

# Underemployment affects African-American parents and their relationships

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Penn State researchers have found that perceived underemployment among African-American parents may have an effect on their careers, their mental and physical health, and their relationships.

Conducted by Xiaoran Sun, former Penn State graduate student in [human development](#) and family studies and current postdoctoral scholar at Stanford University, and Susan McHale, distinguished professor of human development and [family studies](#) and demography and director of Penn State's Social Science Research Institute, the research explores African-American employees' perceptions that their jobs require less expertise and fewer capabilities than they actually have.

"Underemployment is prevalent within the U.S. workforce, and previous studies of predominantly white samples show that perceived underemployment is related to lower levels of career achievement as well as poorer physical and mental health and [interpersonal relationships](#)," said Sun.

The work was published in the January issue of *Cultural Diversity and Ethnic Minority Psychology*, and featured in the American Psychological Associations Journals Article Spotlight.

The researchers found that fathers' underemployment perceptions had negative effects on their own reports of love and satisfaction as a couple in their parenting roles. Fathers with more [depressive symptoms](#) were even more vulnerable to these [negative effects](#).

For mothers, contrary to predictions, perceived underemployment predicted higher levels of love as couples in their parenting roles, but only for mothers who worked fewer hours.

"It may be that underemployment is not a stressor for mothers who work part time but instead benefit their couple relationship functioning—at least in dual-earner families that we studied," Sun said.

Negative effects of perceived underemployment did emerge for mothers with more expressive personalities. In addition, mothers'

underemployment had no significant effects on their partners' couple relationship reports—consistent with prior work showing that men are less responsive than women to the emotions of their partners.

The findings point to the importance of investing resources to reduce not only unemployment, but also underemployment. The results also highlight how forces outside the family, such as [underemployment](#), affect African-American couple relationships—a key issue for this sociocultural group whose marital relationships are vulnerable to disruption, said the researchers.

**More information:** Xiaoran Sun et al. Perceived underemployment and couple relationships among African American parents: A dyadic approach., *Cultural Diversity and Ethnic Minority Psychology* (2019). [DOI: 10.1037/cdp0000285](https://doi.org/10.1037/cdp0000285)

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