

MICHELLE HARRIS AND MICHAEL KAHN  
Wheaton College



## Parenting, Education, and Well-Being: The Case of Jamaican Men and Women

### ABSTRACT

We add to a sparse literature on the well-being of Jamaican adults by examining the relationships between parenthood, education, and psychological distress. Data for these analyses come from a multistage area probability sample of 388 adults in Manchester, Jamaica. Regression methods yield two main findings: (1) respondents suffer greater levels of psychological distress as they have more children and endure higher levels of financial stress; and (2) though more educated respondents report less distress, the magnitude of this education effect differs significantly for men and women.

### INTRODUCTION

Research on the Jamaican family has presented evidence that while both men and women place a high value on having children, mothers and fathers understand their relationships and levels of engagement with their children very differently (Barrow 1996; Clarke 1970; Evans 1989; Leo-Rhynie 1993). Using an anthropological model, early conception of the West Indian family unit focused on matrifocality, suggestive of maternal centrality to the family, and was often used pejoratively to describe the lower-class Caribbean family. In this conception, men play a less involved role in child rearing than women, avoiding their re-

sponsibility to their families, and women are therefore left with the bulk of the tasks of socializing and caring for children, meeting the family's economic obligations, and providing emotional support. Men, to the extent that they are present in the home, are considered to be marginal to the family structure and less involved in interacting with and nurturing their children than are mothers (Clarke 1970; Smith 1973; Smith 1988).

More recent writings on West Indian families have challenged the view that Caribbean family structure is an inadequate variant of the white, nuclear Western family. The shift to seeing parental roles in the Caribbean as reflecting unique cultural perspectives that are, in part, extensions of the enactment of gender roles in these societies has led researchers to examine how West Indians<sup>1</sup> understand these roles (Barrow 1996; Roopnarine and Brown 1997). Two studies conducted in Jamaica provide interesting insights. First, in a study of men's roles in lower-class Jamaican families, Brown, Anderson, and Chevannes (1993) found that while motherhood was synonymous with child rearing, the expectations of fatherhood were narrow and included only discipline and economic provision for the household. Respondents reported that fatherhood did not require regular male presence in the home. Although men were found to participate more in domestic tasks than stereotypes would suggest, their concept of manhood was not enhanced by this fact, and these tasks were still considered "women's work." Second, Alexander (1977) reported a similar characterization of fatherhood from a sample of middle-class Jamaicans. Here, too, fathers were described as the authority figures and providers, and mothers as having a more hands-on, complex involvement in rearing children.

Later research by Roopnarine and others (1995) reveals that Jamaican adults subscribe to the notion that fathers, even when they do not head households, are still expected to play a leadership role in areas such as discipline of children and the household economy. Further, "mothering" is conceived as being essential to the female makeup, while "fathering" is a task that men must learn. In a study of the gender division of child care, cohabiting Jamaican parents were likely to spend equal time playing with their babies, but mothers more than fathers had the tasks of providing care (e.g., feeding, changing, and bathing the baby) and taking care of the house and laundry (Roopnarine et al. 1995). As in most countries of the world, both parents

held very traditional conceptions of the roles of mothers and fathers in the care of their children (i.e., that mothers were the primary caretakers of children and the home).

If child rearing is the central activity of the domestic domain, and mothers are more involved in this activity than fathers, does the reality of parenthood place different stressors on men and women and therefore have different mental health implications for each? While many studies of West Indian families address issues of family organization and child-rearing practices (see, for example, Crawford-Brown 1999; Leo-Rhynie 1997; Rohner, Kean, and Cournoyer 1991; Sargent and Harris 1992; Smith and Mosby 2003; Wilson, Wilson, and Fox 2002), there is a notable absence of studies on the mental well-being of Jamaican adults, generally (Harris 2003; Lambert et al. 1999), and on parents, specifically.

As a developing country, Jamaica poses an interesting site in which to address these questions. Income distribution is one of the most highly skewed in the world, with about 18 percent of households operating below the poverty line (STATIN/PIOJ 2001). According to Miller (1994), there is general public perception that women outperform men in a number of areas, including educational attainment; they are more likely to complete high school than their male counterparts and compose 70 percent of University of the West Indies enrollment. Yet, in keeping with traditional values and persistent patriarchy of social structures, women's status is lower than men's, and, as stated previously, women are almost solely responsible for the domestic domain, including child rearing. In Jamaica, 44.9 percent of all households in 2001 were headed by women (STATIN/PIOJ 2001).

## PARENTHOOD AND WELL-BEING

Psychological distress has been broadly defined as an assessment of a subjective state of well-being. According to Mirowsky and Ross (1986), distress can include feelings of general malaise, such as aches and pains, lethargy or heart palpitation, feelings of anxiety and worry, and feeling depressed and sad. While low levels of distress (or high levels of well-being) may indicate better mental health and a greater sense of personal control over one's life, high levels of distress may suggest poor mental and/or physical health.

Researchers have investigated the relationship between parenthood and well-being by two main routes—quality of life and psychological distress. Quality-of-life findings are paradoxical. On the one hand, adults with children suffer worse mental health, are less happy, and report lower levels of satisfaction with life than adults who are childless (Abott and Brody 1985; Ball 1983; Ross, Mirowsky, and Goldsteen 1990). On the other hand, parents report higher levels of life meaning than nonparents (Umberson and Gove 1989).

Much of the literature on psychological distress has clearly established that parents with children at home are less well off psychologically than adults without children (see review by McLanahan and Adams 1987). Since women consistently report more psychological distress than men (Aneshensel 1992; Canino et al. 1987; Kessler et al. 1993; Mirowsky and Ross 1986, 1995), what is the link between this disparity and being a parent? This question spawned a line of research by Gove (1972) and others into the *multiple roles of women and gender role perspective*. Briefly stated, this line of reasoning contends that the gender difference in mental health is a function of the kinds of roles that men and women enact. Stereotypically female roles, such as nurturer, are inherently more stressful than some of the instrumental roles a man may perform. Further, this parenting role limits access to other roles, such as worker. Thus, women may endure greater exposure to psychological stressors and the corresponding deleterious effects, for example, lower levels of well-being (Gove 1972; Gove and Tudor 1973).

Feminist theories that emphasize how individuals “do” gender support this idea. It is through the daily gendered roles people enact, and their understanding of what it means to be a man or woman, that gender provides both costs and benefits to the individual (Travis 1992). The pervasive structural inequalities that women face in contemporary society can also be seen in women’s roles (e.g., less power, authority, prestige, and value) relative to men’s roles. It is one way to understand the links between personal biography and social structure (Mills 1959), and it forms the basis for understanding the ways in which social structure influences individual well-being (House 1981). It is also a way in which to view motherhood, one of the primary socioculturally constructed “nurturing roles,” as a role associated with worse mental health. Mothers report higher levels of depression than

fathers (Aneshensel, Frerichs, and Clark 1981; Bird 1997). In this article we will address whether Jamaican women report higher levels of depression than Jamaican men. In fact, the evidence provides a more nuanced perspective on the extent to which gender correlates with reported psychological distress, particularly after accounting for a variety of other concomitant correlates.

Another explanation for the disparity in levels of psychological distress between mothers and fathers is the *role-strain perspective* (Goode 1960). In this conceptualization, individuals who enact roles that demand more resources (e.g., financial, emotional) than they have will experience negative psychological effects. Therefore, the ratio of demands to resources is the factor that is most important in determining psychological well-being. Parents of several children, with low incomes, and/or who are single mothers report low levels of well-being and high levels of psychological distress.

#### FINANCIAL STRESS

Financial stress is thought to be one mechanism by which children affect mental health. Inherent expenses such as feeding, housing, clothing, providing health care, and educating children place greater financial burdens on parents and also increase the likelihood that they will suffer financial strain. Ross and Huber (1985) report that after they controlled for income, adults who admitted to having difficulty meeting expenses associated with caring for children experienced higher levels of distress than others in their study. More recently, Ross (1995) found that adults living with children experienced more financial hardship and greater levels of depression.

In a study of 1,601 adults, Bird (1997) reported that parents of children under the age of eighteen experienced higher levels of distress than other adults, and that mothers were the most distressed individuals in her study. Furthermore, she found that it was the economic burdens associated with parenting that were distressing for parents, not simply the number of children they cared for.

Economic strain is also increased when adults raise children alone. This phenomenon disproportionately affects women and makes them vulnerable to poorer mental and physical health outcomes through their exposure to higher rates of poverty, poorer living conditions, and

exposure to more chronic stressors (McAdoo 1988; Ulbrich, Warheit, and Zimmerman 1989; Verbrugge 1983). Even among married individuals, financial hardship has been shown to have a greater impact on the mental health of wives than of husbands. Huber and Spitze (1981) hypothesize that wives are more likely to have purview over the day-to-day handling of household expenses and the family budget, so wives may be more likely than their husbands to feel the immediate psychological impact of these challenges.

### SOCIAL SUPPORT THROUGH MARRIAGE

Social support is a variable that has received considerable attention in the literature on stress. The degree to which individuals perceive relationships with family, friends, and associates to be supportive has been shown to provide a buffering effect between stressful situations and psychological distress (Cohen and Wills 1985; House, Landis, and Umberson 1988; Kessler and McLeod 1985). When social support is operationalized as marriage, research consistently indicates that married men and women report better mental health than those who are not married (Kessler and McRae 1982; Thoits 1986). When parents were married or cohabiting (versus single), they too reported fewer worries and better mental health than single parents (Cleary and Mechanic 1983; McLanahan and Adams 1987).

Scholarship on marriage in Jamaican society indicates that its structural organization must be understood in a Caribbean cultural context. Distinctions about form and function must be made between marriage among the upper and middle classes and among the lower class (Fox 1999; Sobo 1993). Among the more socioeconomically advantaged, marriage takes on the more North American form, where men head households in which unions are primarily motivated by conjugal love and the fulfillment of personal happiness (Clarke 1970). Children are usually born in these families after committed unions are formed.

Among the lower classes, marriage is often understood as a union based, in part, on the economic advantage it can afford; couples may choose to form common-law unions or marry only as they approach middle age. Both lower-class men and women view marriage as an institution that brings respectability, but the conception of children, and often their reaching adulthood, frequently happens before such unions

occur. According to Powell (1986), over 50 percent of all children in Caribbean homes are born outside of wedlock; in Jamaica this figure reaches 80 percent (STATIN/PIOJ 2001).

The tendency to marry around the age of forty is especially true among lower-class men, though they are likely to have been involved in at least one common-law union prior to a marriage, some of which may have produced children. Among their female counterparts, the decision to enter a live-in relationship is often based on the knowledge that a partner can contribute to the household's economic viability. Cohabiting with the father of one's child may not be economically advantageous, and, therefore, important consideration must be given to partners who might be helpful in providing support in the form of maintaining the household and providing for the children's needs.

The present study adds to a sparse literature on the well-being of Jamaican adults by examining the relationship between parenthood and psychological distress. It also considers low educational attainment and financial challenges—material circumstances within which individuals enact their roles—as potential sources of stress for adults with children. Finally, it considers whether social support, in the form of marriage or cohabitation, conditions the relationship between parenthood and distress.

## METHODS

### DATA

The data for these analyses come from a community survey conducted in Manchester, Jamaica. Manchester is a parish that contains the fourth largest city in Jamaica. The sampling frame used to select households was developed by the Statistical Institute of Jamaica for use in the decennial census. Using a multistage probability technique, researchers randomly selected enumeration districts within the parish (representing both urban and rural areas) in the initial stage. Next, households were selected randomly within these districts. Finally, a respondent was randomly selected from a household if that household contained more than one eligible adult (aged eighteen and above). These selection criteria yielded a total of 388 completed interviews from a sample

of 515 households—a response rate of 75 percent. Among the 388 respondents, there are 170 (44 percent) men ranging in age from nineteen to eighty-five years, and 218 (56 percent) women aged nineteen to eighty-four. Interviewers were recruited from the student body at Northern Caribbean University, located in the city of Mandeville, Manchester. After participating in a three-week training program, they conducted face-to-face interviews with all respondents. Data collection began in the summer of 2002 and was completed in May of 2003.

## MEASURES

*Psychological Distress.* Psychological distress, a measure of mental well-being, can represent a negative response to stress. This study used the Hopkins Symptom Checklist (Derogatis 1977; Williams, Wilson, and Chung 1992)—a scale of seven items ( $\alpha = .79$ ) assessing the frequency with which respondents experienced thoughts or feelings or behaviors associated with depressive symptoms. These include the frequency with which individuals felt depressed, had crying spells, could not “get going,” felt sad, were nervous and fidgety, or felt hopeless. Distress scores range from 0–16, with higher scores indicating greater distress.

*Explanatory Variables.* Gender was examined as a dichotomous variable. Operationalized in the same way as in an earlier study in the Caribbean (Williams, Wilson, and Chung 1992), the variable educational level is treated as a categorical variable with three categories: “at least some college,” “high school graduate,” and “less than a completed high school education,” with the latter chosen to be the baseline category. Marital/cohabitational status was treated as a dichotomous variable: married or cohabiting versus “other.” The respondent’s age in years and number of children were also examined variables. Finally, financial strain was calculated from a six-item scale ( $\alpha = .89$ ) of questions concerning the difficulty in paying monthly bills, purchasing food, buying clothing, accessing medical care, and affording leisure activities.

## ANALYTIC MODEL

Statistical analyses were performed using the statistical language R (Ihaka and Gentleman 1996). Ordinary least-squares (OLS) linear regression models were used for all models reported. Because of the ordinal



and skewed nature of the psychological distress response, quasi-Poisson regression models (McCullagh and Nelder 1989) were also employed. The results from this generalized linear model were similar to those reported using OLS. All p-values are reported from two-sided tests.

## RESULTS

Table 1 presents summary statistics of the sample by gender and educational attainment. A larger percentage of men (47 percent) than women (39 percent) do not finish high school. The least educated women report higher levels of psychological distress than their male counterparts, and both men and women in this group report more distress than men and women in the most educated group. Those with less than a high school education are also older than others in the sample. Given the age differences, it is not surprising to see differences between the six gender-by-education level subgroups regarding the proportion of respondents with no children. In particular, respondents with less than a high school background are older and more of them have children than in the other two education categories. It is interesting to note, however, that the percentage of women with some college background who have no children is more than five times the percentage of women with less than a high school background who have no children, 36 percent compared to 7 percent. For the men, the increase is approximately a factor of two, 49 percent compared to 22 percent. This trend is also seen in the mean number of children for each of the gender-by-education level subgroups. Women with some college experience have the fewest children, on average, while women with less than a high school diploma have, on average, the most children.

Table 2 presents regression coefficients for psychological distress as a function of respondents' age, gender, educational level, marital status, number of children, and financial stress. In model 1, age is significantly associated with psychological distress in that older respondents, on average, report less distress than younger respondents. Men, on average, report lower levels of distress than women, and there is a significant inverse relationship between education and distress. Marriage/cohabitational status is not significantly related to distress.

**Table 1. Selected Characteristics of the Analysis Population by Gender and Educational Attainment**

	<i>Less Than High School</i>		<i>High School</i>		<i>Some College</i>	
	<i>Men</i>	<i>Women</i>	<i>Men</i>	<i>Women</i>	<i>Men</i>	<i>Women</i>
N	80	85	55	82	35	51
%	47	39	32	38	21	23
Psychological Distress (Mean)	3.7	5.3	3.8	4.1	2.5	2.7
<i>Explanatory Variables:</i>						
Age (Mean)	55	52	32	35	44	34
Married/Cohab (%)	42	48	37	43	38	38
# of Children (Mean)	3.1	4.6	2.0	2.6	2.4	1.3
% with No Children	22	7	35	15	49	36
Financial Stress (Mean)	4.3	3.7	3.2	3.8	1.6	2.4

In model 2, number of children is added to the regression equation. Age and education continue to be significant predictors of psychological distress, but the addition of the “number of children” variable reduces the effect size of gender so that there is no longer a significant difference in distress between men and women when considered as a main effect. This suggests that parenthood is one path through which levels of distress can be influenced. Number of children is a significant predictor of distress in that the more children a respondent has, the greater his or her reported level of stress.

Next, model 3 adjusts for financial stress. On average, individuals who experience greater financial stress report more psychological distress. Interestingly, while the coefficient for age remains unchanged from model 2 to model 3, the coefficients for education and number of children decrease, though they remain significant. This indicates that the effect sizes of education and number of children are mitigated by the financial stress people experience. As main effects, gender and cohabitation continue to be unrelated to distress after accounting for the number of children, education, and financial stress.

Model 4 introduces a gender-by-education interaction term. The interaction is significant. Figure 1 depicts the marginal regression lines of psychological distress on number of children for each of the gender-by-education subgroups. Figure 2 shows the model-adjusted average

**Table 2. Regression Coefficients for Psychological Distress on Age, Gender, Education, Marital Status, Children, and Financial Stress**

	<i>Model 1</i>	<i>Model 2</i>	<i>Model 3</i>	<i>Model 4</i>
<i>Age</i>	-0.04**	-0.06***	-0.06***	-.054
<i>Gender</i>				
Male	-0.82*	-0.55	-0.48	-1.34*
Female (omitted)				
<i>Education</i>				
Some College	-2.55***	-2.31***	-1.54**	-2.35***
High School Grad	-1.38**	-1.35**	-1.12*	-1.68**
< High School (omitted)				
<i>Married</i>	0.61	0.38	0.56	0.59
Not Married (omitted)				
<i>Number of Kids</i>		0.29***	0.22**	0.18*
<i>Financial Stress</i>			0.40***	0.43***
<i>Gender*Education</i>				
Men*Some High School			1.24	
Men*Some College				1.85*
Constant	6.804	6.734	5.008	5.350
R <sup>2</sup>	0.087	0.121	0.212	0.223
N=	355	349	348	346

Note: \*p < .05; \*\*p < .01; \*\*\*p < .001

levels of distress for each of the gender-by-education subgroups. Model 4 and figures 1 and 2 make clear that the largest difference in psychological distress is between women with at least some college background and women with less than a high school educational level. More specifically, after accounting for all other predictors, there is more than a two-point (2.35) decrease in the average reported psychological distress for women who attended college compared to women with less than a high school education. Psychological distress for the group of women with a high school diploma but no college background lies somewhere in between the “some college” and “didn’t finish high school” groups, though it is not significantly different from either. The next largest difference is between men with some college background and women with less than a high school diploma. Here, after accounting for all other predictors, there is slightly less than a two-point (1.85) decrease in the average reported psychological distress for men with some college background compared to women with

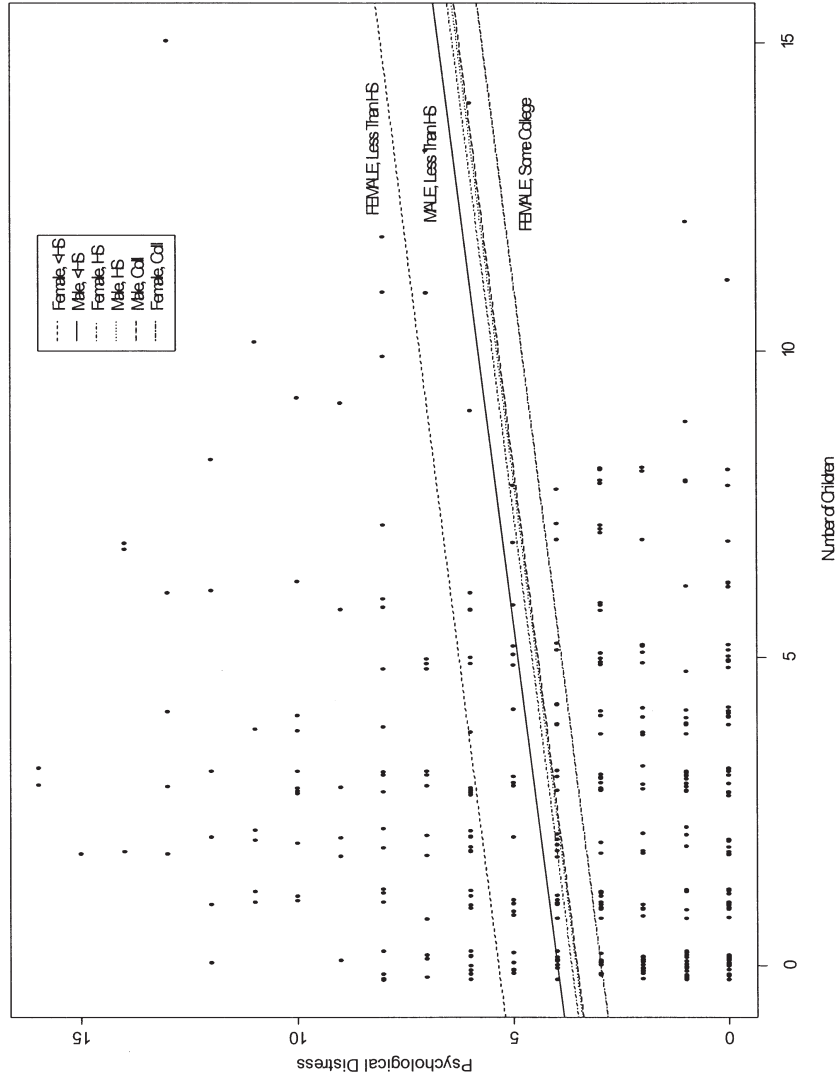
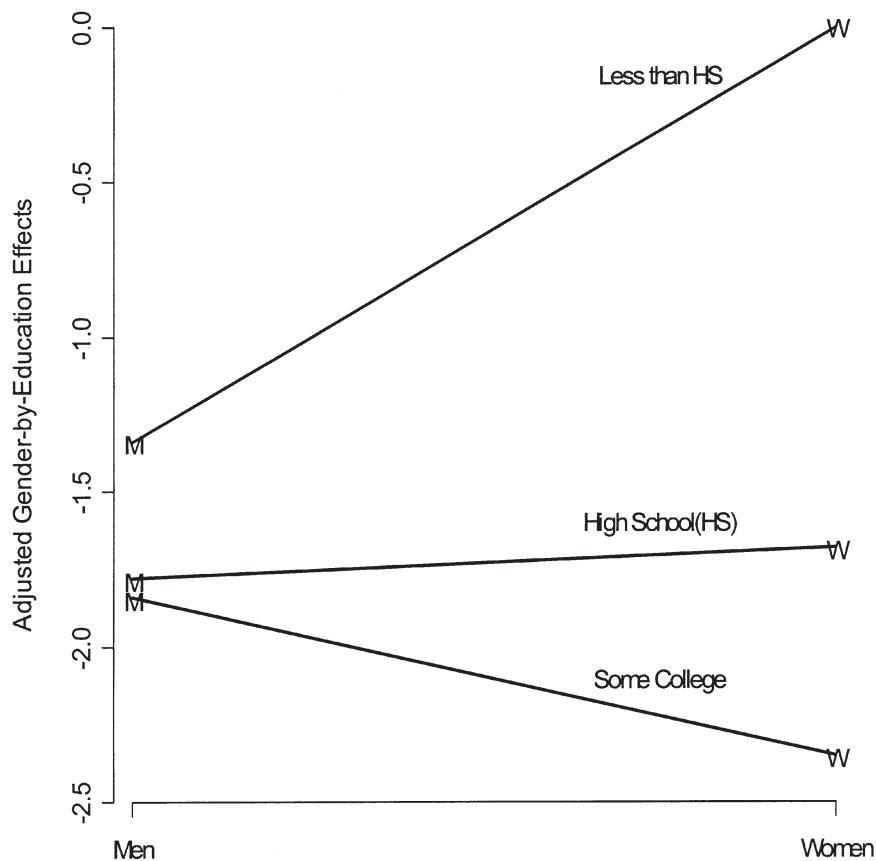


Figure 1. The Effects of Children on Psychological Distress by Gender and Educational Level



**Figure 2. Adjusted Differences in Psychological Distress by Gender and Education from Model 4**

less than a high school background. Among men, too, the education effect in distress is evident. After accounting for all other predictors, there is a half-point decrease in the average reported psychological distress for men with some college experience compared to men who did not complete high school.

Figures 1 and 2 and model 4 also make clear that respondents with some college education suffer significantly lower average psychological distress than respondents with less than a high school background and that men tend to suffer less distress than women. However, the nature of the interaction effect is that the difference in psychological dis-

stress for women with some college background compared to women with less than a high school education is significantly larger than the corresponding difference for men. This last model also finds that, as before, age, education, financial stress, and number of children are significant predictors of distress

A key feature in all of these models is that the greater the number of children a respondent has, the greater his or her reported distress levels (see figure 2). Furthermore, the size of this effect on distress is independent of the gender, education level, age, and cohabitational status of the respondent. This stands in stark contrast to the education effect, which differs considerably between men and women. Children are clearly and consistently associated with higher levels of stress.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Previous theoretical and empirical work suggests that while parenthood is a highly valued social position, it is often associated with lower levels of psychological well-being among adults. This research also suggests that mothers, more so than fathers, report poorer mental health, as do individuals under financial stress. In this article we assess the effects of a variety of factors on the levels of psychological distress of Jamaican adults. We extend the research on West Indian families by bringing together literature on the social roles of Jamaican mothers and fathers with research on the psychosocial predictors of psychological distress. In this way, our study provides a unique lens through which to view the connections between certain demographic measures, social factors, parenthood, and mental well-being.

The key findings from this study are as follows: (1) subjects suffer greater levels of psychological distress as they have more children and endure higher levels of financial stress; and (2) respondents with higher educational levels report less distress, and the magnitude of this education effect differs significantly for men and women. In particular, women with some college education report the lowest levels of distress among all six gender-by-education subgroups. It is important to note that this gender-by-education difference persists even after accounting for age, number of children, and financial stress of each respondent.

Socioeconomic status emerges as a signifier of different mental health trajectories for different cohorts of Jamaican men and women, a finding similar to those reported from other samples around the world (Cooper 2002; Ross 1995; Ross and Huber 1985; Williams, Wilson, and Chung 1992). We do not see significant differences among men and women when viewed simply as two distinct groups, but once we disaggregate men and women by educational attainment, differences emerge. While more education tends to be associated with factors that are themselves associated with less distress, such as fewer children and less financial stress, our results show that the effect of education persists even after accounting for these other factors, and, more importantly, the size of this effect is greatest for women. An analogous effect exists for men, though the size of the effect is smaller than that for women.

This gender difference in distress supports the role-strain hypothesis among Jamaican adults. To the extent that traditional women's roles, relative to men's, keep them from seeking more education, there is corresponding, higher psychological distress. If women are fortunate enough to obtain higher levels of education, and leverage the associated benefits of higher socioeconomic status, they increase the resource-to-demand ratio, above that measured simply by financial status (i.e., resources) and number of children (i.e., demands), thereby reporting less psychological distress.

It is also important to note that throughout all of our analyses, marriage or cohabiting was unrelated to psychological distress. Though research on American families suggests that married parents report less distress than single parents (Cleary and Mechanic 1983; McLanahan and Adams 1987), our finding may indicate that in the Jamaican cultural milieu, the value in social support is not so much in living together, per se, but in having resources to care for children and the home. The less differentiated boundaries defining common-law unions, or the "norm" of the absent or visiting father, may change the social significance of marriage, and thereby alter the impact of the psychological benefits we find in the United States. Though these analyses could not tease apart this process, this is obviously an important area of family life in Jamaica that needs more thorough investigation.

The restricted scope of this article and our use of cross-sectional data limit our ability to speak to causal factors or to address certain

other factors. For instance, we did not account for the age of children or the length of respondents' marriage. Having longitudinal data would have allowed us to gather information at different points of respondents' lives to assess levels of stress trajectories as a function of their children's ages, as they had additional children, or as their financial circumstances changed. Nevertheless, this research represents a first step in understanding the relationships between social factors, parenthood, and distress in Jamaica. These findings highlight the impact of parenthood and socioeconomic factors on psychological distress of Jamaicans and the strong association that education has with reduced levels of psychological distress.

## NOTES

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1. In the studies cited, reference is made primarily to Afro-Caribbean families, which predominate in most English-speaking Caribbean countries; different pictures would emerge of other Caribbean ethnicities.

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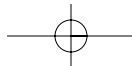
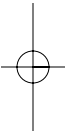
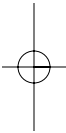


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