction between mothers' self-esteem, marital status, and family income it is clear that for many of the married mothers with higher family incomes their financial situation may reflect mostly income from their spouse's employment. This could explain why income does not have added self-esteem benefits for married mothers.

The effects of marriage vary from individual to individual. For most women including It is important to have a constant family income to reduce the negative effects of single parenthood for African American mothers.