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The Self-Esteem of African American Women: The Impact of Black Church Attendance

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Introduction

Research on women and self-esteem has received considerable attention over the years and justifiably so, since they are experiencing more demanding roles in a male dominated society (Byrd & Shaver, 2013). Although African American women have demonstrated extraordinary resilience in the face of adversity, the on-going burden of prejudice and discrimination can negatively affect their ability to perform (Davis, Lawrence, Williams, Williams & Lawrence, 2019). The consequences, as research shows, can negatively impact African American women's self-esteem and overall mental health and well-being yet, African American women are the least likely to seek help in traditional therapeutic/ counseling settings or are less likely to seek or receive adequate mental health treatment (Black, DeSouza, Duncan, Parker, & Spearman-McCarthy, 2021). Taylor, Gilligan, & Sullivan (1995), conducted a study entitled, *Between voice and silence: Women and girls, race and relationship*, and in the results reported that internalization or lack of support, when facing adversity, was detrimental to one's self-esteem. More importantly, is that the inability to adapt to stress leaves a person overwhelmed leading to depression, and, consequently to low self-esteem, and numerous other physical and psychological illnesses.

According to the Centers for Disease Controls, studies that focused on the relationship between biobehavioral influences and disease found that depression, stress, and anxiety due to disparities in social determinants of health, adverse childhood experiences, and racism and discrimination among other stressors, could place certain subpopulations at a higher risk for hypertension, cardiovascular reactivity, heart disease, and poor heart health outcomes (Cai, & Robst, 2016; Rosen, 2016; , Akintade, Chapa, Friedmann, Hunt, Hartung, Son, Thomas & Woltz, 2014; American Psychological Association Working Group, 2016). A historic study, *The*

Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) Study conducted from 1995-1997 by the Centers of Disease Control (CDC) and Kaiser Permanente, is one of the largest investigations of childhood abuse and neglect and household challenges and later-life health and well-being to-date. Over 17,000 confidential surveys regarding childhood experiences and current health status and behaviors were completed. Results of the study offered insight into the impact of the adverse childhood experiences throughout the developmental lifespan (Anda, Edwards, Felitti, Koss, Marks, Nordenberg, Spitz, & Williamson, 1998). An expanded study conducted in 2019 of more than 144,000 adults from 25 states revealed 60% of Americans experienced at least one adverse experience during childhood. More than 15% experienced four or more. A follow-up study in 2019 revealed that Americans who had experienced ACEs were at higher risk of dying from five of the top 10 leading causes of death.” (Ports & Merrick, 2019). Consistent with the findings of both studies, the 2021 Vital Statistics Report on Mortality Rates showed that African American women ranked number one on six of the top ten causes of death. Sadly, many of causes were preventable and could be directly related to mental health, coping (Bajaj, Gupta, & Sengupta, 2019; Alexandris-Souphis, Chaddha, Kline-Rogers, Robinson, & Rubenfire, 2016).

Identifying interventions and addressing barriers to treatment has far reaching implications for African American women who are considered pivotal to African American life and culture. According to Hargons (2021) stressors can leave an imprint on the brain that could result in trauma, and what the research is showing is that physical health disparities that were once thought to be due to personal behavior are often a function of stress and discrimination (Brown, Chang, Darden, Lewis, Moody & Pantesco, 2019). Helping professionals who work with this population agree that there is much to be done to improve the mental health of African American women, ranging from expanding access to licensed professionals with experience in

treating people of color to reducing incidents of racism discrimination, and microaggressions. One study seeking to address treatment barriers for African American women, Collaborative care for patients with depression and chronic illnesses, examined treatment seeking behaviors among adult African American women (Cheng, Howell, & Lo, 2014; Abrams & Belgrave, 2016). The researchers found that only 13% obtained services, and even when diagnosed with anxiety, depression, or other mental health issues, many did not follow-up. Reasons cited were sociopolitical such as cultural mistrust of Whites attributable to past and present experiences with racism, microaggressions, stigma, proximity, and stereotypes (Ciechanowski, Katon, Lin, Ludman, Von Korff & Young, 2010; Bajaj, Gupta, & Sengupta 2019; Cheng, Howell, & Lo, 2014; Crowther & Neal-Barnett, 2000). The Office of Minority Health & Health Disparities Research 2018 report found that African American women while disproportionately impacted among all groups in health disparities, they are less likely to seek help.

African American women have persevered the many obstacles embedded in discrimination, prejudice, and other life's stressors; and a plethora of research has been conducted to gain insight into the resilience of this population. A growing body of literature is focused on the relationship between Black church involvement and the development of positive self-esteem of African American women.

The Role of the Black Church

Historically, African Americans, as a group, have used religion as a coping strategy, to deal with problems due to adversity, and view the church as a necessary social support system (Hardy, 2012; Hahn, Koenig, Pargament & Tarakeshwar, 2004; Hardy, 2012). According to the Pew Research Centers' 2021 Faith Among Black American Report, one of the key findings was while helping African Americans deal with stressful events such as racism, poverty, and social

exclusion, it also provides important explanatory frameworks for adverse events. African American women use prayer as a major coping mechanism, in addition to church involvement and private devotion which are positively correlated with self-esteem (Avent & Cashwell, 2015; Chatters, Jackson, Lincoln & Taylor, 2008; Ellis, 1993; Wilson, 2000; Christopher, 1993). One major reason why church attendance is essential to self-esteem is that African American children are frequently taught that inherent worth or “inner divinity” is given by God and available to all individuals regardless of status. In this context the Black church’s attention to “those that have come before and for those who will come after,” speaks to God and matters of faith that can be best understood in terms of “struggle” and overcoming adversity. For some this speaks to the resilience of African Americans in general and African American women and religious involvement specifically. DeAngelis, Ellison & Guven (2017) study entitled Does religious involvement mitigate the effects of major discrimination on the mental health of African Americans? Findings from the Nashville Stress and Health, found that one common element among African American women since arriving in the Americas, and many who have followed, is a strong support system and their connection to the Black church (DeAngelis, Ellison & Guven, 2017). A longitudinal study yielded similar conclusions related to the impact of the Black church on the self-esteem of African American women. This study examined the self-esteem of African American women (N =428) over a 14-year period using the National Survey of Black Americans: A Panel Study of Black American Life 1979-1992 (NSBA; Jackson & Gurin, 1996). Difference-of-means tests were used to examine self-esteem in four time periods (1979 to 1980, 1986 to 1987, 1988 to 1989, and 1992), and OLS regression was used to determine the effect of three variable categories (support networks, achievement outcomes, and racial esteem) on self-esteem in 1979 and 1992. Although historical analyses of self-esteem predicted low self-esteem

for Blacks in general and Black women in particular; Black women-maintained a very high self-esteem. Support networks and achievement outcomes significantly affected self-esteem, and racial esteem was significantly related to self-esteem. Results also indicated that many of the women attributed their faith and the support of the Black church in their journey. Although research exists on the traditional Black Church as therapeutic as it relates to women and self-esteem, research on development of positive self-esteem by church attendance and education level limited.

Purpose of the Study

This research study sought to determine what effect, if any, attendance and education level has on the total self-esteem of African American women. It was hypothesized that participants who practiced religious lifestyle would have higher total self-esteem scores than those who practiced traditional religious lifestyle by church attendance. It was also hypothesized that the differences exist by level of education.

Operational Definitions

For the purposes of the study, the following operational definitions were used: Black or African American – African American refers to persons of African descent historically associated by their experiences (Census.gov, 2022).

Self-Esteem: Self-esteem refers to feelings of significance, worthiness, and capabilities.

Black Church: refers to an independent, historic, predominantly Black controlled denomination, which was founded after the establishment of the Free African society of 1787, and which constituted the core of Black Christianity (McKinney, 1971).

Communal lifestyle: The term is used to refer to members of a church who live within a church community setting, but not segregated from others within the community.

Educational level: Highest level of education completed.

Church attendance: The number of times an African American woman attends church as it relates to worship service, bible study, or ministry.

Methodology

Type of Research Design

The research design used in this study was the Ex Post Facto Design. The Ex Post Facto research paradigm attempts to establish a cause-effect relationship between variables. Employing this type of research design required selecting two groups to compare. Moreover, this type of research design provides the investigators with an opportunity to examine the independent variables, which cannot be manipulated, and to identify variables worthy of experimental investigation (Gay, 1996). Thus, the present researchers examined the level of education, and church attendance on the total self-esteem scores of African American women. The level of church attendance was measured by the following categories: “Once a week”; “Twice a week”; “Three times a week”; “Four or more times a week”; and “Attends occasionally”.

Population and Sampling

One hundred twenty (120) African American women attending two (2) large Black churches in a metropolitan urban center in Southeast Texas, participated in this empirical investigation. One of the religious institutions incorporates practices consistent with a communal lifestyle, the other a traditional lifestyle. Seventeen (17) or 14.2% of the women reported a high school diploma or less; 61 or 50.8% had some college; 25 or 20.8% had earned either a BA or BS degree; and 17 or 14.2% of them had obtained a master’s degree.

Finally, with regards to the religious lifestyle practiced by the African American women who participated in this study, 60 (50%) were practicing a communal lifestyle and 60 (50%)

were practicing a traditional lifestyle. The sample was divided into five church attendance groups. There were 36 women (30%) who indicated they attended church once a week; 21 (17.5%) twice a week; 11 (9.2%) three times a week; 32 (26.7%) four or more times a week; and 20 (16.7%) reported they occasionally attended church. These data were derived from the demographic questionnaire. The simple random sampling procedure was used in this empirical investigation. This sampling procedure allowed everyone in the population to have an equal chance of participating in the study.

Instrumentation

The Coopersmith Self-Esteem Inventory (CSEI) developed by Stanley Coopersmith (1967), was used in this study to assess the self-esteem of African American women. The SEI is one of the most widely used instruments in research to measure the self-esteem of individuals between the ages of sixteen and above (Simon & Simon (1975). The present study employed the Adult Form and was scored using a scoring key from the test administration package. The inventory is a pencil-and-paper test and can be administered individually or in a group setting. The upper quartile generally can be considered indicative of high self-esteem, the intermediate quartile range is generally indicative of medium self-esteem, and the lower quartile range is generally considered indicative of low self-esteem.

To validate the Coopersmith Self-Esteem Inventory, two types of validity procedures were used, construct validity technique and the concurrent validity procedure. Factor Analysis was used to compute construct validity. The Coopersmith Self-Esteem Inventory was adjudged to have excellent construct and concurrent validity (Coopersmith, 1987).

The Rational Equivalency and Split-half reliability procedures are employed to compute the reliability for the Coopersmith Self-Esteem Inventory. Rational Equivalency reliability is a procedure which determines “how all items on a single test relate to all other items and to the test as a whole” (Kerlinger, 1986). To determine this type of reliability, the Kuder-Richardson 20 Formula was used. The Spearman-Brown formula is used in conjunction with the Split-half coefficient to compute reliability for the whole test. Thus, Kuder-Richardson coefficients ranging from .80 to .86 were found for three samples of adults on the Adult Form of the investigative instrument (Coopersmith, 1987).

Data-Collection Procedure

The procedure for administering the study involved a two-fold process. First, the participants were told the purpose of the study and asked if they would participate. Secondly, the investigators set an agreed upon time for administering the instruments and questionnaires on site to each participant in the study. To ensure the anonymity of responses, the participants were asked to remain anonymous. All completed surveys were logged and examined for non-responses and errors. Questionnaires with missing responses such as age and attendance information were rejected. Once the foregoing tasks were completed, the researcher coded the data from the instruments and questionnaires and entered the coded data into the computer using statistical analysis software SPSS.

Statistical Analysis

The instruments for this study yielded quantitative data, two parametric techniques were employed. They were the t-Test of Independent Samples and the One-Way Analysis of Variance (ANOVA). According to Hinkel, Wiersman, and Jurs (1994), a t-Test of Independent Samples is a statistical procedure, which will allow the investigator the opportunity to determine the

differences between the means of two independent samples. Moreover, the second parametric test, the One-Way Analysis of Variance is a statistical procedure, which provided the investigators an opportunity to analyze the independent effects of one independent variable on the dependent variables. Furthermore, when differences were found among the sample means, the Scheffe Method, a post-hoc, was employed to determine whether the difference was significant or could be contributed to random sampling fluctuation (Hinkle, Wiersman, and Jurs, 1981). Finally, the hypotheses formulated for this study was tested at the .05 level or better.

Data Analysis

The primary purpose of this study was to examine the influence of church attendance and the level of education on the self-esteem of African American women. The investigators sought answers to the following questions:

- 1) Will there be a difference in the self-esteem scores of African American women based on church attendance?
- 2) Will there be a difference in the self-esteem scores of African American women based on level of education?

Results

1. H_0^1 : There will be no statistically significant difference in the total self-esteem scores of African American women by church attendance.

The One-way Analysis of Variance relative to the total self-esteem scores of African American women was computed by their church attendance. As shown in Table 1 differences were found ($F = 3.4223$, $df = 4/115$, $P < .01$) between the total self-esteem scores of the five church attendance groups of African American women at the .01 level. Consequently, Hypothesis One was rejected.

Furthermore, further data analysis utilizing the Scheffe post-hoc test revealed that African American women who attended church more than once a week had a significantly higher total self-esteem scores than those African American women who attended church occasionally.

Table 1 Analysis of Variance summary Table Regarding Total Self-Esteem Scores of African American Women by Church Attendance

Source of Variance	Degrees of Freedom	Sum of Squares	Mean Squares	F	P
Between Groups	4	198.2258		49.5565	3.4223
Within Groups	115	1665.2408	14.4804		
Total	119	1863.4667			

**** Significant at the .001 level**

Table 2 Scheffe Results Regarding the Total Self-Esteem African American Women by Church Attendance

Mean1 Once	Mean2 Twice	Mean3 Three	Mean4 Four	Mean5 Five	Observed Mean Difference	Scheffe Critical Value
20.72	19.76				.96	3.31
20.72		20.09			.63	4.06
20.72			19.13		1.59	2.87
20.72				16.09	3.82**	3.31
	19.76	20.09			-.33	4.38
	19.76		19.13		.63	3.31
	19.76			16.09	2.86	3.71
		20.09	19.13		.96	4.06
		20.09		16.09	3.19	4.38
			19.13	16.09	2.23	3.31

**** Significant at the .05 level**

2. HO²: There will be no statistically significant difference in the total Self-esteem scores of African American women by educational level.

As shown in Table 3, when the One-way Analysis of Variance was computed between the four educational levels of African American women and their total self-esteem scores, there were significant differences found between the educational groups of women ($F= 3.1873$, $df = 3/116$, $p<.05$) at the .05 level. Therefore, Hypothesis Two was rejected.

Table 3 Analysis of Variance Summary Table Regarding Total Self Esteem Scores of African American Women by Educational Level

Source of Variance	Degrees of Freedom	Sum of Squares	Mean Squares	F	P
Between Groups	3	141.9086	47.3029	3.1873*	.2064
Within Groups	116	1721.5580	14.8410		
Total	119	1863.4667			

* Significant at the .05 level.

Table 4 Scheffe Results Regarding the Total Self-Esteem Scores of African American Women by Educational Level

Mean High School	Mean2 Some College	Mean3 BA/BS Degree	Mean4 Master's Degree	Observed Mean Differences	Scheffe Critical Value
16.88	19.57			-2.69	3.04
16.88		20.12		-3.24	3.40
16.88			20.47	-3.59	3.72
	19.57	20.12		-0.055	2.63
	19.57		20.47	-0.90	3.04
		20.12	20.47	-0.35	3.46

Summary of Hypothesis

Interestingly, the findings of the present study show that the Black church does have a significant influence on the self-esteem scores of African American women by level of church attendance and educational level. This is consistent with research that identify the Black church as a long-standing entity within Black communities where African American women have found some level of solace when coping with stress, anxiety, and other mental health issues due to racism and discrimination while trying to meet societal standards in a male dominated society (Bajaj, Gupta & Sengupta, 2019; Ellison, 1993).

Table 5
Summary of Hypotheses Tested
Scheffe Results Regarding the Total Self-Esteem Scores of African American Women by Church Attendance and Educational Level

	Hypotheses	Df	T or F Value	Conclusion
HO ¹ :	There will be no statistically significant difference in the total self-esteem scores of African American by church attendance.	4/115	3.42**	Significant
HO ² :	There will be no statistically significant difference in the total self-esteem scores of African American by educational level.	3/116	3.19*	Significant

*Significant at the .05 level

**Significant at the .01 level

Discussion

The primary purpose of this study was to examine the influence of church attendance on the self-esteem of African American women. Based on the results derived from the statistical analysis, the researchers obtained the following major findings. Namely, the self-esteem scores of African American women were significantly affected by church attendance and educational level; and the variable church attendance produced a significant effect on the total self-esteem

scores. These significant findings show that involvement in the Black church is potentially beneficial to the overall mental health and well-being of African American women and African Americans in general. The concept appears to be consistent with recent and historical research; the revelation that the various racially affirming rituals and practices African American women engage in within the Black church positively impact their self-esteem and how they view themselves (Calhoun-Brown, 1999; Carter & Johnson, 2020).

These findings also concur with research that speak to the theoretical framework that Black churches espouse as primary advocates for social and racial justice in African American communities. As cited in the research Black church's have served as a refuge for African American women since the beginning of their journey in America (Allen, Allen & Musgrave, 2002; Hardy, 2012; Smith, 1998). Black churches speak to the "struggle" of African American's given the on-going social and political adversity and discrimination in American society. African American women speak of attending church on Sunday to get reenergized for the week, to make it another day (Jalata, 2002; Boyd-Franklin, 1991). Further, the results are consistent with research that indicate the Black church, while helping African Americans deal with stressful events such as racism, poverty, and social exclusion, it also provides important explanatory frameworks for adverse events (Ellison, George & Larson, 2002).

In addition, these women are more apt to share their experiences and skills which allows them to create strong group ties needed to enhance how they view themselves in all aspects of their lives. The findings relative to self-esteem scores of African American women regarding their church involvement were consistent with findings of other researchers (Cardemil, Nelson, & Shahid, 2020; Eugene, 1995; Albee, 1999). These researchers found that overall, and

regardless of status, African American women's attendance in the Black church positively impacts their self-esteem.

Implications

The present findings provide data that could be used in clinical settings, to assist therapist's with obtaining valuable information when working with African American women who present with issues related to self-esteem. This information could be considered during the screening and assessment and treatment planning process, in therapeutic settings, to help counselors assist clients in identifying viable systems of support. While this current research and researchers cited found that there was a positive relationship between church attendance and self-esteem, further studies delineating various components of church ministries or lack thereof could be beneficial in providing additional data to increase evidence-based research, that could assist African American women in confronting issues related to self-esteem.

Thus, further study into the various aspects or components of church ministries that could be catalysts in addressing the overall mental health and well-being of African American women; and could prove beneficial in addressing issues related to self-esteem. Additionally, future research on ways church attendance can be increased among women who only attend church occasionally, and those who may be educated but have issues related to self-esteem could also be important. For example, what impact does non-church attendance and educational level, or non-church attendance, educational level, and age, have on the self-esteem of African American women. This inquiry could provide researchers and mental health clinicians with an understanding of how African American women conceptualize mental health treatment options, and the significance of the Black church as a potential resource, in terms of support, in the therapeutic process.

Conclusions

Based on the findings of this research study, the investigators arrived at the following conclusions.

1. It appeared that African American women who attend church more often had higher self-esteem scores than those who attended only occasionally.
2. Educational level seemed to have had some influence on the self-esteem scores of African American women.

To extend the findings of this study, the researchers recommend that a post-hoc study be conducted involving African American women practicing within various types of ministries within the Black church, and the effectiveness of church attendance on self-esteem of women across income, age, and educational attainment. Finally, counselors as well as other helping professionals who work with this population, should be cognizant of the significance of the Black church in the lives of African American women. An understanding of the life experiences of African American women can assist these professionals in their attempt to help these women deal with stressors that impact their self-esteem.

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