

## Influence of Parental Employment Status on Caribbean Adolescents' Self-Esteem

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### Abstract

Potential connections between the self-esteem of adolescents and their parents' employment status have been revealed in the literature. This cross-sectional study examines the relation of gender, age, and parental employment status to academic and global self-esteem of 369 fourth to upper sixth form Caribbean secondary school adolescents. Their ages ranged from 13 to 18 years old ( $M=15.52$ ,  $SD=1.21$ ), 223 were females and 146 were males. The participants completed a questionnaire that assessed academic and global self-esteem. Pearson product moment correlation coefficient, Independent t-tests and Multiple Regressions were used to analyse the data obtained from the sample. Results indicated no significant differences in self-esteem between male and female adolescents. With regard to age, the 16-18 year old age group had higher levels of academic self-esteem than the 13-15 year olds. Adolescents of unemployed parents had the highest academic and global self-esteem. However, multiple regression analyses did not reveal any predictive relationships. These findings are discussed with due consideration of earlier research and their implications for the psychology of Caribbean people.

**Keywords:** Parental employment; Transpersonal components; Adolescents

### Introduction

Parental employment status, gender and age are highly visible factors for the Caribbean adolescent; given the physical land space and low population size of many of the small island states that make up the Caribbean, individuals are very familiar with each other and there is a history of social interconnectedness between family and friends [1,2]. Thus, adolescents develop within a context that is "socially close," and it is likely that their parents' employment status would have some effect on their self-esteem, not only in relation to the amount of accessible family income but more so in relation to social standing within their communities.

Parental employment status has, in the literature, been classified in many ways, such as employed, unemployed, disabled, housewife; among mothers only [3]. It has largely been used in studies which focus on the physical health of children and adolescents [4,5]. Research has also looked at parental unemployment and the serious effects that it can have on adolescents' psychological well-being [6].

In the Caribbean, both parents employed outside of the home is commonplace long gone is the traditional family where the mother works inside the home and the father is the breadwinner working outside of the home. Even though the traditional family has almost become obsolete, research still alludes to the belief that the children of "stay-at-home mothers" fair better psychologically and academically than those of employed mothers [3,7,8]. In these times of economic recession, we have to consider further the possibility that parents are more likely now, than ever before, to face unemployment.

The father's role as that of the sole breadwinner of the family is also becoming an outmoded custom. Employed parents have become the norm due to a combination of free education opening up access to women, the high cost of living fuelling the necessity for two-income

households, and feminism [9]. Hence, women have entered the workforce as equals whether married or single and we need to know what effect this has on adolescents' self-esteem when the mother and father are both employed outside of the home.

Evidence also suggests that parental employment status has been considered to be an important, although often disregarded, contextual factor that may influence parent-adolescent relationships [10]. In turn, there is much research that links the importance of the function of parent-adolescent relationships in adolescent self-esteem [11,12]. Hence, by extension parental employment status naturally lends itself to be considered as a variable in adolescents' self-esteem.

Self-esteem is considered to be a critical component of good mental health. It is the evaluative feature of the self-concept; a broader representation of the self that includes cognitive and behavioral aspects, specifically physical, academic, social, and transpersonal components [13]. The academic self-concept relates to how well we learn and the extent of our overall performance in school, hence academic self-esteem is the evaluative appraisal of the experience of being capable of meeting academic challenges and being worthy of happiness [14].

### Problem statement

Self-esteem plays a major role in adolescent development as adolescents react to all of the physical, emotional and social changes taking place during this period. In the Caribbean, adolescence is a developmental stage that is signified by children establishing their identity and preparing themselves for entry to adulthood. It is therefore a period of heightened stress [15] when they need to develop good and high self-esteem to cope with the turmoil and emotional changes at this transitional period. Unfortunately, it is still unclear what variables are related to adolescent self-esteem. It is against this backdrop that this study was conducted, the current study therefore focuses on two of such variables that have received much attention, age

and gender, and one that may serve as a proxy indicator for important parent factors; that being parental employment status, which indicates, in this study, if a parent is employed, self-employed or unemployed. Thus, this study investigated the influence that parental status, gender and age may have on adolescents' self-esteem.

## Literature Review

Research on adolescent self-esteem has spanned more than four decades [16-21] proving that it is an enduring and important area for study. There is no clear evidence as to the relationship between age and self-esteem in children. There are a number of cross-sectional studies [15,22,23] and longitudinal studies [24-27] that have found that self-esteem levels remain constant with increased age, and therefore increased age was not a significant predictor of self-esteem. However, outside of the North American culture self-esteem has been found to be associated with age among adolescents in India where early adolescents (10-11 years) reported higher self-esteem as compared to late adolescents (12-13 years) [18].

Some longitudinal research has indicated a gradual increase in self-esteem across adolescence [28-31] and others have shown that self-esteem decreased over time during adolescence [17,32]. Yet, there are a number of studies which have shown that self-esteem is highest during childhood, drops significantly during adolescence, and increases again into adulthood [17,32].

On the contrary, findings with respect to the relationship between gender and adolescents' self-esteem appear to be fairly consistent. As to the specific differences according to gender, results show that girls tend to have a poorer self-esteem than boys during adolescence, regardless of the domains taken into consideration [26,33-39] studied secondary school adolescents in Malaysia aged between 13 to 17 years old and also found that males obtained higher self-esteem scores than females. In further support, Kling, Hyde, Showers and Buswell's [40] metaanalysis of gender differences in self-esteem supported that males score higher on standard measures of global self-esteem than females, but stressed that the difference is small.

The vast majority of research on self-esteem in adolescents has been conducted in the U.S. [7,17,20,41,42], with single studies conducted in Israel [43], India [35,39]. Research has been conducted with adolescents in the Caribbean focusing on self-esteem differences across cultures in which Caribbean girls gained a higher mean score for self-esteem than their male counterparts but the difference was not statistically significant [44]. It is therefore important to explore self-esteem for Caribbean adolescents and some of the factors that may be related to it.

There has been much research on parental employment status as it relates to adolescents' physical health [6,45]. However, parental employment status in relation to adolescents' psychological well-being has not been the focus of past research. Sleskova [3] in their research on the influence of parental employment status on adolescents' health found that Dutch females whose mother was a housewife reported better psychological well-being than those with an employed mother. These investigators used the Rosenberg self-esteem scale [46] to assess long-term well-being in Dutch and Slovak adolescents in their study on the influence of parental status on adolescents' health

The general assumption has been that the mother's employment outside of the home is somehow related to detrimental effects in their adolescents' physical, social, psychological and academic development

or results in maladjusted development [42,47]. Yet there is little support for this belief from the majority of studies which speak to the positive effect of maternal employment on adolescents' self-esteem and psychological well-being [7,48,49] some even suggesting that adolescents of employed mothers are more achievement oriented [7] and have higher academic aspirations [50].

The effect of the father's employment status on the adolescent's psychological well being has not been a major focus of research. Isralowitz [51] investigated the impact of family unemployment on adolescent personality development in Israel and found that there were not any significant differences in self-concept among youth from families where the father was either employed or unemployed. However, Cinamon [52] later found that adolescents in Israel who had fathers that were employed demonstrated significantly higher expectations for success than those with fathers who were unemployed.

Cultural differences have been found in a number of studies for example Slovak male adolescents' self-rated health and long-term well-being is negatively influenced by their unemployed fathers, but this is not the case for Dutch adolescents, and having an unemployed mother has been found to have a negative effect on the self-esteem of Slovak adolescents [49]. These varying findings suggests that the link between parental employment status and the health of their children may vary between countries, and therefore further studies involving various cultures are needed [6]. Parental employment status may in part serve as a surrogate for socio-economic status and for parents as role models for their children in small societies like those found in Caribbean countries. This is especially the case in Barbadian society where there is a general perception that social class is largely determined by one's employment status. Hence for adolescents in Barbados one's parental employment status is a salient feature in their lives. It is important to note that parental employment status in this study is utilized as a proxy measure to capture elements of how parents' behaviors associated with employment are related to their adolescent children's self-esteem. Hence, the parental employment status variable is of great importance to the adolescents' sense of self worth. Therefore, we hypothesize that there is a relationship between one's parental employment status and one's self-esteem.

Parental employment can also benefit children's educational progress. On the one hand, parents gain in self-esteem, competency, and social support (as well as income) through their employment; these benefits for parents may translate into benefits for children. Mothers who are employed in professional positions serve as positive role models for daughters. In addition, parents' work characteristics are related to the quality of their parenting. Parents who enjoy their work, who are socially rewarded for it, and who are intellectually challenged in the work setting are more likely to show warmth and greater flexible but firm control with their children than parents who have less satisfying employment [53].

Consequently, considering that employment of both parents is most common in the Caribbean family, we have chosen to look at the relationship among gender, age and the parental employment status and self-esteem of adolescents. In addition, it is important to explore age, gender and parental employment status as they relate to Caribbean adolescents' self-esteem for available research has not addressed these variables in a Caribbean context nor for both mother and father. Hence, this study aims to discover if there is a relationship among gender, age and the parental employment status and self-esteem of adolescents. The main questions addressed in this study are: Will the

parental employment status, age and gender of the adolescents predict their (a) global self-esteem? and/or (b) their academic self-esteem?

## Method

### Participants

The sample consisted of 369 students (223 females, 146 males) conveniently selected from the 4th, 5th and lower and upper 6th forms of one public secondary school in Barbados. The students ranged in age from 13 to 18 years ( $M=15.52$  yrs.;  $SD=1.21$ ). There were 192 (52%) adolescents within the age bracket of 13-15 years while 177 (48%) were in the 16-18 years age group. Of the 369 adolescents 135 of them had parents who are employed, 179 self employed, while 55 are unemployed.

### Measures

The questionnaire employed in this study has two sections: A and B. Section A of our survey contained demographic questions, which included a few items identifying one's gender (male or female), age (13-15 or 16-18) and parental employment status for both parents. Each participant's maternal and paternal parental employment status was coded as employed, self-employed or unemployed. Section B of the questionnaire consisted of 26 items which measure academic and global self-esteem. The foremost 20 items in section B assess adolescents' global self-esteem, with the first 10 of those items being an adapted version of Rosenberg's Self-esteem Scale [46] The Rosenberg Self-Esteem scale is a widely-used measure of global self-esteem in adolescents, consisting of 10 items (e.g., At times I think I am no good at all, I certainly feel useless at times) rated on a 4-point Likert scale ranging in responses from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree", with the sum score ranging from 10 to 40, with 40 indicating the highest level of self-esteem.

Research examining the reliability of the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale generally has reported the instrument to be psychometrically sound; test-retest reliability was found to be 0.85 after a two-week interval and 0.82 after a one-week interval [22,35,54] reported a Cronbach's Alpha of 0.83. In this study, the scales yielded reliability

coefficients of 0.82 for global self-esteem and 0.62 for academic self-esteem (Cronbach's Alpha), which indicate that the adapted Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale was an internally reliable measure in this Caribbean adolescent sample. The validity of the instrument was ascertained by the choice of items that were subjected to internal consistency analysis (Cronbach's Alpha), which is an index of item homogeneity and an indication of construct validity.

The following items 11-20 in Section B include statements such as; I take a positive attitude to myself, I feel unattractive, while the final six items (21-26) measure the students' academic self-esteem and include e.g., I score low marks in many of my subjects, I always feel neglected in class items. The response format of the instrument consists of a modified 4-point Likert scale ranging from 4 being "strongly agree" to 1 for "strongly disagree." Possible scores range from 20 to 80 on the global self-esteem measure and 6 to 24 on the academic self-esteem scale, with 80 and 24 indicating the highest level of global self-esteem and academic self-esteem respectively.

### Procedure

Informed consent for the students to participate in the survey was obtained from the school principal. The adolescents were surveyed in their school hall by the researchers with the assistance of the school principal, teachers and the school guidance counsellor. The researchers took time to brief the participants on the process of answering the items in the questionnaire and they were informed that the information would remain confidential and that they were free to not participate in the study if they so wished. The administration of the instrument lasted for approximately one hour.

### Results

Descriptive statistics for the entire sample for age group, gender and parental employment status for mother and father are presented in Table 1. Data was analysed using independent t tests and one-way analyses of variance (ANOVA) to determine the effects of parental employment status, gender and age, on academic self-esteem and global self-esteem.

(N=369)	M	SD
Age	15.52	1.21
Academic self-esteem	18.10	2.94
Global self-esteem	60.13	8.98

**Table 1:** Overall means and standard deviations for entire sample

### Parental employment status resulted in four combinations

- mother and father unemployed
- father unemployed and mother employed
- father employed and mother unemployed

- father and mother employed

Table 2 displays the means and standard deviations for global and academic self-esteem for each of the four parental types.

Independent variables	Dependent variables	
	General	Academic self-esteem

		self-esteem				
		M	SD	M	SD	
<b>Age of adolescent</b>	13-15 (n = 192)	59.96	9.4	17.97	2.88	
	16-18 (n = 177)	60.32	8.54	18.25	3.02	
<b>Gender of adolescent</b>	Female (n = 223)	59.96	9.4	17.97	2.88	
	Male (n = 146)	60.32	8.54	18.25	3.02	
<b>Parental employment status</b>	Paternal Unemployed	Maternal Unemployed (n = 6)	62.16	5.91	19.83	2.92
	Paternal Unemployed	Maternal Employed (n = 49)	59.75	10.58	17.97	3.64
	Paternal Employed	Maternal Unemployed(n = 19)	57.75	8.53	17.73	2.7
	Paternal Employed	Maternal Employed (n = 146)	60.34	8.77	18.11	2.83

**Table 2:** Means and standard deviations for age group, gender and parental employment status.

### Regression analyses predicting global and academic self-esteem

Multiple regression analyses were used to examine the effects of sex, age, and parental employment status on global and academic self-esteem. Parental employment status comprised four categories; hence, three dummies were created: (1) adolescents with both employed fathers and mothers, (2) adolescents with employed fathers and unemployed mothers, and (3) adolescents with unemployed fathers and employed mothers. The category that depicted adolescents with unemployed mothers and fathers was omitted as the reference category. Sex (0=Female, 1=Male) and age (0=13-15, 1=16-18) were entered as dichotomous predictors, along with three dummy variables for parent employment status. Given that there were two outcome variables, two regression equations were generated.

Overall, the regression analyses revealed that none of the predictors significantly impacted global self-esteem (R-square=0.01, F=0.66,  $p>0.05$ ) or academic self-esteem (R-square=0.01, F=0.96,  $p>0.05$ ).

### Discussion

The purpose of this study was to investigate if adolescents' parental employment status, age and gender predict their self-esteem (academic and global) in a Caribbean adolescent sample. It was hypothesized that parental employment status, age and gender of Caribbean adolescents would predict their self-esteem. The statistical analyses showed that the parental employment status, age and gender of the adolescents do not appear to be important factors to be considered in determining adolescent's academic and global self-esteem. However, from the descriptive data it would appear at first that adolescents of unemployed

parents had higher levels of academic and global self-esteem than those of employed parents. This finding is unusual when compared to previous research [50,52].

In regard to age, it was hypothesised that that there would not be any relationship between the age of the adolescents and their academic and global self-esteem due to the inconsistency of findings in previous research with adolescents. However we found that although there was no significant age effect older adolescents had higher means for both academic and global self-esteem than younger adolescents. This supports the earlier findings that reported a gradual increase in self-esteem across adolescence [29-31,55,56].

Finally, male adolescents exhibited higher academic and global self-esteem means than females. This supports findings of previous studies which have found that males have a tendency to report higher self-esteem [26,33,34,36-38].

We must note that there were only six adolescents of unemployed parents in the sample, and it was this group that exhibited the highest means for both academic and global self-esteem. It could be argued that this sample is not representative of adolescents of unemployed parents due to the small number of cases. Alternatively, in Caribbean society it could be that these adolescents exhibited higher self-esteem because they were at secondary school and were more likely to progress further in life than their parents. This finding contradicts earlier research by Cinamon [52] who found that adolescents in Israel of unemployed fathers demonstrated significantly lower expectations for success than those with employed fathers. Although the findings appear to contradict those of Cinamon [52] we could argue that they really support them when we look at the next highest means for the self-esteem measures which are for those adolescents of employed parents; this finding corroborates the earlier research that employed-



parental employment status positively affects children's development. This is largely due to the socio-economic importance of parental employment status for Caribbean adolescents. Hence, indicating that the parental employment status of the adolescents is associated with their sense of value and worth. It may also relate to the fact that employed parents provide working models that underpin their adolescents' academic self-esteem. Adolescents of employed parents experience first-hand their parents being organised, setting goals and achieving those goals, as well as reinforcing the relationship between learning and employment.

Further investigation of the pattern of parental employment status reveals that adolescents of employed mothers have high academic and global self-esteem regardless of the fathers' employment status. This could largely be accounted for by the matrifocal nature of the Caribbean family [9] hence it is not surprising that the adolescents of employed mothers have high academic and global self-esteem, irrespective of whether or not the father is employed.

When we examine the data by age we found that the older age group had higher means for both academic and global self-esteem. This corroborates with previous studies that have found a gradual increase with age in self-esteem across adolescence [29-31,39] which has been attributed to increase in cognitive functioning with maturity.

Our findings with regards to academic and global self-esteem though not significant corroborate previous research that girls tend to have a poorer self-esteem than boys during adolescence [26,33-37]

## Conclusion

Although it is recognised that due to the many facets inherent in parental employment status (e.g. family income, educational level, health condition) this research is by no means conclusive. However, the study provides research-based knowledge of the possible influence of parental employment status on adolescents' self-esteem. Future research should use a larger sample including representation from more adolescents of families that have a parent who is unemployed, as well as those where both parents are unemployed, and should also include nationals from other Caribbean countries. In addition there is a need to examine some other variables which might contribute to adolescents' academic and global self-esteem as suggested by Pervin [40], who indicated parental attitudes and behaviours as the key antecedents of children's self-esteem.

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