

Study helps bridge gap in understanding of suicide risk for African-American women

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Three University of Kentucky (UK) sociologists have co-authored a study that helps to fill a gap in our understanding of suicide risk among African-American women.

Appearing in the December issue of [Social Psychology Quarterly \(SPQ\)](#), the study, "Too Much of a Good Thing? Psychosocial Resources, Gendered Racism, and Suicidal Ideation among [Low Socioeconomic Status African American Women](#)," examines the relationship between racial and [gender discrimination](#) and suicidal ideation, or thinking about and desiring to commit suicide. The co-authors of the study include assistant professor Brea L. Perry, associate professor Carrie B. Oser, and Ph.D. candidate Erin L. Pullen, all from the UK Department of Sociology.

In basic terms, the study investigates risk and protective factors for mental health among African-American women with low socioeconomic status. The researchers found that women who have experienced more race and gender-based discrimination have a higher risk of suicidal ideation than women who have experienced less discrimination, which reinforces previous research on the positive correlation between discrimination and [poor mental health](#).

However, the study goes even further to examine whether different psychosocial resources such as eudemonic well-being (sense of purpose in life), self-esteem, and active coping—that have traditionally been found to be protective of mental health among white Americans—can

buffer the effects of racial and gender discrimination on suicidal ideation among low socioeconomic status African-American women.

Perry said that some of the findings were unexpected.

"We were somewhat surprised to find that moderate levels of eudemonic well-being, self-esteem, and active coping are protective, while very high and low levels are not," Perry said.

The *SPQ* study used data from 204 predominantly low-income African-American women, collected as part of the [Black Women](#) in the Study of Epidemics (B-WISE) project. The *SPQ* study has helped to fill a gap in knowledge about [suicide risk](#) among African-American women, which is important because recent research suggests that rates of suicide attempt are high in this group.

The UK researchers said they hope the *SPQ* study positively impacts students.

"I hope that this study can inform identification of African-American students who are at risk for [suicidal ideation](#) and point to some potential interventions for coping with discrimination," Perry said.

Perry believes the most important lesson learned from this study is that it is critical to examine culturally specific risks and protective processes in mental health.

"These findings demonstrate that it is not sufficient to simply study African-American women as one small part of an aggregated sample composed largely of whites," Perry said. "When we take that approach, we completely miss what is going on in smaller, underrepresented groups. We cannot assume that what is protective for white men, for example, is also protective for African-American women. There are

specific historical and cultural circumstances and lived experiences that are unique to each racial and gender group, and these differentially shape factors that increase or decrease vulnerability and resilience."

Provided by American Sociological Association

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