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The Perception of Spirituality and its Manifestations in the lives of African American Male College Students

Adrienne Coleman, Illinois Math and Science Academy
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This thesis looks at the definitive, functional and expressive nature of spirituality as perceived by African American male college students at Illinois State University.

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This study initiated in response to the lack of information on spirituality in African Americans and more specifically African American males. It is very important that spirituality be studied to make health educators knowledgeable about its overall nature. With awareness the health educators will be prepared to implement health promotion interventions that are appropriate and consistent with the beliefs of this subculture.

The literature regarding this subject addressed many different aspects of spirituality. There was only a minute amount of information on African Americans and even less on African American males. Instead the literature search concentrated on areas such as: spiritual health; spirituality from different world perspectives including African, Christian, African American women, feminist and ecological points of view; shaping of spirituality, spiritual movements in African Americans and the African American male overall. The literature suggests that spirituality throughout time has been an important entity, but has also lost its value and true meaning.
This study was conducted utilizing a qualitative research design. Focus groups were used as the method of data collection. Twenty-five African American males were recruited to participate in the focus groups. Once the data was collected, it was content analyzed, coded and categorized to establish themes, patterns and relationships.

The findings were consistent with the literature in some instances, but there was one element totally unique. Struggle was discovered as the underlying premise behind the development or underdevelopment of spirituality. A model of meaning was diagramed in order to gain a deeper level of understanding.
THE PERCEPTION OF SPIRITUALITY AND ITS MANIFESTATIONS
IN THE LIVES OF AFRICAN AMERICAN
MALE COLLEGE STUDENTS

Adrienne L. Coleman

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A.L.C.
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CHAPTER I
THE PROBLEM AND ITS BACKGROUND

Statement of the Problem

Spirituality has been important for daily maintenance in many traditional cultures throughout the world. This is evident in African, Asian, Native American and European cultures. The health education field began to recognize spirituality as an important entity of holistic health in 1964 due to the work of Hoymann (Goodloe & Arreola, 1992). A professor of health education, Delbert Oberteuffer integrated spirituality as a dimension of holistic health in 1966 (Goodloe & Arreola, 1992). He believed that health educators should commit themselves to understanding and developing the spiritual dimension of holistic health. His position was strongly supported in the holistic movement of the 1970s, which stressed that spiritual well-being is important for the functioning of individuals (Goodloe & Arreola, 1992). In 1979 Osmann and Russell urged health educators to integrate spiritual health with other components of holistic health (Diaz, 1993).

Holistic health encompasses many aspects of life. It concentrates on the total being and includes dimensions of physical, intellectual, emotional, social, aesthetic and spiritual well-being (Banks, Poeler & Russel, 1984). All dimensions have been accurately defined and described with exception of the spiritual component. The spiritual
component of holistic health lacks a specific definition that is generally agreed upon by all health educators (Bensley, 1991). The information available is very broad with many explanations and interpretations of spirituality. Many health educators find spirituality difficult to measure and completely understand because of this complex nature (Bensley, 1991). Thus, understanding of spirituality and its relationship to health is constantly evolving.

To achieve a better understanding of spirituality, it is important that health educators appreciate and become aware of cultural differences. “In today’s multicultural environment spirituality differs from case to case” (Summer, 1998). Having a cultural perspective of spirituality will allow the health educators to serve their target audience appropriately. The problem is that there are no known studies that define/describe spirituality from an African American male perspective. Other aspects of holistic health have been studied from an African American male perspective including physical, intellectual, emotional and social well-being (Moresi, 1998). With knowledge of spirituality from an African American male perspective, the health educators will be prepared to implement health promotion interventions that are appropriate and consistent with the beliefs of this subculture.

This study will describe spirituality and its manifestations in the lives of some African American male college students at Illinois State University. Although this is a minute portion of the African American male population, the study will serve as a foundation for further research specific to African Americans on topics such as the
impact of spirituality, the development of spirituality in life, perspectives of spirituality compared between gender and culture and spirituality as it pertains to holistic health.
Purpose

The purpose of this study is to offer findings on spirituality that will enhance the knowledge of health educators and aid in the development of spiritual health promotion interventions that are specific to African American males.

Research Questions

1) What is spirituality in African American males?
2) How does spirituality function in the lives of African American males?
3) Through what avenues is spirituality expressed and/or communicated by African American males?
Definition of Terms

The following terms were used in this study...


**Black Religion:** an organized religion whose patterns and beliefs are derivative from African culture with Euro American influence that responds to the part Blacks and their minority status in America (Baer, 1984).

**Coding:** grouping and summarizing data for the purpose of analysis (Miles & Hubermann, 1994).

**Common Ground:** inward journey of self; symbol of spiritual insights that is distinctly African American (Baker-Fletcher, 1997).

**Culture:** patterns of a race of people regarded as expressing a traditional way of life, subject to gradual but continuous modification by succeeding generations.

**Focus Group:** a qualitative research technique in which a group of usually 8 to ten participants of common demographics, attitudes, etc. are led through a two hour discussion on a particular topic by a trained moderator (Morgan, 1989).

**Hidden Wholeness:** lack of awareness of spirituality, an underdeveloped spirituality; when a choice is made to move away from God, enslave others; thus enslaving self and pretend that spirituality is only a small segment of total being (Dash, 1997).
Holistic Health: an approach to health that emphasizes unity of the mind, spirit and body; and emphasizes self-healing, the maintenance of health and the prevention of illness (Edlin, Golanty and Brown, 1996).

Qualitative Research: a research technique in which data is collected that emphasizes peoples experience and applies meaning to perceptions, assumptions, prejudgments and relates to the world around them (Miles & Hubermann, 1994).

Self: mind (conscious/unconscious), body and spirit (Teish, 1988).

Spirit: a realm of consciousness which is involved in contacting the divine within self and beyond ego (Diaz, 1993).

Spiritual Health: The spirit of human beings which enables and motivates the search for meaning and purpose in life, to seek the supernatural or some meaning which causes transcendence; living in congruence with the values of community and self (Bensley, 1994).

Subculture: an ethnic, regional, economic or social group exhibiting characteristic patterns of behavior sufficient to distinguish it from others within an embracing culture or society (Webster, 1965).

Tribalism: the belief in being faithful to one's own kind; defined by ethnicity, language, culture and religion (Harvey, 1997).

Xodus: a creative way of naming the various liberative responses to the crisis in African American hope and vision (Baker-Fletcher, 1991).
360 Degrees of Life: a never ending cycle that consists of 120 degrees of knowledge, 120 degrees of wisdom and 120 degrees of understanding; life is complete through unification of thought and experience, person and community, present and past, and nature, history and spirit.
Delimitations

The study was delimited by the following...

1. The study consists of African American male college students.
2. The participation of the African American male college students is voluntary.
3. A structured interview guide will be used to collect data.
4. The African American male college students individual experiences may account for different levels of spirituality.

Limitations

The study was limited by the following...

1. The African American male college students individual experiences may account for different levels of spirituality.
2. The African American male population at Illinois State University is a very minute portion of the African American subculture.
3. The African American male college students might provide information that the focus group facilitator will want to hear, devaluing the purpose of the study.
4. The African American male college students have a higher level of academic achievement than other African American males in society.
5. The African American males might not be honest and open in responding to spirituality questions.
6. The African American males will communicate their perception of spirituality inaccurately.

Assumptions

The following assumptions were made...

1. The African American male college students will be honest and open in responding to spirituality questions.

2. The African American males will accurately communicate verbally and/or through writing their perception of spirituality.
CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Introduction

This literature search has been very challenging and interesting. The nature of spirituality is very comprehensive and complex. The majority of the literature focuses on the role of African American males in society and spirituality in the African American community. There was also discussion of empowerment journeys in African American males that contained a spiritual component. However, there was very little information on the meaning and role of spirituality in African American males. This study will contribute to knowledge of spirituality in African American male college students and its manifestation in their lives.

Spirituality

Spirituality is simple, yet complex. It is a life process; interpreted and defined differently by the individual and the collective. One common interpretation of spirituality is: that it's a basic human phenomena that helps create meaning in the world (Summer, 1998). Spirituality is complimented by diversity. Its meaning is dependent on the attitudes and beliefs of people from different backgrounds and cultures. This first
segment of the literature will present various concepts of spirituality as perceived by society.

Spirituality, according to traditional Western Christianity is based on “Greek, Hellenistic dualism, hierarchy of beings and androcentric bias” (Balasuriya, 1993, p. 231). "Man" is seen as a dominant force of nature; in control of woman, nature and earth. "Women", on the other hand, see spirituality more globally in which all of nature is equally important. According to the feminist and ecological world-view spirituality involves immanence of God, sacredness of land and wholeness of body, sensuality and sexuality (Balasuriya, 1993). This perspective of spirituality suggests the rape of woman and the rape of earth come from the same root.

This balance in nature puts the individual in sync with the universe. It supports an interdependence of existence (Harvey, 1997). When an individual honors and respects nature, earth and others, a closer relationship with the Supreme Being can be established. This in turn unifies mind, body and spirit (Baker-Fletcher, 1991). Eventually a more holistic attitude about life is achieved.

This unification of mind, body and spirit brings about wholeness and fulfillment in life (Trulear, 1996). It involves learning from and understanding the good as well as bad experiences of life. To become spiritual, an individual must embody these situations and reflect on achievement as well as improvement. To achieve wholeness, awareness of self must be gained which leads to the development of self-confidence, self-respect and humility (Trulear, 1996).
According to Vanzant (1992), spirituality means in and of the spirit. It is oneness with self and with the world. There is a sense of peace, balance and knowledge. This spirituality requires “relaxation of the conscious mind, suppression of the ego and reliance on divine universal energy as a motivating life force” (Vanzant, 1992, p. 121). It becomes a learning process in which, through time; fear, hate, anger, loneliness, and deprivation are replaced through time with purpose, love, worthiness, understanding and truth. Once this spirituality is developed, individuals can recognize and understand their role in any given situation (Vanzant, 1992). An understanding of life is gained. Reflections of positive morals and values will also be evident.

This way of living is reflected in the Spiritual Code of Conduct. This code requires accepting “oneness” with the creator as a primary source of power, knowledge, truth and order in life (Vanzant, 1992). Components of this code are unconditional love, truth, willingness, righteousness, responsibility, discipline, humility, compassion, perseverance, patience, speaking with a conscious tongue, selflessness and tithing. Living by this code will lead to a more balanced, harmonious and orderly approach to life.

Without this code of conduct, spirituality has the potential to become hidden, lost or forgotten. If this occurs, interventions such as prayer and meditation should be initiated. This will open hidden wholeness and unifies aspects of life: family, community, church and school with the individual (Dash, Jackson & Rasor, 1997).
The literature suggests that individuals perceive spirituality differently. Some components of spirituality are similar such as believing in a higher being, living life to its fullest and understanding self; but the means to achieve spirituality are diverse in nature. Therefore spirituality can potentially manifest differently in individuals.

Spiritual Health

Spirituality is like food; it energizes and revives self. Its maintenance is important in the achievement of holistic health (Chapman, 1986). Holistic health involves the integration of social, mental, emotional, spiritual and physical health (Bensley, 1991). The spiritual dimension is needed for all other dimensions to work and be of value (Bensley, 1991). “Just as a candle cannot burn without a fire, men cannot live without a spiritual life” (Goodloe & Arreola, 1992).

The spiritual dimension of wellness is deemed a very important part of holistic health (Banks, Poehler & Russell, 1984). The development of this dimension aids in understanding purpose of life; learning how to experience love, joy, peace and fulfillment; and learning how to help self and others achieve their full potential (Chapman, 1986). Components of spiritual health include, but are not limited to courage, faith, humor, patience, compassion, imagination, humbleness, forgiveness, intuition, creativity, optimism, honesty and love (Seaward, 1998). Utilizing these qualities on a regular basis contributes to spiritual health and thus, the achievement of optimal wellness.
Spiritual health has served as an intervention in programs such as narcotics anonymous and alcoholics anonymous. Spiritual principles are established to aid in recovery and unify mind and body with spirit (Mathew, George, Wilson & Mathew, 1995). Nurses also promote spiritual health to patients whose support systems are weakened and whose levels of physical and mental wellness have diminished (Summer, 1994). Without the promotion of spiritual health; apathy, loneliness, alienation, dissatisfaction and wasted human potential become evident; but with spiritual health optimal wellness can be achieved enhancing the quality and quantity of life (Chapman, 1986).

African Spirituality

Spirituality in traditional African culture is considered innate. This is reflected in the strong oral tradition of many African tribes. The following story of Obatala, a Yoruban (West Africa Tribe) tale has been passed down from generation to generation. It tells a story of spiritual foundation and expresses the fact that everything needed for survival is already provided. This thought process is embedded in Africans initially in childhood and reinforced throughout life.

In the beginning of human existence, Iya divided the land. To the birds She gave the sky, to the fish the sea, and to the humans She gave the fertile valley rich with plant and animal life. For herself she kept the barren hills. The people cried, "What a wonderful Mother is this Obatala!" The humans plucked coconuts from the trees, pulled yams from the earth, ate the flesh of the animals, and made clothing from their
somes.
On the barren hill, Obatala pounded rocks into dust, 
enriched it with her sweat, and planted her garden.
In the valley the people made music, danced joyously, 
and told stories under moonlight.
Obatala toiled in her garden.
One day the humans reached for fruit, but there was none;
they pulled at the earth and found her barren; and no meat 
could be found for their stews.
The people became outraged and cried out, “What a terrible 
Mother is this woman, Obatala. She has given us nothing 
and kept everything for herself!”
Angrily the people climbed to the top of the mountain and came upon Obatala sleeping.
They cut her body into eight equal pieces and cast them over the land. Everywhere that Her pieces fell a great civilization sprang up and the people practiced agriculture and temperance in these places. Her head landed in Ile-Ife, and it became the spiritual center of Yorubaland, Obatala is a wonderful mother indeed (Teish, 1985, p. 117).

Spirituality according to the indigenous people of Africa is described as a “web of life”. It involves life-giving values, sacredness of land, reverence for all creatures, conservation of the earth’s resources, and compassion for the weak, oppressed, and marginilized (Balasuriya, 1993). All experiences good and bad are important in the development of spirituality. These experiences form a “web of relations” that include: intrapersonal and interpersonal, communal and societal, global and planetary. These relationships were based on justice, exploitation, manipulation and oppression (Balasuriya, 1993). The development of spirituality involved living and understanding these relationships. In essence, spirituality involved respecting one another, the earth and all of nature.

Nature was God-infused, the earth was sacred, the land and water were a source of food from God’s
bosom, wind and air were God's life-giving breath, 
God was a life-giving power, the cosmos were in 
God's womb and the intimate relationships with 
God, man and energy from the cosmos was able to 
create, nurture, heal, and recreate life (Balasuriya, 1993, p.232).

Other aspects of African spirituality included an "unhesitating and unquestioning 
acceptance of the reality of the invisible world" (O'Hanlon, 1991, p. 15). God was the 
supreme ancestor and beyond understanding. There was a strong sense of community 
and delight in celebration. Spirituality was expressed through chant, dance, symbols, 
proverbs and storytelling (O'Hanlon, 1991).

The Shaping of Spirituality in African Americans

Spirituality in African Americans emerged from African and Euro American 
traditions as a means to endure society and maintain self. Throughout time African 
American history has been rewritten, lost or forgotten (Dash et al, 1997). With this 
offense, the deep-rooted spirituality that was engrained in the African descendants of the 
African American subculture has manifested uniquely. African American must realize 
and accept this innate spirituality to achieve wholeness within the African American 
community, as well as in society.

Common ground, a symbol of African American spirituality insists "there is a 
necessary earth-connection revitalizing for Africans who have been colonized by the 
earth-hating practices of urbanization" (Baker-Fletcher, 1991, p. 81). African 
Americans must become aware of their purpose in life and begin to understand and apply 
meaning to the struggles and hardships they endure. "When a mans' self is hidden from
himself...it permits disease and death to gnaw into his substance without his clear knowledge” (Kunjufu, 1995, p.78). African American must become aware of self in order to promote a healthier spiritual self. This can be done by breaking through historic layers of degradation, oppression and injustice in the African American community (Dash, 1997). A discovery or rediscovery of spirituality that has been hidden in western culture will be achieved. Important social factors that have been lost in urbanization will be regained. The cultural strength of African Americans that has decreased due to crowding in cities and other factors will also become evident (Teish, 1985). Westernalization/urbanization has led to the diminishment of traditional African spirituality and influenced the stereotypical notions that African Americans are inferior, profane, invisible subhuman beasts in society (Baker-Fletcher, 1991). Therefore African Americans must regain a sense of self and community. They are Africans by descent, but are Africans in America whose experience as an oppressed people for the past few centuries has shaped them uniquely (Usry, 1996). Therefore,

African people living in the USA must experience both a historical excavation of what we have done and a psychospiritual migration “back to Africa” by which we might find a firm sense of humanity not dependent on amending a 3/5 of a person constitutional appraisal of our human beingness. This psychospiritual migration is complex because it involves the forging of a new understanding of life and responsibility for the well-being of the community (Baker-Fletcher, 1997, p.155).

In summary, the literature suggests everyone has the ability to develop their spiritual way. However, the spirituality of the African American has changed throughout time. Many unique experiences have helped shape the spirituality of African Americans.
Therefore it is important to develop spirituality interventions that are specific to the needs of African Americans and understand the African American experience. Once a clear understanding of these experiences is gained, African Americans can become an integral part of society, fulfilled and empowered. Spirituality can eventually build a strong African American male which leads to a strong African American family/community, thus building a strong society.

Spirituality in African American Females

Spirituality in African American females has emerged as a tool of coping and empowering. African American women have barriers in life such as poverty, discrimination, unemployment, and health/family problems (Gibbs, 1994). Although these barriers exist, African American women have maintained a high self-esteem and a positive self-image (Jones, 1992). This is due partially to the development of spirituality through paths of spiritual and personal growth. This is evident in the writings of Iyanla Vanzant, an African American Yoruban Priestess and spiritual life counselor. Through exercises and readings Vanzant introduces programs of inspiration and motivation that improves emotional and spiritual health for African American women (Vanzant, 1992).

The African American Male in Society

African American males are in a political, economic and mental prison (Baker-Fletcher, 1997). "White" society has pre-judged and criticized African American males,
preventing them from coming to full emotional maturity (Assibey-Mensah, 1997). White society has two images of African American males: an image of welfare, crime and drugs and second, a stereotypical image of musicians or basketball/football players (Fraser, 1994). They also have negative perceptions of African American males as a result of the media. Some of these stigmas are: 8 out of 10 White Americans feel Blacks prefer welfare over self-support, 6 out of 10 say Blacks are lazy, 5 out of 10 say Blacks are less intelligent and 6 out of 10 say Blacks are a violent culture (Fraser, 1994). These attitudes have contributed to White America being frightened and disgusted, leading to public disrespect and disdain for African Americans (Loury, 1996). The attitudes of White America have also led to an unfair stigma and a negative image of African Americans in their own minds. African American males thus, see no future for themselves, lack hope and have no respect for the value of human life (Loury, 1996).

However, there are some African American males that have overcome the stigmas of society. This is reflective in African American male college students. African American males that have been academically successful are raised in families with high levels of determination, strictness, nurturance, and community connectedness such as church and extracurricular activities (Matton, 1998). The academic achievement of African American male college students is also reflected in positive relationships with faculty and students (Davis, 1994). Basically, a system of social support has encouraged success in African American male college students.
There are still challenges that African American male college students face. These include: lack of a stable relationship with father, peers with academic and behavioral problems, problems/discomfort with Whites and other African Americans, and problems with temper/fighting. (Matton, 1998). With love, support, communication and modeling other successful African American males, and an encouraged belief in self, the African American males can face these challenges and prevail (Matton, 1998).

Movements of Spirituality in African American Males

Spirituality in African Americans began during African slavery in America. This was a result of enabling factors that helped African Americans survive. These factors included:

- having a tendency toward wholeness by which families, love and life were sustained and nourished despite hardships;
- having an all encompassing spiritual dimension that could reach the native soil of the human spirit;
- having aggression whereby the drive and urge for community seeks to nourish its own and reject intruders (Baker-Fletcher, 1991).

Spirituality in slaves affirmed a hope for freedom and independence. They sung spirituals in order to affirm their faith that they would one day be free. The spirituals were influenced by slave culture and served as an outcry of the slaves refusal to “submit to the lethal self-hatred promulgated by the oppressive system” (Baker-Fletcher, 1991, p. 214).

Another movement of spirituality in African Americans was the creation of spiritual churches in the early 1900s. These were community churches that gave Blacks a sense of
recognition in a society where regarded as inferior. This spiritual movement had commandments they followed which state:

1) Believe in spirit(God) within matter 2) Ignore a sky heaven for happiness and a downward hell for human punishment 3) Believe in the fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of man 4) Believe in Heaven and hell here on earth 5) Believe in what you sow, you shall also reap 6) Believe that the Ethiopians and all nations shall rule the world in righteousness 7) Thou shall not pray to bless your enemies 8) Thou shall ask God to give power to overcome 9) Thou shall believe that our relations and friends whose spirits have departed from the body is within our own bodies to help overcome the difficulties in life (Baer, 1984, p. 220).

This was a response spiritually to the racist structure of capitalist America (Baer, 1984).

The emergence of two great spiritual leaders of the church occurred during the middle 1900’s. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcom X led moral and spiritual movements each with different means, but both hoping to eliminate notions of inferior and superior races. Their symbol of human dignity includes:

love one’s self and one’s body that originated from life-changing encounter with the divine; radical self-affirmation that is the fruit of the life-changing divine encounters, self-affirmation that counteracts the self-hatred and depersonalization of one’s past self-image produced by systematic racism; a sense of pride gained by analysis of one’s historic past; and affirmation of Black Power as a healthy thing spiritually, emotionally, psychologically and economically (Baker-Fletcher, 1991).

The spiritual movements of these two great men left a definite mark in history. They led to a belief in “Black Power” which is building an African American identity (Martin, 1991). This identity is based on self-determination, pride, self-respect and participation with/control of one’s destiny and community affairs (Martin, 1991). The development of
this identity can occur through immersion into African/African American culture and understanding of cultural identity in relation to other culturally diverse groups (Jagers, 1993).

A more recent spiritual movement that began in the early 1980s is the Xodus Journey. This journey addresses issues such as sexism, classism, heterosexism, ageism and ableism. This is reflective of the past; it incorporates African tradition which honors and respects the elders/ancestors. It includes all and attempts to rejuvenate the bodies, souls, minds and spirits of African Americans (Baker-Fletcher, 1991).

A movement of spirituality that unified the African American male population is the Million Man March. This movement sought to encourage positive actions of African American males within the community such as, registering to vote, decreasing “Black on Black crime, submitting applications to adopt African American children, increasing child support payments by African American fathers and becoming a leader/role model within the community. To commit to these actions a pledge was made by the African American males attending the march. This pledge states that the African American males will: strive to love each other and self; improve self spiritually, morally, mentally, socially, politically and economically for the benefit of self, family and community; support African American newspapers, radio and television; and respect self, the African American community and the entire human family. This ultimately seeks to improve the overall health of the African American community.
The movement of spirituality that has been a continuum throughout time is the music(soul) of African Americans. This continuum began with the slave spirituals and has evolved into blues, jazz, bebop, rhythm and blues, and most recently hip-hop (Keita, 1993). Hip hop is a message of spiritual revival whose message calls for a return to African cultural and spiritual values (Baker-Fletcher, 1997). It describes the African American experience by expressing aspirations and beliefs and at the same time embracing spirit. Thus, through hip-hop knowledge is acquired and a spiritual foundation is established (Nelson, 1992).

Conclusion

The literature suggests that spirituality throughout time has been an important entity in the lives of African Americans. This is seen in the form of African spirituality, spirituals, and spiritual movements. Even though spirituality is deemed important, the literature also suggests that in today's society it has lost its value; meaning it is not being developed as it should. With this lacking, African Americans cannot achieve higher levels of holistic health.

African American males and spirituality are interconnected. They are within each other therefore, spirituality can be manifested in life. Spirituality in African American males will give them a sense of tribalism that is consistent with present culture which in turn will uplift the African American community and lead to more healthier lifestyles. “Black men, you were once great, you shall be great again” (Usry, 1996, p.162).
This study will concentrate on spirituality in African American males. It will discover their perceptions, attitudes and beliefs on spirituality. Eventually, this study can be used as a tool in the development of spirituality interventions that are culturally defined and specific to the needs of African Americans. It can also serve as a guide to health educators in the implementation of spiritual health.
The purpose of this study was to define/describe spirituality from an African American male perspective. This was accomplished through a research design that is qualitative using focus groups as the method of data collection and coding as a way of content analysis. Using coding, the responses of the African American males were identified, grouped and analyzed in a structured fashion.

Research Design

This study was conducted in a qualitative research design. A qualitative study allowed the African American college student to express spirituality as formulated by self. This is the best methodology for exploring unknown phenomena (Matton et al, 1998). For example, the rain dances of Native Americans were conducted to fulfill a spiritual need (Riggs, 1998). Through quantitative study areas such as time, place and amount of rain can be measured. However, the meaning behind the rain dances cannot be measured quantitatively; if measured in that way, meaningful interpretation is lost. This qualitative study of the perception of spirituality and its manifestations in the lives of African American males attempted to understand the meaning and nature of spirituality in African American males.
Through qualitative research spirituality and its manifestations were described in African American males. Qualitative research emphasizes people's "lived experience" and leads to deep understanding (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Patterns and themes among the individual responses of the African American males were analyzed for similarities, differences, relationships and new ideas/concepts. This study gave the researcher a picture of spirituality and its manifestations in the lives of African American male college students at Illinois State University. A qualitative study of this nature contributed to literature on spirituality in African Americans and established a foundation for future research. "In order for scientific study to occur there has to be a consensus of meaning with regard to phenomena being observed" (Bensley, 1991, p.288). This study provided insight into the phenomena based on the responses of the African American males.

**Recruitment of Participants**

Two strategies to obtain volunteer participants were used in this study. First, personal contact was used. The researcher asked students, friends and associates to participate in the focus groups. Second, letters seeking volunteers for the study (See Appendix A) were sent to African American organizations on campus including: Black Student Union, National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, Multicultural Center, Office of Minority Research and Black Greek Fraternities. Follow-up visits and phone calls were made to the organizations to confirm any volunteer participation.
Data Collection

Information was gathered through in-depth, open ended focus groups. This aided the researcher in obtaining perceptions of the importance and impact of spirituality in the lives of African American males. The focus group was facilitated using a six question guide structured to collect pertinent information on spirituality and its manifestations in the African American male (See Appendix B). The African American males responded using their own words, which helps the researcher gain a deeper level of meaning (Stewart et al, 1990). There were three focus groups with five to six participants in each group. Each focus group session was approximately two hours in length. Discussion was open to explore related issues that are stimulated by other participant responses. The focus group was video-recorded and audio-taped with permission from the African American male participants (See Appendix C).

Data Analysis

The data was analyzed using a coding system. This process involved breaking down, examining, comparing, conceptualizing and categorizing data (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Initially, the codes were consistent with the research questions (Miles & Hubermann, 1994). For example, the definition of spirituality was coded as SP-DEF and the impact of spirituality was coded as SP-IMP. This is a way of categorizing. New codes were added for responses not directly related to the initial research questions, but
are important to the description of spirituality. From this point themes, patterns and relationships were established, analyzed and interpreted. In addition, a conceptual diagram was developed to illustrate the findings of the study (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

Once the data was grouped appropriately, the researcher began to conceptualize the data. Subgroups were the result of breaking down larger groups for purposes of understanding. For example, the SP-DEF category was broken down into groups SP-DEF1 and SP-DEF2. These subgroups represent two sets of definitions, similar in the fact that they are definitions, but distinct in nature. Links were then established between groups and subgroups. This gave the researcher a mental/visual picture of spirituality in African American males.

Data Presentation

The data was presented in a narrative format. Diagrams displaying relationships were used as a basis for obtaining a visual understanding of the text presented. Also, to gain an understanding from the African American culture, direct quotes of the focus group participants were used.
CHAPTER IV
RESULTS

Introduction
The perception of spirituality and its manifestations in the lives of African American males is an unknown phenomenon to health educators and society at large. As a component of holistic health, it is important that spirituality be studied and understood along with all other components in order to become knowledgeable of its role in the lives of African American males and to ultimately improve their spiritual health. This study attempts to build a beginning level of understanding leading to awareness and meaning of spirituality in African American college students at Illinois State University. Although this focuses on only a minute portion of the total population, it has provided insight into spirituality of African American males. The definitive, functional and expressive nature of spirituality has been communicated, thus providing a basis for understanding and meaning of spirituality in African American males. The present study provides feedback from African American male college students in attendance at Illinois State University on the perception of spirituality and its manifestation.

Discussion of Sample
Participants were recruited via personal communication and through recruitment letters sent to various African American organizations on campus. The participants were
informed that they would be participating in a 1 ½ to 2-hour focus group session, that they would be audio and video taped and that all evidence of their identities would be destroyed. The participants addressed six open-ended questions about their perception of spirituality and its manifestation in their lives.

A convenience sample of twenty-five African American male college students was recruited for participation in one of three focus groups on spirituality in African American males. The participants ranged in age from nineteen to twenty-five. The participants were all descendants of Africa with twenty-four being African American and one Haitian American. Three of the participants were from rural areas, the others resided in Chicago or East St. Louis, Illinois. The sample consisted of one freshman, five sophomores, seven juniors, nine seniors and three graduate students. They majored in a variety of areas which included: criminal justice(5), education(5), business(4), industrial technology(3), biology(1), theatre(1), safety(1), psychology(3), and mass communication(2). The large majority of the samples were of Baptist(10) faith; while others practiced Catholicism(2), Islam(1), Pentecostalism(2) and Presbyterianism(1) faiths. The rest of the participants referred to themselves as Christians(9), but were not associated with any religious denomination.

Data Reduction

The responses of the participants from the focus group sessions were content analyzed. The coding scheme used was derived initially from the research questions in
Chapter 1 which attempts to get knowledge of the definitive – DEF, functional – FUNC and expressive – EXP nature of spirituality. This was further broken down into six focus group questions which were hence separated into the three categories. DEF was complimented by one focus group question coded as, define/describe spirituality – SP-DEF. FUNC was complimented with the coding of three focus group question which include: impact of spirituality; SP-IMP; role of spirituality, SP-ROLE; and impact of spirituality on experience, SP-EXP. The expressive nature was described using two focus group questions and coded in the following format: communication of spirituality, SP-COMM and being an African American, SP-AAM. Once the codes were developed a line by line analysis was done to produce key themes for each category. Once themes were identified the researcher compared and reviewed the narrative responses for any consistencies or inconsistencies, also for patterns. The researcher then began to interpret and apply meaning behind the narrative responses. The end result was the development of a model that visually displays and summarizes the narrative responses. This brings words to life and introduces a concept that can be a guide for future research done in this area.

Findings

The African American male college student participants responded to six open-ended questions formulated from research questions in Chapter I; definition of spirituality, function of spirituality and expression of spirituality. This study proved to be
beneficial providing an array of meaning into spirituality in African American male college students at Illinois State University. The next section will contain a summary of the respondents' answers as well as narrative quotes that depict spirituality linguistically as African American males perceive it. Some of the respondents' answers were similar in nature, but others provided different points of view.

The definitive nature of spirituality was addressed using one focus group question, define/describe spirituality. The narrative responses of the African American male participants brought about four themes. They include (a) spirituality is a way of life for African American male college students at Illinois State University, (b) spirituality is belief in a higher being for African American male college students at Illinois State University, (c) spirituality is understanding self for African American male college students at Illinois State University, and (d) spirituality is a level of consciousness that aids human-environmental interaction for African American male college students at Illinois State University. There was a general agreement that spirituality exists and all the participants were aware of it because they all responded to the question. However, the most common definition given for spirituality was that it's a way of life, which is reflected in a belief in a higher being, and the experiences of life. Through this belief and experience an understanding of self is gained. This is reflected in responses such as:

1. "spirituality is a way of life, belief in a higher being and the way you carry out your life"
2. "spirituality is living out your life and believing in a higher force and once you’ve pleased that higher force you’ll go to a better place”

3. "spirituality is your own individual perception, how you view yourself and person"

4. "I know who I am and I know there’s a higher being that exists and I know what I want to accomplish out of life”.

These remarks suggest spirituality is dependent on learning yourself through experience and belief in a higher being.

Some participants expressed that the nature of that higher being did not matter, God or Allah etc, and that spirituality is separate from religion. This is expressed by responses such as:

1. "spirituality is different than religion because it has no bounds or confines"

2. "Religion splits up a community, religio in itself means to split, conquer and divide, while with spirituality when you’re in tune with your self you become in tune with everybody else”.

In essence religion is limiting while spirituality is exploratory. This is expressed in response of one participant who exclaims: “being a spiritual person extends beyond all realms, its not something that man made”.

This brings about the final theme. Spirituality is not only an identifier of self but the way in which self interacts with and in the environment. In this light the participants have defined spirituality as a level of consciousness in which your mental and physical
being helps one’s existence in the environment. One respondent preferred to use the word "energy". He believed that this internal energy helps interaction and survival in the environment.

Morals and values have characterized this interaction in the environment, those taught early in life as well as those learned throughout life. They also are a determinant factor in the development of spirituality. This is suggested in the following responses:

1. "spirituality is one’s moral foundation"
2. "spirituality is the ability to decide right from wrong"
3. "spirituality is an avenue to making us better people"
4. "morals and values invested in us by our parents will reserve our spirituality and help our children to reserve their spirituality”.

The functional nature of spirituality was discussed utilizing three focus group questions in order to get an array of meaning and understanding. The function of spirituality consisted of the role of spirituality, impact of experience on spirituality and outside influences that impact spirituality. The above components were categorized separately to establish themes.

The role of spirituality brought about three themes which include: (a) spirituality controls everything, African American males at Illinois State University, (b) spirituality encourages appreciation and thanksgiving in African American male college students at Illinois State University, and (c) spirituality brings about inner peace and understanding in African American male college students. There was a general consensus that
spirituality and its development is a daily facet of life. Most felt it controls every aspect of life, from the time one wakes up in the morning until one goes to bed at night. This is best explained in the following responses:

1. “it’s a daily event and it impacts my life in everything I do from the way I speak and act, to my sport, to dealing with my son and fiancé; but overall it helps in my struggle to get better everyday”

2. “it has to be an everyday thing in my life since I have to pray five times a day, I think about it everyday”

3. “I think it helps along on a daily basis especially when things are going wrong it kind of helps you accept the bad knowing that tomorrow will be a better day”.

According to the participants it helps people to function in life in the following ways:

1. “its almost like a savior, helping out with your thoughts and situations”

2. "it gives me a sense of peace, a sense of humbleness, it gives me a sense that everything will be okay, it gives me a sense of tranquility and the feeling that I should know how to live my life”.

The impact of experience on spirituality was discussed to provide insight into the function of spirituality. Three themes emerged as a response. They include (a) experience helps define spiritual purpose in the lives of African American male college students, (b) experience increases awareness of spirituality in the lives of African American male college students, and (c) experience aids in the development of spirituality in African American male college students. The role of spirituality is evident
in all experience of life, positive and negative. Examples of situations that reflect an impact of spirituality in the lives of African American male college students include death, competition, fatherhood, academic insufficiencies, and struggle. These events in the lives of African American male college students make them aware of spirituality and help develop their spiritual nature. One participant expressed a concern with the spirituality in the collective African American male population: "I think a lot of brothers are lost because they don't know their true spiritual life"

It seems that through experience the African American males have become more in tune with their spirituality. Some examples of how experience impacts spirituality include:

1. after the passing of a friend, "I looked at the situation like this, the last time I saw him we had the best time of our lives"

2. after 20 year old cousin died of a heart attack, "it made me realize what's important in life"

3. after having a child, "I had to be responsible for my daughters sake"

4. being here today, in school, "it took a long road to get here and I don't think I could have done it without believing in myself".

The final question that addressed the function of spirituality was what outside influences impact spirituality? The major themes identified in this instance are as follows: (a) family, friends and mates influence spirituality in the lives of African American male college students at Illinois State University, (b) culture influences spirituality in the lives of African American male college students at Illinois State
University, and (c) mind and body influences spirituality in the lives of African American male college students at Illinois State University. Many influences have an effect on spirituality. Culture, however, was a key influence on spirituality. The participants defined it as self-power, expression, music and food. Other influences expressed were the media, environment, and negative/positive experiences. The most unique idea expressed was the influence of mind and body: “to be totally spiritual and get harmony your mind, body and soul should be in line”

Finally the expressive nature of spirituality was discussed. The two focus group questions that addressed this topic were: through what avenues is spirituality communicated and how does being an African American male in society shape spirituality? Although the latter of the two questions does not directly suggest expression, it does indirectly have substantial basis since expression varies amongst cultures.

Themes that emerged from spiritual communication include: (a) spirituality is expressed through feelings and emotions of African American male college students at Illinois State University, (b) spirituality is expressed through a sense of self pride/dignity in African American male college students at Illinois State University, and (c) spirituality is expressed through music by African American male college students at Illinois State University. Spirituality is expressed in many forms and through many avenues. One participant believes that, “a part of spirituality is expressing your feelings and emotions”.
Expression thus becomes evident through prayer, giving thanks, the way on carries self, by trying, through involvement, and being realistic. Examples of expression in the lives of the African American male participants are evident in the following narrative responses:

1. "I express my spirituality through hip-hop; through every verse I bust and when I rhyme it's a picture"

2. "I express my spirituality when I run in competition, come on the side on someone, talk shit, then leave them behind".

Generally speaking African American express themselves verbally: "we all have different roots and we have different ways of expression".

The underlying theme that emerged from being an African American male in society was: (a) the struggle behind being an African American male in society impacts spirituality in African American male college students at Illinois State University. There was a general agreement that struggle is a unique element that shapes their spirituality. Since the participants existence in this world they had to deal with the struggle of being who they are. One participant exclaims: "society hinders us as a people of what we are doing because the African way and the European way are totally different".

The participants feel this is the underlying cause of struggle. They believe, however, that struggle has made them stronger individually. This is reflected in the following statements:

1. "struggle makes me grow stronger, it makes me realize"
2. "I love being Black, the daily struggles we’ve been through helps me get through the next obstacle”

3. "Being an African American male you’re already at a disadvantage and you’ve already been given a challenge you’ve already been given something to overcome and starting at a disadvantage makes you that much more spiritual”.

As a whole the experience of society has diminished the plight of the African American male population. This is represented in the statement “our structure that has made us men has broken down, but we need to find our way back so that I can teach my son, so that he can teach his son, so when generations grow it will grow stronger”. With a stronger population the participants hope to gain more respect in the eyes of society and begin to receive credit for actions.
CHAPTER V
DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Discussion

In order to gain an accurate perspective of spirituality in African American male college students at Illinois State University the narrative responses must be analyzed along with the behavior of the participants during the focus group. This gives the researcher and reader more insight into the vagueness of some responses in comparison to the very descriptive other responses.

The participants were open in responding to the focus group questions. They were willing to share, although the older participants had the tendency to dominate the discussion. In a way this was positive because the younger participants seemed intrigued and very interested in the thoughts of others. It also made the younger participants think about different perspectives. On the other hand the younger participants had an influence on the older participants. They helped them realize that talking and being a positive role model can definitely influence the African American culture. Overall the participants complimented each other and gave insight into each others thoughts.

The definition of spirituality was consistent with the literature. It was similar in nature to traditional African spirituality and spiritual health as defined by health
educators. The belief in a higher being and unification of mind, body and soul are very important entities. This should then be complimented with respect and honor for the environment. The functional nature of spirituality was also consistent with the literature. Just as spirituals were sung to affirm spirituality; spirituality is constant and persists as a means to overall functioning. The development of spirituality is deemed as an important entity for survival and its foundation is experience. Through experience African American males can develop and become more in tune with their spirituality. This can be accomplished by learning from experience, positive or negative, and improving self based on that experience. Experience is usually accompanied by the influence of the environment, friends, family etc. Therefore the function of spirituality is dependent on how one defines it. The expressive nature of spirituality was also consistent with the literature especially the music aspect. African Americans have been stereotyped for many years about music; but it is a reflection of the culture. It is a way in which spirituality is communicated. The one unique element of the study however was the issue of "struggle". The literature suggests that spirituality was used to endure struggle, but the study suggests that struggle increases spirituality. It also suggests that every experience is a struggle whether positive or negative; but the ultimate outcome builds spirituality.

Spirituality is a way of life; it has no beginning nor an ending, thus impacting everything you do. This is expressed in the model of meaning (See Appendix A). This model of meaning summarizes spirituality as perceived by the African American male college students at Illinois State University. It ultimately impacts your being; who you
are, what you want out of life. In essence it is the initiator of understanding self which consists of mind, body and moral structure. In the process of understanding self as an African American male there is constant struggle. Spirituality exists through struggle and the foundation of struggle is experience. It is the experience of being an African American male in society. This struggle is due partially to the negative stereotypes society has placed on African American males, but also to the lack of responsibility on the part of African American males. The two most important constructs that impact the level and development of spirituality are belief in a higher being and the experiences of life. One’s level of spirituality thus becomes dependant on how an individual utilizes their experience, faces their struggles and whether that individual admits the existence of a higher being.

Implications

The findings of Chapter IV indicate that spirituality is important for the functioning and survival of African American male college students at Illinois State University. It affects every aspect of their life on a daily basis. It also affects their health. This information will benefit the health education field in developing interventions that will lead the African American males to develop their spirituality. The African American males identified components of holistic health in relation to their spirituality such as: physical, emotional, environmental and intellectual components, as well as a unity of mind, body and spirit. It is important that health educators are aware
that African American males perceive these components as interrelated with spirituality. Health educators will now have a foundation to develop interventions in the light of holistic health that’s specific to African American males. It is also important that health educators address the issue of struggle as the underlying premise of spiritual manifestation in the lives of African American male college students. This defines spirituality and demonstrates the uniqueness of African American male college student spirituality.

Limitations

The population studied is a very minute portion of the population of African American males. Therefore, generalizations cannot be made. Also the group studied represented only college students at one particular university. Therefore, there was not much diversity in the sample. These factors have limited the study, however, the information provided can be beneficial and serve as a basis for the understanding of the perception of spirituality and its manifestations in the lives of African American male college students.

Recommendations for future study

The following are recommendations to Health Education:

1. Compare spirituality amongst culture and gender
Ex: Compare spirituality in African American male with Caucasian male or African American male with African American female

2. Develop a spiritual health curricula
   Ex: Create a class that teaches about holistic health with spiritual health as the focus

3. Integrate multicultural approaches to spirituality
   Ex: When planning spirituality programs use methods that are specific to target population

4. Develop active learning exercise that seek to improve spiritual health
   Ex: Create exercises in which one becomes more in tune with self

5. Develop a program that strictly addresses spiritual health in relation to holistic health

6. Integrate spirituality as a coper in dealing with other facets of life
   Ex: Use spirituality as a coper for stress
REFERENCES


APPENDIX A

LETTER OF REQUEST
March 25, 1999

Dear African American Student Organization:

My name is Adrienne Coleman. I am a graduate student at Illinois State University, pursuing a Masters of Health, Physical Education and Recreation with an emphasis in Health Education. To achieve this goal, I have chosen to complete a master's thesis and am seeking your help in identifying African American male college students to participate in a study on spirituality. The title of the study is “The perception of spirituality and its manifestations in the lives of African American male college students”. Participation by members of your organization can contribute to research in this area. The study will be conducted using focus groups. Written and oral responses will be analyzed and evaluated. The participants will be responsible for attending one, two to three hour focus group sessions during April 1999. Food and letters of service will be provided to participants. The identities of the participants will be confidential. I will appreciate any volunteers willing to participate. I will contact you to confirm any volunteer participation. Thank you!

Sincerely,

Adrienne L. Coleman
Graduate Teaching Assistant
(309)438-8014
alcolem@ilstu.edu
APPENDIX B

FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS
1. Define and describe spirituality.

2. How does spirituality play a role in your life?

3. Describe an experience.
   a. How did spirituality impact this event?

4. What outside influences impact your spirituality?

5. Through what avenues do you communicate/express your spirituality?

6. How does being an African American male in society shape spirituality?
APPENDIX C

STATEMENT OF INFORMED CONSENT
I give Adrienne L. Coleman, graduate student in the Department of Health Sciences at Illinois State University permission to audio tape and video record my responses at the *Spirituality and its manifestations in the lives of African American male college students* focus group. My participation in this study is strictly voluntary. I understand that the video tape and audio tape will not be copied and will be used for the sole purpose of Adrienne L. Coleman’s Masters Thesis: *Spirituality and its manifestations in the lives of African American male college students*. I also understand that my identity will not be revealed and that all evidence of identification will be destroyed at the conclusion of the study.

Participant: ____________________________ Date: __________

Adrienne L. Coleman: ______________________ Date: __________
APPENDIX D

SPIRITUALITY MODEL
Belief in a Higher Being

Struggle

Undeveloped Spirituality

Self

Life's Experiences

Developed Spirituality

Struggle