

How discrimination, class, and gender intersect to affect Black Americans' well-being

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Black Americans experience racial discrimination as a chronic stressor that influences their quality of life. However, it exists in conjunction

with other social factors that may modify the impact in various ways. A new study from the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign explores how discrimination, gender, and social class affect individual well-being and relationship quality for Black Americans.

"It's well documented that discrimination negatively impacts individual quality of life, but research on how it affects relationships is mixed. Some studies find it has a negative effect, others that it has no effect, and some even find a positive effect, such as more partner support. We were interested in how intersecting dimensions of sexism and classism could provide more insights," said lead author TeKisha Rice, now an assistant professor at Virginia Tech.

Rice conducted the research as a doctoral student at the U. of I. Brian Ogolsky, professor in the Department of Human Development and Family Studies, part of the College of Agricultural, Consumer and Environmental Sciences (ACES) at U. of I., is a co-author of the paper, which is [published](#) in the *Journal of Family Psychology*.

Rice and Ogolsky found that [racial discrimination](#) and financial strain were associated with lower levels of psychological well-being. However, the anticipated interaction between factors varied by gender.

"We found that among women who had higher levels of financial strain, racial discrimination predicted lower levels of [quality of life](#), but this association did not show up for men in the study," Rice said. "There is a gender dynamic in the way discrimination affects psychological and relational well-being. This aligns with other research indicating that [black women](#), in particular, may take on more of the emotional labor of their relationships."

The researchers used data from the [Survey of Midlife in the United States \(MIDUS\)](#), a large-scale, [longitudinal study](#) that measures health

and psychological well-being in individuals across the U.S. They included respondents who identified as Black or African American, and who were married or cohabitating. Participants ranged from 27 to 83 years old, with an average age of 53, and all were in heterosexual relationships.

The findings also speak to the potential resilience of Black individuals in the face of discrimination, the researchers said.

"One of the theories we use to understand the results is the Mundane Extreme Environmental Stress (MEES) model, which states that racial discrimination is mundane because it is common but also extreme because of the negative impact that it can have on people's lives," Rice noted. "As people get older, the way they respond to discrimination may be different. Perhaps they have gotten used to ignoring it, or they have effective coping mechanisms in place already."

This can help explain the non-significant findings for black men in this dataset, which had a large proportion of middle-aged respondents.

In addition, there are different types and levels of discrimination, Ogolsky added. "A single, major discriminatory event could influence well-being differently than low-level chronic discrimination. We need to think about these events with a fine-toothed comb, looking at both frequency and salience of discrimination."

As the MEES theory indicates, Black Americans may come to expect discrimination as a part of life. However, the chronic stress of financial strain might be felt in material ways that impact relationship experiences.

"For example, a couple may have to talk about bills and figure out how to ration expenses. It's not that financial strain is more negative than

discrimination, but it may be felt more directly on a day-to-day basis," Ogolsky stated.

Future studies should explore the gender differences in how Black Americans are navigating or experiencing racial discrimination. For practitioners who work with couples, it's important to be attentive to how each partner might be responding differently to discrimination and the ways it can generate potential distress, the researchers concluded.

More information: TeKisha M. Rice et al, Discrimination, gender, and class: An intersectional investigation of Black Americans' personal and relational well-being., *Journal of Family Psychology* (2024). [DOI: 10.1037/fam0001173](https://doi.org/10.1037/fam0001173)

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