Womanist Preservation: An Analysis of Black Women's Spiritual Coping

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The highly spiritual and religious nature of Black women is fairly established in the social science arena, yet the transpersonal field yields very little discourse on this relevant nexus. This static void resembles the macro and micro aggressions Black women face routinely in the Western world which perpetually diminishes and nullifies their collective character and lived experiences. The ostracism Black women face regularly stems primarily from the triple threat of racism, sexism and socioeconomic status which thereby stimulates the inherent and roused use of spiritual practices as a form of resiliency. By analyzing existing research this investigation exposes the experiences, strategies, and research methods that apply to Black women's use of spirituality to cope with mundane and oppressive transgressions with the spiritualized support of family, church, and a deeply personal relationship with what Alice Walker calls the divine, Mama. Multiple measures, instruments, and culturally appropriate research structures are reviewed to explicate and expand the transpersonal womanist orientation.

Keywords: *coping, spirituality, lived experience, transpersonal, Black feminist, Afrocentric, triple-threat, Black Church, resilience, Africultural, womanist*

Black women have resilience, whether we like it or not
—Dr. Maya Angelou

Spirituality plays a central role in the everyday lives of people of African ancestry (Banks-Wallace & Parks, 2004; Mbiti, 1969/1990). One frequent and significant way spirituality is experienced in the lives of Black Americans is as an aid to manage and regulate a variety of stressors. Empirical data consistently reveals that religious and spiritual beliefs are used to inform coping practices in daily life (Bell & Nkomo, 1998; Marks, Nesteruk, Swanson, Garrison, & Davis, 2005; Mattis, 2000; Patton & McClure, 2009). This paper focuses specifically on how women of African ancestry in the United States infuse spiritual beliefs, practices, and experiences into, and as, their routine coping strategies. The unique intersection of aggressions directed toward Black womanhood (racism, sexism, and classism) impacts their use of spiritual activation in oppressive circumstances (Floyd-Thomas, 2006). Considering the societal influences that spark spiritual armoring as an act of resiliency by Black women it is crucial that transpersonal savants openly recognize and engage in measures to purposefully advance cross-cultural awareness, mutual healing, and collaboration.

In light of the current invisibility of Afrocentric spirituality in transpersonal psychology—a fact noted more than 30 years ago (Myers, 1985) that remains equally true today—there exists a vastness of opportunities to glean from the multitudes of phenomenal contributions precipitating from the cradle of civilization (Asante, 1984). As expressed by Grof (2008), modern Western transpersonal psychology was born in the 1960s from a resurged interest in "Eastern spiritual philosophies, various mystical traditions, meditation, ancient and aboriginal wisdom" with the goal of creating a "comprehensive and cross-culturally valid psychology" (p. 47). Further, he posited that this aspiring "fourth force" of psychology aspires to encompass the spiritual components of the human psyche (Grof, 2008). Despite this decree of inclusion, transpersonal scholarship has almost completely neglected spiritual systems in Black communities, and specifically those based in Africana women's experiences, with the womanist mind theory scholarship of transpersonal psychologist Juko Holiday (2010) as one of the primary exceptions. Articulating and integrating the breadth of Black women's spiritual

experiences would be a prolific point of entry for transpersonal researchers interested in incorporating Afrocentric cosmologies.

Given that transpersonal psychology seeks to examine and embody the scope of human spirituality, authentic Afrocentric spirituality needs to be fully incorporated into the field. As an integrated aspect of cultural identity, Afrocentric cosmology epitomizes a comprehensive transcendence model (Asante, 1984) and is undoubtedly a vital ingredient for diversification in transpersonal understandings of human spirituality and consciousness. The scant inclusion of identifiable Afrocentric transpersonal articulations have aged with very little advancement within the canon. Although this dynamic of limited cultural diversity is common in consciousness studies, transpersonal psychology is being beckoned to honor its overdue promise to favor a more comprehensive array of human experiences. Currently, transpersonal scholarship partners with women's spirituality thus delving into a feminist paradigm (Brooks, Ford, & Huffman, 2013; Gross, 1984; Louchakova & Lucas, 2007; Schavrien, 2008); yet within the field, coverage of Black women's spirituality, situated in an Afrocentric cosmology, remains negligible. This paper offers an abbreviated overview of the applied spiritual practices of Black women to the field of transpersonal psychology, while also expanding the womanist psychology canon. In an effort to establish a baseline of normative terminology, the first portion of this paper will attend to spiritual and religious research, and the second half will review the various uses of spirituality as a coping strategy.

Defining Spirituality

Even though defining spirituality is relative and personal (Thomas, 2001), social science research typically uses the term interchangeably with religiosity/religious (Lewis, Hankin, Reynolds, & Ogedegbe, 2007; Utsey et al., 2007b; Walker & Dixon, 2002), without distinction or cultural relevance. Embracing the ability to define one's relationship with the divine is a womanist act as demonstrated by Alice Walker who called the divine, Mama (Reiss, 2012) and who lauded "Loves the Spirit," in her explication of her coined term womanist (Walker, 1983). A limited number of empirical studies have defined African American spirituality specifically, a few core references are noted here as exemplars in cultural specificity. To start, personality and social psychologist

Jacqueline Mattis (2000) used a dual study to both define spirituality and to distinguish religiosity and spirituality among a sample of women of African ancestry. Next, Banks-Wallace and Parks (2004) conveyed findings from five Black female focus groups who collectively orient the characteristics of religion and spirituality. Finally, Lewis and her colleagues (2007) constructed a cross-gendered approach by sampling African American male and female participants to define spirituality, differentiate it in their cultural contexts from religion, and identify health outcomes in relation to spirituality. These research findings clearly provide different variables, yet they each intentionally acknowledge the specificity of spirituality in the lives of Black women.

Bound to authenticity, spirituality defined directly by a sample of women of African ancestry is fundamental. Highly representative of this populace, the definition synthesized from the written narratives of African American female participants (N = 128) in Study 1 (Mattis, 2000) is extremely salient data. Through the direct question, "What does spirituality mean to you?" this initial study advanced a definition of spirituality as privileged by Black women. Blending proper representation with culturally explicit markers (oral narrative format) results in a race, gender, and culturally specific context. Maintaining the utmost consideration for the central demographic is essential to ethnographic competency, and in this case Mattis applied such treatment to Black women's relationship to spirituality. Consequently, she surmised from Study 1 that,

> For the majority of respondents, spirituality is associated with a belief in the existence of a transcendent, nonmaterial dimension of life. For many women, spirituality refers in part to ideologies, practices, and experiences that reflect both a belief in a Higher Power (e.g., God) and evidence of the active presence of that Higher Power in daily life. Furthermore, many women define spirituality as a belief in the existence and active presence of spirits (e.g., ancestors) in daily life, and to abilities and experiences (e.g., near-death experiences) that defy scientific explanation. (p. 111)

In total, her study offered 13 themes as insight into the universal and unique properties associated with the lived experiences of women of African ancestry spiritual relationships. Of particular value to resilience is the

theme *willingness to cope*, which is underscored by her participants' accounts of exercising spirituality to handle and overcome adversity. Other themes accentuated the use of spirituality as a strengthening phenomenon such as: applied understanding, acceptance, and being in touch with self; attainment of peace, calm, and centeredness; and activating internalized faith, a positive outlook, and positive outcomes. Together these themes demonstrate spirituality as a concomitant with self-preservation. In a subsequent study, Mattis (2002) discerned spirituality from religiosity, finding that for her participants "'Spirituality' refers to an individual's personal relationship to and with the sacred and transcendent nature of life, the manifestation of a sense of connectedness with others (e.g., humans, spirits, and God), and in a quest for goodness" (p. 310). Although the author of this paper is particularly concerned with the impact of spirituality as a factor in resiliency, the distinct and collaborative properties attributed to religiosity are often equally instrumental in coping proficiency. After a brief outline of how religion and spirituality are differentiated in relevant research, the next portion of the paper will flesh out expressions of faith and spirituality, and the personalized role of the Black Church.

Religion and Spirituality

Focusing on the unique qualities of religion and spirituality, Mattis (2000) purposefully demonstrated how Black women differentiate religion from spirituality. Utilizing in-depth interviews, a sub-group of Study 1 (*N* = 21) furnished oral narratives in Study 2 from which three themes were identified. Theme one described an internalized process that consistently outlines a key value in religion as the "embrace of prescribed beliefs and ritual practices related to God" (p. 114). Theme two magnified religion as a conduit for spiritual expression; and the final theme deemed religion as structured by static doctrines and formal worship. Similarly, Nancy Boyd-Franklin (2010), expert in Black family dynamics, asserted that religion centralizes core beliefs that are practiced through church or faith based affiliation, an external process. These outward activities are concrete expressions and practices that are shared with others (Thomas, 2001). Additional empirical data suggests that both African American women and men concur that spirituality is a separate internal process that differs from religion in that it serves as personalized activity without imposing a strict belief in God (Lewis et al., 2007). Data from a highly religious sample offers testimonies from

Black adults who quantify their membership in the Black Church, a broad set of Christian institutions, as a fortress for both secular and sacred needs (Marks et al., 2005). The expression of faith in religious institutions and in personal spiritual practices can overlap, and among people of African ancestry these expressions are often molded into and emanate from extensive lived experiences.

Spiritual expression is a significant part of daily life whether via intentional religious worship or through the act of conscious living; either occurrence can activate and strengthen faith. Subsequently, faith strengthened by consistency enables a greater ability to deliberately fend off adversities (Walker, 2009). Reserves of faith are built and fortified through innumerable actions, which may include prayer, ancestral veneration, fasting, meditation, reading sacred texts, singing, testifying, praise dancing, hearing the Word, trance worship, altar creation, or sacrifice (material or monetary). For many people of African ancestry faith practices, either spiritual or religious acts, are forms of self-care and preservation (Bacchus et al., 2004).

Expressions of spirituality by women of African ancestry are richly varied with some girded in a religious context while others interplay with or exist without formalized religion. Likewise, spiritual growth, a personal phenomenon, can be prompted, cultivated, and perpetuated by private endeavors or outer stimuli. A prodigious number of Black women seek both solace and religious community within the Black Church, while privately exercising faith practices/rituals to create and witness sacred acts, healing, and spiritually connected experiences. In addition to faith communities, family-based interpersonal interactions are external experiences which are often intentionally constructed to challenge individuals and the collective to overcome distress by using spirituality as a cornerstone (Banks-Wallace & Parks, 2004). Interpersonal interactions may include active storytelling in the form of testimonials and narratives. Banks-Wallace and Parks (2004) described storytelling in the Diaspora as an activity rooted in African oral traditions. The stimulating effects of story-telling and listening reportedly invites Black women to reciprocate wisdom through verbal and non-verbal communication, strive toward spiritual clarity, and re-member spiritual truths (Dillard, 2008).

An important internal attribute of spirituality is a personal acceptance of the role of conservator or

participant in God's master plan, favoring a notion that one's circumstances, conditions, and experiences are divinely ordained (Banks-Wallace & Parks, 2004; Mattis, 2002; Patton & McClure, 2009). This outlook of interconnectedness between self and a divine entity(ties) provides the benefit to accept what might otherwise be perceived as a negative experience instead as a fortuitous, necessary, and sacred manifestation of Divine will (Mattis, 2002). Another significant internal stimulus routinely employed by Black women, classified as an avoidance coping technique, is the concealment of spiritual experiences (e.g., communicating with God and/or spirits and ancestors), wherein Black women purposefully maintain a level of confidentiality about personal psychospiritual or exceptional encounters. These venerated experiences remain undisclosed beyond close social networks to retard any risk of the behavior being pathologized, marginalized, or dismissed (Mattis, 2002). Many mystical encounters risk marginalization within the traditional Black Church although some denominations openly regard glossolalia (speaking in tongues), praise dancing, catching the spirit, or other personal experiences as plausible, normative, or even extremely meaningful.

Although the formalities of the Black Church at large may compartmentalize nonconventional experiences, congregants who fellowship together may develop or form *church families*. Generally, the church is also credited for offering physical, financial, and emotional support with positive communal relationships and acclaimed role models (Thomas, 2001). Communal supports established by Black Churches primarily focus on social welfare ventures such as affordable and senior housing, pre-K through college academies, and building both charitable and financial agencies that help sustain surrounding communities. Frequently called a *church home*, the Black Church is highly regarded as a necessary place that supports congregants by offering space for expression, status, meaning, refuge, catharsis, and other worldly issues (Nye, 1992). To this end, direct involvement in the affairs of the Black Church may include participation by laity in non-cleric roles such as: musician, cantor, or choir director; usher, board or committees member; deacon, *church mother*, missionary, or children and teen group leader; sacristan, liturgist, devotion or altar server, and community outreach liaison. Boyd-Franklin and Lockwood (2009) expounded on confidant roles in the Black Church such as kinship and child-rearing aids who are of particular value to persons raising children in single parent households and who represent the *church family* model. When utilized, these various components of the Black Church are integral to the meaningfulness of religious fellowship and the activation of religiously based coping strategies.

As reflected in her place as a social change agent working toward securing civil rights, the Black Church stands as a public forum for Black women to speak before congregants on matters of devotion and civic duty. This trend in the Black Church began more than two centuries ago. Although vaguely noted in mainstream scholarly research, holy women of the late 18th and early 19th centuries such as Jarena Lee, Rebecca Cox Jackson, and Maria Stewart are celebrated for their religious and activist contributions, and are revered as foremothers in religious womanist and feminist circles. Furthermore, women like Sojourner Truth, an itinerant preacher, whose commitment to evangelism framed the mid-19th century, presented an ardent faith dedicated to Black liberation and women's suffrage (Brah & Phoenix, 2004). These pioneers and prophetesses of faith are exemplary spiritual and religious role models whose valiant coping in the face of legally sanctioned servitude and denied alienable rights is the composition of the proverbial shoulders on which Black women still stand (Walker, 2009). Using a faith-centered approach, these women of significance prevailed in a precarious era while facing enormous adversities even in sanctuaries. Remembering the fortitude of these and other religious women leaders is another potential spiritual and religious coping medium that utilizes and re-members the importance of ancestors, intergenerational partnerships, and village oriented compeers to resist oppressive wrongdoings, paralyzing invisibility, and other marginalizing practices.

Afrocentric Spiritual Coping

Prioritizing the necessity to define religion and spirituality from a culturally specific lens obligates this paper to highlight coping research in relationship to African American women. At the time of this investigation, an instrument specific to the coping styles of women of African ancestry is not readily located among available psychological assessments. Some fairly recent studies utilize the conventional Coping Orientations to Problems Experienced scale (COPE; Greer & Chwalisz, 2007; West, Donovan, & Roemer, 2010), or the Coping Strategies Inventory (Bynum & Brody, 2005).

However, as an alternative, the 30-item Africultural Coping Systems Inventory (Utsey, Adams, & Bolden, 2000) is a culture-specific instrument validated by and with African Americans that cites limitations with conventional measurements. Although the shift to this culturally specific tool is not unanimous, numerous subsequent research studies focusing on culturally relevant issues such as the coping styles of: Black adolescents (Constantine, Donnelly, & Myers, 2002), male and female adults (Utsey, Bolden, Lanier, & Williams, 2007a), female college students (Greer, 2011; Robinson-Wood, 2009), as well as the initial development of the Racism-Related Coping Scales (Forsyth & Carter, 2014) employ the ACSI.

The intention of the ACSI measurement is to capture, through a cultural context, positive coping strategies used by African Americans as a response to daily stressors (Utsey et al., 2000.). The four themes of this measure include: (a) cognitive/emotional debriefing, (b) collective coping, (c) spiritual-centered coping, and (d) ritual-centered coping. Specifically, these four culturally relevant qualities are intended to expand beyond the problem- and emotion-focused coping system supplanted in traditional Eurocentric measurements. In order to establish an ethical protocol the ACSI evolved through means tested procedures and calculations. In the ACSI pilot study, a 57-item prototype was tested by an African American sample (N = 72); post analyses the measure was reduced to a 42-item paper and pencil self-report ACSI prototype. Afterward, concurrently administered in Study 1, a short 30-item version of Ways of Coping Questionnaire (Folkman & Lazarus, 1985) and the ACSI were cross-referenced for comparison; the results fit an item reduction to the current 30-item ACSI. Further, the construct validity process actualized in subsequent Study 2, confirmed appropriate psychometric properties.

For greater specificity, a validated woman-centered scale similar to the African-American Women's Stress Scale (Watts-Jones, 1990) or the Black Women's Spirituality/Religiosity Measure (Mattis, 1995) could be added to focus solely on gender preferences, such as prayer. Prayer, though important to both genders, is highlighted in empirical data for its strength in the collective (sister prayer), dyadic (prayer partner), and individual experiences reported by women (Boyd-Franklin, 2010; Marks et al., 2005). Consistent with other gendered and non-gendered findings (Everett, Hall, & Hamilton-Mason, 2010; Lewis et al., 2007),

the current ACSI model suggests that spiritual beliefs and practices (including prayer) are essential coping strategies that support Black people's ability to surmount adversities.

Black Women's Adversities

There is no shortage of literature positing that Black women face adversities; specifically, many studies point to the *triple threat* embedded in gender, race, and socioeconomic status (Bell & Nkomo, 1998; Everett et al., 2010; Mattis, 2002; Terhune, 2008). What is not clear from any of the reviewed studies related to coping among Black female populations inside the United States is what constitutes an everyday experience. A review of relevant coping research reveals that women of African ancestry are regularly challenged to cope with stress (Marks et al., 2005); stereotypes (Greer, 2011); academic (Boyd-Franklin, 2010; Walker & Dixon, 2002) and/or work settings (Bacchus & Holley, 2004; Harris-Robinson, 2006); physical and mental health factors (Bowen-Reid & Harrell, 2002; Mattis & Grayman-Simpson, 2013; Reed & Neville, 2014); and family life (King, Burgess, Akinyela, Counts-Spriggs, & Parker, 2005) on a routine basis.

In an effort to focus on more common daily experiences, coping related to chronic conditions such as breast cancer, Alzheimer's, HIV/AIDs, obesity, diabetes, abusiveness, or severe mental illness are intentionally excluded from this paper. The breadth of research that supports the use of spiritual coping by women of African ancestry is extensive and relevant, but due to the confines of this paper only dynamics that are generally more commonplace or typical in the lives of Black women in North America will be addressed herein. Following a brief discussion of the typical stressors and common non-spiritual coping strategies related to African American women, methods and contexts in which spirituality and faith communities assist coping will be examined.

Stress, Stressors, and Stressful Experiences

Stress and stressors factor into multiple aspects of life. For African descendants native to the United States stressors often overlap as both internal and external processes and are initiated and exacerbated by racial and class divides. African American women face the additional discriminatory practices reaped from sexism and gendered racism which plainly provoke and instigate stress ergo necessitating coping activation for well-being (West et al., 2010). According to Everett et al., (2010), "Stressful experiences are construed as

person-environment transactions, in which the impact of an external stressor is mediated by the African American woman's appraisal of the stressor and the psychological, social, and cultural resources at her disposal" (p. 31).

Spirituality has been identified as a central component to coping with anti-social behavior, psychological distress, and personal plights (Bacchus & Holley, 2004). Per Boyd-Franklin (2010), spirituality is a survival mechanism for Black women. Learned resistance to internalized stressors often emerges from households who actively offer nurturing and effective coping skills to developing daughters (Bell & Nkomo, 1998). Emphasizing home-training's impact on coping, Bell and Nkomo discussed the matronly habit of *racial-sexual socialization*, a sub-conscious fear for the safety of young Black boys, while avidly preparing young girls to resist and transcend social ills. They went on to disclose another form of armoring which rests in the *parental-child* model, whereby a single parent relies on the girl child to manage some adult level responsibilities. The crucible of this "home training" is to protect and prepare adolescents to properly temper micro and macro aggressions, and the potentially dehumanizing effects of stereotyping.

Stereotypes and Aggressions

Another challenge for the Black American family's child-rearing practices is mindful priming for young girls to avoid the stress generated by the exaggerated stigma of the strong Black woman, as well as other racially based stereotypes. Often a very subtle aggression, stereotyping affects Black women from several different axes (Greer, 2011). Racially motivated misjudgments of a woman's character can impact daily interactions, long-term goals and associations, and intensify discriminatory practices. Although being labeled as remarkably strong presents innumerable challenges, stereotypes rooted in insidious historical falsehoods also intentionally vilify and victimize Black female identity.

Three of the most systemic stereotypes (anchored in colonialism, gender inequality, and forced enslavement) are: (a) the mammy—fat, jovial, dutiful, (b) the jezebel—promiscuous, untrustworthy, immoral, and (c) the sapphire—loud, emasculating, and aggressive (Thomas, 2001). The cross to bear from these often public assaults lies in the laps of Black women who risk internalizing these or other detrimental personas, especially among those lacking sufficient skills, fortitude,

and support to cope with or negate these deprecating pigeonholes.

Despite demonstrative public efforts by womanist/feminist activists, the Black Power movement, and the civil rights campaign to extinguish flagrant distortions, Black women still face false standards of beauty (Everett et al., 2010), objectification, and bias that inhibits respect. For example, a few years ago an internationally paralyzing blog was published online by *Psychology Today* (Kanazawa, 2011), falsely claiming that Black women are less attractive than White and Asian women (errors in sampling, methodology, and data analysis were identified and the data was promptly withdrawn from its primary publication). In order to properly defend against contentious or direct misrepresentations such as this, Shorter-Gooden (2004) described three tactful coping strategies available to address short-term instances of racism or sexism: (a) role-flexing (b) avoiding, and (c) standing up and fighting back. Role-flexing describes temporarily catering to the modes of behavior and mannerisms of the White majority while subtly proving them wrong; avoiding spells out a strategy to ignore or dismiss oneself from biased or prejudiced instances; and standing up and fighting back is the act of standing one's ground, speaking up, or addressing the issue in a direct and proactive manner.

These skills can be activated and promoted by an individual's own resources, one's family, or through leadership roles in the Black Church. Leadership roles in the Black Church can actualize as extended family (church family) that, through intentionality, cultivates strategies that introduce or increase affirming, pro-social, and self-regulating behaviors (Walker, 2009). More private behaviors such as praying or transformative reading of sacred text can promote mindful approaches to stressors, too (Bacchus & Holley, 2004; Mattis, 2002). Also, the personal relationship that comes from being in communion with God or another divine being can elicit self-awareness and appropriate responses (Banks-Wallace & Parks, 2004). This level of prosocial spiritual intelligence can be of tremendous value in daily struggles, especially among young adults transitioning away from stable protective environments.

Academia and the Workforce

Women of African ancestry who pursue a higher education are not exempt from inequalities. In fact, stereotype threats and micro aggressions such

as those referenced above commonly migrate into and potentially emerge from institutions of higher learning. Despite being widely recognized as places of advanced thought, colleges and universities often perpetuate racist, sexist/gender-sexist, and classist scenarios.

In spite of this triple threat, African American women are found to significantly outperform their collegiate male counterparts (Patton & McClure, 2009). Although the origins of this alarming disparity are difficult to pinpoint, it can in part be attributed to a greater spiritual life among women. In a racially diverse investigation of the spiritual life of college students, a study by Walker and Dixon (2002) quantified the spiritual life of African American and European American college students. Results from the researchers' quantitative analysis demonstrated enhanced academic achievement for students of either race as greater with stronger religious or spiritual practices, yet the overall effect of stronger spirituality failed to translate into leading academic achievement for Black students in contrast to their counterparts. Conversely, in a comparison of African American students (N = 102) who attended Historically Black Colleges/University (HBCU) and African Americans (N = 101) who attended predominately White college/universities (PWCU), students at the HBCUs earned better grades, had higher matriculation rates, and overall greater access to spiritual communities (Greer & Chwalisz, 2007). Taken together, these studies suggest that Blacks students who attend predominately White institutions (PWIS) are affected by some factor—perhaps greater overwhelm— no matter how dedicated they are to their spiritual or religious practice(s).

In coping with the gravities of campus-life and increased perceived minority stress, Black students at PWIS suffer more from lower self-esteem, and difficulties with well-being and adjustment (Walker & Dixon, 2002). Specializing in human development and psychology, Tracy Robinson-Wood (2009) compiled coping data regarding Black college women at PWIS using a mixed-method design inclusive of the ACSI, and found that collective coping was the most valued strategy among these students. Reasonably it can be argued that isolation, especially in a potentially oppressive environment, can trigger both a desire for space to divulge personal stories and foster interconnectedness with others, both of which are highly valued attributes within the culture of Black women. Illustrative of her willingness to centralize the

priorities of the culture, Robinson-Wood (2009) asserted that, "Among Black people, collective centeredness is central to being in the world" (p. 82). The collective nature of HBCUs accompanies the coping preference of togetherness.

In another concentrated study published a few months later, using purely qualitative data sourced from 14 African American college women, Patton and McClure (2009) unpacked six major themes related to student participants' use of spirituality as a coping method. The reported themes in their study represent the development of spiritually led lives via the participants' awareness of and spiritual responses to: (a) realties 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 life experiences associated with the themes affirm both the crude number of adversities shared by Black women in White institutions, and the spiritual methods invoked to subdue the subversive effects. Amidst their spiritually derived coping strategies obtaining support from conventional academic resources is blatantly absent. This Patton and McClure study, based in faith development theory and a Black feminist thought theoretical framework, affirmed the nature of spiritual living as an essential coping construct for young Black women in college whose resiliency predominately relies on spirituality, religion, faith, family, and community. Adhering to the coping preferences of the students in the study, Patton and McClure suggested that PWIS implement spiritual mentoring programs, academic communities centered on spirituality, and *spiritual safe spaces* to support the resiliency efforts of this portion of the student body. Additionally, the authors recommended personal spiritual awareness among faculty and staff members. Enacting these culturally responsive dynamics may counter some of the systemic dissonance by lessening remote awareness, inaccessibility, and potential avoidance of academic support systems.

Also pointing out the necessity of spiritual connections for college attendees, is a case study presenting the effects of isolation on a lone African American student; therein, Boyd-Franklin (2010) acknowledged the mindful strategies employed by a school counselor to support a struggling student. Three treatment measures were prescribed for this Black student who was identified as struggling with separation anxiety induced by relocating away from both her biological

and church families. First, with her permission, she was introduced to an African American female mentor figure. Second, the student, with the mentor's guidance, established a local church home (that provided *watch care*, which is watching over someone who is temporarily not able to attend their church home) where she joined the choir. Finally, the student was prompted to start a campus ministry to welcome other isolated students (Boyd-Franklin, 2010). The author pointed out that in the Black community, seeking mental health services can be stigmatizing, and persons utilizing such services risk being labeled as insane or crazy, therefore other more culturally appropriate measures are recommended.

Also of major significance, Dr. Boyd-Franklin pointed out that feelings of cultural isolation is often typical to students attending PWIS and can potentially lead to depression. The marginalizing effects of cultural isolation is prominent in both collegiate arenas as well as in predominately White working environments. An increased risk of invisibility or isolation is credible for women of African ancestry in the workforce in that, like their collegiate counterparts, the possibility of facing the triple threat is ever-present. When mental isolation couples with racism, gender discrimination, and unequal salary compensation, with Black women in the United States earning 63% of what White men earn for example (Hill, 2016), the negative effects can impact professional Black women at all levels, even those in leadership positions (Walker, 2009).

Indoctrinated with the notion that as a Black woman you have to be twice as good, work twice as hard, and stay strong (keep your chin up) in the face of systemic injustices is a prevailing form of racial socialization, coping that strives to avoid defeat and any potential loss of associated livelihood (Terhune, 2008). This double-edged form of internalized armoring is an integral part of the study by Bell and Nkomo (1998) who explicated the chasms experienced by Black women in corporate America. Using a semi-structured, open-ended interview life-history methodology, the Bell and Nkomo study distinguished four stages in life: (1) early life experiences, (2) education and college years, (3) early career entry and development, and (4) personal life sphere. The results, similar to the home-training model presented earlier reveal that beginning in the early stages of a Black girl's life, mothers are the primary agents in armoring their daughters with appropriate coping skills to reduce what could be life-long exposure to stereotypes and intersectionality. Overall, each stage reinforces learned coping skills for self-preservation in instances of isolation, stigmatization, and gender inequality.

In their examination of 10 professional Black women, Bacchus and Holley (2004) used an exploratory design to garner what is meaningful within their participants' independent work experiences. Rendered from the team's face-to-face interviews, no difference between religion and spirituality is evident, and the cumulative definition of spirituality is a belief in a ubiquitous God. Bacchus and Holley (2004) indicated five specific functions of spirituality when coping with work-related stressors, including: (a) as a protective factor, (b) source of personal strength, (c) resource for general guidance, (d) resource for general guidance in decision making, and (e) as a resource for reappraising stressors. These factors demonstrate the critical need to embrace spiritually oriented professional resources within organizations to potentially boost morale, demonstrate inclusion, and build cultural awareness. Additionally, cultural competency built into employee resources and benefits can help retard aggressions against women and create a less hostile environment for everyone. Moreover, purposefully addressing and eradicating institutional and systemic *isms* can deter anti-social encounters and lower work related stressors and corresponding illnesses.

Disabling Societal Illnesses

The necessity of coping with health related issues among African Americans is due in large part to poor accessibility to proper health care, and the resultant disparaging health care outcomes. Bowen-Reid and Harrell (2002) argued that the unparalleled health disparities between Black and White Americans are situated in the context of racism. Countless mainstream messages of culture-related illnesses, cognitive inferiority, and mental and behavioral pathologies continue to stunt access and desirability of treatment options among Blacks. Equally as important, a history of medical apartheid continuously contributes to the dissonance felt by Black Americans who interpret mental health care, in particular, as an anti-spiritual antithesis to well-being. This learned avoidance or taboo, is bitterly embedded in evidentiary history and thereby stimulates blatant resistance to the medical/therapeutic establishment.

In an effort to underscore the dire effects of this sinkhole Bowen-Reid and Harrell (2002) researched the combination of racism and health, stating that, "Given the prevalence of life-threatening illnesses and

diseases among African Americans, it is important that scholars continue to investigate those factors that mitigate poor health outcomes" (p. 21). Using a sample of undergraduates (N = 155) the researchers focused on spirituality as an intermediary. Incorporating psychological instruments and medical devices, observations conclude that the symptoms of social diseases are tempered by high spirituality. Through their investigation, Bowen-Reid and Harrell traced the effects of racist experiences on physiological outcomes and self-reports of general health, and the role of spirituality on health as a protecting agent against racism. From their research they determined that individuals who openly address social digressions fare better, and have lower health risks; likewise, this same phenomenon can be applied within families or communities who engage in open discourse for spiritual healing.

Family Ties and Health

Centralizing religious beliefs as a positive effect on the health of African Americans and Afro-Caribbeans, King et al. (2005) synthesized data from 17 multigenerational families (N = 51). Families represented in the study came from multigenerational households, with most reporting a shared religious orientation and a transmission of cross-generational values. Of major significance, the families in the King et al. (2005) study reported that the family's health rests conservatively in the prime health and resiliency of the mid-generation personage or *sandwich generation* (see also Everett et al., 2010), who acts as primary caregiver to elder parents as well as their own off-spring. Through coded narratives the researchers thematically determined that, these families spiritualize, rather than medicalize, their health care beliefs.

Four ideals emerged from their reports including: (a) faith in divine healing with no human agency, (b) faith in divine healing through doctors, (c) faith in divine healing through health or religious behavior modification, and (d) faith in acceptance of health outcomes (King et al., 2005). Apparent in these finding is that conviction in a Divine Source is fundamental to coping with any health related issues. Not surprisingly, based on the findings in this research health is perceived as a spiritual domain among the reporting study participants. Coping behaviors such as prayer, affirmations, laying of hands, candle burning, and spiritual surrender are likely to be important forms of health intervention (Parks, 2007). As demonstrated by the research presented, multiple spiritualized approaches can and are often used interchangeably by Black women and their families to optimize desired health outcomes and cope with related challenges.

Conclusion

Given the minor treatment of Black women's issues in psychospiritual studies, a prime opportunity exist to align with conscientious scholarship and therapeutic resources to craft culturally appropriate contributions. The cultural hegemony in mainstream social science research is not beyond repair. As aspiring forerunners in consciousness studies, it is the role of transpersonal scholars to further diversify the field, pursuant to embracing the complexities of human existence and transcendence. Although this paper does not purport to encapsulate all forms of divine expression among women of African ancestry, it is intended to open the transpersonal canon to several research processes and outcomes. Opportunities to further womanist transpersonal thought and womanist psychology are copious. Several primary considerations are provided below.

In an effort to fully capture the nuances of spiritual coping by Black women, a number of ethnographic methodologies are a part of current research. Primarily, the development and utilization of culture-specific measures and methodologies are a principle aspects of a matrix that preferences: sacred and spiritual healing methods; racially and ethnically validated scales and instruments; open-ended questionnaires; face-to-face interviews, oral history data collection; interviewee transcript and draft reviews; culturally literate, sensitive and astute researchers/interviewers; and culturally specific theoretical research paradigms to avidly reduce invisibility and marginalization. Foremost, the research methods must aim to work in tandem with the participants' lived experience, cultural milieu, and heritage with unquestionable commitment, respect, and accountability (Lewis, 2008).

Providing an impressive example, Sanchez-Hucles (2016) complemented her case study investigations by culling culturally competent theoretical and empirical research to extract womanist coping strategies. Available as collective armoring, the womanist coping tenets she noted acknowledge the soul wounds of historical trauma, sourcing relational and kinfolk connections, and tapping into the strength of ancestors as significant measures used to preserve the folk culture of Black women. By

utilizing tenets proffered by other researchers of color, Sanchez-Hucles culturally examined and validated the experiences of Black women through a womanist lens.

As previously addressed, observing the legacy of African oral history through storytelling (Dillard, 2008; Walker, 2009) is a prime research method and a viable way to obtain rich data. It is the act of storytelling and sharing experiences, either sacred or secular, that enlivens the spiritual knowingness of women of African ancestry (Banks-Wallace & Parks, 2004; Parks, 2007) while potentially furnishing space for cathartic testimony. For further consideration, at the discretion of the participant(s), utilization of spiritual practices may also be appropriate during research studies and may elicit a connection and relationship between the researcher(s) and participant(s). Designing studies and projects with apposite competencies provides room for individualization and cultural alignment. As a prime example, oral narrative researcher Kim Vaz (2006), developed a womanist psychotherapeutic model that utilizes Yoruba mythology for individual and couples' counseling. Psychospiritual research studies developed with an authentic womanist focus are able to provide academic and professional resources and ultimately support inclusionary models aimed at individual, couple, group, institutional, and community healing. Most importantly, it is imperative that all researchers in the transpersonal arena articulate findings, theories, and critiques with cultural sensitivity to create meaningful contributions, and to broaden perspectives.

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