

# Ethnicity impacts perceptions of mental health among black communities

October 8 2015, by Laurel Thomas Gnagey

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When it comes to self-reported mental health among black Americans, ethnicity may play a role in how individuals perceive their status, say researchers at the University of Michigan.

General anxiety and major depressive disorders often go hand-in-hand. But when African-Americans and Afro-Caribbeans were evaluated for the two conditions and then asked to rate their overall mental health, the groups had different views on what constituted a [mental health problem](#), according to research led by the U-M School of Public Health and Department of Psychiatry.

For African-Americans, anxiety, but not depression, led them to report mental health concerns. Among Afro-Caribbeans, however, poor self-rated mental health was linked to depression, but not anxiety.

"How [psychiatric disorders](#) shape self-rated mental health may be specific to subpopulations. We saw that even within the same race, major ethnic differences exist," said the study's lead author Dr. Shervin Assari.

"We really don't know whether these ethnic variations are due to differences in culture, values, expectations, coping, cognitive styles or presentation of psychiatric disorders. What we know is that we should not ignore their diversity."

The Institute of Medicine has suggested use of single-item measures for

monitoring health needs across populations, but lumping people of different ethnic backgrounds may misinform us about their actual [mental health care](#) needs, Assari said.

Self-rated mental health is very important for multiple reasons, he said. It predicts who seeks help, who uses professional services and who adheres to prescriptions for psychiatric disorders.

Assari and colleagues analyzed responses from nearly 3,600 African-Americans and more than 1,600 Afro-Caribbeans who participated in the National Survey of American Life, the most recent nationally representative mental health survey of black Americans. They measured demographic factors, socioeconomic factors, 12-month general anxiety and major depressive disorders, and current self-rated [mental health](#).

The study appears in the *Journal of Racial and Ethnic Health Disparities*.

**More information:** "Ethnic Differences in Separate and Additive Effects of Anxiety and Depression on Self-rated Mental Health Among Blacks." *Journal of Racial and Ethnic Health Disparities*. [DOI: 10.1007/s40615-015-0154-3](#)

Provided by University of Michigan

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