

THE SELF-ESTEEM OF LOW-INCOME AFRICAN AMERICAN MOTHERS

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Purpose: To describe the meaning of self-esteem for African American women and its influence on their attainment of mental health.

Design and Method: Data for this qualitative descriptive study were collected through semi-structured, in-home, interviews with open ended questions designed to elicit rich information describing the self-esteem and mental health of the population. A purposive sample of six low income single African American women participated in the study. Interviews were audio taped and lasted sixty to ninety minutes. Verbatim transcripts were analyzed using content analysis.

Findings: Self-esteem was a complex multi-dimensional phenomenon. The meaning was derived from both external and internal factors. Several major threats to healthy self-esteem were identified, including overwhelming demands from others, poverty, child rearing as single parents, stereotyping, and racism. Strategies to deal with external threats to self-esteem included confrontation, education, and spirituality. A legacy of adversity, based on historical struggles with multiple oppressions, shaped and influenced the development of self-esteem in positive ways. The ability to persevere despite adverse circumstances led to strength and positive self-worth.

Conclusions: Self-esteem in African American women is, according to the literature, uniquely high. However, these women continue to suffer from high rates of poor mental health. The findings of this study augment the literature by providing further exploration of the meaning of this unique, strength based phenomenon. It gives insight into women who acknowledge the negative judgment of society while maintaining a strong sense of self-worth. This understanding may be used as a basis for further research and as the basis for the development of culturally sensitive, empowering interventions to improve the mental health of these women.