Strength in the Spirit: African American College Women and Spiritual Coping Mechanisms

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Strength in the Spirit: A Qualitative Examination of African American College Women and the Role of Spirituality During College

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The authors of this article explored the role of spirituality in the college experiences of 14 African American college women. Often overlooked, racially isolated, misrepresented, and misunderstood, African American women often turn to spirituality as a transformative, regenerative, and uplifting space. Using faith development theory and Black feminist thought as a framework, the findings of this study provide insight into how and why African American women use spirituality to successfully navigate through their college experiences. Discussion and implications for practice are offered for enhancing the spiritual development and success of African American college women.

To whom do African-American women owe the power behind their voices? What gives black women the strength to survive the destructive social, political forces threatening their daily lives? Whom do black women owe for what they have become as women? (Williams, 1995, p. 187)

The researchers of this study are two African American women in the academy who, similar to Williams (1995), reflected on their own undergraduate experiences and examined how spirituality served as the power behind their voices while attending predominantly White institutions (PWIs). Williams suggested that the questions asked above were best answered by examining them through one’s life experiences.

These reflections were the catalyst for the present study, which focuses on the role of spirituality as a source of strength for Black college women. Despite the research that illustrates the “authoritative role” that religion and spirituality play in the lives of women, there is a dearth of literature that examines this phenomenon (Mattis, 2002). Of particular interest was the exploration of how African American women used spirituality as a means to deal with challenges and find success within the college setting. Milner (2006) noted, “Throughout history, particularly during slavery, African-Americans have held strong spiritual beliefs and convictions. They had to be spiritual beings and in touch with their spiritual selves to survive the hate, turmoil, racism and destruction of their ‘masters’” (p. 373). Spirituality continues to be a strong influence and major cornerstone among African Americans. For African American women, spirituality is a means of negotiation and understanding the issues, struggles, and forms of oppression that they face on a day-to-day basis (Mattis, 2002).

While studies suggest that African American women fare better in college than their male counterparts, little is known about how they manage to do so. In this study, the authors posit that spirituality is one of the most significant factors that contribute to their strength. Recent studies have highlighted the challenges and collegiate experiences of African American men (Cuyjet, 2006; Harper, 2006; Harper & Quaye, 2007); however, few were found that centered on the voices of African American college women. When studies were sought examining spirituality, few focused specifically on African American women.

This article places particular focus on how 14 African American women handled daily stressors and difficulties in college, how they emerged successfully despite the odds, and their spiritual growth and development. The purpose of this study was to explore the role of spirituality in the experiences of African American undergraduate women while attending college. The examination was guided by the five following questions: (a) how do African American women...
undergraduate women define spirituality and delineate it from the concepts of faith and religion, (b) how do they make meaning of and incorporate spirituality into their lives, (c) what role does spirituality play in their coping experiences, (d) what resources and spaces are available to them to exercise, practice and/or develop their spirituality, and (e) what has influenced how they understand spirituality.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Studies illustrated the positive impact of spirituality on student development in terms of high self-esteem and low antisocial behavior (Knox, Langehough, Walters, & Rowley, 1998); controlled sexual behavior (Beckwith & Morrow, 2005); lower substance abuse (Stewart, 2001); persistence (Foster & LaForce, 1999); and integration of meaning and purpose within students’ multiple identities and ways of knowing (Love & Talbot, 1999). These studies highlighted the importance of incorporating more intentional spirituality-based initiatives in higher education; however, they lack in their inclusion and exploration of the experiences of students from historically and racially underrepresented populations.

Few studies on African American college students and spirituality have been conducted. Among those published, researchers have noted how spirituality can contribute to a number of positive outcomes including healthy living, higher self-esteem, coping abilities, and identity development. Bowen Reid and Smalls (2004) found that higher religiosity and the salience of spirituality was associated with better health-promoting behaviors (i.e., maintaining a healthy lifestyle) in their study of Black, Christian-identified students at a historically Black college.

Constantine, Donnelly, and Myers (2002) studied collective self-esteem and Africultural coping styles in African American adolescents. Africultural coping styles refer to coping behaviors grounded in African American culture. The researchers found that higher collective self-esteem—a belief that others felt positively about their cultural group—indicated higher use of spiritual-centered Africultural coping styles in dealing with stress. Constantine, Wilton, Gainor, and Lewis (2002) examined the relationship between religious participation, spirituality, Africultural coping styles, and religious problem-solving among African American college students and found that higher levels of spirituality among participants were related to a higher use of “spiritual-centered Africultural coping mechanisms.” Findings suggested African American college students who might be considered “highly religious or spiritual” may be less likely to use active coping mechanisms for fear that doing so reflects a lack of faith in God to help solve their problems. The findings of the Constantine and colleagues’ studies, both quantitative, were central to the current investigation. The qualitative focus of the current study contributes to an alternative approach in understanding the role of spirituality in the lives of college students.

Lazarus-Stewart (2002) conducted a qualitative study to explore the role of faith in the development of an integrated identity among African American students at a PWI and concluded that spirituality was salient for an integrated identity, spirituality was constructed in various ways, and, higher levels of spiritual maturity may be necessary to facilitate an appreciation for and integration of multiple identities. Walker and Dixon (2002) examined spirituality and religious participation in relation to academic performance among African American and White college students and found that spirituality and religious participation was practiced at higher levels among African American students. Moreover, African American students’ spiritual beliefs and religious participation were most salient in terms of positive academic performance.

Two studies in particular examined the phenomenon of spirituality in African American women. Bacchus and Holley (2004) explored perspectives of spirituality and its use as a coping resource in work-related stress among ten professional Black women. The study participants practiced spirituality through prayer, meditation, and inspirational readings to garner strength, maintain a sense of inner peace, and reflect on stressful work situations. Findings, similar to Berkel, Armstrong and Cokley (2004), indicated participants made no differentiation between spirituality and religion. Mattis (2002) also examined how African American women use religion
and spirituality to cope and construct meaning in times of adversity. Recent literature supports the notion that spirituality is a major factor in the experiences of some African Americans in college and beyond (Constantine, Wilton, Gainor & Lewis, 2002; Mattis, 2002; Watt, 2003; Bacchus & Holley, 2004; Berkel, Armstrong & Cokley, 2004; Bowen Reid & Smalls, 2004). The findings suggest that spirituality not only serves as a coping mechanism, but also may promote healthy living, and identity development to foster meaning of diverse experiences.

DEFINING SPIRITUALITY, FAITH, AND RELIGION

Spirituality, faith, and religion are used throughout this study. Spirituality is perhaps the most difficult concept to articulate because each person conceptualizes the term differently. Haefner and Capper (2005) noted the importance of "recognizing that each definition of spirituality is bounded by the epistemological perspective from which it emanates" (p. 626). For the purposes of this study, the authors cautiously approached this research realizing that participants’ perspective on and articulation of spirituality might differ from their own.

Spirituality is the commitment to a particular paradigm that gives honor to the principles of interconnectedness and the inner being (hooks, 2000). It is also “defined as the degree to which individuals endorse a relationship with God or a transcendent force that brings meaning and purpose to their existence” (Berkel, Armstrong, & Cokley, 2004, p. 49). Spirituality involves an individual process, communion with others, and relationship with something greater than oneself.

Faith is a process of discovering and creating connections among experiences and events; the process of trying to find meaning and make sense of the “big picture” and establishing a sense of purpose (Fowler, 1981; Parks, 2000). Faith also involves, “a quality of human living that at its best grounds capacities for confidence, courage, loyalty, and generosity even in the face of catastrophe and confusion enables one to feel at home in the universe” (Parks, 2000, p. 24). Faith involves hope, belief, and action despite the unknown, unanticipated, or unexpected.

Religion refers to collective expression through rites, myths, symbols, teachings, and music (Fowler, 2000). Religion is one way in which people choose to practice their spirituality. Thompson (as cited in Haefner & Capper, 2005) viewed religion, “as one choice among the many paths” of a spiritual journey (p. 626). Spirituality, faith, and religion need not hang in a contentious imbalance. While some individuals lead lives in which spirituality and religion are inextricably intertwined, others do not necessarily link these concepts (Capper, Haefner, & Keyes, 2002).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is framed through “traditional” faith development theory and Black feminist thought. Parks’ (2000) work is significant because it acknowledged the influence of college experiences on faith development. Unlike her predecessors who crafted stage-related development theories and identified movement from adolescence to adulthood as a “simple transition”, Parks argued that “young adulthood” occurs between the aforementioned stages. Becoming a young adult in faith requires one to:

Discover in a critically aware, self-conscious manner the limits of inherited or otherwise socially received assumptions about how life works—what is ultimately true and trustworthy, and what counts—and to recompose meaning and faith on the other side of that discovery. (Parks, 2000, p. 7)

However, Parks’ theory reveals less about the intersection of spirituality with race and gender, and does not highlight how spirituality factors into the experiences of African Americans. Milner (2006) described spirituality as “a source of survival for African Americans” (p. 368) and suggested that to study African Americans, researchers must understand racism and cultural epistemologies of this population. One theory accounting for race and gender among African American women is Black feminist thought (BFT).
According to Dillard (2000), “African American women’s ‘theory’ has not been broadly utilized in mainstream educational research, even as it has been continually and constantly constructed and utilized within African-American communities and contexts to give sense and meaning to one’s life” (p. 664). BFT was introduced by Patricia Hill-Collins (2000) and represents what Dillard considers “African American women’s theory.” Using BFT, Dillard (2005) introduced an “endarkened feminist epistemology” to describe how spirituality rests within the core of African American women’s system of knowledge and being. She explained, “I use the term endarkened feminist epistemology to articulate how reality is known when based in the historical roots of Black feminist thought (p. 662).

African American women often turn to spiritual beliefs to cope with everyday struggles associated with living in a socially and politically oppressive system. Spirituality can serve as a coping mechanism, promoting psychological resistance, and fostering identity development (Watt, 2003). According to Mattis (2002),

... African American women have engaged in radical re-readings of biblical text and have embraced private beliefs about the nature of the relationship between God and humans that have helped them disrupt and resist the impact of patriarchy and other forms of oppression including racism. (p. 310)

Together, Parks’ theory (2000) and Dillard’s (2000) contribution to BFT are central in exploring the religiosity of African American college women.

METHODS

A phenomenological approach was most appropriate for this study because it allows for deep examination of how individuals make meaning of their experiences with a phenomenon and capture the essence or essences of experiences (Creswell, 1998). The descriptive nature of phenomenological research enables researchers to report data that in many cases inform the work of educators, particularly as they create interventions and programming for African American undergraduate women. The phenomenon of this study was the role of spirituality among Black college women. The research questions placed the experiences of the participants and their understanding of spirituality at the core of the exploration. The authors remained reflective by engaging each other in a series of conversations about why these questions were most appropriate and how their responses to these questions likely influenced the production of them.

The participants in this study consisted of 14 African American undergraduate women with seven from a large research institution and seven from a mid-size, religiously affiliated institution, both in the Midwest. The students represented first-year students to seniors who participated in a variety of student organizations. Each participant identified as Christian, acknowledged aspects of spirituality as central during college, and believed in a higher being referenced as God. An e-mail invitation providing basic information about the study was sent to a number of student organizations representing several groups (e.g., Black Student Union, African American women’s organizations, and African American sororities) to recruit participants.

Each student participated in a one-hour, audio-taped, semi-structured interview that was transcribed and individually analyzed. Analysis consisted of both researchers reviewing the participants’ transcripts and bracketing their assumptions and impressions line by line. Each author highlighted central phrases that corresponded with the research questions and discussed individual interpretations of those statements. Throughout the analysis, the authors consistently asked, “Is this interpretation an accurate reflection of what the participants shared, and how are our own experiences influencing our interpretations?” to be reflective and to ensure that the methods were consistent with phenomenology. By adopting this perspective, the authors were free to use their own “spiritual way of knowing.” According to Shajahan (2005), “In a spiritual way of knowing we need to pay as much attention to the process of inquiry, if not more, than the outcome” (p. 702). On the initial analysis, fifteen invariant constituents were found (Moustakas, 1994), which were clustered into six thematic categories. To ensure trustworthiness member
checks were conducted with participants by forwarding an electronic copy of their transcripts and the emergent findings to review and revise as needed. Feedback from three peer debriefers, were also solicited.

FINDINGS

There were six major themes that emerged from this study: (a) the realities of race; (b) coping strategies; (c) the presence of something more; (d) consensus and confusion; (e) thought transitions; and (f) perceived lack of support. The findings support this article’s theoretical constructs of spiritual development and a Black feminist lens to shed light on how and why the participants in this study felt about, reflected on, and practiced spirituality.

The first theme, “The Realities of Race,” illuminates how race manifested itself in the participants’ daily experiences. The students recognized that their race affected their encounters and experiences in college. They reported many instances in which they felt alone and isolated because they were likely to be the only one, or one of few people of color, in a classroom setting. This isolation made them feel pressures and responsibilities for positively representing their race. One student shared,

It is difficult to be here, knowing that I feel like I am that example of what a Black person is. I have been in classes where professors have like turned to me to say, what would the Black person think? . . . like I am the sole representative of Black people . . . I am an individual . . . I can’t speak for my whole entire race.

Another student revealed that in her day-to-day interactions with White peers,

I have to do my best to kind of sell myself the best way possible so that when they walk away if they never meet anyone from Gary [a predominantly Black city in Indiana] again they can kind of say, ‘Okay well they’re just not all like murderers.

In addition to ensuring they presented themselves well, participants described how they wanted to be perceived. One student explained,

. . . So you gotta really try to stay on guard, stay on point with everything because other people are looking at me, I guess stereotyping me . . . On point is taking care of business, making good grades, in attendance all the time at classes, being able to talk to other people, communicate effectively. A go-getter.

Women in this study shared amazement about the lack of consciousness among their White peers regarding the realities of race. One student noted, “. . . Typically, White people, they don’t have to think about race . . . as opposed to minorities.” Participants recognized that race and racism existed whether they were thinking about it or not. It was an inescapable reality in a predominantly White setting. Participants described a “conscious-unconscious binary.” Race was prominent in their daily lives; so pervasive that it was normal. In disclosing an event that one student experienced, she expressed that she thought about her race and the impact it had on her almost unconsciously.

The second theme, “Coping Strategies”, describes the processes and practices participants implemented to manage academic, social, and personal experiences. Many of the women shared basic instant internal reactions to stressors such as crying, stressing out, spending time alone, or sleeping. After internal reactions, their next way of managing challenging experiences involved external sources of support such as calling family, friends, and mentors for encouragement. After that, participants’ actions would reflect some form of spiritual practice. The process followed a particular path:

- “stress out” or cry,
- process the situation internally,
- talk to a family member/church official,
- pray and/or read the bible,
- write in journal or reflect, and
• find peace and/or leave it in God’s hands.

One student described her process of dealing with difficult situations in the following way:

I always start by crying . . . I always shed a few tears and then my first instinct is to always call my mom and she always puts everything back in motion. She’s like ‘Hold on, you really need to do this, you really need to do that,’ that kind of stuff to help me sort things out. And then just words of encouragement and then I always of course pray and stuff. You know that always settles your heart when you’re thinking about what’s going on because it kind of helps to realign yourself . . . That’s usually what I do and then like usually that day is kind of a loss, but then the next day, after a good night’s sleep, I have to add that in there too. I usually feel a lot better.

Another student, who was dealing with the challenges of being one of few African Americans in the nursing school program, described her coping process: “If it’s really stressing me out, I read the Bible to just kind of calm my mind; and you know sleep . . .” When asked if she selected any particular verses to read, she responded,

I just have liked the NIV [New International Version] I just randomly pick a couple and just read them. I just feel like I’m not in this alone you know, that God is with me, that I can achieve all things through [Him]. So I don’t fret as much.

Those who did not describe this specific pattern offered a variation of it, but the pattern was fairly consistent (10 out of 14) among the participants.

The third theme, “The Presence of Something More,” reflects the strong spiritual component present in the experiences of the participants, particularly as they attempted to make sense of things they did not understand. This theme highlighted how they found meaning in their college experiences and responded through spiritual mechanisms. Many of their responses revealed biblical principles and practices learned during their early faith development. One student referred to “praying without ceasing.” She found herself praying on the way to class or at other moments throughout the day. There are two sub-themes that emerged from this finding: “The Master Plan” and “More Than Conquerors.”

“The Master Plan” described the belief among the majority of participants that they were part of God’s master plan. The challenges they faced were necessary to facilitate their growth and become the women whom they were called to be. For example, one participant was in her senior year and in the process of applying to law schools. Unknowingly, the opportunity to attend a highly prestigious law school to which she had not applied was presented. Many participants also made references to being “blessed.” They endured situations for example, receiving opportunities or rewards highly unanticipated and of which they had no control. These experiences confirmed for them that their lives were not in their hands, but that a higher power was watching over them and taking care of them, even through the most difficult times.

One participant noted that she felt her steps were ordered, “I just feel like He [referring to God] has a plan and I feel like sometimes things just work out the way that He wants them to go.” Another commented, “Everything is for a reason and you know somebody up there’s making sure that all of my steps are in order and everything is going to be okay, I’m in good hands.” Several of the participants stated that God makes a way out of no way, confirming their successes were part of God’s master plan.

The second sub-theme, “More Than Conquerors” highlighted the unique experiences of participants. Women in this study dealt with highly stressful or traumatic ordeals, including domestic abuse, rape, single-motherhood, and working multiple jobs to make ends meet and support family members. Such situations were commensurate with establishing and maintaining spirituality to be resilient in college. One student indicated she “turned her bad into her good.” Because she did not like being at the institution she attended and she often felt her presence as a Black woman was tolerated and not accepted, she went on to establish an organization, where she has been recognized as a student leader. In addition, this student noted,
...I am an African American woman now who as a child was molested, beat, emotionally, physically, and sexually abused and somebody [whose] mama has had two brain aneurysms and has almost died over seven times, [whose] grandmother basically had diabetes on top of like three or four strokes and seizures and can die in her sleep. On top of all that ... I mean it’s the traumatic events in my life ... I don’t have time to label them all off. But you know what I mean ... I am [supposed] to be on drugs, I’m [supposed] to be dropped out of school, but no I am a McNair Scholar. I have good grades. I have two jobs. I take care of my mother. I take care of my brother. I am in church ... I’m on fire for God. I’m going against all odds and the only way I can do that is through God and the strength that He gives me.

The fourth theme, “Consensus and Confusion,” focused on the participants’ descriptions of faith, religion, and spirituality and how they viewed the interrelatedness of these concepts. When asked to define spirituality, the participants offered a range of diverse responses. Definitions were consistent in terms of their recognition of a higher presence that gave them hope, guidance, and helped them to make meaning out of their lives and the idea of connectedness to other individuals. One student shared that spirituality was, “A presence within someone that gives them hope and meaning.” Another student answered, “Belief in a higher being, some kind of higher authority that is being answered to or something to find comfort in or turn to for guidance and help.” Another said that spirituality is a “belief in something that is greater than you. Something that is outside of you, but it can be internal ... It is believing in connectedness; you’re connected to the world and individuals in it.”

Their definitions of religion were also consistent. The majority described religion as a structured way of how people practice spirituality. One student viewed religion as, “a teaching or beliefs about a higher being ... more of a structured teaching and thought process about a particular being or way of life.” When they described the concept of faith, their responses were a recitation of Hebrews 11:1: Faith is “the substance of things hoped for and the evidence of things not seen.” To demonstrate, one student defined faith as, “believing in what you cannot see or what’s not there, believing in the unseen which is ultimately, when it comes down to it, everything that you need in order to have a relationship with God.”

However, when asked to articulate what relationship, if any, existed among spirituality, faith, and religion, not only was there no consensus in their responses, but many of them mentioned that they had never explored the relationship. Responses were often followed by a lengthy pause, suggesting that the women either lacked a clear understanding of the connections among the three concepts, saw no connection at all, or believed in a central connection, but were unable to clearly articulate the connection. One student’s comments clearly exemplified difficulty in explaining the connections. She stated,

I think they all go together in the sense that with spirituality, it’s like your religious beliefs and your religious values. It’s like you have [pause] ... faith comes into play because it’s in your religious beliefs ... which is your spirituality and that’s your religion.

In another interview, in which a student attempted to explain how these concepts were related, she paused to really think about the concepts of faith, spirituality, and religion. However, her response indicated the difficulty in connecting the concepts.

The fifth theme, “Thought Transitions” represents the period from adolescence to adulthood participants experienced while in college. Parks (2000) identified this period as “young adult” because it represents the spiritual movement that college students may experience as they attempt to define who they are and understand their purpose in the grand scheme of life. Examples of struggle and movement were expressed by two participants who were raised Baptist. Since coming to college, they began to question their religious practices and decided to become non-denominational Christians.

One participant discussed how college is a time in which people stray from the spiritual principles they were taught and try to find their own form of spirituality. She stated,

Especially at the age of being a college student, it’s kind of hard for spirituality because most ... Black people grow up in the church ... but around this age you kind of stray ... and this is the time when you try to pick your own spirituality and like I’m dealing with that right now.
Another participant discussed how college provided her with the opportunity to explore. She was careful to avoid exploration of temptations she believed would negatively affect her relationship with God. She explained,

... Coming to campus being a preacher's daughter ... was totally different and I guess the normal thing is to get, 'buck wild' and do everything and anything ... but I had a chance to explore but not get into anything that would hurt because I had a relationship with God.

One participant who grew up with parents of two different religious denominations discussed the thought transitions that occurred in college and the role of family stating,

When you're at home you get in the routine every Sunday. You're going to church ... But then you get here and it's kind of like a whole different environment. You have to take a more active approach toward religion, faith or spirituality and sometimes you get caught up in other things that are going on ... Being at home you have somebody driving you, you know go to church every Sunday morning, so it's expected. Whereas here [at college] it's kind of like, 'I'm going to go this Sunday but next Sunday I may not', you know what I'm saying? It's more of a relaxed approach to the whole ... actually pursing a religion or faith thing.

Finally, another participant expressed how college changed her thought processes, regarding church: "Church is like a fashion show—it's fake. It seems like everybody is doing it for show." This was a realization she never pondered prior to coming to college. The culture of her upbringing was that members should at least attempt to look nice or presentable at church. This aspect of culture was seen quite differently once she was in college.

Family, most notably mothers and grandmothers, were the most influential factors in the participants' spiritual development. While collegiate experiences prompted participants to explore and question earlier spiritual authorities, they still felt a sense of influence, particularly from their mothers. If their mother did not participate in church or provide any structure for spiritual growth during their upbringing, the daughter's exploration of spirituality had little structure. The women noted that when there were male influences it was usually their fathers, who were either pastors or heavily involved in the church when they were growing up. The influence of family members resulted in lessons the women carried with them each day. Some of the biblical lessons included, "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you," "Always be thankful for what you have," and live by the Ten Commandments. One student noted she was taught to "treat others in a way that would be pleasing to God." These lessons helped guide the women morally, especially, when they left home for college.

The final theme, "Perceived Lack of Support," referred to participants' perception that a lack of resources were available to help them develop, practice, and exercise their spirituality. Both participant groups were able to identify the mainstream student organizations and university offices that had a spiritual component but felt that these offices and organizations, did not fulfill their needs. One student stated, "We have all these things, but they do not cater to my spiritual needs as a Black woman." Another participant described the organizations and activities as "too White." One respondent said the worship services on campus did not represent the type of worship tradition with which she was comfortable. While still another at the private institution shared,

At first, I would say no, but then you think about where you are at. Issues are talked about and people can make you feel like it is ok to be a Christian and this is a God-centered school, but ... I would like to see more African American groups or just more minority groups ... sponsored.

The responses the women shared reflected a connection between spirituality and culture or race. They were more comfortable expressing spirituality in a manner representative of their racial and cultural heritage. One student commented, "We [Black people] are very vocal, we like movement, we like energy and the preacher is going to get his point across to you if it involves running, yelling, screaming. I think it's just a whole different atmosphere."

Another student also described what she was used to in comparison to predominantly White churches,
You know, you go to church and you've got grandmas with the hats on and the nurses and the usher board and the choir ready to sing and the little children quoting the bible verses, it's like a totally different atmosphere versus like they [referring to White people] go to a more relaxed church, like their church to me is like bible study . . .

When some participants stepped beyond their comfort zones to attend services with predominantly White members, they described negative experiences. One participant stated, “It just doesn’t catch my eye . . . it's not very welcoming. It’s not that they say you can't come, but if you don’t feel welcomed then you’re not going to come.” In contrast to the energy she experienced with a Black church, a participant stated, “I’ve been to a few White churches . . . I just kind of feel constrained, like I have to sit and be quiet . . .” Another participant spoke about her experiences with Campus Crusade for Christ. When asked why more African American students do not attend, she stated,

It may be the same reason that I felt, is that it's just kind of an intimidation factor where even if you try it out, it's like, 'Man, it's nothing like being there with people who you can relate to.' Because if I go to one of my fellow [White] Christians, I might not receive their help as much as I would if there was a Black Christian. If I for example went to them about a problem that I feel overwhelmed about because of how much I feel my race adds to my burden, I might not feel that they truly are able to understand . . . They could give me the same advice. Like a [White] person could say go pray, but the person really doesn’t know what I'm going through. So you might not take their advice as much as you would someone who you feel reflects you.

Given these experiences, participants chose to attend churches in the local community that were more reflective of their culture and experiences or they chose to practice spirituality on their own because suitable resources were unavailable on campus and the surrounding community.

DISCUSSION

Parks' (2000) asserted that college is an integral time for the development of spirituality. The participants realized as a result of their college experiences that they began to see their spirituality in a different way. Instead of adhering to the authority figures they had while growing up, they started to take ownership for their spiritual experiences, and were more willing to challenge some of the things that they learned in the past. Participants also recognized the role college played in their transitions. Prior to college many of them attended church regularly and actively participated in spiritual practices. College presented alternatives and an environment in which they could break from the routines of home. At college they did not attend church every Sunday, consistently read the bible, or adhere to the authority of church leaders. It was clear what they learned about spirituality and religion was important, but college was the time to explore these concepts on their own. Going to college resulted in some participants becoming non-denominational Christians, growing even deeper in their spiritual identity, or disassociating from some of their spiritual roots. This process relates to Dalton’s (2001) statement, “The spiritual quest is a lifelong pursuit, but it emerges full bloom during the transition from youth to adulthood. For most students, the college years are a time of questioning and spiritual searching . . .” (p. 17).

From a Black feminist lens, participants' responses suggested a collective understanding of the challenges present at PWIs. They all dealt with different life issues, but coping in racist environments that provided very little support of their spirituality was a clear challenge. As a result, their coping process was similar. The process involved emotions, reflection, seeking external support (family, close friends, spiritual counsel), and prayer or bible readings. The consistency of the participants' comments was that they confronted situations believing things would work out according to their life plan facilitated by God. This standpoint suggested a “spiritual way of knowing” used to guide their lives and coping processes, which is consistent with the studies of Mattis (2002) and Bacchus and Holley (2004), where participants followed similar patterns of spirituality. It was suggested in this study that while college may foster changes in how these women view spirituality, a spiritual foundation is still likely to be maintained beyond the college years.
The authors specifically highlighted the racial realities of the participants. One experience discussed was the expectation of representing their race. Although the women did not feel as if they represented all African American people, they still wanted to ensure that they represented themselves well, and hoped in the process, to avoid being stereotyped. Notably, their lack of perceived campus support and the inability to find spaces in which they were comfortable practicing spirituality were affected by race. Despite what participants faced, they had coping strategies grounded in spirituality to succeed. “In a sense, their spirituality was their survival . . .” (Mijner, 2006, p. 373).

The findings of this study relate to Dillard’s darkened feminist epistemology, emphasizing the importance of spirituality to deal with college experiences. While this study was geared toward gaining a better understanding of the role of spirituality in the lives of the participants, the findings indicated spirituality does not exist in a vacuum. Other factors such as race, family influences, and changes in thought processes had an impact on how spirituality developed. Race made a difference in the practice of spirituality in that participants felt more comfortable worshipping with African Americans. This did not mean that these women discredited the spiritual bonds built with White people, but did suggest that other African Americans might be better able to understand them and offer spiritual counsel. Their family was important in instilling early beliefs and a foundation from which spirituality could be fostered, while also learning valuable lessons that had a spiritual basis. This was helpful in guiding their interactions and relationships with others. Spirituality was central in helping these women cope in difficult situations. However, spirituality was also a major factor in how the participants understood life experiences, whether those experiences were positive, challenging, or unexpected.

Another observation among the findings was that participants could define religion, faith, and spirituality, but often found it difficult to articulate the relationship among the concepts. Initially, responses suggested a sense of confusion. After additional reflection, it became clear that the participants might not have been challenged to think about the concepts in this manner, and may have seen the concepts working in their lives in a deeply embedded and intertwined fashion, which made it difficult to explain. Wade-Gayles (as cited in Hafner & Capper, 2005) stated, “African Americans of different hues and different ages . . . do not define spirituality. Instead, they witness for the spirit” (p. 625). For the women in this study, living spiritually led lives was more important than defining the term and its relation to faith and religion.

The study was limited because only one interview was held with participants. Additional interviews may have yielded more extensive responses. A longitudinal study examining spirituality from the freshmen year to the senior year would have provided an even richer perspective of spirituality. This study occurred on two different campuses; therefore, the participants’ responses were given within their institutional context. The authors caution readers to keep in mind that this study was carefully focused on the experiences of these 14 women. Their experiences cannot be generalized nor do they necessarily reflect the larger population of African American college women.

**IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS**

The incorporation of African American women with other spiritual traditions would have potentially made a difference in this study. However, the findings of this study reveal important implications for higher education but should be understood in the context of the experiences of 14 Christian, African American, collegiate women. According to these women, PWIs are not adequately equipped with resources that enhance their spiritual development. Spirituality was highlighted as a way to handle difficult situations and stress, therefore, the allotment of greater resources toward enhancing spiritual development seems necessary. Also, the women in this study struggled with drawing connections between faith, religion, and spirituality. While this may be indicative of African American cultural norms that cluster these ideas; it signifies an opportunity
to challenge college students to think more deeply about both the connectedness and the individual constructions of faith, religion, and spirituality.

A recent trend in university measures to diversify their institutions has resulted in the hiring of a growing number of chief diversity officers (Gose, 2006; Williams & Wade-Golden, 2008). Furthermore, there have been attempts to make sure campus programming and activities are reflective of the needs of all students. The findings of this study indicate that spirituality is also an important component of diversity. Therefore, university ministries or religious offices can take additional measures to diversify their practices by hiring local ministers or other individuals who can better understand the experiences of African American women as well as other diverse student populations. The findings suggest that African American undergraduate women are more likely to internalize many of the challenges they face and are less likely to seek campus resources such as the counseling center or campus ministries.

The implementation of spiritual mentoring programs (Parks, 2000), learning communities, which focus on spirituality, and the creation of a "spiritual safe space" program on campus might provide the additional outlets for African American women to express their spirituality or to identify spiritual resources. Programs that offer students an opportunity to learn different ways that spirituality is practiced, allow them to speak about how they view spirituality, or provide an opportunity for deep personal reflection on spirituality and as members of a larger campus community should be considered. These types of programs should not only involve students, but should also be open to faculty, staff, and the campus community (Hodges, 1999).

Moreover, college administrators and faculty who are willing to serve as a resource for spiritual development should be encouraged to make this known to any student in need of spiritual support. Similar to Lazarus-Stewart (2002), participants in this study lacked “space” to practice their spirituality. They were uncomfortable with the student organizations on campus and there was no physical space available that they found welcoming. This suggests that campuses should do a better job of creating physical spaces where students’ diverse spiritual beliefs will be acknowledged and accepted. Encouraging students to form organizations where they can practice spirituality with others is another way to assist students with their spiritual development.

Walker and Dixon's (2002) findings that religious and spiritual beliefs, in conjunction with practice was beneficial to African American students’ academic performance, programmatic efforts aimed toward incorporating spirituality within the curriculum, class discussions, and campus programs might prove to be beneficial for African American women. There may even be a collaborative effort between the women’s center and campus ministries.

Finally, it is critical that members of the higher education community actively explore their own spiritual development in relation to their work with students. Moran and Curtis (2004) encouraged educators to do in-depth soul-searching, maintain authenticity about their own spiritual journey, and to create safe spaces for spiritual dialogues. If institutional leaders and administrators are unclear about their own spirituality, there is little that can be done to support the needs of African American women or other student populations.

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