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Understanding the Relationship between Slavery, Self-Esteem, and Income: An Analysis of the Master-Slave Dynamic and the Socioeconomic Status of African American Men and Women

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Understanding the Relationship between Slavery, Self-Esteem, and Income: An Analysis of the Master-Slave Dynamic and the Socioeconomic Status of African American Men and Women

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ABSTRACT

This research project analyzes why a person's status and opportunity for achievement is shrouded in a racialized context. The analysis focuses on the effect of the master-slave dynamic, which was unique as an institution of slavery in the United States because it was conceived along racial lines. Considering that for over 400 years this master-slave dynamic was a primary determinant of the relationships between black and white people, it is not unimaginable to consider that some aspects of that dynamic are still in play today. They have firmly entrenched an unequal economic system that falls along racial lines. For the purposes of this paper, I will use the terms African American and black interchangeably. Since this is the beginning of ongoing research, there are some generalizations made about black men and women.

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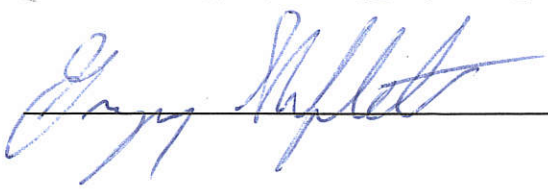<div align="center">(Name as it is to appear on diploma)</div>

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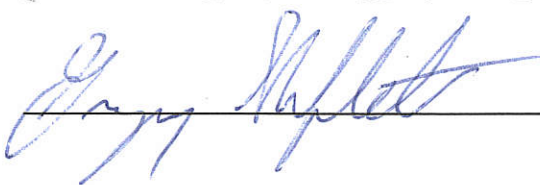
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UNDERSTANDING THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SLAVERY, SELF-ESTEEM, AND INCOME: AN ANALYSIS OF THE MASTER-SLAVE DYNAMIC AND THE SOCIOECONOMIC STATUS OF AFRICAN AMERICAN MEN AND WOMEN

Slavery was a pivotal historical period for black people in the United States of America. The struggle for freedom and for recognition weakened black individuals mentally, physically, emotionally, and spiritually. Their humanity was institutionally disregarded in the United States Constitution and in the Three-Fifths Compromise that was added to ensure ratification and ignored in order to objectify them as property. Their self-worth stemmed from the work they could do for their masters. Black men and women were legally prevented from receiving any form of education, which made them more vulnerable to accepting the negative stereotypes about them and to recognizing white people as superior. During this time, laws were enforced that permitted white slave owners to execute their power through physical abuse.

The dynamics of the interaction between the master and his slave have been institutionalized to reflect white people possessing more political and economic power than black people. This same idea continues today in the design and purpose of government institutions. They are structured to give white Americans more power over people of color and to prevent African American men and women from obtaining power. These government structures are made to convince black people that they will protect them from discrimination; however, these are the same institutions that set limits and boundaries that impede upon their upward mobility. The intent of this research project is to explore the perspective raised by Achille Mbembé in his book, *Critique of Black Reason*, about the master-slave dynamic. This research

will look at how this has played out through institutions and through periods noted for black

struggle, such as slavery, reconstruction, Jim Crow era, Civil Rights, and the contemporary

conservative backlash. During each period of black struggle, policies were enforced to put black

people in their place.

In his book, *Critique of Black Reason*, Mbembé critically reevaluates history, racism, and

the future of humanity and addresses the development of the category of blackness. The

development of blackness begins during the Atlantic slave trade until present-day and has

negatively impacted the black man (Mbembé 2017). Colonialism and racial thinking allow the

black man to be objectified and dehumanized, which causes him to be ashamed of his blackness

(Mbembé 2017). Dehumanizing the black man to a "rag doll" makes it easier to feed him a

narrative that fosters more self-hatred and more acceptance of white supremacy (Mbembé 2017).

Mbembé argues that race is an imagination that allows white people to see what they choose to

see, which is the black surface instead of the humanness of black people (Mbembé 2017). The

intent of racism against black people is to destroy their soul and self-esteem in order to prevent

them from recognizing and activating the power within them (Mbembé 2017). Mbembé theorizes

that black reason is the collection of discourses and practices that equate blackness with being

nonhuman in order to uphold forms of oppression (Mbembé 2017). The equation of blackness

with nonhuman serves as a template for all new forms of exclusion and prevents the United

States from experiencing a just future. Although slavery has been abolished and the African

slaves are set free, the struggle to reach their full potential and to thrive still exists for many

African Americans, descendants of those who were enslaved.

Citizens and policymakers should care about this issue because these are people who live in their community. Black people are not being protected from institutionalized racism, which prevents them from fully engaging with other community members. The institutions need to become more deliberately equitable across racial lines. Ordinary citizens must consider their role in these institutions that keep racism alive and work with the African American community to hold their elected officials accountable for not addressing this systemic issue. State actors, sub-state actors, and ordinary citizens must recognize the wealth gap as a racial issue and engage in tackling the systems that perpetuate racial discrimination. Policymakers should care about this issue because it has economic implications. African American individuals struggle to obtain higher paying occupations, which impacts their ability to contribute to the economy.

The economic disparities lead me to explore the following research question: how has the master-slave dynamic affected the socioeconomic status of African American men and women? My main argument is that the master-slave dynamic can be realized through socioeconomic indicators comparing black people to white people. This power dynamic affects black people's self-esteem, which negatively impacts their wealth and status. In my literature review, first, I will provide historical background of how the master-slave dynamic plays a role in designing these government institutions. Second, I will explain how my research project fills in the research gap.

Third, I will discuss one of my supporting arguments, which is that transgenerational trauma plays a role in African Americans' low self-esteem and low socioeconomic status (Abraham 1994). Fourth, I will identify my other supporting argument, which is that

institutionalized racism is internalized differently by African American men and women

(Thompson 2010; Alexander 2010; Mbembé 2017; Hall 2015; Harris-Perry 2014; Molloy 1998;

Payne 2017; Harris-Perry 2012). Fifth, I will identify my two hypotheses, independent

variables, and dependent variables and provide a model of my hypotheses, which explain how

they relate to the two schools of thought. Lastly, I will identify my research design, focus group

interviews, and explain the results using this methodology.

UNDERSTANDING THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SLAVERY, SELF-ESTEEM, AND INCOME

One focus of this research to demonstrate the institutionalized effects of the master-slave

relationship is the wealth gap between black and white Americans. The data in Figure 1.1 are

gathered from Brookings and show the difference between black and white individuals who have

or do not have a bachelor's degree and the median net worth of their households in 2016 (refer to

the Appendix). The median net worth examines how much households own minus how much

they owe (Dettling, Hsu & Jacobs 2017). White people with a bachelor's degree have a median

net worth of approximately $400,000. Black people with a bachelor's degree have a median net

worth above $50,000. Even though black people have the same educational attainment as white

people, they still do not have the same median net worth.

The disparity provokes people to think about why this happens in black households.

What more do they have to do to have a median net worth of $400,000 or even $200,000? This

gap is also reflected in the average wealth of white and black families in figure 1.2 (refer to the

Appendix). In 2016, white families held seven times more wealth than black families (McKernan, Quakenbush, Ratcliffe, Kalish & Steuerle 2017). These financial struggles make it difficult for African American families to prosper. It is challenging for them to pass down family wealth to the next generation in order to keep them from struggling financially. These families work hard but have nothing to show for it. Because of the long-term effects of the institution of slavery, black people do not start on an equal footing as their white counterparts, which explains the wealth gap between white and black families. To combat the wealth gap, black people must attack institutionalized racism, which is an obstacle that creates more challenges for them.

To study the basis of this institutionalized racism, it is imperative to consider the historical design of these government institutions. Before the Atlantic slave trade, African and European people saw themselves as equals within their separate communities. They operated independently of one another and possessed an undeveloped sense of equality (Kohn 2005). As an illustration, the people of Eboe, Benin developed their own government and justice systems by constructing their own constitution (Equiano 2017). No one was inferior to each other or had lower socioeconomic status until the Europeans invaded their land and took it upon himself to create his own form of equality, which resulted in the marginalization of black people. Black people were extracted from their African roots for the purposes of slavery, and racism was used to take advantage of the black body (Fuchs 1995). The people of Benin did not know there was anything wrong with the color of their skin until the Europeans made it apparent to them and forced them to believe that they needed to be saved from themselves.

The invasion and division led the Europeans to identify himself as the master and the black man and woman as his slaves. This demonstrates that there is not inherent inequality but an external cause that explains the differences in socioeconomic status. During the 1600's in the colonies, the colonists wanted agricultural laborers, who were white people from England, Scotland, and Ireland, to settle in the colonies and preferred them as opposed to Africans, which led to Englishmen in the colonies fixing the law to guarantee rights to white indentured servants and limit their terms of indenture to five or six years (Elkins 1976). Since Negroes were not preferred by the Englishmen, their servitude and low status were fixed in law by the 1660s and no legal structure was established to assist them in obtaining freedom (Elkins 1976). White men did not consider the possibility of black people becoming free and being active members of society and property holders. Negroes did not benefit from the laws established for the white indentured servants, which deepened the color divide and kept black people in perpetual slavery.

During the late 1600s, institutions were designed to recognize black people as slaves and to maintain their low status. The Maryland law of 1663 made it known that all Negroes on American soil, coming to America, and unborn would be slaves for the rest of their lives (Elkins 1976). This was the first legal step in equating black skin with slave and nonhuman. Similar laws were implemented that allowed white people to have absolute power over the black body and to beat the slave into submission. With these laws, there was a continuing shift in identities and in racial labels for black people, such as from "Negro" to "colored" to black to African American (Elkins 1976). These labels reminded black people that the color of their skin kept them from fully being recognized and accepted as American citizens.

This represents how the laws contributed to institutionalized racism. These laws also permitted certain practices that would not have been allowed toward poor white indentured servants, such as giving them thirty lashes on their bare backs and punishing them for miscegenation (Fuchs 1995). Another example is in 1669, Virginia made it lawful to kill unruly slaves and runaway slaves (Johnson 2000). The slave catcher who killed the runaway slaves was paid two tons of tobacco for each life lost (Johnson 2000). These legal structures and practices gave birth to the master-slave dynamic. Making black people powerless and dependent upon the white race was institutionalized in order to keep them at a low social status, which lowered their self-confidence to stand up to a world that stood against them.

The historical account informs how other philosophers and scholars engage in conversation about the master-slave dynamic and the wealth gap. For example, Friedrich Nietzsche, a German philosopher, argued that master morality and slave morality were two fundamental types of morality (Kohn 2005). Master morality focuses more on pride and power, while slave morality is more about kindness and empathy (Kohn 2005). On the other hand, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (G.W.F. Hegel), another German philosopher, focused more on the development of self-consciousness (Kohn 2005). He explained that there were two different self-conscious beings who wanted to be recognized by the other being (Kohn 2005). Although these two philosophers provide insight into understanding the master-slave dynamic, the shortcoming in their works is that they do not take African Americans' low socioeconomic status into account. They do not analyze how the legacy of slavery in the United States still influences black people's ability to obtain a higher status in society.

Possessing wealth contributes to the status of black people, which is researched by other scholars. These scholars attempt to understand the wealth gap between black and white Americans by analyzing many factors, such as home ownership and education (Sullivan 2015). While these scholars explore how the wealth gap in the United States is racialized, their research fails to connect this to black people's self-esteem. Making this connection is essential because it reveals that African Americans struggle to gain self-confidence and to believe in themselves. Even though the practice of slavery has ended legally, the African American community still feels its effects present day. This institutionalized racism prevents them from having confidence in themselves to apply for high-paying positions, obtain a higher-level degree or pursue other opportunities that may close the wealth gap.

The laws established during this time period still impact the design of current government systems and the lives of black people. Younger generations are left to carry the trauma that racism inflicted upon their ancestors, which is transgenerational haunting. These generations inherit trauma, even though they did not experience it and do not know about it directly (Abraham 1994). These traumatic and racist experiences are shared with black children through stories, explanations, assumptions, stereotypes, and parenting (Abraham 1994). The traumatic events are the unspeakable, shameful, and a secret that is buried alive (Abraham 1994). Adults of black families attempt to protect their children from experiencing similar trauma by informing them of what happened to their family members before them, which can cause the younger generation to act more out of fear or not to advocate for themselves at all. For instance, the younger generations hear about previous generations being given thirty lashes as slaves and

being raped by white men. They exclude themselves from other people in fear that they will

experience similar traumatic situations they had heard about from the previous generation.

This creates limitations for the younger black generation to pursue opportunities that can

elevate their status and improve their self-esteem. The deep-rooted issues that generations of

black families are left with create cycles of fear, which is seen in adult territoriality. Adult

territoriality in humans means the spatial strategy to control or influence people by controlling

their area and their mobility (Abraham 1994). Adults in black families control the mobility of

younger generations by placing them in certain environments and by sharing with them

narratives that will cause them to act out of fear. They can control the type of people who the

younger generation interacts with and the type of places they can go.

This type of control can become unhealthy for younger generations and cause them to

become more self-conscious and fearful to engage in aspects of society that can improve their

socioeconomic status. Since previous generations in the African American community did not

use constructive ways to educate the next generation, these individuals suffer from not fully

addressing the legacies of abuse of power (Abraham 1994). They are unsure of how to go about

tackling institutional discrimination, which causes them to fall into the same cycle of trauma and

of marginalization (Abraham 1994). Transgenerational trauma reinforces adult territoriality,

which limits the agency of the younger black generations and challenges their ability to achieve

self-esteem and status.

My second school of thought examines how institutionalized racism is internalized

differently by black men and women. The history of African American men being oppressed

and marginalized creates a normative environment for institutions to interfere with their upward mobility. The criminal justice system targets black men and resembles the master-slave dynamic. Mass incarceration is most of the population in local jails and in federal and state prisons (Thompson 2010). The number of Americans in local jails, state prisons, and federal prisons has grown within three decades. In 1980, 1.84 million Americans were incarcerated (Thompson 2010). This system contributes to the oppression of the black man.

The criminal justice system is designed to target men of color and to remind them of their nonhuman status. In 2010, 2.4 million people were incarcerated in the United States (Thompson 2010). Black men are more likely to be arrested for small crimes than their white coequals (Alexander 2010). For example, African American men are four times more likely to be arrested under marijuana charges than white men (Thompson 2010). They are given longer sentences than their white peers (Thompson 2010). The crackdown on crime came about in the 1980s under the Reagan administration (Thompson 2010). Legislators passed policies that put more people in jail for small crimes (Thompson 2010). Black men make up a large portion of the prison population because racial discrimination helps keep them in an inferior position (Alexander 2010). While they are in prison, they are mistreated and disrespected and are not considered members of society.

Black men are perceived to be dangerous individuals who deserve and need to be locked up to protect society. When black men are released from prison, they are stigmatized and struggle with assimilating into society. They cannot vote or get high paying jobs (Alexander 2010). Their felony is on their record, which makes it difficult for them to receive any

government assistance (Alexander 2010). African American men are at a disadvantage while

they are in jail or prison and when they are released. They do not possess high self-esteem after

being locked up for months or years and mistreated. They have a low socioeconomic status

because they cannot and do not know how to pursue opportunities that will help them increase

their social status. The master-slave dynamic helps the prison system to disguise mass

incarceration as a War on Drugs and to make black men appear as a burden on society. The

black man is viewed as a problem and danger to other society members.

Black women internalize their oppression differently from black men, which explains

why they have lower self-esteem than black men. They suffer from stereotypes about their

physique or their behavior. For example, black women are labeled as Jezebel because they are

seen as hypersexual creatures or as the angry black woman because they are dismissed for

always being angry (Harris-Perry 2014). Similar to black men, black women are viewed as a

burden on society and dangerous. They are seen as needing to be tamed. Black women are

misunderstood, and their efforts to elevate themselves go unnoticed (Harris-Perry 2014). They

work and fight so hard with very little in return. Black women struggle to keep their head up

because societal structures and practices feed and remind them of who they are, and the shame

brings their head down again. Being disregarded and rejected results in their rights and

citizenship not being recognized (Harris-Perry 2014). Black women and their grievances are not

considered in American political debate. Their issues are not prioritized on the political agenda.

The struggle to fight for their rights as black Americans and as women to be acknowledged by

the American government system (Harris-Perry 2014). Black women internalize their oppression

by adopting these archetypes and allowing them to lower their self-esteem. African American

women experience another level of oppression, which is sexism.

Society criticizes their appearance. For example, they are expected to be thin because it is

viewed as more feminine (Molloy 1998). However, most black women have thicker body

shapes, which cause them not to meet these societal expectations (Molloy 1998). They feel

ashamed of themselves, which lowers their self-esteem. In addition, black women are criticized

for being too dark (Hutchings, Jefferson, Lewis & Yadon 2014). Colorism is the belief in

treating others within the same racial group differently due the lightness or darkness of their skin

tone (Hutchings, Jefferson, Lewis & Yadon 2014). Colorism can be traced back to the law that

declared mulatto children free during the time of slavery in order to relieve the master of slaves

and to protect him from owning his children as slaves (Elkins 1976). Lighter-skinned women are

seen more beautiful than darker-skinned women because the prejudice stems from the

deep-rooted history of racism. Lighter-skinned women are further away from being black and are

closer to being white, which makes them purer. Therefore, thick dark-skinned women continue

to suffer more oppression for not being thin and light-skinned.

Not only are black women's body types and skin color criticized, but their hair is judged

as well. An illustration of black hair being problematized is in the controversial Shea Moisture

ad. Shea Moisture is a skin care company that takes pride in using natural and ethically sourced

and certified organic ingredients (Payne 2017). The company released an ad that promoted a

campaign about women's hair challenges and how Shea Moisture can solve those challenges

(Payne 2017). Women, specifically, African American women, were outraged by this ad because

it had a blonde-haired model, two red-haired models, and one curly-haired black woman and

stated that the Shea Moisture product could save women from "hair hate" and could straighten

out their "kinks" (Payne 2017). Black women were disappointed by this ad because for one, it

included one African American model, and it problematized black hair. African American

women's hair is known for being kinky and curly, which caused them to find offense in the

company for promoting the way their hair is as a problem and needing fixing. In this instance,

the company resembled the societal structures and practices that also found black hair as an

issue.

The ad speaks to the politics of black hair. It reflects the power dynamics between black

women and the rest of society. Due to black women's lack of authority, society establishes

beauty standards for them and watches them to see if those expectations are fulfilled, which

results in interpreting black hair as always making a political statement to outsiders. If an

African American woman wears an afro, then she is radical and is considered a black identity

extremist (Harris-Perry 2012). If an African American woman wears weave, then she is

unauthentic and does not accept her natural beauty (Harris-Perry 2012). If an African American

woman is bald, then she is too masculine (Harris-Perry 2012). These various interpretations of

black hair contribute to how black women think about themselves. If they want to suit the beauty

standard, which is typically straight, long hair, then they use chemicals, such as a relaxer, to

straighten the kinks in their hair and beat it into submission.

The fact that black women feel as though they must change their hair to be recognized by

society speaks to their low self-esteem. They are controlled to believe that they are not enough

and need to be fixed. Since society is ashamed of their appearance, black women should feel ashamed as well and want to meet these societal expectations to discover their place in society, which is at the lowest level. This is unfortunate because according to recent data shared by Brookings, black women are earning more college degrees (Reeves 2017). Data show that approximately 25% of black women have four or more years of college education, while approximately 17% of black men have four or more years of college education (Reeves 2017). Since black women are disregarded and overlooked, their educational accomplishments are neither recognized nor celebrated, which contributes to them lacking confidence in themselves and motivation to continue achieving higher levels of education. The politics of black hair play an essential role in how black women see and feel about themselves and about their capabilities to improve their low social status.

For this research project, the first hypothesis is the following: if the master-slave dynamic lowers African Americans' self-esteem, then they have low socioeconomic status. The hypothesis represents a positive relationship. The independent and dependent variables for the first hypothesis are the master-slave dynamic and the socioeconomic status of African Americans. The second hypothesis is the following: African American women with low self-esteem have lower socioeconomic status than African American men with low self-esteem. Again, this is a positive relationship. The independent and dependent variables for the second hypothesis are self-esteem and socioeconomic status of African Americans.

The following is a graphical representation of the first hypothesis:

Master-Slave Dynamic → Self-Esteem → Socioeconomic Status

The following is a graphical representation of the second hypothesis:

Self-Esteem → Socioeconomic Status

Both hypotheses relate to the following schools of thought: transgenerational trauma contributes to the lowering of African Americans' self-esteem and socioeconomic status and institutionalized racism is internalized differently by black men and women. Black people exist independently of white people until they need cheap labor and decide to misuse and abuse the black body. Thus, black people are made to feel inferior to white people because of their skin color, which causes them to suffer from racism and to obtain low self-esteem. This is clearly spelled out in the laws during the 1660's and fixed black people's low status in society. The purpose of designing institutions to benefit white people is to keep black people in perpetual slavery. Institutionalized racism against African American men is seen in the prison systems, while black women are stereotyped for being women, for being black, and for having black hair. Their self-esteem decreases due to their inability to meet societal expectations for their appearance.

Moreover, black people struggle to improve their socioeconomic status because of the fear that is instilled in them by previous generations. Many black families suffer from transgenerational trauma, which is carrying the traumatic experiences of others from the past without actually living out those experiences. The younger generations internalize the fear and shame behind these narratives and prevent themselves from engaging in certain aspects of society that can improve their status. Additionally, both black men and women internalize the negative stereotypes about them and struggle to raise their socioeconomic status. They do not

believe in themselves because government structures and societal practices remind them that

they should not try to obtain wealth and status and that they can only accomplish so much.

African American people accept this narrative and convince themselves that they are satisfied

where they are. They do not believe in taking risks to raise their socioeconomic status. They

focus more on what they do not have instead of what they can achieve.

TESTING THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SELF-ESTEEM AND

SOCIOECONOMIC STATUS

To test my hypotheses about the relationship between the master-slave dynamic,

self-esteem, and socioeconomic status, I relied on focus group interviews. Focus groups are used

to study people's reactions in market research or political analysis with open or guided

discussions about new products or political concepts (Stanley 2016). Focus groups are small yet

diverse groups of people based on their demographic background (Breen 2006). Focus groups

assist in providing a deeper understanding of research and new insights about the product or the

political concept (Breen 2006). Conducting a focus group helps me to understand how pivotal

my research is to the black community.

Focus groups are more appropriate than surveys to test my research question for multiple

reasons. For example, focus groups allow the participants to connect and interact with one

another on difficult and emotional topics. Moreover, survey respondents are not encouraged to

provide accurate and honest answers due to the lack of personal interaction. However, in focus

groups, the participants are in the same space and are engaged in discussion, which compels

them to share accurate and honest responses to the interview questions (Guest 2017). This

research strategy will assist in testing my hypotheses by making it easier for the participants to

talk about the subject matter and to answer the questions.

The universe for this research project is African American men and women over the age

of 18 because I want to focus on their self-esteem and their socioeconomic status. To conduct the

focus group, I had one group of five African American men and another group of five African

American women, which equals to ten participants in total (Krueger 2015). Each focus group

interview for the African American men and women lasted for one hour. I constructed the

consent form, the interview questions, the short questionnaire, the flyer, and the email sent to the

individuals who were interested in this focus group and received approval by Butler University's

Institutional Review Board for all these items.

I conducted the focus group interviews at a local church, and the participants were new

members of this church. I recruited the participants by making announcements about the focus

groups for two weeks at the church and by posting the flyers that I constructed in the vestibule of

the church (see attached here). I recruited participants who were apart of the Visitor's Ministry at

the church and who shared similar demographics (Guest 2017). The focus group occurred on

Saturday at the church, which helped the participants to feel more at ease about the situation. I

sent them emails thanking them for volunteering to participate and provided them with more

information about the focus group. I sent them more details about the location, date, and time of

the interview. I received several responses from the participants who stated that they had not

participated in a focus group before, which motivated me to ensure this would be an insightful

learning experience for them.

The pastor approved of me to conduct the focus group at the church on Saturday because

the Visitor's Ministry meets every Saturday at 3:00 p.m., and I planned for the first focus group

to begin at 1:00 p.m. The participants were greeted by the pastor when they came in, which also

helped them not to be nervous about the focus group. They signed the consent form, which

guaranteed them confidentiality and the right not to answer certain questions. After signing the

consent form, the participants completed the focus group questionnaire that asked four questions

about their age, their personal income level, their preference between being described as African

American or black, and their level of self-esteem.

After signing the consent form and completing the questionnaire, I led them to the space

where the focus group would be held. I was the moderator and the note-taker, which meant that I

oversaw asking the questions and ensuring that the discussion was summarized properly and

accurately (Friedman 2017). The interview and the questions were semi-structured, which meant

that a certain framework was set for the interview but still allowed new insights to be brought up

during the interview (Paay 2018). The following are the five questions asked during the

interview:

1. How would you define success?
2. Do you believe that it is more difficult for the African American man (woman) to obtain wealth?
3. How would you describe the level of self-esteem among African American men (women)?
4. Compared to white Americans, what structures or practices might prevent African American men (women) from achieving success?
5. How would you describe the experience of African American men (women) today compared to previous eras?

As the moderator, I had to probe the participants to explain their responses to the questions and keep the conversation on track. Using the focus group methodology was beneficial in being less expensive than surveys and in receiving my results relatively quick. However, there are reliability and validity concerns with this research strategy. For example, in each focus group, there was one person who dominated the discussion, which caused everyone else not to participate as much (Guest 2017). The sample size was small, which meant that there was not much diversity, and it was not representative of most African Americans. Furthermore, when participants did contribute, they wanted to minimize conflict by thinking like everyone else instead of expressing their own beliefs, which may differ from other participant's perspectives (Gang 2016). This led to social desirability bias, which meant that participants answered the questions in a way that would allow them to be viewed favorably instead of answering the questions truthfully (Gang 2016). I also witnessed a sense of observer's dependency during the interview and possibly on the questionnaire, and many of the observations were based on what they assumed I wanted to hear, which made me question the validity of some of their responses (Breen 2006). Despite of these shortcomings, the focus group interviews were the best methodology to use to begin engaging with the black community about this sensitive subject.

UNDERSTANDING THE RELATIONSHIP

RESULTS

The findings from my focus group interviews were significant and supportive of my research. The relationship between self-esteem and socioeconomic status exists because it appears in the responses and the stories that my participants shared. For the participants who had low-income levels, I noticed that their definition of success included obtaining material items, such as expensive cars and mansions, and meeting their basic needs, such as paying their bills on time. I found this significant because it revealed to me that the problem for some black individuals is not just to obtain wealth but to be able to show it off as well. Since some of my participants had low-income levels, their low self-esteem was based on their inability to appear wealthy. Participants with low self-esteem said things like they were embarrassed to go out to lunch or dinner with their white coworkers to an expensive restaurant, such as Ruth's Chris Steak House, and could only afford one side and water, while everyone else could order whatever they wanted without any hesitation.

This relationship is also highlighted in the different responses that my participants had to the question regarding the level of self-esteem among black men and women. The black female participants I interviewed opened up more and became more emotional while sharing their experiences. During the conversations, my participants also engaged more with the other layer of oppression that I highlighted in my literature review, which was sexism. For example, one female participant grew emotional while sharing her experience as a young single mother of six children. One of the fathers was shot, and the other two fathers were imprisoned. She could neither work nor attend college because she did not have anyone to help her care for her children.

The participant shared a story about how one of the white male elementary teachers at her children's school scheduled a meeting with her to discuss the behavior of her children. She explained that she was intimidated by the white male teacher because he was a white man, and she felt less than and incompetent because she did not have a degree like he did. She did not know the "big fancy words," like he did.

The female participant did not want to appear as a bad mother and have her children taken away from her so she agreed with everything he said and did not feel confident to share her opinions that may differ from his views. The participant's story reveals that African American women who already have low self-esteem have lower socioeconomic status than black men with low self-esteem. The participant felt like she failed her children as a mother because she could not provide for them financially. There was another layer of oppression that the participant suffered from in this situation, which was being a woman. Not only did she feel insecure about her impoverished state but her identity as a black woman as well. She internalized the stereotype of black women being poor mothers, which contributed to her low self-esteem during the conversation with the teacher. The participant's story reveals how black women internalized oppression differently than black men due to their identity as a black American and as a woman.

Unlike my female participants, the male participants were more reserved and responded to gender roles. Most of the men associated providing for their family with their definition of success because they were taught to be the men of their household at a young age and that providing for their family was protecting their family. Having this responsibility caused them to feel shame and frustration from their low-income level because they could neither provide nor

protect their family while making below $40,000. The shame and frustration are internalized by

black men, which causes them to feel low self-esteem.

As a collective, my participants agreed that there were government systems that failed the

black community, prevented black men and women from achieving success, and contributed to

their low self-esteem. One participant believed that the judicial system targeted black families

since the war on drugs during Ronald Reagan's administration. It gave long sentences to a large

majority of black men, which caused many black men not to support or protect their family and

disunified the family unit. This left black mothers to raise the family alone and to be the

breadwinners, which most often resulted in not attending college and working two or three jobs

to make ends meet. The participant concluded that the judicial system caused black people not to

obtain wealth and to have a high socioeconomic status.

The conversation about institutionalized racism led my participants to sharing their

opinions of the black experience today compared to previous eras. Based on the responses and

the story shared, I could see my first school of thought about transgenerational trauma coming

into play. My participant's story was about him being affected by the story that was told to him

as a child about the lynching of his great grandfather. The participant explained that this story

stuck with him because he grew up near a predominantly white neighborhood, and he struggled

to understand his place and his mother's place in society. This story represents how

transgenerational trauma can impact black men and the choices they make. The participant did

not feel confident in engaging with the white children in the other neighborhood because of the

fear that was instilled in him from this story.

As he matured, the participant still struggled to communicate with his white counterparts, which impacted his choices in employment. He internalized the image and the description of this traumatic event, which resulted in him feeling self-conscious about himself. Due to his low self-esteem, the participant did not have any motivation to apply himself and to pursue job opportunities that could elevate his socioeconomic status and allow him to fulfill his responsibility to provide for his family. Thus, the focus group interview was helpful for the participants to engage with and learn from one another and for me to learn about and analyze other African Americans' experiences with institutionalized racism.

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this research project is to assess if the master-slave dynamic impacts African American men's and women's self-esteem, which affects their socioeconomic status. The first argument analyzes the impact that transgenerational trauma has on the self-esteem of black men and women. The second argument explores how black men and women internalize their oppression that stems from government institutions and societal practices. For black men, mass incarceration is an example of a modern-day form of slavery. For black women, they suffer from added oppression due to their gender and have to deal with racial stereotypes and societal expectations of their appearance.

Focus group interview is the best research strategy to test if the master-slave dynamic affects African American socioeconomic status, and if African American women with low self-esteem have lower socioeconomic status than African American men with low self-esteem.

Based on the responses I gathered from the questions asked, both of my hypotheses were supported. An area of improvement for this research project is exploring more arguments that oppose the explanations presented or that believe slavery has nothing to do with the wealth gap between white and black people. This is important to consider because the opposing arguments can sharpen the three schools of thought.

In the future, I plan to continue with this research project and conduct a larger focus group. This research essay is the first essay of a series of essays about this topic. For the next project, I will explore education and religion as possible solutions to mitigate internalized oppression among the black community and will identify solutions that address institutionalized racism. It is possible that education can help black people think more positive about themselves and reject the stereotypes about them (Rowley 1998). They will be more likely to appreciate their racial identity and feel more comfortable with themselves (Phinney 1997). I can also explore capitalism more in the next project and see how it has caused systemic failures in the United States (Freire 2018). I anticipate that both projects will take me approximately four years to complete. Since my hypotheses were confirmed through my research and there was a relationship between self-esteem and socioeconomic status, then this research project should inform public policy, educational curriculums, and social services. I will use focus group interviews again for my next project in order to engage with the black community on strategies that can be used to combat institutionalized racism and the wealth gap.

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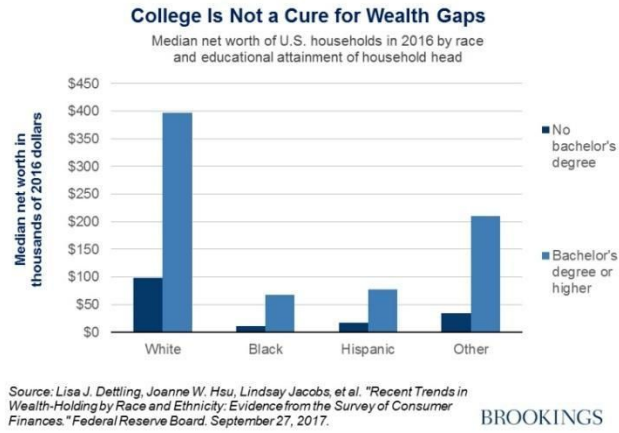UNDERSTANDING THE RELATIONSHIP

APPENDIX

Figure 1.1- This graph displays the median net worth of households of the United States based on the race and educational

attainment of the head of the household.

Dettling, L. J., Hsu, J. W., & Jacobs, L. (2017, September). Recent Trends in Wealth-Holding by Race and Ethnicity: Evidence

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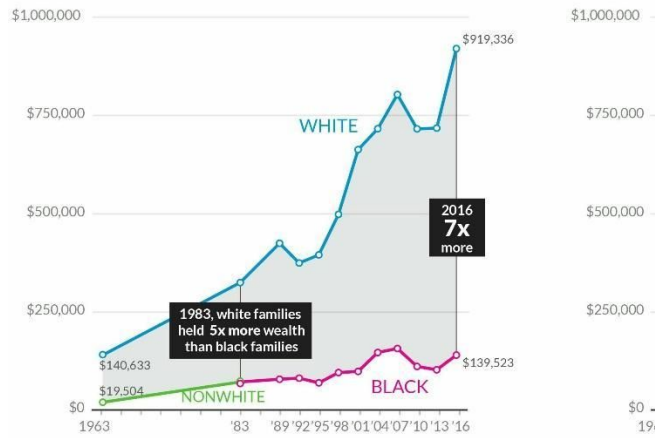
UNDERSTANDING THE RELATIONSHIP

APPENDIX

Figure 1.2- This graph shows the average family wealth based on race from 1963 to 2016.

McKernan, S., Quakenbush, C., Ratcliffe, C., Kalish, E., & Steuerle, C. E. (2017, October 04). Wealth Inequality is Growing.

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Participate in a 60-minute focus group about the experiences of African American men and women in the United States.

As part of a research study at Butler University, I will assess the relationship between African American men's and women's self-esteem and their socioeconomic status.

If interested, please contact:

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