

An Examination of Spirituality in the African American Church

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Abstract

Previous studies investigate whether spirituality aids African Americans in coping with the complexities of life when confronted with a host of issues such as higher levels of poverty, health issues, and incarceration. However, few studies have examined the consistency of spirituality across multiple parameters. This study examines spirituality across gender, city, and the interactions of gender and city. Findings indicate the consistency of spirituality within the African American community supporting the role of the church for males and females in both rural and urban settings.

Keywords: Spirituality – Blacks – African Americans – Gender

Black churches have long been the centers of African-American communities, serving as sites for schools, taking up social welfare functions, such as helping the indigent, and going on to establish ministries in schools, orphanages and prisons. As a result, black churches have promoted the building of strong community organizations and have provided spiritual and political leadership. In his article, "Impact of Church Activities and Socialization on African-American Religious Commitment", Wielhouwer (2004) observed that the sociopolitical isolation of African Americans led to the hierarchal formation centered around the black church.

Wielhouwer (2004) also noted that, as a result, the church became the key social institution for African Americans and pointed out two key roles for the church: (1) evangelism – spreading the word about the faith and (2) discipleship – training and equipping believers to integrate the faith's teachings into their lives. Wielhouwer detailed three primary dimensions to religious commitment. These dimensions follow.

- **Church involvement** was defined as the frequency of attendance at religious services or taking part in other activities at the place of worship, the number of church clubs or organizations the respondent belongs to or participates in, and whether the respondents held any positions or offices in the church.
- **Private devotionism** was defined as the frequency of the respondents' reading of religious books or materials, watching or listening to religious programs via various media, and time engaged in prayer.
- **Salience** included beliefs about the importance of going to church and the level of religiousness adopted by respondents.

Affiliation was also considered as an important aspect of religious commitment. Affiliation was based on the question, "What is your religion now?" Wielhouwer (2004) proposed that even those who do not claim a religious affiliation participate in devotional activities pray, watch or listen to religious programming, read religious books, and so on, but at a lower rate than affiliated people.

Spirituality is a common and important element of life and a major strength in Black and African-American communities. Spirituality has been identified as a fundamental attribute of African-American family life. The term is defined in various ways, yet generally refers to the belief in a force greater than oneself. Spirituality engages a trusting relationship with a higher power to hearten meaning, hope, and purpose in life (Letiecq, 2007). African-Americans participate in a wide span of religious affiliations. The most common being Christianity includes National Baptist Conventions, African Methodist Episcopal churches, the Christian Methodist Episcopal Church as well as mainline Protestant denominations such as United Methodist, Roman Catholic, and nondenominational churches.

Numerous studies have cited the significant role of spirituality in African-American communities in providing a framework for meaning and hope. Spirituality maintains connectedness through a supportive faith community and enhances self-esteem. Spirituality also opens a sense of comfort and caring from God within the African American population, increasing the sense of life satisfaction and encouraging health resilience. Like many other races in this nation, African American communities are faced with issues involving poverty, unemployment, and drug and alcohol abuse. Whatever the issue may be, people in these

communities turn to their spirituality to gain a sense of comfort and assurance for deliverance in their time of greatest darkness.

Banerjee, Mahasweta, and Canda (2009) of the University of Kansas' School of Social Welfare conducted a study that examined the role played by spirituality in the lives of women participating in a Micro-Entrepreneurial Training Program (MET Program). These participants overwhelmingly indicated that spirituality is their major source of strength when dealing with everyday issues ranging from problems at work to problems in the home, with their families and with poverty. Including and beyond the issues of poverty, participants stated that spirituality helped them address various life challenges such as helping them cope with basic needs after losing employment. Spirituality helped them persevere while seeking food, clothing, shelter, and re-employment. Spirituality also helped them deal with personal and family crises, face the death of loved ones and survive health problems.

African-Americans turn to spirituality as a source of strength and guidance for contending with changes in relationships with their children and spouses or partners, as well as, to enhance self-esteem and a sense of inner peace. Equally as important, spirituality plays a major role when developing nonjudgmental and caring attitudes toward others along with helping to process feelings of anger or frustration (Letiecq, 2007).

African American spirituality does not differ to any great extent whether in the rural or in the urban area (Letiecq, 2007). This finding is consistent with the broader Christian view that spirituality is the belief in or a deep faith in God, including Jesus Christ, characterized by a loving relationship with Him, which gives significant meaning, purpose, and direction to life. Overall, spirituality touches a multitude of areas in the lives of African Americans. Spirituality empowers them to meet their basic needs of food, clothes, shelter, health, and overall well-being. Spirituality also protects them, their children, partners/spouses, family and friends in many areas of life including health and allows them to deal with the world of work.

Churches are extremely important institutions in the black community. As previously mentioned, most African Americans view their churches as central to their lives whether they are part of a congregation of 50 or 500. The issues faced by smaller rural congregations are just as important, yet often more complex than those faced by their larger urban counterparts. Rural churches face a multitude of issues simply because of their geographical locations. Rural churches struggle as they strive to meet the needs of more geographically diverse congregations (Bositis, 2007).

In a population survey conducted by the U.S. Census Bureau in 2002, several issues relating to the inclusion of African Americans in mainstream America were brought to light. For example, 22.7% of them lived in poverty compared to the national average of 11.7% for all races combined. Health disparities were also significantly greater. A higher incarceration rate among them was also identified. These differences present significant and unique challenges for African American communities of all sizes. However, rural communities are especially challenged in dealing with these issues across wider geographical regions (Bositis, 2007).

Limited revenue is also a major issue faced by rural black churches as they struggle to provide for their congregations. A significant segment of rural black churches serves disadvantaged communities with substantial needs that cannot be met solely by the resources within the community. The majority of these rural churches do not have the social networks to leverage funding from elsewhere, nor can they leverage too widely from their own

congregations. Adding to this issue is the fact that almost half of the rural black churches have 70 percent of their members who are economically disadvantaged or working class (Bositis, 2007).

Spirituality for African Americans continues to be a significant part of their lives whether they live in a rural or urban setting. Researchers have found that spirituality provides a central organizing framework for how African Americans view themselves, solve personal and community problems, and connect to each other. Taylor, Chatters, Jakody, and Levin (1996) found that African Americans attend church services, read religious material, and see comfort through spiritual activities more often than their White counterparts. Even today, when African Americans who were “raised in the church” stray from services, the moral values they learned early on continue to frame their worldview as adults (Letiecq, 2007).

Research conducted at Baylor University’s Institute for Studies in Religion (Bader et al., 2006) found that 100% of the African American participants expressed no doubt that God exists and that Jesus is God’s son. This study also identified these participants as holding the highest and most consistent levels of belief and practices. These practices included praying and reading Scripture. Blacks today, according to this study, believe God is an Authoritarian, meaning they believe God is very judgmental and engaged. In addition, this study reported that Blacks are more likely to have seen “Passion of the Christ” than Whites.

With the numerous challenges faced today by African Americans, spirituality can help them cope with meeting their basic needs, dealing with health issues and family crises, and with growing relationships with their children, and spouse or partner. Spirituality will also help by enhancing self-esteem and developing nonjudgmental and caring attitudes. Accordingly, Ellaree Hampton, a member of a church in Mayesville, South Carolina was quoted as saying, “We need black churches like the one I grew up in more than ever” (Fulwood, 1996).

Method

Measures

A variety of self-report measures have been developed to examine people’s religious and spiritual relationship with God and their own characteristics as individuals who draw their strength from God. This study used measures contained in the Daily Spiritual Experience Scale (DSES) developed by Underwood in 2002. The measures assessed two factors experienced by persons who draw their strength from God.

The DSES is comprised of 14 Likert-type items that measure a range of religious behaviors previously shown to be associated with spirituality: direct relationship with God and relationship with God through others. The DSES is simple to use and interpret. Respondents were asked to make summative judgments about several religious-related factors. This included the emphasis given to various spiritual-related activities. The variable for direct relationship with God (DRG) is comprised of the sum of factor scores for ten statements. The variable for relationship with God through others (RGO) is comprised of the sum of factor scores for four statements. For the two subscales, respondents rate how often they directly have an experience with God (divine or holy experience) as follows: 1 = never or almost never, 2 = once in a while, 3 = some days, 4 = most days, 5 = every day, 6 = many times a day.

Sampling

The sample for this study consisted of 153 participants from three medium cities in Texas. Participants represented a broad array of individuals, including traditional-aged, nontraditional-aged, differing employment status, location, and gender. This sample was 49.7% male and 50.3% female; 14.4% of participants came from a small size city, 15% from medium size city and 70.6% came from a large size city. Because of the variety of individuals in the sample, the data set represents rich demographic characteristics of the sample.

Study Design and Procedures

This study used a survey-research design. Participants received paper-and-pencil surveys and were asked questions on key variables that included questions related to their level of attachment to God.

Data Analyses

Once data collection procedures and the construction of various data files were complete, a variety of analyses were conducted. These analyses included descriptive statistics for the sample and instrument items, reliability analysis, and one-way analysis of variance. The descriptive data showed 49.7% of participants were male while 50.3% were female. Of the participants, 14.4% indicated they came from a small-size city, 15.0% came from a medium-size city, and 70.6% indicated they came from a large-size city. Response descriptives are provided in Table 1 and provide item means, standard deviations, along with minimum and maximum values.

Table 1

Item Mean, Standard Deviation, Minimum, and Maximum Values

Direct Relationship with God (DRG)	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Min	Max
I feel God's presence.	5.4	0.71	3	6
During worship, or at other times when connecting with God, I feel joy which lifts me out of my daily concerns.	5.3	0.79	1	6
I find strength in my religion or spirituality.	5.3	0.70	3	6
I ask for God's help in the midst of daily activities.	5.4	0.60	3	6
I feel guided by God in the midst of daily activities.	5.3	0.72	2	6
I feel God's love for me, directly.	5.3	0.69	3	6
I am spiritually touched by the beauty of creation.	5.3	0.76	3	6
I feel thankful for my blessings.	5.5	0.51	4	6
I desire to be closer to God or in union with the divine.	5.4	0.64	3	6
Relationship with God Through Others (RGO)				
I experience a connection to all of life.	5.0	0.95	1	6
I feel God's love for me, through others.	5.0	1.04	2	6
I feel a selfless caring for others.	5.0	1.00	1	6
I accept others even when they do things I think are wrong.	4.9	1.00	1	6

Note: *N* = 153; *SD*: Standard Deviation; Min: Minimum; Max: Maximum

The study provided two distinct constructions; Direct Relationship with God (DRG) with a Cronbach reliability coefficient of 0.93 and Relationship with God through Others (RGO) with a Cronbach reliability coefficient of 0.77. For the DRG measure, item means ranged from 5.3 ("I am spiritually touched by the beauty of creation") to 5.5 ("I feel thankful for my blessings") on a scale of 1 to 6. For the RGO items, item means ranged from a low of 4.9 ("I accept others even when they do things I think are wrong") to a high of 5.0 ("I experience a connection to all of life") on a scale of 1 to 6. DRG means appeared to be higher and include more variance than those for RGO.

Analysis of Variance

First, data were screened to ensure that the assumptions of Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) were fulfilled. Data screening showed that no assumptions of ANOVA were violated. A factorial ANOVA was conducted with each of the two factors (DRO and RGO) as dependent variables while gender and city location were used as the study's independent variables. Findings of the ANOVA for DRO are provided in Table 2.

Table 2

Two-way ANOVA Summary Table for DRO

Source	<i>SS</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>MS</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>
Between Treatments	150.56	5	30.1	1.63	0.16
Gender	67.76	1	67.8	3.66	0.06
City	33.08	2	16.5	0.89	0.41
Gender x City	31.57	2	15.8	0.85	0.43
Within Treatments	2,593.33	140	18.5		
Total	2,743.89	145			

The ANOVA revealed that DRO was not significantly different among participants of different cities, $F(5, 140) = 1.63, p = 0.16$. Gender was also not significantly different for both male and female participants students, $F(1, 140) = 3.66, p = 0.06$. The interaction between location and gender was not statistically significant, $F(2, 140) = 0.85, p = 0.43$. RGO was used as the study's dependent variable with city and gender as independent variables with similar findings. The main effects and interaction were not statistically significant.

Conclusions and Recommendations

This study indicates that gender, city, and the interaction between gender and city do not impact the spirituality of African Americans. These findings support the conclusion that spirituality in the African American community is consistent across gender and location. While rural congregations may face challenges based upon location, spirituality of the congregation does not differ based upon location. While males and females may grapple with a variety of different issues spirituality does not differ based on gender.

The findings of this study lend credence to the broad reaching impact of African American churches upon their respective communities. Spirituality continues to play a role that

cuts across demographics such as place and person. Obviously, the church remains a necessary, vital, integral, and developing component of the African-American life. Additional research is recommended to examine differences in DRG and RGO between and among the factors of gender, location, and subsequent interactions of gender and location.

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