

THE EFFECTIVENESS OF PRAYER IN COPING:
AN AFRICAN AMERICAN FEMALE
PERSPECTIVE

By

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There is no doubt that the shock of slavery was traumatic for us. The culture from which we had been taken was humanly oriented, organized on the basis of the recognition of the human need for love, warmth, and interrelationship. Oppressed by humanizing circumstances, we still found something in which to recognize enough of ourselves to revitalize our souls-to create new selves

Marimba Ani, (as cited by Grady, 2003, p.11).

As an African American woman, I wanted to do more than just examine the numbers regarding the depressing facts in relation to stress and African American women. After reading a journal article concerning African American women and their most significant trend of utilizing prayer to annihilate stress, I decided that a closer, more intimate look at the coping trends of African American women was important and needed. It is also important that, as a subject and moral agent with power in this world, I examine the phenomenon beneath the numbers in order to view the positive aspects of my culture. Since the import of the Africans to America, there have been numerous atrocities done to our women. To recognize that the majority of us 1) have survived, 2) have maintained good, positive self-images, and 3) have experiences that are valuable is important. To recognize not just the few of us who are famous due to our acting, singing, athletic, or political activities but that every, single one of us beautiful, Black women have a story to tell – a positive story of determination, resilience, and strength. A story that says in the end our beliefs, actions, and behaviors are valid. A story of a belief that somehow, someone, or something will change and our future will be better than our past. This is story I wished to study and to share. It is my way of affirming my culture, my sisters, and myself. Thank you for this opportunity and for listening to our story.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

For, while the tale of how we suffer, and how we are delighted, and how we may triumph is never new, it always must be heard. There isn't any other tale to tell, it's the only light we've got in all this darkness.

James Baldwin, 1985, p. 93

Background of the Problem

As do most individuals in American society, an African American woman daily encounters common stressors, such as: family, illness, financial pressures, etc. However, an individual within the culture of African American women must also face the unique trials and obstacles innate to her *blackness* and *womanhood* (Almquist, 1989; Mitchem, 2004; Robinson, 2000). Grady (2003) states the following:

Women of color must deal with the realities that they are both female and nonwhite in a society defined by patriarchy and white supremacy. In addition, many face the added burden of poverty. Taken together, these factors have created unique problems for women of color” (p. 8).

A review of the literature by Jackson and Sears (1992) state, “African American women do not see themselves exclusively or primarily as victims, but display resistance and strategies for survival in the face of oppression” (p. 185). Jendayo Grady (2003) expounds in her dissertation research:

African American women, especially in urban environments, are bombarded with the chronic stressors of single-parenthood, racism, sexism, neighborhood violence, and poverty. In addition, many African Americans experience an accumulation of major life events which may include the death of a family member, a child sent to jail, the loss of a job, and diagnosis of a disease (p. 2).

In their research, Utsey and Ponterotto (2000) found that “African Americans are exposed to unique stressors that require them to call on their entire repertoire of coping strategies” (p. 80). They defined coping as “the process whereby an individual attempts to manage, through cognitive and behavioral efforts, external or internal demands that are assessed as exceeding one’s resources” (p. 75).

African American females report that “prayer, when combined with their spiritual beliefs” is the most significant and frequently used coping strategy (Jackson & Sears, 1992, p. 185). Utilization of prayer as a coping strategy provides a means for African American women to cope and the stamina to deal with their normal, everyday pressures. Jackson and Sears indicated that the coping response of prayer provided African American women “a sense of strength with which to meet personal crisis” (p. 185).

Psychology has a long history of studying gender and racial differences. However, until recently the findings were essentially comparative and appeared critical of those who differed from the established norm. While Sigmund Freud worked with women, he believed them to be inferior to men, and his theories of women were based on dysfunction. Alfred Adler contended that women’s functioning was influenced by their disempowered place in society. More recently, approaches have included a variety of

cross-racial and gender-aware theories, one such theory is the *Black Women's Critical Social Theory* by Patricia Hill Collins (2003).

Statement of the Problem

Every day we get closer to living in a global community. With distances between cultures narrowing, we have much wisdom to gain by learning to understand other people's cultures and permitting ourselves to accept that there is more than one version of reality.

Malidoma Patrice Somé

In the executive summary of the *United States Surgeon General's* report (1999) on Mental Health, David Satcher, stated "culture counts" (p. 2) and emphasis was placed on the idea that cultural variables operate as significant factors in the mental and behavioral health of minority people. He called for the development of,

Culturally-relevant and culturally-rich conceptual frameworks and their related models for effective prevention and treatments with racial and ethnic factors of beliefs, attitudes, expectations, values, and family norms integrated into a historically shaped manner of 'looking at the world', interpreting the meanings of objects and events through that worldview and problem solving strategies that include culturally prescribed ways of coping with life's stressors (p. 3).

According to "Federal Classifications," one of the four most recognized minority groups are "African Americans (blacks)" (p. 2). African American women commonly display culturally-derived skills and techniques as strategies of survival. It is only from culturally-relevant vantage points one can truly see how successful many African American women are as they deal with and overcome the obstacles in their lives. These

same women, when viewed from a western worldview, may not seem as successful in overcoming the obstacles with which they routinely deal. Morris and Robinson (1996) state, “America is becoming more and more diverse everyday. Proactive maneuvers are needed to ensure that all Americans have the mental health services that are appropriate to their needs” (p. 56). Psychology is therefore, socially and morally obligated to respond to the Surgeon General’s call for culturally-relevant and culturally-rich frameworks, preventions, and treatments regarding African American women.

Jackson and Sears (1992) infer that African American women possess traces of an African worldview that helps them develop coping strategies, which ameliorate stress even when facing difficult situations (p. 184). Jackson and Sears therefore, propose:

An Africentric worldview, [which] would provide a more appropriate and positive framework for appraising the experiences of African American women.

Africentric worldview is characterized by certain philosophical assumptions and principles that originated in Africa and that are often reflected in the values, attitudes, and customs of Africans and people of African descent (p.185).

Jackson and Sears have found, “African Americans with an Africentric worldview were more likely to be optimistic, holistic, and spiritual than those who were not Africentric. They were also more likely to possess intrinsic self-worth. In addition, the Africentric worldview is culturally based” (p. 187).

Jackson and Sears (1992) also state, “insight into their (African American’s) ability to endure and cope can provide direction for counselors in practice” (p. 188). In order to gain a complete understanding of the rationale behind the success of these traditional and cultural coping strategies, psychology must make use of what has already

been appraised regarding effective coping with daily stress, according to accepted theory. Then it can look deeply into the phenomenon that accounts for an individual's, or cultural group's ability to survive and cope with stressful situations. Given the effectiveness shown in the research literature (Jackson & Sears, 1992; Henderson, Gore, Davis, & Condon, 2003), of African American women to endure stress, it is essential that their coping behaviors and experiences be examined closely in order to break the coping strategy of prayer down into common underlying threads or concepts. Stokes (2002) states:

Knowledge about the variables that are related to the coping efficacy beliefs of African American women may lead to more comprehensive strategies that can be used to increase coping efficacy and increase successful counseling outcomes" (p. 13).

This study is a foundational step in providing a deeper understanding and an increased awareness of counselors and psychologists regarding prayer as used by African American women. Thoughtful consideration of the common threads or concepts within prayer when used by African American women may also be used to enhance the coping efficacy of other minorities, as well as the dominant culture.

This study will view African American women's prayer practices through the lens of a feminist theoretical perspective utilizing the evolving stress and coping theories of Lazarus (1966), Lazarus and Cohen (1977), and Lazarus and Folkman (1984). "Feminism is concerned with thoughtful action and liberatory praxis designed to deconstruct and free us from limited ways of knowing" (Spector, 1992, p. 20). An ethnographic strategy of inquiry will permit the researcher to learn more about the cultural tacit knowledge of this

group (Cresswell, 2002; Patton, 2002). Viewing African American women's practice of prayer through the lenses that they themselves may view it may provide a framework for affirming both African American's and women's beliefs and behaviors.

Purpose of the Study

Both society and science have recognized the need for acknowledging individuals according to their own cultural worldview. Psychology too has recognized the benefits of developing cultural frameworks from which methods and techniques are derived. However, mental health professionals have yet to recognize prayer as an important coping strategy within the African American women's culture.

The goal of this research has been to investigate the prayer experiences utilized by African American women in coping with daily stress. Using an Africentric, Feminist theoretical orientation, the common threads or concepts of this phenomenon have been isolated and identified.

Guiding Research Question

This study seeks to answer the following question:

What common inherent threads or concepts are present within the phenomenon of prayer that enables it to be an effective coping strategy for African American women in their reduction of daily stress?

Definition of Terms

African American: American citizens of African descent (Collins, 2004, p. 30). "African Americans represent a substantial subgroup of Blacks who reside in the United States. [However,] the terms Black and African American are used interchangeably in much of the literature" (Constantine, Lewis, Conner, & Sanchez, 2000, p. 29). For the

purposes of this study, the researcher will use the term African American, but will quote the literature verbatim.

African American culture: activities and traditions that stem from African civilizations and that have been shaped by phenomena such as traditional African religions, slavery, and segregation, as well as, Western and European cultures.

The day-to-day activities of many African Americans consist of numerous religious and spiritual practices and traditions that have been woven into the fabric of the African American culture (Jackson & Sears, 1992, p. 185).

Africentric worldview: “a framework comprising interacting philosophical assumptions that structure an individual’s way of viewing the world and relationship to the world” (Jackson & Sears, 1992, p. 185). Bridges' (2001) comments agree, “the Africentric worldview... helped African Americans to forge their own worldview” (p. ix). Jackson and Sears continue, “Certain philosophical assumptions and principles that originated in Africa and are often reflected in the values, attitudes, and customs of Africans and people of African descent (p. 185).

Coping: As stated earlier, “the process whereby an individual attempts to manage, through cognitive and behavioral efforts, external or internal demands that are assessed as exceeding one’s resources” (Utsey and Ponterotto, 2000, p. 75). Strang and Strang (2001) defined coping as the “ongoing cognitive and behavioral efforts to manage specific demands that are appraised as taxing the resources of a person” (p. 129). Coping as it is used in this study refers to the efforts utilized to increase manageability in times of psychological stress.

Coping strategies are defined according Lazarus' categorization criteria, as listed in the *Baker Encyclopedia of Psychology*, as follows "direct actions; including problem-solving skills that aim to modify the actual stress and palliative (soothing or claming) modes, which relieve the impact of the stress without changing the situation" (Brenner, 1993, p. 1122). For the purposes of this study, coping strategies are the direct actions that are actively used to cope with, adapt to, or overcome vulnerabilities or risks and the coping process referred to will be that of a palliative mode.

Prayer: "an attempt to foster identification with God or gods while seeking salvation and/or enlightenment" (Spilka, Hood, Hunsberger, & Gorsuch, 2003, p. 65). Prayer does not necessarily need to be synonymous with religiosity or spirituality. However, religion is the context in which prayer has probably been most explicitly institutionalized, and it is with that context in mind that this study examines prayer.

Religion: "the outward practice of spiritual understanding and/or the framework for a system of beliefs, values, codes of conduct and rituals" (Strang & Strang, 2001, p. 128).

Spirit: "derived from the Latin *spiritus*, or the essential part of the person which controls the mind, and the mind controls the body. Thus, the spirit is the vital life force, which motivates people and influences one's life, health, behavior and relationships" (Baldacchino & Draper, 2001, p. 834). Strang, Strang, and Ternstedt (2002) define *spiritus* as "meaning 'breath, make alive', which suggests a broad concept of the essence of life" (p. 50).

Spiritual: “the search for existential meaning within any given life experience, which may exist in the absence of any clear practice of a religion or faith, and may or may not involve prayer and/or meditation” (Strang & Strang, p. 128).

Spirituality: “the presence of a personal relationship with a Higher Power that affects the way one operates in the world” (Armstrong, as cited in Strokes, 2002, p. 8). and also may or may not involve prayer and/or meditation. According to Miller and Thoresen (2003) “prayer is a private form of spirituality, whereas religious practice, such as attending religious services is a more public form” (p. 29).

Stress: “a universal human and animal phenomenon, [resulting] in intense and distressing experience and appears to be of tremendous influence in behavior” (Lazarus, 1966, p. 2).

Stressors: “any event in which environmental demands, internal demands, or both, *tax* or *exceed* the adaptive resources of an individual” (Lazarus, 1966, p. 2).

Threat: “the harms or loses that have not yet taken place, but are anticipated” (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, p. 32). The psychological processes between the stress stimulus and response, or between the stimulus and conditions. When threat occurs, usually coping behavior or psychological process is activated for the purpose of mitigating or eliminating the threat (Lazarus, 1966, p. 14).

Significance of the Study

And she had nothing to fall back on; not maleness, not whiteness, not ladyhood, not anything. And out of profound desolation of her reality she may very well have invented herself.

Toni Morrison, 1987, p. 86

While research has shown prayer to be effective in helping African American women in their daily coping with stressors, the existing literature on coping self-efficacy fails to identify the common threads or concepts within the phenomenon of prayer by African American women that may contribute to the formation of coping efficacy. This study postulates that awareness and acceptance of the methods in which African American women cope with daily stressors, particularly their prayer, is a critical factor to equip psychology with culturally sensitive tools that may be used to counsel African American women, if not all peoples. It is hoped that the increased understanding of the cultural coping strategy of prayer may develop an attitude of awareness and acceptance toward African American women and aid in the provision of interventions that are culturally sensitive.

The research within this study was accomplished according to ethnographic methodology, as it seeks to isolate and define the common threads or concepts existing within the prayers of African American women. Patton (2002) states, “the importance of understanding culture is the cornerstone of ‘applied ethnography’” (p. 81). This study portrays the individual experiences of what is considered to be African American women’s most significant coping strategy. It uncovers common, hidden aspects of what is inherent in these women’s prayers, which may provide a framework for affirming both African American and women’s beliefs and behaviors.

Exploring the experiences of African American women according to a feminist /ethnic worldview through ethnographic research has allowed the researcher to begin the process of identifying common threads or concepts that exist within the prayers of these African American women. Ethnography places emphasis on the richness of detail

inherent in these women's common experiences of prayer as used in their everyday existences. Valuable information and processes have been revealed that are commonly utilized in the African American woman's natural skills of coping. Richly descriptive information concerning the phenomena of prayer, once gathered and identified, was analyzed and the common threads or concepts and processes became apparent. These commonalities were reread and reanalyzed several times to tease of themes within the phenomenon of these women's prayers. This combination of culturally derived and exploratory research methods may in the future form new and effective interventions pertinent for working with African American women, as well as with other individuals.

Delimitations of the Dissertation

Previous research has shown that the most effective coping strategy for African American women is prayer (Jackson & Sears, 1992). To recognize if there are specific aspects within the prayers of these women that can be isolated, identified, and utilized in times of overwhelming stress, the scope of this study had to be limited to African American women who pray. Hence, the African American women who qualified as subjects for interview in this study must have reported that they pray.

Organization of the Study

This dissertation is composed of five chapters. Chapter I is the introductory chapter with nine sections relating to the purpose of this research. The nine sections included in Chapter I are the background of the problem, the statement of the problem, the purpose of the study, guiding questions, assumptions / definition of terms, significance of the study, delimitations of the study, scope and limitations of the study, and organization of the study.

Chapter II is a review of related literature on stress and coping methods, worldview and coping, prayer and coping, African Americans women and coping, and psychology's evolving interest in these areas.

Chapter III describes the reasoning behind the feminist theoretical orientation and the qualitative ethnographic methodology of this dissertation. Included in Chapter III are discussions of the rationale for the selection of subjects and the sampling protocol, as well as the procedures to be used for the analysis of data. Chapter III also contains an analytic log of this study.

Chapter IV describes the findings of the research and contains thematic narratives that articulate the female, African American interviewees' ideas, thoughts, words, and actions regarding their use of prayer as a coping strategy.

Chapter V contains a summary, a discussion of the findings of this study regarding stress and coping by means of prayer through the lenses of *Black Women's Critical Social Theory* (Collins, 2002), the conclusion, and recommendations for future research in the areas of stress and coping.

CHAPTER II

A REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

You really don't have a purpose for your facts

if you don't know the facts of your purpose.

Michael Eric Dyson, 2003, p. 83

Introduction

Over the past two decades, psychology's interest in religious practices and coping has skyrocketed (Harrison, Koenig, Hays, Eme-Akwari, & Pargament, 2001, p. 86). This has been because research has shown us that about 97% of U.S. residents believe in God, about 90% pray, and about 76% regard prayer as very important in everyday life (McCullough & Larson, 1999; Spilka et al., 2003). According to Spilka et al. prayer is the most often practiced form of religiousness and one of the principle rituals that lies at the core of religion. They contend, "instead of focusing upon the content and phenomenology of prayer, researchers have focused on its correlates" (p. 280). The basic goal of psychology is to understand people; therefore, we in psychology must seek to understand the realms in which prayer assists individuals in coping. Pargament (1997) discusses additional reasons to study these important aspects of most American's lives:

The study of religion and coping has something to teach us about coping. It can bring to light humanity's more valiant side: the persistence, the will to live, the courage, and indeed the heroism that are a part of human nature. Religion has

much to say about human strengths and resources. People bring a reservoir of religious resources with them when they face stressful times. For many, the depth and nature of this reservoir is unknown. When people are stressed, the religious reservoir is often tapped and revealed for whatever it does (or does not) hold. Finally, the study of religion and coping has some practical implications. People and problems are often most malleable during hard times. In fact, many therapeutic approaches are built on this concept and intentionally try to ‘shake people up’ as a prelude to change. Crises are pivotal periods. They destabilize ‘tried and true’ methods for dealing with problems and call for new solutions. Painful as they may be, stressful periods represent a cross-roads, a point at which the individual may have to choose among paths that lead in very different directions (p. 5).

Stress is often recognized as a major factor in determining health and well-being. Jackson and Sears (1992) report that African American women are more likely to experience frequent and uncontrollable stressful life events than the general population (p. 184). Despite this picture of African American women and the level of stress in their lives, many of these women are resilient and psychologically healthy (Campbell-Burden, 2001; Grady, 2003; Smith, 2003). These women in some way utilize effective coping strategies that allow them to mitigate and buffer the stressors.

One of the most prevalent buffers for African American women is prayer, which “helps them to survive adverse circumstances” (Taylor, Chatters, & Levin, 2004, p. 77). Social support networks and culture are other variables that are related to the successful coping of many African American women (Jackson & Sears, 1992, p. 185). Recent

research studies have focused on the coping strategies of women in general and African American women in particular. Campbell-Burden (2001) conducted a study endorsing the practice of empowerment as a solution for treatment for working with African American women. She emphasizes that an empowerment approach will harnesses their strength and resilience in a constructive way. Grady's (2003) research explored the relationship between African American women's self-esteem and their ability to cope with stressful life events. He determined the women that possess a high self-esteem have a greater ability with which to cope with stress (p. 62). As more research studies, like his, regarding African American culture and gender are conducted that employ the effects of spirituality and prayer as viable aspects of coping processes, a more definitive description of the resilience in African American women will be attained.

Simply put, we in psychology don't know when African American women use prayer, how they make decisions to use prayer, what the content of their prayers is, or how effective prayer is. Taylor et al. (2004) state, "We lack crucial information about the inherent meaning and nature of prayer for individuals, factors associated with the use of prayer in coping and specific information about what the relevant outcomes and functional mechanisms are... in the coping process" (p. 84). Very little is known about how African American women use prayer to cope with problems and what they identify as being important about praying. The successful coping strategies that have made many generations of African American women resilient must be researched, identified, and made available to psychology.

Psychological Studies

A Call to Psychology

According to Jackson and Sears (1992), “an analysis of stress and culture has the potential to provide a culturally-relevant framework for understanding stress reduction among those outside the mainstream culture” (p. 184). Mays, Rubin, Sabourin, and Walker (1996) challenge traditional western science and call for a psychology of “practical cultural significance investigating people’s behavior in such domains of behavior as ethnic and religious conflict” (p. 497). McLennan, Rochow, and Arthur (2001) state:

To overlook these influences is to miss the opportunity to learn from clients and to integrate these influences into the counseling process. This negligence is a great disservice to clients who may feel that a central part of who they are is not being respected or validated (p.133).

Taylor et al. (2004), discuss the importance of examining these influences, as follows:

Religious and spiritual concerns are important to African American individuals and have a significant and potentially broad influence on health and social attitudes and behaviors. Given this, it is our responsibility as researchers and scholars not only to understand how and in what manner religion operates to influence health and social behaviors, but to determine how this information might be used to advance health and social welfare practice and positively affect relevant outcomes (p. 235).

Bingham (1992) states, “perhaps the behaviors we learn will provide the counseling field answers to significantly influence the stress levels of African American women” (p. 191).

The inference from these researchers is that mental health professionals assisting African American women to manage their stress must have in-depth knowledge of, and sensitivity to African American culture.

Stress and Coping Theories

This study focuses on how African American women cope with daily stress, through their use of prayer. This research is based on the evolving theories of stress and coping presented by Lazarus (1966), Lazarus and Cohen (1977), Lazarus and Folkman (1984), Pargament (1997), and Folkman and Moskowitz (2004). This study is interested in those stressors that are termed *daily hassles*. “Daily hassles vary in content from person to person and touch more on personal needs and deficits in coping skills” (Gruen, Folkman, & Lazarus, 1988, p. 743). These daily hassles can be considered to be a source of stress due to the respective demands on the individual (Baldacchino & Draper, 2001, p. 834).

The use of coping strategies has one main goal: to increase manageability. As stated in Chapter I of this study, Lazarus and Cohen (1977) define stressors as “demands that tax or exceed the resources of the system or, to put it in a slightly different way demands to which there are no readily available or automatic adaptive responses” (p. 72). Gruen et al. (1988) explain the destructiveness of stress and coping in the following statement:

The extent to which a harmful or potentially harmful encounter between the person and the environment is stressful depends on the meaning or significance of that encounter, which in turn is based on the personal agendas and coping resources the person brings to it (p. 744).

Lazarus and Folkman (1984) identify two major types of coping: Emotion-focused coping and problem-focused coping. Emotion-focused coping regulates stressful emotions, while problem-focused coping alters the troubled person-environment relation causing the distress (p. 44). Regarding these types of coping, Folkman, Lazarus, Dunkel-Schetter, DeLongis, & Gruen (1986) state the following: “Problem-focused forms of coping were used more often in encounters that were appraised as changeable, and emotion-focused forms of coping in encounters appraised as unchangeable” (p. 993).

Within the literature regarding stress and coping, two processes are identified as critical mediators of stressful person-environment relations: Cognitive appraisal and coping. In primary cognitive appraisal the individual first appraises the stressor – a particular encounter with the environment. The person then determines whether it is threatening or challenging – is there anything at stake in this encounter? In secondary appraisal, the individual determines what if anything can be done to overcome, prevent, or to improve the benefit prospects. Following this interpretation, the individual evaluates different coping options, such as altering the situation or accepting it. Primary and secondary appraisals converge to determine if the person-environment transaction is significant toward personal well-being, and if so, whether it contains the possibility of harm or loss (threat), or does it hold the possibility of mastery or benefit (challenge). When threat occurs usually coping behavior or psychological process is activated for the purpose of mitigating or eliminating the threat (Lazarus, 1966; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; & Folkman et al., 1986). Cohen and Lazarus (1973) originally labeled these processes *potentiation*: the calling up of one’s potential resources, and *tension management*: the rapidity and completeness with which problems are resolved and

tension is dissipated (p. 375). In their later work, Lazarus and Folkman (1984) refer to this process as coping (p. 6).

Most daily hassles in life situations do not over tax people's capacities and are not experienced as threatening. The daily hassles that are appraised as taxing or exceeding the person's resources require that person to change cognition and/or behavior in order to manage the psychological and environmental demands of those specific stressful encounters. The action tendencies aroused by threat may be regarded as an individual's coping processes.

Coping is focus oriented. Folkman, Lazarus, Dunkel-Schetter, DeLongis, & Gruen (1986) state, "coping focuses on what the person actually thinks and does in a specific stressful encounter, and how this changes as the encounter unfolds" (p. 992). Coping is also contextual, in that it is, "influenced by the person's appraisal of the actual demands in the encounter and resources for managing them" (Folkman et al., p. 992). In other words, both the person and situation shape coping efforts. According to Folkman et al. (1986), when coping, an individual uses his or her individual values, goals, and expectations in order to judge the immediate outcome of the person-environment encounter. Occasionally there may not be a resolution of the problem causing distress; however, the outcome can be evaluated positively if the individual feels that the demands of the encounter were handled to the best of their ability. Or, even though the problem may have been resolved, the outcome can be judged as unfavorable if the resolution is inconsistent with other values and goals, less than what the person expected, or creates added problems to the person's social context (p. 994).

During the 1990s stress and coping theorists began to research the area of *religious coping* (Folkman & Moskowitz, 2004, p. 759), which investigated coping, religiousness, and spirituality. About this time Kenneth I. Pargament (1997) became a prominent figure in the psychology of religion and coping. In 1998 Pargament, Koenig, and Perez developed a testing instrument entitled the RCOPE. The RCOPE measured an individual's religious coping strategies across the following five religious coping assumptions:

- MEANING: Finding meaning in the face of suffering and baffling life experiences,
- CONTROL: Providing an avenue to achieve a sense of mastery and control,
- COMFORT/SPIRITUALTY: Finding comfort and reducing apprehension by connecting with a force that goes beyond the individual,
- INTIMACY/SPIRITUALTY: Fostering social solidarity and identity, and
- LIFE TRANSFORMATION: Assisting people in giving up old objects of value and finding new sources of significance (p. 521).

The five religious coping assumptions investigated by Pargament et al. were those of meaning, control, comfort/spirituality, intimacy/spirituality, and life formation (p. 521).

These assumptions are used as a guideline in this current study to determine the coping effectiveness of the African American women interviewed.

Worldview and Coping

When working with diverse individuals, Janet Helms (1990) cautions, “seeing the problem according to the counselor's worldview can prevent hearing the [client's] issues” (p. 84). Jackson and Sears (1992) propose a different worldview from which to view

African American women: “For African American women who experience low levels of emotional well-being, an Africentric worldview may be especially helpful” (p. 189).

In the following statement, Davis’ (2001) agrees:

Worldview provides a perspective on problems that help people better cope with life’s ups and downs. Having a worldview helps individuals integrate difficult life changes and relieves the stress that goes along with them, gives people a more optimistic attitude - gives them more hope, a sense of the future, of purpose, of meaning in their lives (p. 16).

Recent literature continues to assert the need of additional stress and coping research within cultural boundaries. Taylor et al. (2004) make the following proposition regarding stress and coping research:

Examining these factors within the context of race and cultural factors would enhance our theoretical understanding of these processes and sharpen our appreciation of specific factors (e.g., group norms and expectations, cultural values and beliefs) that shape the nature of stress and coping experiences (p. 86).

Folkman et al. (1986) state the following:

An important motivation for studying coping is the belief that within a given culture certain ways of coping are more and less effective in promoting emotional well-being and addressing problems causing distress, and that such information can be used to design interventions to help people cope more effectively with the stress in their lives. Despite the reasonableness of this expectation, the issue of determining coping effectiveness remains one of the most perplexing in coping research (p. 753).

Spirituality, Prayer, and Coping

African American women frequently utilize prayer as one of their coping strategies. Ellison and Taylor (1996) state, “among many African Americans, the use of prayer is often cited as a means of coping with various life issues. In particular, African American women have been found to use prayer in response to... interpersonal, emotional, and death problems”(p. 30). When used as a variable in quantitative studies, spiritual beliefs (as also defined in Chapter I to include prayer) have proven to be an effective coping strategy. Strang and Strang (2001) found that “individuals who managed to cope with life had strong inherent coping resources of their own and expressed confidence in themselves and in their own strength” (p. 129).

For many African American women the most prominent of these strong inherent coping resources is prayer. Stokes (2002) speaks about her findings from her research relating to African American women and coping.

As the women’s spiritual beliefs increase, there is an increase in a woman’s belief in her ability to overcome barriers. This finding indicates... spirituality is an essential coping response for African American women and is frequently used as a coping mechanism (strategy) in stressful or aversive situations (p.88). Smith (2003), who studied the coping strategies of African American *Othermothers* (African American women who care for relative’s children) found that, “spirituality played an important role in their coping capacity because it minimized the deleterious effects of caretaker stress” (p. 123). She goes on to state; “Othermothers studied were emotionally resilient and had coping mechanisms that protected them from experiencing

elevated depressive symptoms” (p. 123). In addition, the literature shows that the resource of prayer also relates to increased feeling of self-efficacy for coping with particular stressful life events (Grady, 2003).

Taylor et al. (2004) defined “the measures of private religious behavior, as prayer and other devotional activities, [which] serve primarily psychological functions for positive mental health outcomes” (p. 91). As regards African Americans, they made the observation that “prayer and religious activities were not regarded as something that was separate from one’s normal, everyday life. Prayer and religious faith were, instead, regarded as givens in one’s life and were simply a fundamental aspect of one’s being” (p. 91). Taylor et al. also state, “Across all religious traditions, prayer is a fundamental activity of faith that is associated with, among other things, efforts to cope with life problems” (p. 84). The comments of Spilka et al. (2003) agree, “Religious activities, especially prayer, are usually regarded as positive coping devices directed toward both problem solving and facilitating personal growth” (p. 488). Nooney and Woodrum (2002) state, “these behaviors aid in the development and reinforcement of a framework with which to interpret life, enhance self-worth through relationships with a divine other, and provide hope for change and healing” (p. 360).

Prayer also has a physiological effect upon the person praying. According to Harvard scientist Herbert Benson, M.D. (as cited by Davis, 2001), who has conducted studies on prayer for over 30 years, “All forms of prayer evoke a relaxation response that quiets stress, quiets the body, and promotes healing” (p. 15). Newberg and d’Aquili (2000) state, “religious and spiritual experiences are highly complex states that likely involve many brain structures including those involved in higher order processing of

sensory and cognitive input as well as those involved in the elaboration of emotions and autonomic responses” (p. 251). Ellison, Boardman, Williams, and Jackson (2001) discuss the physiological effects that some individuals may have as the effects of worship style.

Specific mental health benefits may be associated with certain worship styles, such as those that involve singing, shouting, and physical activity and those that encourage emotional catharsis. Individuals who respond affirmatively may well feel greater peace and assurance that their life is part of a divine master plan, and they may perceive their daffy lives as infused with spiritual power (p. 237).

Negatives Results of Private Religious Behavior

Some researchers and investigators infer that private religious behavior (e.g., prayer and other devotional activities) “may exacerbate the deleterious effects of at least some types of stressors” (Ellison et al., 2001, p. 223). Hill and Pargament (2003) found in a recent literature review they conducted that spiritual struggles were related to both negative and positive mental health outcomes.

On the negative side, religious and spiritual struggles have been associated with a number of psychological distress, including anxiety, depression, negative mood, poorer quality of life, panic disorder, and suicidality.... But various indicators of religious and spiritual struggle have been associated with positive outcomes, such as stress-related growth, spiritual growth, open-mindedness, self-actualization, and lower levels of prejudice.... How well the individual is able to resolve these struggles may hold the key to which road is taken” (p. 70).

Sanford and Donovan (1985) discuss a possible rationale for the negative effects of private religious behavior upon African American women:

While Protestantism, Catholicism, and Judaism can and often do affect women in myriad positive ways, these religions also can and do great damage to women's self-esteem. Much of this owes to the unfortunate fact that Protestantism, Catholicism, and Judaism all have long histories of being patriarchal in both doctrine (God is a father; woman brought sin into the world; women are less holy than men) and in practice (only men can administer the Catholic sacraments; only men can be priests; only men count to make up a quorum in temples). For a woman of color, the image of God provided by the patriarchal religions is doubly negating because the God given us by Judaism and Christianity is not only male, He is also white (p. 165).

Spilka et al. (2003) discuss significant negative results found in the studies they reviewed in their meta-analysis and found negative results were primarily due to religious characteristics rather than as a direct result of prayer. These negative religious characteristics include:

Punishing God reappraisal (I have sinned and deserve to suffer),
Demonic reappraisal (It is the work of the Devil),
Spiritual discontent (How could God do this to me?), and
Interpersonal religious discontent (I feel as if the church had deserted me)
(p. 488).

Smith's (2003) research also demonstrated that it was not religiousness that aided in coping, but rather a personal relationship with, and reliance in a divine being (God) that was maintained through prayer. In her dissertation, she states, "The post-hoc analyses performed to interrogate the mediation results indicated that negative spiritual coping and

church attendance were the important mediating components, and not positive spiritual coping or church activities” (p. 109).

African American Women and Coping

The issues that African American women face are in many ways unique to her. Due to the unique cultural influences of African American women, their learning experiences frequently differ from that of other groups, making their acquisition of coping strategies distinct. For hundreds of years, African American women have remained resilient. This resilience was first demonstrated as they were taken unwillingly from their homes and families in Africa, and transported across an ocean to new lands to be sold, enslaved, and disenfranchised in America. Stokes (2002) discusses a “dual subjugation: that of being Black and female” (p. 3). The African American woman has endured a history of racism and sexism. Almquist (1989) contends, “The convergence of African American women’s race and gender means that their issues differ from those of European American women and African American men” (p. 207). Mitchem (2004) also addresses this constellation of roles present in the lives of these women and states, “The experiences of oppression are not abstractions. They actually impact African American women’s material realities, their mental, economic, physical, and spiritual health” (p. 5).

Almquist alleges that “Black women [have] coped with oppression in myriad ways, and their coping strategies continue in the present day” (p. 420). In the discussion of African American women’s coping, consideration of spirituality is essential as it may be a useful construct in understanding the development of coping in African American women. As discussed previously, the literature verifies African American women’s use of prayer. Taylor et al. (2004) reported that “prayer to cope with a serious personal

problem and was considered the most beneficial coping strategy. Prayer was mentioned more often than other strategies” (p. 92). Jackson and Sears (1992) “found prayer to be the most important coping response among African Americans. More women were found to use prayer than men” (p. 185). The information gained as a result of their study “indicated that prayer gives African Americans a sense of strength with which to meet personal crises” (p. 185). In her study, Stokes (2002) reports, “In times of aversive or stressful situations, African American women... have reported that spirituality and the use of prayer provides a sense of direction and purpose and is significantly related to fewer depressive symptoms and fewer perceived worries” (p. 36). Robinson (2000) found, “Prayer is a means for many African American women to deal with stress in their lives and to encourage feelings of well-being” (p. 167).

The use of prayer as a coping strategy may also reflect, in part, some African American women’s attempts to minimize the potential stigma associated with using formal mental health services (Pargament, 1997). Issues such as perceived differences in life experiences and the potential for cultural misunderstandings may produce an attitude of distrust and influence some African American women’s willingness to pursue counseling. Some may avoid seeking professional counseling because they perceive that traditional mental health settings are inherently oppressive or because they believe that their counselors will ignore spiritual or religious issues (Constantine, Lewis, Conner, & Sanchez, 2000, p. 31).

Stokes (2002) refers to the need for specific, psychological research, “There is a call to attend to the coping efficacy held by African American women. Attending specifically to this group and their experiences may lead to a more comprehensive

understanding of their coping strategies” (p. 3). Studies that do focus on African American women, stress, and coping may miss the risk factors that cause distress and possible protective factors that buffer the stress.

The Status of Related Psychological Research

During the 1970s there were few psychological studies conducted on spiritual effects physical and mental health.¹ The 1980s brought forth more studies finding a positive relationship between variables of health, stress, and coping. However, the variables of religion and prayer were still mostly overlooked.² With the arrival of the 1990s, studies on religion and mental health increased and the effects of gender was beginning to be recognized.³ “Unfortunately, most of the otherwise excellent early summaries and reviews of this literature paid little or no attention to the racial composition of study samples” say Taylor et al. (2004) in their book, (p. 210).

Since the late 1990s and into the 21st century a paradigm shift in psychology occurred. This shift came about around the time of Mental Health Report of the U.S. Surgeon General (1999). Since then, the positive impact of a client’s spiritual and cultural commitment is now accepted. There have been numerous studies that have aided in the recognition of these factors.⁴ Studies dealing with African Americans, religion, prayer, and coping have now been conducted.

The statement made by Taylor et al. (2004) address the current status of race, religion, and coping research in psychology.

In general, research studies on religion, race, and mental health and well-being have approached the issue of race in one of three different ways. First, there are those studies in which a binary race variable (i.e., Black vs. White) has been

introduced in statistical models, ostensibly in order to control for the effects of race on a presumed religion-mental-health or religion-well-being association. A second set of studies has made explicit racial comparisons in associations between respective religious variables and mental health or well-being indicators. In these studies, investigators stratified their analysis by race (i.e., Black vs. White) in order to compare and contrast structural relationships across race. A third group of studies has used African American study samples exclusively. Many of these studies focus on older adults or on age differences across the life course (p. 211).

In the discussion of findings in Taylor et al.'s mega-analysis regarding religion in the lives of African Americans they state, "Prayer gives strength, guidance, and wisdom. Prayer helps reduce the stresses that are associated with the problems and issues of daily life. Prayer also works to strengthen and sustain one's endurance in order to deal with life issues" (p. 100). "It allows maintenance of a positive sense of self" (p. 86).

Hill and Pargament's (2003) mega-analysis discusses the growth in psychological literature investigating religion and spirituality in relation to factors such as physical and mental illness and health behaviors. Across every domain reported in their review, the most common religion or spirituality measure was a measure of religious involvement, normally denominational affiliation or frequency of church attendance. They state, "Much of the conceptual and empirical work from the psychology of religion has not been well integrated into research on the connection between religion and spirituality and health" (p. 66). Nooney and Woodrum's (2002) comments show agreement, "Studies tend to privilege either the social psychological effects of religious activity or the social structural impact of involvement in religious institutions that sometimes translates into an

emphasis on either religious coping styles or social support derived from religion” (p. 359).

These mega-analyses provide evidence that empirical studies have been able to identify significant links between religion, spirituality, and health, but have not been able to indicate the reasons for these associations. Hill and Pargament (2003) assert, “Typically, religion and spirituality have been measured by global indices that do not specify how and why religion and spirituality affect health” (p. 64). These authors also contend that research has “underestimated the complexity of religion and spirituality variables and overlooked the possibility that something inherent within the religious and spiritual experience itself contributes to or detracts from physical and mental health” (p. 66).

The literature reviewed thus far has shown that prayer can serve as resource for African American women’s coping with stress in daily living. However, as Hill and Pargament (2003) state, “There are still unanswered critical questions about how and why religion and spirituality influence health, such as: ‘What is it about religion and spirituality that accounts for their linkage to mental and physical health?’” (p. 66).

The Next Step For Researchers

The review of the literature has shown that little is known in psychology research about the experience of praying, the processes used, or the contextual variables involved and there remains a need for a sound empirical base. Although literature has shown that prayer aids African Americans to cope with the stressors of daily life, to date there is little or no research, which examines the way in which African American women pray.

The coping strategies of African American women are still under explored topics in mental health studies.

The successful coping strategies that have facilitated generations of African American women's resilient must be researched, identified, and made available to psychology. Of major concern to psychology is the problem of depression as an understudied illness among African American women (Smith, 2003; Stokes 2002). A theoretical framework, which includes cultural and contextual variables, is needed when examining the development of coping efficacy in African American women (Hill and Pargament, 2003; Nooney and Woodrum, 2002). These studies indicate that further research is warranted. This research should include spirituality and other thoughtfully designed measurements, such as prayer, that capture the unique life experiences, beliefs, challenges, and values of African American women. Taylor et al. discusses this need in the following statement, "studies are needed of African American expressions of spirituality and models of health-related behavior in the context of a longstanding history of 'therapeutic pluralism'" (p. 225). Almquist (1989) states, "Minority women must be free to define themselves, their priorities, and their goals based on their own analysis of their condition in American society" (p. 440). "By incorporating this research into practice, African American women will be less minimized and more understood as they enter a therapeutic relationship with a counseling professional" (Campbell-Burden, 2001, p. 34).

These studies have examined areas regarding African American women, stress and coping. However, they have failed to examine, according to the women themselves, the single most significant mitagator of stress - Prayer. Prayer when viewed as a coping

strategy benefits the mental health of African American women by coalesce the links between religion and mental health. This is the focal point of the research investigated in this study. The results and findings of this study may also be applicable to African American women as they seek assistance from the Mental Health community. The results may also be applicable to other cultures and thus can be viewed beneficial in a broader multicultural context. As Plante, Saucedo, and Rice (2001) said, “everyone must cope with some level of stress on a daily bases” (p. 291).

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

There is a world of difference between truth and facts. Facts can obscure the truth.

Maya Angelou

Introduction

As discussed in depth in Chapter II, research has established that the primary coping strategy utilized by African American women is prayer (Bingham, 1992; Ellison & Taylor, 1996; Jackson & Sears, 1992; & Levin, Chatters, & Taylor, 2005). Given these research findings, one can postulate that as a result of their spiritual beliefs and practices, African American women may experience a reduced state of anxiety in the face of adversity. However, as also seen in Chapter II little or no research has been found that specifically determines what aspects of African American women's use of prayer help them to effectively cope with their daily stress (Taylor et al., 2004).

The purpose of this study was to isolate and identify common threads or concepts within the phenomenon of prayer that African American women employ as an effective coping strategy in their reduction of daily stress. This chapter describes the pilot study done in 2004 as well as the current study. The rationale of this study's theoretical orientation, methodology, design, and qualifications of the researcher are addressed. Included in the design is the rationale behind the selection of the sample for study, the

data collection, interview protocol and information regarding trustworthiness and the analysis of data.

The Pilot Study

In 2004 a pilot study was performed with three participants. However, data from that study was not included in this, the main study. The purpose in conducting the pilot study was to practice and evaluate data collection and data analysis techniques within and as a requirement of two separate doctoral-level qualitative research courses at Oklahoma State University. During the pilot study I interviewed and observed African American women, who met the criteria (as later discussed in Selection of Subjects), on the subject of their use of prayer in coping. The interviews, which were exploratory and semi-structured, were recorded and transcribed verbatim. Initial field notes were made immediately after each interview and observation.

Several common threads or concepts emerged from the original data that served to express the connection between the interviewees' prayers and their ability to cope. These concepts were then coded. The codes that became apparent were:

- “Tears roll down her face”
- “The matter had been settled.”
- “You are not controlling this, this is not about you.”
- “It’s a form of relationship”
- “When I’m in the fire”
- “Transported to a different place.”
- “Prayer is...”
- “God’ll kind of sound like you a little bit.”
- “That was God.”
- “I’m God’s favorite child.”
- “You know... HELP!” and
- “God guides me...”

Each code uncovered through the initial study conveyed a way of thinking that promoted the women’s capability to effectively deal with the accumulation and build up

of daily stress. One of these codes, “I’m God’s favorite child,” described how prayer resulted in helping these women to feel special and increases their self-esteem. While conducting a semi-structured analysis of the interview data, the unexpected code “Oh, I can change” also became apparent. This code seemed to speak of the interviewee’s unusual surprised reaction to hearing and realizing that another possible course of action existed other than her original plan. As a result of her prayer, the interviewee was able to reduce the level of responsibility she personally took on without the accompanying stigma of feeling inadequate. To add depth and clarity to the codes (and to practice the procedures) a follow-up interview and member check was performed with one of the participants. The method of inquiry, selection of subjects, data collection, interview protocol, and initial interview questions utilized in the current study were selected as result of the findings in the pilot study.

Theoretical Orientation

A Black Feminist Statement:

*If Black women were free, it would mean that everyone else
would have to be free since our freedom would necessitate the
destruction of all the systems of oppression*

The Combahee River Collective (1977)

Black Women’s Critical Social Theory

“Theory enables us to see immediate needs in terms of long range goals and an overall perspective on the world. It gives us a framework for evaluating various strategies in both the long and short run, and for seeing the types of changes that they are likely to produce” (Bunch, 2000, p. 16). The current study was conducted using the framework of

Black Women's Critical Social Theory by Patricia Hill Collins. Feminist theory assumes that knowledge of self will empower those who are oppressed by giving to those worked with the tools to emancipate themselves. "Critical feminism strives to find women's voices, experiences, and perspectives as a means of discovering self, addressing inequity of power relations, and resisting hegemony" (Spector, 1999, p. 20). "For African American women the knowledge gained at intersecting oppressions of race, class, and gender provides the stimulus for crafting and passing on the subjugated knowledge of Black Women's Critical Social Theory" (Collins, 2002, p. 325).

According to Collins (2000), epistemology constitutes an overarching theory of knowledge. It investigates the subjugated knowledge of subordinate groups, in this case, African American women. This requires the investigation of "*why* we believe what we believe to be true" (p. 252). In addition to positivist approaches which "aim to create scientific descriptions of reality by producing objective generalizations" (p. 255) Collins proposes an alternative epistemology,

Black women have had access to another epistemology that encompasses standards for assessing truth that are widely accepted among African American women. An experiential, material base underlies a Black feminist epistemology, namely collective experiences and accompanying worldviews that U.S. Black women sustained based on our particular history. [Therefore,] a series of experiences when shared and passed on become the collective wisdom of a Black women's standpoint. Moreover, a set of principles for assessing knowledge claims may be available to those having these shared experiences. These principles pass

into a more general Black women's wisdom and, further, into what I call here a Black feminist epistemology (p. 256).

The use of Black Women's Critical Social Theory in the current study allowed me to hear the voices of the African American women interviewed. Their insights and their own experiences were brought together in an effort to produce new understanding regarding African American women's methods of coping with stress. It is through the lens of Black Women's Critical Social Theory that I question the status quo and deconstruct what has been said (and not said) within the research literature and the mental health community regarding African American women, coping, and prayer. For "African American women, Black Women's Critical Social Theory encompasses bodies of knowledge and sets of institutional practices that actively grapple with the central questions facing U.S. Black women as a collectivity" (Collins, 2002, p. 326).

Epistemological Tenets of Black Women's Critical Social Theory

The current study utilizes the epistemological tenets that are fundamental for Black feminist thought. In her writings Collins (2000) describes four dimensions of Black feminist epistemology: Lived experience as a criterion of meaning, the use of dialogue in assessing knowledge claims, the ethics of caring, and the ethic of personal accountability.

Lived experience as a criterion of meaning.

This dimension of Black feminist epistemology acknowledges that living life as Black woman requires wisdom because knowledge about the dynamics of dynamics of intersecting oppressions has been essential to U. S Black women's survival. For most African American women those individuals who have lived through the experiences about which they claim to be experts are more believable

and creditable than those who have merely read or thought about such experiences (Collins, 2000, p. 257).

The use of dialogue in assessing knowledge claims.

The second dimension of Black feminist epistemology alleges “connectedness rather than separation is an essential component of the knowledge validation process” (Collins, 2000, p. 260). Collins refers to the “call and response discourse mode” that involve “spontaneous verbal and nonverbal interaction between speaker and listener in which all of the speaker’s statements, or ‘calls,’ are punctuated by expressions, or responses, from the listener pervades African American culture” (p. 261).

The ethics of caring.

The ethics of caring dimension of Black feminist epistemology is comprised of three aspects, which imply that personal expressiveness, emotions, and empathy are all central to the knowledge validation process. “Rooted in a tradition of African humanism, each individual is thought to be a unique expression of common spirit, power, or energy inherent in all life” (Collins, 2000, p. 263). Secondly, the ethic of caring concerns the appropriateness of emotions in dialogues. “Emotion indicates that a speaker believes in the validity of an argument (p. 263). Thirdly, caring involves “developing the capacity for empathy” (p. 263).

The ethic of personal accountability.

The fourth ethic, the ethic of personal accountability implies that people are expected to be accountable for their knowledge claims. According to Collins (2000) “African Americans consider it essential for individuals to have definite positions on issues and assume full responsibility for arguing their validity,” and “many African

Americans reject prevailing beliefs that probing into an individual's personal viewpoint is outside the boundaries of discussion" (p. 265).

Stages of Feminist Theory

Black Women's Critical Social Theory is a form of feminist research. According to Bunch (2000) feminist methodology begins with description. New descriptions of African American women and their coping skills are a prerequisite for those in the mental health community to acknowledging and potentially alter their existing perceptions. The purpose of this study was to embark on raising the consciousness of those working with African American women through Black feminist thought. Collins (2003) stated, "Clarifying Black woman's experiences and ideas lies at the core of Black feminist thought" (p. 332). Using an ethnographic approach in this study allowed me to examine and gain richly descriptive, intimate knowledge and facts regarding the coping strategy of prayer as utilized by African American women.

Bunch (2000) considered the second stage of feminist research to be analysis. "Analyzing why reality exists involves determining its origins and the reasons for its perpetuation" (p. 18). "For African Americans worldview originated in the cosmologies of diverse West African ethnic groups" (Collins, 2002, p. 326). "Through their retaining and reworking significant elements of their ancestral West African cultures, African American women maintained positive coping mechanisms and were able to resist the negative controlling images of Black womanhood" (p. 327). Through careful analysis of their experiences and the rich description from the interviews held with the African American women, I derived a deeper understanding of their lived experiences and the reasoning behind these women's determination and perseverance. This study brings

enlightenment regarding the significance that African American women place on prayer, and why it enables them to courageously cope with stressors within their daily lives. These strategies may now be incorporated into psychological therapeutic interventions with African American women.

The third stage of feminist research is vision. Bunch (2000) states, “in taking action to bring about change, we operate consciously or unconsciously out of certain assumptions about what is right or what we value (principles), and out of our sense of what ought to be (goals)” (p. 18). Goals are based on our assessment of our vision, they are what we move toward, not away from. The clearer is our vision, the clearer are our goals. The vision regarding this study is acknowledgement by the mental health community of the value in recognizing and affirming the African American woman and her primary method of coping with stress. The long-term vision is mutual respect and communal giving and receiving between the psychological and African American communities.

Bunch (2000) alleges the forth stage of feminist research is strategy. Strategy is defined as “the overall approach one takes to how to accomplish one’s goals” (p.18). The descriptive and analytic approach of qualitative ethnographic study has aided me in developing a systematic understanding of African American women and their coping strategies. The interaction between description and analysis of reality, vision, and goals continually informed and altered each other throughout this study and determined which strategies were most effective.

Qualitative Research

*Learn to listen to our experiences and become
more conscience of what they can tell us*

Gwyn Kirk and Margo Okazawa-rey, 2001, p. 278

Strauss & Corbin (1990) propose that “qualitative methods can be used to uncover and understand what lies behind any phenomenon about which little is yet known” (p. 19). The use of qualitative research allowed me to inductively and holistically understand what was being said about African American women's experiences and their constructed meaning of prayer as a coping strategy (Patton, 2002). The phenomena of prayer as an instrument of coping by African American women is complex, and qualitative research allowed me to study it in “very fine detail” (Schloss & Smith, 1999, p. 94). “Qualitative research is especially sensitive in measuring and studying the dynamic and often cyclical nature of multicultural issues such as a client’s racial identity or spirituality” (Patton, 2002, p. 448), therefore, the qualitative methods used aligned well with the Africentric and feminist frameworks used in this study.

In this study, as in most qualitative research, the data collection and data analysis were simultaneous rather than sequential. Regarding this process, Lincoln and Guba (1985) state:

Data analysis is not an inclusive phase that can be marked out as occurring at some singular time during the inquiry. Data analysis must begin with the very first data collection, in order to facilitate the emergent design, grounding of theory, and emergent structure of later collection phases (pp. 241-242).

Ethnographic Methodology

Ethnographic research aims to understand people through immersion in their culture in order to produce detailed description of them, their culture and their beliefs (Snape & Spencer, 2003). Ethnography has been regarded as “particularly suited to Black Women’s Critical Social Theory and feminist research” (Madriz, 2003, p. 368) as it is permits a “social scientific description of a people and the cultural base of their peoplehood” (Patton, 2002, p. 81). Patton states, “the importance of understanding culture, especially in relation to change efforts of all kinds, is the cornerstone of applied ethnography” (p. 81).

Studying African American women in their daily lives in accordance with ethnographic research required my entering into the lives of the women interviewed through their own words and through the naturalistic observations I conducted. Through these methods, immersion was obtained through the relationships that were developed with the women and I grew to know each one of them in intimate ways. From them I obtained first hand information regarding their lives, their routines, and their daily stressors. The term ‘participant-observation’ is used by Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw (1995) to characterize this basic type of research (p. 1). As I became immersed in this research, everything I observed and learned was written in “regular, systematic ways” (p. 1) in order to create “an accumulating written record of these observations and experiences” (p. 1). Through these actions I was able “to enter into the matrix of meanings of the researched” (p. 2) and gain insight and understanding into the community of African American women that utilized prayer to cope with stress in their daily lives. My task has

been “not to determine ‘the truth’ but to reveal the multiple truths apparent in [African American women’s] lives” (Emerson et al, p. 3).

Selection of Subjects

The selection of subjects used in the current study was accomplished by a combination of criterion sampling and snowball sampling. Criterion sampling allows the researcher to study cases that meet a predetermined criterion. The criteria for inclusion in this study was that the individual must be an African American female, over 18 years of age. She must have defined herself as a spiritual person that utilizes prayer as a method of managing her daily stress, been willing to communicate her experiences during the interviews, and was capable of reading a consent form, protocol forms, and a transcript in the English language. The snowball sampling approach allows for researchers to locate information-rich key informants and begins by asking well-situated people: “Whom shall I talk to about ____?” (Patton, 2002). Once the process utilizing key informants was accomplished, I then asked the participants to refer others that fit the criterion. Included within this study were 15 individuals. One individual was referred from the original pilot study, eight individuals were referred for this study by key informants, four individuals were referred by first generation interviewees, and two individuals were referred by second generation interviewees.

The vast majority of African Americans are Protestants, primarily Baptist according to Van Hook, Hugen, and Aguilar (2002), “African Americans make up the forth-largest denomination in the United States and the largest religious group among African Americans, with over eight million members affiliated with the National Baptist Convention, U.S.A. (p. 207). Therefore, I contacted, as key informants, the religious

leaders of three major African American Baptist churches in Tulsa, Oklahoma. After explaining the purpose of the study and requirements of the participants to each of them (Appendix A), I asked them for recommendations of individuals suitable for this study. Initial contact with possible participants was made by phone after the referral source secured permission from the individual for me to contact them. During this initial phone contact, I explained the nature of the study (Appendix B) to each individual and asked her if she would be interested in participating. All individuals referred in this manner were interested in participating, and I scheduled a time to meet with them to further explain the study and conduct the interview.

Although there were no known risks expected in this study, prior to the actual interview, each of the women were informed that reminiscence of personal experiences had the potential to elicit painful memories and/or feelings, however, not greater than the potential that may be encountered in the daily life of the participants. However, all participants were provided appropriate referrals for assistance at the time of our initial face-to-face meeting. Each individual was then asked if she would like to continue her participation in the study or withdraw at this point. Again, all of the women agreed to continue on with the study. Each woman was also advised that she may be withdrawn at any time without penalty. The women were then asked to sign an informed consent form (Appendix C), which included a written explanation of this study. The informed consent was verbally reviewed with each participant. The consent form signed by each granted permission to be interviewed, permission to audio and/or video tape the interviews, and permission to include information from the interviews in the research document given that no names or other identifying information have been included. Also included in the

consent form was information regarding how to contact my research advisor, Dr. Al Carlozzi, the Oklahoma State University Internal Review Board (IRB), and myself. Participants were then asked to complete a demographics questionnaire (Appendix D). The individual interview was then conducted.

The Current Study

The guiding research question for this study has been: What inherent, common threads or concepts are present within the phenomenon of prayer that enables it to be an effective coping strategy for African American women in their reduction of daily stress? The data was collected during the months of July 2005 and August 2005 in Tulsa, Oklahoma, a moderate-sized, midwestern city.

Data Collection

In order to obtain rich, descriptive data for this study, I interviewed 15 African American women that fit the criteria discussed in Selection of Subjects. All participants selected were interviewed and questions were asked from the Initial Interview Protocol (Appendix E). The interviews took place at the participant's home, at my home, or at their church according to each woman's preference. The participants were interviewed on the topic of their use of prayer in coping with stress. As in the pilot study, the interviews were conducted according to exploratory and semi-structured methods and were recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Each participant was also asked if I could observe her at a prayer meeting or other religious ceremony. Five of the women interviewed allowed me to observe them in various situations as they prayed. This form of naturalistic observation aided me to better understand and capture the context in which the participants act, which is essential to a

holistic perspective. In both the pilot study and the current study, naturalistic observation allowed me to be open, discovery oriented, and inductive. It also allowed me the opportunity to see important nuances that may have been missed by the women interviewed (as they were routinely involved in the setting and may no longer notice small things).

Initial field notes were made immediately after each interview and observation as “reflection and introspection are important parts of field research” (Patton, 2000, p. 264). Following verbatim transcription, each of the 15 participants was sent a complete, written copy of their interview, interview observation, and naturalistic observation for their approval, and to clarify any miscommunications or misinterpretations (member check). One of the purposes of the member check is that it “provides the opportunity to assess *intentionality* – what it is that the respondent intended by acting in a certain way or providing certain data.” It also “gives the respondent an immediate opportunity to correct errors of fact and challenge what are perceived to be wrong interpretations” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 314).

This initial data collected was then analyzed for common threads or concepts within the data, which were then coded. Ongoing formative analysis occurred simultaneously to data collection, and the processes of data collection adjusted to incorporate the new findings. Therefore, the coding of the initial interviews shaped subsequent interviews, group focus meeting, and any additional follow-up questions (Burnette, 1994).

A focus group meeting was held in December 2005 in which all participants were invited. During this focus group interview, the findings of the initial interviews,

observations, member checks and additional questions resulting from the data or from each other were discussed. It also afforded the opportunity for multiple interactions among all participants in the group (Patton, 2002). Each of the participants also was later provided a verbatim copy of the focus group meeting.

Six of the women returned their member-checked transcripts of the interviews and observations. The new data formulated from these returned member checks were then also included in the analysis and coding process. The qualitative data utilized in this study included a total of 61 discreet interactions with the participants.

Throughout the course of this study, all data (including identifying information and recorded tapes), were securely stored in a locked file cabinet, within a locked room, at my home, which only I had access to. Upon completion of this study, all identifying information and tapes have been destroyed.

Methodological Rigor

Trustworthiness within qualitative inquiry comes down to one basic question, according to Lincoln and Guba (1985). “How can an inquirer persuade his or her audiences (including self) that the findings of an inquiry are worth paying attention to, worth taking account of?” (p. 209). They identify measures that should be implemented within the design. “The conventional criteria for trustworthiness are internal validity, external validity, reliability, and objectivity” (p. 218). Reliability is the consistency of measurement or the extent to which the data can be replicated by another researcher. Validity addresses the extent to which an instrument measures what it is supposed to measure.

These terms, along with generalizability are actually quantitative terms. Lincoln and Guba propose that “these conventional formulations” be replaced with four terms or *criterion areas*: “credibility (in place of internal validity), transferability (in place of external validity), dependability (in place of reliability), and confirmability (in place of objectivity)” (p. 219). Table 1 presents a summary of these criteria and the techniques used to establish trustworthiness.

Credibility.

Credibility is the consideration that credible findings and interpretations will be produced. The operational techniques used in this study to establish credibility are prolonged and persistent observation, triangulation, and member checking. According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), “prolonged engagement is the investment of sufficient time [to] learning the culture, testing for misinformation... and building trust” (p. 301). Due to my having long been an African American praying woman myself, I began this study an accepted member of this group of individuals. This actuality promoted the women’s confidence and trust, which allowed them to confide in me. My acceptance also afforded me the opportunity to see “perceptual distortions, selective perceptions... and situated motives” (p. 302).

“The purpose of the persistent observation is to identify those characteristics and elements in the situation that are most relevant to the issue being pursued and focusing on them in detail” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 304). This required the ability to look at the things that “really count” and “sort out the irrelevancies,” recognizing when the “atypical may be of importance” (p. 304). To satisfy this criterion, I maintained an analytic log, which describes in detail how the process of tentative identification and detailed

Table 1 **Summary of Techniques for Establishing Trustworthiness**

Criterion Area	Technique
Credibility	(1) activities in the field that increase the probability of high credibility
	(a) prolonged engagement
	(b) persistent observation
	(c) triangulation (sources, methods, and investigators)
	(2) peer debriefing
(3) negative case analysis	
(4) referential adequacy	
(5) member checks (in process and terminal)	
Transferability	(6) thick description
Dependability	(7a) dependability audit including the audit trail
Conformability	(7b) conformability audit including the audit trail
All of the above	(8) the reflexive journal

Note. From *Naturalistic Inquiry* (p. 328), by Y. S. Lincoln and E. G. Guba, 1985, Beverly Hills: Sage. Copyright 1985 by Sage Publications, Inc. Reprinted with permission of co-authors.

exploration was carried out. As Lincoln and Guba stated, “If prolonged engagement provides scope, persistent observation provides depth” (p. 304).

Triangulation also improves the probability that findings and interpretations are creditable by locating a “characteristic pattern of distortion within a source” (Lincoln and Guba, 1985, p. 306). Four types of triangulation exist: “the use of multiple and different sources, methods, investigators, and theories” (p. 305). The methods used in this study were those of multiple sources, which include multiple interviewees, and multiple methods of collecting data (interview, observation, and focus group meeting).

The member check “is the most crucial technique for establishing creditability” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 314). It is through the member check and the focus group interview that the participants of my study reviewed my notes, transcripts and reports, and provided feedback (Schloss & Smith, 1999). The use of the member check established that the reconstructions within this study were “recognizable to audience members as adequate representations of their own realities...[and] given the opportunity to react to them” (Lincoln & Guba, p. 314).

Dialogical validation was used in all interactions with participants. This is a process in which similar questions were asked during the interview, within the member check, and during the focus group interview, to insure the participants’ genuine perception was caught (Strang & Strang, 2001).

Transferability.

In qualitative research the establishment of transferability is done through “thick description, [which is] necessary to enable someone interested in making a transfer to reach a conclusion about whether transfer can be contemplated as a possibility” (Lincoln

& Guba, 1985, p.316). “The widest possible range of information for inclusion in the thick description” may be provided through the specification of the minimum elements needed through “purposeful sampling” (p. 316). In this study, transferability was provided throughout by thick, rich, descriptive data and criterion based, purposeful sampling.

Dependability.

According to Lincoln and Guba (1985) the assessment of dependability involves:

- the appropriateness of inquiry decisions and methodological shifts,
- the extent to which the inquirer resists early closure,
- the extent to which all data has been accounted for and all reasonable areas explored,
- the extent to which decisions about the conduct of the inquiry may have been overly influenced by practical matters, and
- the extent to which the inquirer endeavored to find negatives as well as positive data (p. 324).

The appropriateness of inquiry in this study was addressed through Chapters I, II, and III and by the proposal process. Several re-coding and analyses procedures helped to ensure against early closure and make certain complete exploration and analysis has been preformed. No practical matters, such as deadlines or cost, have been set regarding this study. Negatives results of private religious behavior was covered within the literature review was addressed in Chapter II. Negative issues that were discussed by the women interviewed were also attended to.

Conformability.

Lincoln and Guba (1985) propose the major technique for establishing conformability is the collection of data in accordance with Halpin audit trails categories, whether or not an audit is actually held. In this study, collected data fall under the following categories.

- Raw data – Video and audio recordings, written field notes, and survey results.
- Data reduction and analysis products – write up of field notes, summaries, unitized quotes, and theoretical notes.
- Data reconstruction and synthesis products – codes, themes, findings and conclusions, and the final result with connections to the existing literature and an integration of concepts, relationships, and interpretations.
- Process notes – methodological procedures (designs, strategies, and rational), and trustworthiness notes (credibility, dependability, and conformability).
- Materials relating to intention and dispositions.
- Instrument development information – pilot studies, preliminary schedules, observation formats, and questionnaires.

Each of these items that form the basis of conformability have been addressed and incorporated into the design of the current study.

Data Analysis

The process of data analysis involves making sense of the data. Lincoln and Guba (1985) claim the entire process of data analysis should be “carried out in an open-ended way” (p. 241). Data analysis, according to Creswell (2003), is “an ongoing process involving continual reflection about the data” (p. 190).

Within this research study, open-ended data gathered from the transcribed interviews, detailed description of observations, and naturalist observations were first read to “obtain a general sense of the information and to reflect on its overall meaning” (Creswell, 2003, p. 191). The data was then reread and analyzed several times “for material that could yield codes that address topics [about African American women and their use of prayer] that readers would expect to find, codes that are surprising, and codes that address a larger theoretical perspective in the research” (p. 193).

Additional data collection from the participants was accomplished by means of the focus group meeting and the completed and returned member checked verbatim interviews and observations. Continuous data analysis was utilized in the current study through the re-coding processes as the additional data was collected. Layers of complex analysis were conducted and “complex theme connections” were made (Creswell, 2003, p. 194). This was accomplished within the re-coding processes as some of the original codes were incorporated into other codes or became sub-codes if the ideas presented in them were similar. The final step of data analysis involved making narrative interpretations of the data as is seen in Chapter IV.

According to Emerson et al. (1995) in writing ethnographies, one constructs discrete pieces of field note data into an overall story, which is analytically reduced into *thematic narratives*. The thematic narratives developed in this study incorporated several analytic concepts linked by a common topic and coded. These codes are then organized into themes, and the themes arranged into a coherent story called thematic narratives (p. 170). The thematic narratives in this study revealed and accounted for the resiliency of

these African American women in dealing with daily stress by their use of prayer. The themes and codes that eventually emerged were:

What is prayer?

- Relationship
- Continuously
- Something Bigger, Something Better, Not Alone
- Giving it to Him
- Decree / Declare to the Situation

Why Pray?

- A necessary part of life.
 - Calling for help, “Suddenly!”
 - Prayer for oneself.
 - Prayer for direction.
 - Prayer for one’s family.
 - Prayer for others.
- Results: “It reeealllly works!”
 - Peace.
 - “That little oomph.”
 - A Release.
 - Safety, love, and comfort.
 - “I call it a mind healing.”
 - “He views us all as special.”

When to Pray

- In weakness and in strength...
...and in death.
- “Okay Lord, whatever”
- “The Test”

How to Pray

- Passionate and Fervent Prayers
- Prayer Also Includes...
 - Faith and trust.
 - Clearing the mind and getting past the flesh.
- Talking, listening, and being quiet
- “Holy Spirit” / “Holy Ghost”
- Hearing from God
 - How do you hear?
 - When the answer is NO!
- A Living Sacrifice

Conclusion

- A Change of Attitude: “The Good, The Bad, and The Ugly.”

Once the narratives were completed they were then assessed according to Stress and Coping Theory (Pargament et al., 1998) and *read* through the lens of Black Women’s Critical Social Theory (Collins, 2002) as observed in Chapter V.

Subjectives: Biases of the Researcher

I am because we are, and since we are, therefore I am

(Maulana Karenga, 2000, p. 43)

In qualitative research, the researcher functions as the primary instrument of data collection (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003) and Patton (2002) states “that analysis is the interplay between the researcher and data” (p. 489). According to Lincoln and Guba (1995) qualitative research consists of the constructions of interpretations influenced by the researcher’s background – education, experience, philosophical orientation, personality, and personal bias toward the issue and/or context. Therefore, the experiences that have shaped my life, have influenced this study.

I believe three major issues have shaped my experiences regarding this study: my race, my gender, and my own spirituality. Collins (2000) argues, “Black women intellectuals best contribute to a Black women’s group standpoint by using their experiences as situated knowers” (p. 19). “No scholar can avoid cultural ideas and his or her placement in intersecting oppressions of race, gender, class, sexuality, and nation” (p. 253). Therefore, I believe that my personal identity as a spiritual, African American female establishes me as a situated knower, having an insider’s view of the circumstances and participants in this study. As mentioned in Chapter II, many African Americans have a cultural distrust of the dominant culture, and may better relate to another African

American during interviews. This is due to the fact that they may see me as ‘one of them’ and that I have experienced many of the same discriminations and stressors as them.

The fact that I am also a woman may have further encouraged the African American women to talk about their experiences, as Marjorie DeVault (1999) states “woman-to-woman talk is quite different from talk in mixed groups – because women speakers are more likely to listen seriously to each other – and it affords opportunities for women to speak more fully about their experiences” (p. 62). Her discussion suggests that the tradition of “woman talk” help women, such as myself, interviewing other women through better transmission of ideas, in that, “women are better prepared than men to use the interview as a ‘search procedure’ cooperating in the project of constructing meanings together” (p. 62). Due to my involvement in the African American religious community throughout my life I was able to understand the ‘religious language’ and the sentiments expressed by the women interviewed. Although seeking to distance myself during the collection of the data, an intimate rapport was quickly built, I believe, based on common experience, and these women began to view me as an ‘insider’ and as a friend. In addition, the training I have received in pursuit of my doctorate in counseling psychology, specifically in the areas of research and interviewing has afforded me the opportunity to learn about, train other professionals, and counsel African American men and women, minorities of different cultures, and individuals of the dominant culture. Therefore, I believe the culmination of who I am has prepared me to work with African American women and fully understand their concepts of spirituality and prayer.

While researching the literature for facts concerning African American women, their stressors, and methods of coping I encountered periods in which I experienced

feelings of anger. In retrospect, I realize now, I was emotionally recycling through the stages of Janet Helms' (1990) Black Racial Identity Theory. My anger had been as a result of reading the plights of African American women throughout the years, women like myself. According to Helms' theory, I was experiencing the stage of Immersion/Emersion (p. 26). However, my continuing work regarding African American women afforded me the opportunity to again regain a "positive nonstereotypic Afro-American perspective" (p. 28), which according to Helms' is an aspect of the Emersion stage. Depicting the women's experiences involved me in an activity which was specifically designed to help reduce the chasms of racism and sexism, aspects of the Internalization stage (p. 29).

In attempting to approach this study from an interpretivist theoretical perspective, I had to also recognize the dilemma of my own influence on the women I interviewed as well as my own personal filter in the observation, interview, and analysis processes. Although I began this study with the open and unstructured approach of ethnography, I entered (whether I acknowledge it or not) looking for evidence to support or refute my original concepts. I make this statement based on the prior frameworks that exist for researchers, my existing body of knowledge, and my own experiences, which tell me that I must acknowledge, at some level, I retain vestiges of a positivist framework. That is, I *expected* to find common threads or concepts within the prayer experiences of the women interviewed that enabled them to better cope with their daily stressors (Parr, 1998, 100). Because this study is also of a personal nature to me, as the instrument through which all data is to be channeled, I had to ensure that the data was verified by the participants themselves. Detailed field notes, journal, and logs were maintained throughout the study

and helped to determine my perceptions from those of the participants. However, in the end, I must acknowledge that a major influence through which this study was viewed were my own eyes and experiences, and the subjectives and biases inherent in these.

The issues of whether and how African American women are able to speak are fundamental to a feminist orientation (Miller, 1998) as in feminism, women fashion their own ideas about womanhood. Asking women to speak about their prayer and coping strategies seemed at first to be straightforward. Yet, however public some of their actions may be, the act of prayer is very private and personal, and with a few of the women I encountered differing levels of disclosure. Perhaps this was partially due to pressure from a society where spirituality and prayer are about being a moral person. Or, reluctance may have been felt due to the idea of voicing the ‘personal’ (self-disclosure) was too risky (p.66).

Another possible limitation of the study may have been a direct consequence of how attractive a person I am to the subject. That is to say, that some women in this study undoubtedly liked me better than others, such as when an aspect of my biography resonated with their own. This may have affected the ways in which they were able to voice their experiences and construct their individual stories to me (Miller, 1998, p. 67).

I feel that as an African American female and mental health professional, I carried out a responsibility to explore in depth the culturally sensitive areas of spirituality, prayer, and coping with African American females. Through this study I consider I have accomplished this. Regarding this idea Almquist (1989) states:

Black women scholars are producing a variety of insightful analysis of their own position and that of the entire society. These writings assess the need for Black

women to define themselves and their priorities; to refuse any simplistic explanations of the conditions in which they live; to combine with other groups to achieve specific changes that are beneficial; and to recognize that race, class, and gender oppression are inseparable (p. 421).

CHAPTER IV

FINDINGS OF THE RESEARCH

In everything by prayer and supplication

with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.

Philippians 4:6

The Holy Bible, King James Version

Introduction

The goal of this research has been to investigate the prayer experiences utilized by African American women in coping with daily stress. Data was collected using an Africentric Feminist theoretical orientation and analyzed according to Ethnographic methodology. Through this process I was able to isolate and identify the common concepts or themes of this phenomenon.

Description of the Participants

Within the scope of this study, I interviewed and observed 15 African American women with an age range of 32 through 58 years, and a mean of 42.3 years. Participants were asked to indicate their marital status. Six (40%) of the women were married, five (33.3%) were single, three (20%) were divorced, and one (6.7%) was widowed. Table 2 presents the age data of the participants and Table 3 presents the marital status of the 15 participants.

TABLE 2
AGE OF PARTICIPANTS

Age in Years	Number	%
30-35	3	20.0
36-40	2	13.4
41-45	5	33.3
46-50	3	20.0
51-55	1	6.65
55-60	1	6.65

TABLE 3
MARTIAL STATUS OF PARTICIPANTS

STATUS	Number	%
Single	5	33.3
Cohabiting	0	0.0
Married	6	40.0
Divorced	3	20.0
Widowed	1	6.7

The demographic data questionnaire asked the participants to identify how often they prayed, how spiritual, and how religious they considered themselves. Eleven of the participating women reported they prayed many times a day, while four reported they prayed daily. Of the 15 participants; six reported themselves as extremely spiritual, eight as very spiritual, and one as somewhat spiritual. However, only two of the participants reported themselves as extremely religious, six reported very religious, three somewhat religious, and four not at all religious. Table 4 presents demographic data concerning frequency of prayer and Table 5, the distribution of the participants concerning their reported spiritual and religious levels.

Participants were also asked to identify their religious affiliation. There were 5 Spirit-filled Christians, 4 Baptists (one of which was 7th Day Baptist), 3 Christians, 1 Catholic, 1 reported being non-denominational, and one individual failed to answer this question. Participants were also asked the length of time in their current church which ranged from two to twenty years, with a mean of approximately 11 years (although perhaps, in hindsight regarding the demographics questionnaire, the question should have how long since they acknowledged the role of God in their lives).

Regarding the participants' social-economic-status, the women were asked to identify their level of education, employment status, annual household income, and type of residential area lived in. Of the 15 participants, six (40%) reported completion of a graduate program, four (26.6) reported completion of a bachelor's degree, three (20%) reported an associate's degree, one (6.7%) reported some college, and one (6.7%) reported having finished high school. Ten (66.6%) of the participants worked full-time, one (6.7%) worked part-time, two (13.4%) were homemakers, one (6.7%) was a student,

TABLE 4
FREQUENCY OF PRAYER OF PARTICIPANTS

Frequency	Number	%
Multiple Times A Day	11	73.3
Daily	4	26.7
Weekly	0	0.0
Occasionally	0	0.0

TABLE 5
SPIRITUAL AND RELIGIOUS LEVELS OF PARTICIPANTS

LEVEL	SPIRITUAL		RELIGIOUS	
	Number	%	Number	%
Extremely	6	40.0	2	13.4
Very	8	53.2	6	40.0
Somewhat	1	6.7	3	20.0
Not at all	0	0.0	4	26.6

and one (6.7%) was retired. The annual income of the participants ranged from \$0 - \$4,999 through \$75,000 - \$99,000, with a mean of approximately \$17,800 reported annually. Ten (66.6%) of the participants resided in urban city areas, four (26.7%) in suburban areas, and one (6.7%) in a rural area.

Data Sources

The key sources of data were the verbatim transcriptions, written observations of the interviews, and the transcript of a focus group meeting with the women. Five of the women interviewed were observed in various situations as they prayed and my notes of those observations were used as well. Six of the women returned member-checked transcripts, which were also analyzed. What emerged from the data were several phenomena or concepts that serve to express the connection between these women's prayers and their ability to cope with their daily stress.

Thematic Narratives

As discussed in Chapter III, when writing ethnographies, one constructs discrete pieces of field note data into an overall story, which is eventually analytically thematized into thematic narratives. The thematic narratives developed in this study incorporated several phenomena or concepts linked by a common topic or theme and organized these into a coherent story (Emerson et al., 1995, p. 170). Each thematic narrative uncovered through this style of qualitative research conveyed a way of thinking that spoke of these 15 African American women's capability to effectively deal with the accumulation and build up of daily stress.

What is Prayer?

The first of the themes examined was *What is Prayer?* This first theme describes the women's view of what prayer actually is to them. What is Prayer consists of *Relationship; Continuously; Something Bigger, Something Better, Not Alone; Giving it to Him; and Decree / Declare to the Situation.*

“Okay Lord, Whatever”

Within each individual interview the women were asked to relate what had been their most significant experience involving prayer. The answers I received were heartwarming and heartbreaking, good and bad, both for them as they related these events to me and to me as I listened to the ladies. As an introduction to each of the sections, a brief glimpse into one of the women's experiences is given. Within these observed glimpses a wide range of experiences are discussed. However, the most amazing thing about these narratives is that the women went into them and dealt with them in ways similar to Amy's, “Okay Lord, whatever” (20050730-6-A, p. 39, line 876). These women were not helpless, nor hopeless, but filled with a supernatural confidence that everything was going to be all right. As Laura told me, “I said, ‘God!’ and He was like, ‘I told you, you would make it.’ That’s all I could hear, ‘I told you, you’d make it.’ ‘I told you, you’d make it’” (20050807-8-A, p.22, lines 486-487) and make it they did..

Relationship

As Clarice described the premature birth and first three years of her daughter's life, her voice became reflective, and the rate of her words slowed. It appeared as if at points, she was reliving the experience, even as she spoke about it. When asked to examine her current level of relationship with God, she became very

serious, as she struggle between her humility and her grown, and her voice became very light, quiet, and childlike. At this point there was a look of wonder in her widely opened eyes and she again stared off in the distance, as if in awe of something that was deeply a part of her, and yet so much larger than she herself was. As she recovered and realized where she was, she quickly diverted the subject and instead began to speak of her relationship with her children. As I brought back the subject of her growth she seemed less caught off guard and immediately gave the credit for the deeper relationship to her God (20050626-1-O,p. 3, lines 47-57).

Relationship described prayer as a connection between the African American Women interviewed and God. One of these women, Clarice said, “The prayer is the relationship. The more I pray, the more I feel like I have a relationship with Him through prayer. I feel like that the reason I pray is so that I can have that relationship” (20050626-1-A, pp. 16-17, lines 364-366). Debra voiced that prayer was “A respectful relationship between you and God because you understand to communicate takes two people” (20050810-9-A, p. 4, lines 66-67). This relationship, according to the interviewees, was created and maintained by their communication with God through prayer. Tammy discussed her concept of prayer during her interview, saying “My communication line with... um, Father God. I feel like I can’t exist without it, because it’s my way of communicating with Him, which is the way I developed my relationship with my Lord” (20050726-5-A, p. 1, lines 8-10). Laura also stated this point quite plainly, saying “My quiet time... um, my prayer time is just, just, just relationship. It’s how my relationship with the Lord... um, is developed” (20050807-8-A, p. 17, lines 374-375).

For the women interviewed during this study, the theme ‘relationship’ also addressed how their relationship with God was similar to other caring relationships in their lives, such as a husband or father. Two of those that felt this way were Clarice and Amy, saying, “I felt that He was, He was like my husband, like He would come in and say, ‘Honey, I’ve got it all taken care of, you’re okay’” (20050626-1-A, p. 6, lines 129-130), and “It’s like me running to my daddy” (20050730-6-A, p. 3, line 65). Debra correspondingly discussed her feelings of her relationship with God.

He does care about me down here on Earth and all my little bitty problems, you know. But He does care. So when I think about my prayer... my relationship with the Lord, I know that He loves me. I know this. And even when I’m a mess in the middle of the mess, I always can envision Him as my Father, correcting me but loving me. I think it’s that love that keeps me staying in the Lord. Knowing that that love is there, even in my time of trial and tribulation, in my error, I know that God loves me (20050810-9-A, p. 5, lines 98-106).

Along this line of thinking, even my perceptions of Cindy and Laura as they spoke of their relationship with God was one in which they were being taken care of. For example: “What was missing was that strong head, that father image, that husband. Cindy now depended on, and what kept her standing were her God, her faith, and her prayers” (20050707-3-O, p. 4, lines 85-87); and

I watched her wrap her arms around herself as she related her pleas to God for justice regarding an old relationship in which she was hurt and again as she spoke of the women in her prayer group ‘cuddling’ her (a being taken care of) (20050807-8-O, p. 4, lines 72-75).

Tammy too looked at her relationship with God as Him being like a father to her.

God is the God of abundance, and just as I have a natural love for my own children, I'm not going to see them suffer or lack for anything that I can do. I believe that, that Father God has that love towards me and so much more. He supplies everything that I need. Whenever I go to him in faith, in prayer, he will supply (20050726-5-A, p. 5, lines 103-107).

Tammy summed up what she perceived to be the benefits of this caring relationship by stating, "Father God is my supplier, He's my provider, He's my protector, He's all these things to me" (p. 3, lines 59-60).

The women's prayers and their communication with God also created a relationship they felt essential for them to maintain. One of the women, Monica said, "In the natural we say we have to work on relationships with people if we want to see them flourish" (20050813-11-A, p. 3, lines 47-48). According to Alice, this takes time and prayer, "As you develop any relationship it comes through time spent together. And that time spent together is through prayer. And that's how we get to know God, that's how we get to know His personality" (20050811-10-A, p. 19, lines 413-415).

The relationship theme additionally explored the intense level of closeness that existed in these women's relationships with God. Debra stated quite succinctly, "The intimacy part is more-or-less God looking into me. In to me. Seeing into me. Inside of me. In-to-me-see. Intimacy" (20050810-9-A, p. 22, lines 481-482). Tammy said, "That's where a personal relationship comes in with the Lord. You develop a oneness with the Lord. He knows each child, He knows each one of his children name by name" (20050726-5-A, p. 8, lines 177-179). Lynn said, "This is an intimate relationship thing,

anyhow. You know, if I can't talk to anybody, I'm supposed to be able to talk to God" (20050815-13-A, p. 13, lines 285-287).

Continuously

At times Laura would intertwine her hands in an apparent gesture of modesty, such as when she spoke about 'the atmosphere of prayer.' Which seemed to me, she created through her own reverence and awe of the God she worshiped. It was easy to see that she also felt familiar with God, that is to say, at ease with Him. For example, referring to Him as 'Ish' (Hebrew), her husband. Her posture reflected a sweetness on which she rested, as she placed her elbow on the back of the coach and leaned her tilted head on the back of her hand. Laura spoke about her relationship with Him, His essence and her adoration of Him. She told me of her openness to Him and her worship to Him. She told me of her love (20050807-8-O, p. 3, lines 56-63).

The consensus of the women interviewed expressed that prayer was something they did continuously. This can be at any time of the day, in any place, or in any position, or as the result of any emotion. Laura remarked regarding this:

Some people think that if you're praying continuously, you know, that you'll have to have a posture of prayer, on your knees, but just a, a knowing that anytime, anywhere I can open up my mouth, where I am, or in my spirit I can whisper a prayer and I know that God... You know, just in an atmosphere of praying and seeking God (20050807-8-A, p. 3, lines 48-53).

Sharon stated, "I believe that I pray all the time, I mean throughout the day. My prayer might be as simple as, 'Please God'" (20050710-4-A, p. 15, lines 327-328). Clarice too

referred to this, “Pray without ceasing” (20050730-6-A, p. 1, lines 3-4); as did Maya, “I’m constantly in prayer. It’s like that whether I’m joyful or whether I’m sad” (20050816-14-A, p. 2, line 14); and Cindy, “Even like I’m talking to you now, there was a prayer going on in the back of my mind” (20050707-3-A, p. 11, lines 227-228). However, the clearest statement concerning continual prayer was by Nancy, who stated, “To me, it’s constant communication with God” (20050805-7-A, p. 1, line 6).

Something Bigger, Something Better, Not Alone

There is an innocence within Cindy, or maybe an ‘innocence lost.’ I was allowed a quick peek of this side of her as she discussed her father’s nightly prayers while she was still a child, as she clasped her hands together and spoke of kneeling at her bedside. This image of a young child’s nightly prayers reminded me of ‘The Precious Promise’ figurines we see all around. Someone sweet, soft, someone in need of protection somehow fit with this strong, steadfast, African American woman in front of me. What was missing from her life following her husband’s death was that strong head, that father image, that husband. Cindy now depended on, and what kept her standing were her God, her faith, and her prayers (20050707-3-O, p. 4, lines 80-87).

Prayer reminds you that you’re not in control of things. That it’s not about you. That this whole set up of life is not all about you. It’s bigger than you, and through prayer... and the more that you pray you realize that this whole universe thing is bigger than we could ever think of, bigger than we could ever imagine. And so prayer, prayer brings about a sense of humbling in your spirit (20050626-1-A, p. 7, lines 146-150).

In this statement by Clarice, she gives homage to God, a greater being, something larger than herself. Expressing the same type of reverence, Pamela uniquely expounded, as follows:

I have to acknowledge Him for who He is. I know that I have the right person to give me. I have just asked the only one who can give me that particular thing.

There is no other. Otherwise, my prayer is empty, worthless, and futile

(20050814-12-A, p. 5, lines 111-114).

Many of the daily problems and stressors the women interviewed discussed, at first appeared to them as being unmanageable or larger than that they could cope with on their own. They explained to me that through their prayers they were able to release or reduce their apprehension of the situation through prayer. Lydia said this while discussing a typical situation she and her husband would deal with:

We could sit down and figure it out. But... uh, and we do that too. But, it's like we have to pray about this, because we know that we need, we need God to help with this, because it seems bigger than us (20050628-2-A, p. 3, lines 65-67).

Clarice stated she could rest at night because someone bigger than her watched over her children. "He can protect them. I can't do everything. I got to go to sleep and rest, I have to work tomorrow" (20050626-1-A, p. 12, lines 270-272), and while discussing her husband's illness, Laura stated, "I felt like God was just cuddling me and saying, 'I got this. Don't look at this. I'm bigger than this'" (20050807-8-A, p. 12, lines 250-251). Alice explained why prayer helped her cope, "You know that there's somebody bigger on your side. The other neat thing is that the more you talk about God, the bigger He becomes" (20050811-10-A, p. 5, lines 103-104) and Sharon's statements

agreed, “So really just, anytime when I feel that there’s a need to reach beyond my capabilities” (20050710-4-A, p. 1, lines 16-17). Amy reiterated, saying, “Because I felt, like just... this is part of something bigger than what you and I both know” (20050730-6-A, p. 2, lines 38-39), and Tammy explained that God had a larger perspective of the problem, “I’m in the forest but He has the bird eye, or the eagle’s perspective over the whole situation” (20050726-5-A, p. 10, lines 228-229). Clarice succinctly stated, “Like you kneel to something greater than you” (p. 7, lines 150-151).

Moreover, all of the women interviewed seemed to feel the same as Clarice in my observation of her during her interview, “As if in awe of something that was deeply a part of her, and yet so much larger than she herself was” (20050626-1-O, p. 3, lines 53-54). As Tammy concisely stated, “So there’s no sense in worrying about this since God has got this covered. He’s taking care of this for you... He’s taking care of us” (20050726-5-A, p. 7, lines 144-146).

Giving It To Him

As Sharon explained the detail of her experiences she would use facial expressions and hand gestures. For instance, when she spoke of things being beyond her control, such as her son’s profuse bleeding after a medical procedure, she spoke in a shocked voice and she would frown deeply showing her helplessness in the midst of the situation. Then, as she explained her realization that the only option she had was that of prayer, she clapped her hands together. It gave me the impression that, ‘just like that’ she was given the answer that she sought. She explained that she still had some concerns regarding her son’s

bleeding after praying, but the worry, the fear seemed to be gone (200500710-4-O, p. 3, lines 46-54).

The African American women interviewed were able to, in a sense, step away from the daily stressors in their lives, the issues that were too big for them to effect by themselves. They handed their stressors over for something better, to someone bigger, to God. As Lydia stated “Ultimately in my heart, instead of trying to deal with it in my mind, or figure out what’s going to happen next. I always just knew God was going to take care of it. I just had given it to Him. I knew He was taking care of it” (20050628-2-A, p. 8, lines 167-170); Cindy stated, “When I pray, when I say offer it up, I let go of my burden. Um, so the prayer for me is not necessarily taking the burden, because I give the burden to God” (20050707-3-A, p. 18, lines 390-393); and Sharon said, “Just to know that I’ve put my problem, my dilemma in God’s hands, and however it works out is up to Him” (20050710-4-A, p. 15, lines 330-331).

Even in times of anger, the women spoke of giving the situation to God. For instance, Lynn stated, “God’s got control. You know, and I told [my father], I said, ‘I’m going to try and not get upset, there’s no point in getting upset, you know. If I really know that God’s got control, why get upset?’” (20050815-13-A, pp. 2-3, lines 44-46). Laura discussed her irritation with someone on her job, saying, ““So, just flush it away, God’.... [The] anger, frustration. You know, wanting to get vengeance, wanting to feel just... ‘Justify me Lord!’ You know, it’s kind of giving it to Him” (20050807-8-A, p. 9, lines 189 & 192-193). Amy also talked about times she was upset, “The Lord has literally told me sometime, ‘I can handle vengeance, but you can’t. I will repay. Don’t worry about it’” (20050730-6-A, p. 14, lines 313-314). Monica stated that at such times, she has

a solution. “I cast it all on him, and He brings about a peace and He says, ‘It’s going to be alright” (20050813-11-A, p. 7, lines 159-160). Lydia responded similarly, “Peace, um, ah, I feel like you, um, gave the care to Him, instead of carrying it on your own” (20050628-2-A, p. 8, lines 161-162).

Decree / Declare to the Situation

When Maya talked about going through her separation from her ex-husband she really opened up. As when she stated she was “through” and her gesture of wide open arms expressed the idea that she was out of strength, worn out, and ready to hand over the responsibility or weight of this thing to someone who could better handle it, her God (20050616-14-O, p.4, lines 70-73).

The African American women interviewed in this study expressed they also could *speak to the situation* directly, within their prayers or as a result of them. Tammy commented on this within her interview. “God has given us binding and loosing powers where we can speak directly to a situation” (20050726-5-A, p. 12, lines 260-261). Lydia stated,

I think a lot of times, I’m not even talking to God. I’m not saying, ‘Lord, please change this.’ I think I’m... um, speaking to the situation. Not praying to God, but we have God behind us, supporting us in our declaring and speaking to the situation (20050628-2-A, p. 5, lines 93-94 & 96-97).

Tammy went on to say,

In what we’re saying everyday, we create our atmosphere. We create paths for ourselves. We can create an atmosphere where there’s faith and love, which is an atmosphere of a great... um, combination where miracles can happen. Or you can

use your mouth destructively and create an atmosphere where um... havoc can be worked in your life. The mouth, speaking, praying, well, life and death is in the tongue (p. 13, lines 277-283).

Here is an exchange Tammy and I had on this subject: “**Margaret:** So let me get this. You’re saying that you can speak a thing, and because of the faith you have in Him, then He’s free to make the thing come to pass. **Tammy:** Exactly” (p. 13, lines 297-299). Lydia also referred to this, “Like, okay, this situation has to change. It’s like you’re going to stop... you’re almost speaking to the situation, as you’re talking to God” (20050628-2-A, p. 4, lines 90-91). Alice gave me an example of speaking to her situation, while on vacation in Africa.

We arrived in Africa... [and] we had discovered that our luggage was the only luggage that had not arrived. They do the investigating and, you know, they found out it didn’t make it on the plane. After the second or third day if you don’t get it back, there’s no chance that you are ever going to receive it. Based on what God said, if we would agree, anything we agreed on, He would answer that prayer. It was seven days later, but do you know that afternoon our luggage arrived (20050811-10-A, pp. 10-11, lines 221-223 & 228-238).

Why Pray?

The second theme, *Why Pray?* discussed the reasons the women interviewed prayed. *Why Pray* includes two subheadings, *A Necessary Part of Life* and *Results: “It reeealllly works!”* *A Necessary Part of Life* is broken down further and consists of *Calling for help*, “*Suddenly!*” *Prayer for oneself*, *Prayer for direction*, *Prayer for one’s family*, and *Prayer for others*. The subsection *Results: “It reeealllly works!”* is also

broken down further and consists of *Peace*; “*That little oomph*;” *A Release*; *Safety, love, and comfort*; “*I call it a mind healing*;” and “*He views us all as special*.”

A Necessary Part of Life

What was remarkably expressive about Amy was her voice. Amy sounded like she could have been a young woman in love. When Amy spoke about God, her voice became as rich, as soft, and as comforting as black velvet. Her voice would fill with awe as if she couldn't believe that this great creator and ruler of everything had chosen her to be his daughter. Although it wasn't beyond Amy to go to that “sista-girl” place with me, or laugh out loud with me (in a most unladylike way). At different instances in the interview Amy's voice became reverent and she continually raised her hands in honor and surrender to God. She chose to give Him all the glory that radiated from her, in her voice, in her face, and in her heart (20050730-6-O, p.2, lines 25-33).

Each of the African American women interviewed stated they prayed regularly to give God praise and thanksgiving, to worship Him, and out of reverence, as well as in accordance with established religious ritual. Several of the women conveyed the message that prayer was considered to be a necessary, integral part of their very lives. For example, Laura stated, “It's just a lifeline. It's, it's almost like the air that I breathe, spiritually. It *is* the air that I breathe” (20050807-8-A, p. 1, lines 11-15). Lydia and Tammy also specifically used the term “lifeline” when speaking about the need for prayer in their lives (20050726-5-A, p. 18, lines 402-404 & 20050730-6-A, p. 2, lines 39-40). Tammy also stated, “I just can't live without it” (20050726-5-A, p. 1, line 8). Other phrases the women used that expressed the same sentiment were “Prayer is the glue that

keeps the day together” (20050810-9-A, p. 1, line 3), “It’s unbearable without prayer” (20050730-6-A, p. 13, line 284), and “I could not function without prayer” (20050814-12-A, p. 18, line 397). One of the women just said, “Prayer, prayer for me is so powerful, that I don’t know if I could exist without it” (20050707-3-A, p. 18, lines 401-402). Pausing to think of the importance of prayer within her life, Clarice bewildered herself with her own realization of the importance of prayer, stating:

It’s like... like... probably, to me, it would probably be the most... besides my children, properly greater than my children. Probably the most significant thing in my life is my prayer life with God. The most important thing in my life. Right there. It’s right there with my children. It’s just like so important. I would put it... I mean, I would put it up there, real high. It’s a little scary to say God is more important than my children (said with surprise in her voice). It’s like... well, you know. My kids are real important to me Lord, so let me... (laughs as if uncomfortable)” (20050626-1-A, p. 20, lines 439-445).

Whereas, Maya expressed herself plain and simply stating emphatically, “Prayer is just what I do” (20050816-14-A, p. 2, line 31).

Calling For Help, “Suddenly!”

When Sharon spoke of things being beyond her control, such as her son’s profuse bleeding after a medical procedure, she spoke in a shocked voice and she would frown deeply showing her helplessness in the midst of the situation. Then, as she explained her realization that the only option she had was that of prayer, she clapped her hands together. It gave me the impression that, ‘just like that’ she was given the answer that she sought. She explained that she still had some

concerns regarding her son's bleeding after praying, but the worry, the fear seemed to be gone (20050710-4-O, p. 3, lines 48-54).

Many of the women interviewed remarked they prayed an abbreviated cry of help to God in response to crisis situations encountered. Pamela stated, "There are times when I am lost for words, when all I can say is, 'God help me'" (20050814-12-A, p. 7, lines 146-147); Laura said, "All I can do is pray, 'Lord! Help me!' or all I can do, is cry" (20050807-8-A, p. 26, lines 588-589); and Cindy said she just calls, "Lord Jesus, help me please, help me" (20050707-3-MC). Clarice shared with me a time in which she felt besieged by her situation, "Immediately, I sat down and I was like 'Lord, I just need you to help me, cause this is just too much. I cannot do this'" (20050626-1-A, p. 3, lines 67-68). Alice correlated this type of immediate prayer to that of being a parent.

When you just say, 'Jesus' (laughing). That's a prayer time too, no doubt. That's called an immediate need. It's kind of like that cry for help. You have a relationship with your child and, and, and they're outside playing and fall off the swing and they yell for help. You know that child's voice over everybody else's. They don't have to say, 'Mommy come help me, I need help right now.' 'Help!' or just screams (20050811-10-A, p. 20, lines 442 & 445-449).

The women interviewed also felt a need to pray immediately when they became tired and worn by the circumstances of life. An example of this was when Cindy attempted to discuss her actions when feeling distressed, "I pray because I... I feel that prayer is... um, sustains me. When I don't um... when I'm at my wit's end, I fall back on prayer" (20050707-3-A, p. 1, lines 21-23). Monica talked about using this type of prayer as she dealt with her mother's death. "I was thinking when she passed away, 'Lord help

me, just keep me’” (20050813-11-A, p. 14, lines 309-310). These women even used this type of immediate prayer when feeling too broken to pray. Debra and Maya talked about this saying, “All I can say is, “Help me, help me because I can’t pray right now,” and believe it or not, He does (20050814-12-A, p. 9, lines 186-187); “I came home and got down on my knees, and went before the Lord. I said, ‘God help.’ Wasn’t nothing there. I couldn’t even cry” (20050816-14-A, p. 32, lines 717-721). These women knew their immediate response in times of crisis and overwhelming problems was to go to God in prayer regarding the problem. In her explanation, Tammy said regarding this type of prayer, “Prayer is a way to untie God’s hands to work for us, to move in situations” (20050726-5-A, pp. 11-12, lines 253-254).

Prayer For Oneself

At points Lydia might clasp her hands together and hold them close to her heart as she discusses her invisibility as a child that seemed only visible to this God she trusts so fully. Or, in an instance like her speaking of her road rage (yes! road rage!) she would blush and smile embarrassingly as she lambasted her fellow drivers. Or, how as she was talking about herself during childbirth avoiding the words she couldn’t allow herself to say in front of a relative stranger. But then again, in times of deep contemplation, she would cover her mouth with her hand and rub her upper lip, as would a man rubbing his mustache (20050628-2-O, p. 3, lines 52-60).

Many of the 15 African American women interviewed indicated they normally began each day in the morning with a prayer. Monica stated, “I like to have my first

words of the day with the Father” (20050813-11-A, p. 15, lines 343-344), Alice said, regarding prayer:

It starts off in the morning. It’s my opportunity to spend time with God and start out my day with Him. Giving Him my day... um, thanking Him for another day, you know, to live. To then have Him direct my steps throughout the day (20050811-10-A, p. 1, lines 3-6),

and Pamela stated the following:

I’d like to think that I don’t make a move unless I’ve prayed about the situation. Prayer is my first step. Prayer is my first choice to solve any problem, any situation. Prayer is the first point of contact for me with the Father in my everyday life. When I wake up my first words are to God in prayer, and it’s to say ‘thank you for this day’ (20050814-12-A, p. 1, lines 4-7).

The women pointed out that prayer gave them control over events throughout their day. Maya said, “It’s my way of dealing with my everyday problems” (20050816-14-A, p. 1, line 9), Lydia stated, “I talk to the Lord all day, just to get through” (20050628-2-A, p. 2, lines 34-35), and Lisa confessed, “Conversation with the Lord is how I just get through the day, basically” (20050818-15-A, p. 5, line 33).

These women of prayer put their trust in God both in good times, in difficult times, and for the affairs of each day. Debra explained this idea to me, saying,

If I put God first today, He’s going to make my day go smoother and even if it doesn’t, He’s going to give me the strength to go through the hard stuff. So prayer is almost like the okay... that okay you can enter in this day (20050810-9-A, p. 1, lines 10-13).

While Amy stated, “Everyday has been just, ‘Lord help me, just help me’” (20050730-6-A, p. 16, line 350) and Monica said, “All I know to do is to get the Lord to help me, from day to day” (20050813-11-A, p. 26, lines 577-578). Alice even spoke of her evening habit of, “Praying before I go to sleep, that I have peaceful sleep” (20050811-10-A, p. 4, lines 72-73).

Prayer For Direction

Quite often Laura would sigh deeply and close her eyes, as she attempted to get her thoughts in order to respond to my questions or bring up the details of an experience she was relating to me. As Laura spoke of the benefits she received in answer to prayer, she waved the air in toward herself as if receiving and accepting through the very ambiance of the air. Once received, she opened her arms wide saying, “Whew, I can breath. Okay, God. Now I can hear” (20050607-8-O, p. 3, lines 50-55)

During my interview with Debra, when asked *why* she prayed, she stated, “We sometimes just don’t understand which way we are supposed to go” (20050810-9-A, p. 18, lines 400-401) and Tammy shared, “Prayer has given me direction for my life” (20050726-5-A, p. 1, line 5). Their statements concerning direction gained through prayer appeared to be true of all of the women within their daily routine. Laura and Amy remarked that they ask for direction as part of their morning prayers as well. Laura stated she asks questions such as, “Okay God, what does this day hold? What is the assignment today? Where am I to go?” (20050807-8-A, p. 1, lines 5-6), she continued on saying, “I can’t move forward in the things of God if I don’t pray, because that’s how God talks to me, giving me directions” (p. 1, lines 14-15). Amy said she also asks outright, ““God, I

want You to be my guide today.’ I just ask for His favor, ask for Him to equip me with the things that I need for that day” (20050710-4-A, p. 6, lines 129-130) and Sharon said, “I just ask for, you know, guidance. I ask for guidance on a daily basis” (20050710-4-A, pp. 6-7, lines 136-137). Monica stated she frequently says, “Okay Lord, so tell me what do you want me to do?” (20050813-11-A, p. 12, line 257).

The women in this study also prayed daily for direction and knowledge in more specific areas of their lives and many asked to be shown the correct action to take. Cindy talked about her requests to God, stating, “My morning prayer and my evening prayer includes to know and to do the will of the Lord” (20050707-3-A, p. 28, lines 636-637), and as Laura spoke about her move to another state, she said:

I knew then, that was my answer cause I had been praying, ‘God, am I doing the right thing?’ That day I started getting boxes and packing. I was like, ‘Well, God every step of the way You have got to be with me’” (20050807-8-A, p. 13, lines 276-278).

Lisa stated, “I’ve prayed about tasks I’ve had to face or endure that I wasn’t naturally or educated to know how to do them, but through prayer, I was able to carry the tasks out and do them, successfully” (20050818-15-A, p. 4, lines 83-85) and Pamela said, “I need you to guide me and counsel. I need you to help me to do the right thing” (20050814-12-A, p. 1, lines 22-23).

While speaking about praying in difficult or confusing situations, Monica said, “When you hit those tough times and it looks like there’s no way out, He always provides the out and the promotion, the out and the promotion” (20050813-11-A, p. 2, lines 31-33). Laura said her prayers were sometimes a direct call for instruction: “Listen, I don’t

want to hear no silence! Just tell me what to do! Give me some direction! Tell me what's next" (20050807-8-A, p. 17, lines 378-379). While Lisa spoke in regards to limited vision and direction: "We don't see the way He does. No way. So you get direction and you know how to handle things" (20050818-15-A, p. 3, lines 67-68).

Even in the smallest things, these women of prayer would ask for guidance, Sharon stated:

You know, that scripture that says, 'In all thy ways acknowledge Him and He'll direct thy path.' Okay, I've kind of used that, even when I've gone shopping. I've asked for a close parking space, I'll ask for a sale of all sales, especially if I'm hunting for something (20050710-4-A, p. 13, lines 291-294).

This request for guidance in even small things can also be seen in Lydia's prayerful questions, "What am I going to make? I'm like, 'Lord, what can I make for dinner?'" (20050628-2-A, p. 2, lines 24-25); "Lord, what are we going to do about this?" (line 31); and "Just a simple prayer and just asking God for wisdom on how to handle that. Just those quick, little, short prayers, 'Lord, if you don't help me, I can't do this. I won't respond the right way'" (lines 41 & 43-44). Laura explained that she also asked for direction and, "How to deal with certain things, um, just... I mean even the simplest, little things. Um, 'should I go home this way or that way?'" (20050807-8-A, p. 1, lines 18-20). Regarding her prayers Debra said the following:

Prayer has gotten me through, you know, the Holy Spirit should I say leading me to pray has gotten me through a lot of mind things. Cause, when I say mind things... sometimes the enemy, or shall I say life will cause you to fear things. Or be worried about things that don't even exist yet. No gas in the car, no food, you

get you caught up. So, prayer has gotten me through that (20050810-9-A, pp. 8-9, lines 176-180, 184-185, & 188).

Nancy summed up quite nicely the idea of asking for direction in prayer: “Trust God, talk to Him and He’ll show you things that you need to do” (20050805-7-A, p. 8, lines 179-180).

The women’s prayers for instruction were at times directly related to other things, as well. For example, Lynn said about her job, “I pray everything goes well on my job, that there’s no arguing. I just pray that God takes control of the atmosphere and just give us a peaceful environment to be in, you know” (20050815-13-A, p. 1, lines 6-7). For Pamela, the stress was in getting ready for work, “One of the biggest stressors for me is just getting to work. Getting ready and getting out the door to be gone for 3 days at a time, leaving my family. So, I go to prayer because I tend to... I tend to want to... just... do it to make sure it’s done” (20050814-12-A, p. 1, lines 14-15 & 18-20). Many of the women specifically stated they prayed regarding their finances. Lynn stated, “If there’s... a financial situation, I pray about that” (20050815-13-A, p. 2, lines 39-40). They have also prayed for protection for themselves and others. Maya discussed this, saying, “Sometimes you don’t really know things that are going on throughout the day. You’re protected” (20050816-14-A, p. 14, lines 307-308) and Alice stated, “I had to put... ah... ah... a troop up around her. So I could... I had to put her in protection” (20050626-1-A, p. 10, lines 224-225). Concerning prayer requests about one self, Clarice made an astute observation when she stated she asks, “For, for all of the good things, all of the goodness in life, the finer things. You know, He says, ‘ask.’ Cause, there are some things that, I

may not necessarily... probably don't need, but still I ask for it" (20050626-1-A, p. 8, lines 179-181).

Prayer For One's Family

Pamela's enthusiasm was contagious and before this interview was over we were both excited by our subject matter. We displayed it through our speech, gestures, and pitch. Something unexpected happened during this interview. Pamela's voice slowed, her voice became soft as a whisper, and she leaned in close as if to share a secret with a childhood girlfriend. This was when she described the words from God to her, telling of His love for her son and that He wanted to show her son His love through her (20050814-12-O, p. 3, lines 64-69).

The African American women interviewed in this study stated they pray for their families as well, both their families of origin and their immediate families. Tammy talked about praying with her family as child as they dealt with the issue of their mother's illness.

We... um, believe we became as one unit, one voice to the Lord on behalf of my mother. At first [the doctor] said she wouldn't make it through the night probably, but we believe that's why my mother is here today, she can walk, she can talk, and she plays the piano (20050726-5-A, pp. 14-15, lines 322-323, 328, & 330-331);

and Lynn reminisced the death of her nephew, "I remember, just praying to God and asking, you know, to help him and to help my family" (20050815-13-A, p. 9, lines 199-200). Clarice also spoke of praying for family members "to change... maybe negative

situations that are going on in my life presently, or in family members lives” (20050818-15-A, p. 1, lines 9-10). Lisa and Amy discussed praying for their immediately families. “I guess I’ll say, home life, mostly marital” (20050818-15-A, p. 1, line 14), and the other stating as follows:

There is nothing the devil, the enemy fears worse than a man and a woman of God who pray together. Because you have gone all the way back to the beginning. All the way back to Adam and Eve. They were in one accord unto God. The devil broke that up and when you join back together, you have gone back to God’s original plan (20050730-6-A, p. 32, lines 712-716).

The women spoke extensively concerning their prayers for their own children. Clarice discussed how she would pray over her children before putting them to bed, “I just go ‘may the windows be protected by the grace of God’ to the Lord. And I just pray, just pray over my children, and pray that they stay safe throughout the night, and that no one touches them, or harm them” (20050626-1-A, p. 12, lines 253-255). Nancy spoke of her praying over her children at the beginning of each day:

I would just pray over each of them. Over each of my kids that they would do well in school that day, and get along with their peers, and work well with their teachers, and that they would just have a good day and just stay... that God would keep us all safe from hurt harm or danger (20050710-4-A, p. 7, lines 151-154).

Sharon also prayed for her children concerning school, by stating she prays “If my children are experiencing difficulties at school” (20050710-4-A, p. 1, lines 14-15).

Alice and Sharon both stated that they prayed over themselves with reference to raising their children. “I have a teenage boy and I might find myself thinking, ‘I need

wisdom to guide him the best way,' to give him a right answer" (20050811-10-A, p. 2, lines 29-30); "I always pray for God to help me be the parent that He would have me to be" (20050710-4-A, p. 8, lines 161-162). Sharon prayed over herself, not only in regards to her children, but also in her dealings with family, and with others, as well. "You know, just to be the best I can be, be the best mother I can be, be the best daughter, best friend, best sister that I can be. So that I can have a positive affect on the people around me" (p. 7, lines 137-140). Lynn expressed similar sentiment, "I pray for my family, and I pray for other people as well" (20050815-13-A, p. 2, line 32).

Prayer For Others

The one facial expression of Lisa's that was of note was as she talked about 'watching God move' and seeing a small child's healing take place. It was a small smile of assurance, or maybe pride toward this God of hers that was able to heal the sick babies of the world. Lisa had a soft side, deep within her and I'm sorry that I was not able to tap into that. That warm, sweet spirit and promise that I'm sure she would say came from God. I could see it in that small smile as she thought about that child, or saw herself in God's arms (20050818-15-O, p. 3, lines 48-54).

All of the women interviewed stated they regularly pray for others. Pamela explained her reason for this, "When somebody is seeking, God will send His servant. He will send His people, He will send those of us who are willing and able and will be obedient to Him" (20050814-12-A, p. 17, lines 384-386). Monica said, "I know the answer I'm going to get each and every day, which is 'Feed my sheep'" (20050813-11-A, p. 1, lines 12-14), which she felt was her call from God to pray for and help others. Like

her, many of the women expressed that their prayers in some way helped the person they were praying for. Alice stated, “I believe that I can pray for others and, and, and ask God for His intervention in a person’s particular situation or in their lives” (20050811-10-A, p. 1, lines 18-19). She later stated:

In praying maybe for that individual that they would find peace for their situation. I would pray for myself that I would be able to say something that would cause a smile to come to that person’s face, you know, or might, you know, cause things to settle down. A situation where you might have an opportunity to even ask that person, ‘Can I pray for you? I believe that if we pray together, that God’s peace can be upon you.’ It might be for healing, for a physical healing in a person’s body (20050811-10-A, p. 3, lines 61-68).

Another reason Clarice stated she would pray for others was: “When I see cars that may have had, uh, an accident, or someone that may be stranded” (20050626-1-A, p. 1-2, lines 23-24), and Lisa stated, “I feel a need to pray when I see people that don’t know God and I just want them to know God, so that these kinds of things stir me to begin to pray when I see things like this” (20050818-15-A, p. 2, lines 32-34). “Even praying for those that may have been sick, for healing” (20050818-15-A, p. 6, lines 121-122), said Amy.

In contrast to the specific prayers the women prayed for other individuals, they also prayed general prayers, such as Nancy’s, “I sometimes ask Him to help me to be a blessing to somebody else” (20050710-4-A, p. 7, line 137). Monica stated she prayed for “Areas of the world” (20050813-11-A, p. 2, line 24), and Debra said she prayed in response to “Feeling empathy for other people” (20050810-9-A, p. 1, lines 19-22). “Uh, and of course, to intercede... to just pray for somebody that maybe is not in contact with

God, or distant from the Lord” (20050818-15-A, p. 1, lines 10-11), “So that I could be in the gap between her and God” (20050626-1-A, p. 10, lines 213-214), spoke Lisa and Clarice.

Clarice neatly sums up the question of ‘why pray?,’ saying, “I pray for others, for, for healing. I pray for health and strength. I pray for myself for obedience so that I can be more obedient to His Word and I can yield more to what He’s trying to say to me. I also pray for the finer things that He said that if we pray for them, you know, He will honor that” (20050626-1-A, p. 8, lines 173-176). Amy made a point about praying for others that I had never heard or considered. She said,

Jesus prayed for us, it hit me that, He’s way back here and He said, ‘even for... those to come.’ Prayer has no boundaries, no time. It has no boundaries in between people who might have prayed for you, girl, it might have been decades ago, somebody praying for their grandchildren or their great-grandchildren. (20050730-6-A, p. 43, lines 972-976).

Cindy expressed this sentiment exactly, saying, “What can I do? I couldn’t figure out an answer. So, I prayed for her” (20050723-3-NO, p. 2, lines 34-35).

Results: “It Reealllly Works!”

Most of Nancy’s gestures were small and kind of quiet, as was she. As she spoke of the three parts she feels each of us earthly beings possess (the mind, the spirit, and the body), and as she enumerated the many blessings she felt she just been given from God, she counted on her fingers. She used both hands as she waved first one way and then the other when speaking of the different ‘giftings’ we individuals receive from God. At one point Nancy drew her hand to her mouth

sharply, as if in surprise as she shared with me the “miracle” of receiving her new car (20050805-7-O, p. 2, lines 36-42).

The African American women interviewed in this study also discussed the physical manifestation of how their prayers were answered. While all of the women gave affirmative answers to whether their prayers were answered, the first of the women interviewed, Clarice, responded, “It is amazing to see how prayer... prayer really works. It reeealllly works!” (20050626-1-A, p. 13, lines 277-278). She later stated that while she was in the midst of a difficult situation, “I just continued to keep praying and He just kept knocking it out. He blessed me with this, He blessed me with that” (p. 23, lines 504-505). Cindy stated, “Prayer kept me... going” (20050707-3-A, p. 17, line 380). Tammy said, “Prayer generates a peace in me and confidence that regardless of what’s going on around me, I have a supernatural peace. Then I can get through the day” (20050726-5-A, p. 3, lines 54-56). Later in the interview, she also said, “It brings power into your life. It empowers you to overcome circumstances and situations” (p. 8, lines 171-172). Nancy’s comments about answered prayer was:

It gives me security knowing that I can always go to God, even though I can’t see Him, I can’t hear Him, but I feel like I can. Because, the more time you spend with Him, the more real He becomes to you (20050805-7-A, p. 6, lines 116-118).

Debra stated, “He’s given me material things through answered prayer. He’s answered prayer even with my family members, being saved and being delivered from death, literally” (20050810-9-A, p. 12, lines 174-176). While Monica stated, “He helps me be successful” (20050813-11-A, p. 13, line 284); and Lisa remarked, “It helps you cope or deal what’s going on” (20050818-15-A, p. 4, line 77).

Peace.

Lydia discussed the results of praying during her childhood as follows:

I have to say peace, confidence, um, just authority and, well-being, the feeling of well-being instead of feeling totally... ah, helpless and totally... um, what's the word? Ah, kind of abandoned, what's that word? Where you're kind of open to something that happened... Vulnerable! I didn't feel so vulnerable, I felt... um, stronger, and confident, and peaceful, and safe. Safe, safe in the midst of life situations that were not very safe (20050628-2-A, p. 8, lines 176-179 & 181-182),

In speaking of prayer, Tammy agreed by stating that "It brings me to... you know, peace" (20050726-5-A, p. 7, line 144), as did Amy by stating, "Most of the time it's joy and peace... um, sometimes just a refreshing. I think I want to say joy and peace, and refreshing" (20050730-6-A, p. 12, line 270). Nancy's comment was similar: "I realize that's what truly gives me peace and that's where my breakthroughs or answer's come" (20050805-7-A, pp. 4-5, lines 90-92). This same aspect of prayer is echoed in the following statement made by Alice:

The peace that God gives to us is peace that you sometimes don't understand everything what's going on. But somehow you know everything's going to be okay. Peace. It's a peace that I tell you, that you really cannot experience naturally (20050811-10-A, p. 4, lines 87-88 & 91).

"That little oomph."

The women interviewed also related that when they had finished praying that they would receive energy and empowerment. Amy explained this phenomena as follows:

Sometimes it's giving me something to do, an action, like an enthusiasm. Or, given you the okay to do something. Then, it's a... like a charge. Um, it's like regeneration, it's like you've got more... ah, energy. Stuff doesn't bother you. I mean, to me when I go into prayer, and... um, it's just... it's a... peace. I feel like I'm energized, refreshed and restored, so it's like, I'm ready for whatever (20050730-6-A, p. 3, lines 272-280).

Clarice describes this empowerment as well. "It's as if He comes in and just gives that little oomph. Like a cup of coffee" (20050626-1-A, p. 1, lines 7-8 & 12). Lisa said that to her it was, "A renewing, kind of. Like a... I feel like there's a charge. When I come from prayer in those times, I feel uplifted. Like I said... uh, a charge from the Holy Ghost" (20050818-15-A, p. 3, lines 57 & 60-61), and Monica stated, "Communication with the Father and agreement with His word empowers me" (20050813-11-A, pp. 12-13, lines 275-276). Even I, as a participant/observer could sense this energy the women spoke of, as reflected in a comment I made in my writing up a naturalistic observation:

As we stood in that dimly lit sanctuary, an almost glow radiated from these women, making the room feel as if it was brightly lit, although with our natural eyes we could all see that it was still dim. The atmosphere in the sanctuary was charged, so were these women, and so was I (20050819-14-NO, p. 4, 76-79).

A release.

"There's a calming. Sometimes when I'm stressed and I'm in my quiet time and He'll speak a *word* (snaps fingers) and the tears will flow and then it's just like there's a cleansing and a releasing" (20050807-8-A, p. 7, lines 147-149). These words were spoken by Laura as she discussed the relief she receives from God through prayer. Like

Laura, many of the women interviewed informed me that after they prayed, they also often felt a release. A letting go of the stressors they daily dealt with. Take Cindy's statement for example, "I feel an appreciation of... appreciation of the life around me. A lessening of regret. A letting... a letting go of distress. Being vulnerable and... being vulnerable and secure" (20050707-3-A, p. 12, lines 259 & 261-262); Tammy's statement, "Prayer for me is a great stress reliever" (20050726-5-A, p. 1, lines 4-5); or Clarice's statement describing her feelings after praying:

A release. Like all the weight that was on my shoulders was off. It was gone then. It was just like He took it and He lifted it. He took it off of me and He said 'It's alright, I've got it now.' (20050626-1-A, p. 6, lines 127-129).

Monica mentioned, "I always feel refreshed. I always feel refreshed" (20050813-11-A, p. 7, line 151); and Lynn also discussed her feelings as follows:

Sometimes I feel lighter. Like, I just felt so heavy. I just feel lighter. It's like, if something was upsetting me, I'm not upset any more. If it's hurting me, I'm not hurt any more. You know, I feel so much better about it. That whatever is there, is there, but *I'm* changed because of prayer (20050815-13-A, p. 4, lines 86-89).

However, Laura gave a vivid explanation about prayer being a relief for her, which was very clarifying:

It's kind of like when my allergies clown and I feel stopped up. Everything feels okay, but then, I can feel the release, you know. Like when I take the allergy medication and it starts to kick in, or I sneeze a couple of times. That's probably the best description. It just kind of clears everything up and it's like, 'Whew! I can breathe.' 'Okay God, *now* I can hear' (p. 8, lines 165-169).

In addition, there were instances in the women's lives in which they felt unable to continue. Tammy spoke to me regarding her actions and feelings at those times, "To release that in prayer gives me a sense of closeness with God. To know that He's taking care of the situation, but even though it looks like things are not formalizing right now in the natural" (20050726-5-A, p. 2, lines 32-34). Debra also discussed her feelings after prayer during difficult times, as follows:

I can make it. I'm going to make it. I'm left with... oh, it's like a weight lifting. Because, it's like a weight literally lifting. It's a feeling of God's got it in control, now you've given it to Him. Yeah, I feel like I can go on. I feel like I'm ready for whatever may come, good or bad (20050810-9-A, p. 6, lines 119-123).

In addition, the women discussed times when they had felt particularly bad concerning something they had done. Sharon discussed that even in those situations, prayer provided a relief for her.

Afterwards, after I finished praying, I thought... I remember getting up, feeling like, 'Okay the bible says if you go to Him... if you go to God sincerely and you're asking for forgiveness that He will forgive you and He'll forget about it. You know, He'll cast it into the sea of forgetfulness.' So I got up, feeling like I was really sorry, and I was really sincere in my prayer to Him. I got up feeling like He forgave me for it (20050710-4-A, p. 11, lines 241-246).

Laura made a similar point in the following comment:

It was just like there was a washing away of all of that... all that I was holding inside. And, so it was kind of like... I was lightened. I wasn't carrying the load

anymore. Yeah, I wasn't carrying the load anymore (20050807-8-A, p. 7, lines 154-157).

Safety, love, and comfort.

For the African American women interviewed, prayer and their connection with God offered them love, it offered them security, and it offered them comfort. Lydia remarked, "Most of all I knew He loved me. I just felt His love as I was talking to Him and I knew He loved me. I knew He was going to take care of me" (20050628-2-A, p. 8, lines 170-171). Clarice expressed similar feelings, "He loves me no matter what, and I know that by prayer" (20050626-1-A, p. 17, line 386) and Lisa stated, "So, I felt comforted" (20050818-15-A, p. 7, line 159). Monica discussed the time following her mother's death, "When she was gone, when I *knew* she was gone, that's when the Lord... He was right there. It was like He was this big blanket. He just wrapped around me, like a big comforting blanket" (20050813-11-A, p. 21, lines 478-481). Sharon referred to feelings of comfort and safety, "I think prayer offers a safe haven. It offers comfort for me" (20050710-4-A, p. 15, lines 329-330). Pamela stated she knew comfort and safety through prayer, "It's alright, everything's alright. Everything is going to be fine. Everything is going to be fine. Everything is taken care of. You don't have to worry about a thing. You just keep going on doing with what you're doing" (20050814-12-A, p. 11, lines 230-232).

The feelings of comfort, safety, and love resulting from the women's prayers are not just for themselves, but are transferable to those around them. During my interview with Nancy, I paraphrased her words, stating, "So, you feel security, confidence and you feel better about yourself. You said you feel better about yourself and because of that you

are able to be more loving and compassionate toward others” (20050805-7-A, p. 9, lines 188-190).

“I call it a mind healing.”

These women felt strongly that prayer helped to restore good mental health to their minds. Amy said to me, “The Lord will heal you. I call it a mind healing” (20050730-6-A, p. 21, lines 469-471). Pamela gave an explanation of how she perceives prayer heals her mentally, “Prayer covers the darkness. Because, when I pray the word of God, it covers whatever darkness I feel” (20050814-12-A, p. 9, lines 202-203). Monica remarked on this, as well, “It keeps us, sustains us, helps us be all that we are supposed to be” (20050813-11-A, p. 32, lines 721-722). Maya spoke in more detail regarding prayer healing her mind.

I feel so pure. I feel cleansed. My mind is renewed. My strength is restored. My heart is fixed because every time I go in there, I’m saying, ‘God, heal my broken heart.’ Yeah, my heart is healed. And I got something I can see, I can see a little bit clearer than I saw before I went in (20050816-14-A, p. 11, lines 240-243).

Pamela simply said, “Then that hopelessness and that helplessness lift” (p. 8, lines 179-180); and Debra stated, “If I don’t pray, I can honestly say I can lose my mind” (20050810-9-A, p. 11, line 235).

“He views us all as special.”

A couple of the African American women interviewed made remarks that seemed to indicate they were in some way special due to their relationship with God. One such example of this was when Debra made a statement regarding God’s view of her, “That vision that He gave me of myself as a queen in the king’s court” (20050810-9-A, p. 15,

line 323). Another instance of this was when Maya stated, “It’s just something how He has different daughters and it’s just something that He has with each. That’s me and His thing. That’s me and God’s thing” (20050816-14-A, p. 10, lines 203-204 & 207).

Due to these statements and the fact that in the pilot study preformed prior to this study there was a coding theme entitled “I’m God’s favorite child!” I chose to follow-up on this theme. While sending transcribed copies of their interviews, I asked this one additional question to each of the women interviewed. “*Do you think or feel you are in some way special to God, due to your prayer relationship with Him?*”

The answers I received back were surprising, in that they changed my perceptions of *specialness* from the pilot study. Only six of the African American women interviewed returned member checked transcripts. Of these six women, three wrote back indicating not that they thought they were special, but that it was special to *them* that *they* had this relationship with God. One of these three, Sharon responded in the following manor:

I do think and feel that I am special to God. I don’t think my ‘special’ feeling is due to my prayer relationship with God. We are all His creations, and He loves us all. So I think He views us all as ‘special’ (20050710-4-MC).

Tammy expressed a similar feeling, “I feel I am no more special than any other child of God. I just take advantage of the opportunity that is given to every child of God” (20050726-5-MC). Amy replied in this way, “I do feel special to God! I feel I’m a part of His body that He can use to get His will carried out on this earth” (20050430-6-MC). These women feel that this specialness was just not for them alone, but that this important relationship was available to everyone. Nancy’s response to whether she felt special

because of her relationship with God, was a plain and simple, “Yes” (20050805-7-MC) and Debra replied:

Do I feel or think I’m special? No, I feel more like I’m blessed. Everyday I want to desire Him more and more” (20050810-9-MC). Lynn’s answer again, emphasized God’s specialness, rather than her own. Her response was, “I know I am special to Him. Before He created me, He already had a plan and purpose for my life. The more time I spend with Him, the more I come to know God never fails (20052815-13-MC).

One of the women wrote back additional remarks on the topic of specialness. Her answer may even touch upon answering the age-old existential questions of “Who am I?” and “Why do I exist?” Amy stated her wish that all individuals could benefit from such a relationship in this way:

If women could see themselves as daddy’s little girls and guys could see themselves as daddy’s little boys.... I see myself sometimes just crawling up in His lap and just laying my head against His chest. I’m daddy’s little girl... I’m daddy’s little girl (20050730-6-A, p. 24, lines 539-542).

Prior to this statement Amy and I had begun reminiscing our feelings about our relationships with God, our heavenly Father, and our natural fathers. She and I had this conversation.

Margaret: I was praying... I was at a prayer meeting a couple of years back. I think it was when I was going through all that distress about being in my 40’s. At that prayer meeting, while I was on my face, I saw me in this little ripped up, raggedly, blue dress. I actually *had* this dress. I hadn’t thought about this dress in

decades, literally. But, I had on this little, blue dress and it was all torn and ragged, and I was coming in and Jesus was standing over there. He held out His hands and I ran up to him, and we danced. You know how a daddy dances with his little girl. **Amy:** On his feet! Exactly! That's what I did with my daddy too, and that's what I was doing with Jesus (pp. 23-24, lines 518-524 & 527-528)

The significance with which these women and I express our sensations of being special to God is also emphasized in the following discussion between Lydia and myself:

Lydia: That had I not had the inner confidence, and because of the outer confidence, that I do not have. I don't know what would have happened to me. Because if you don't have inner confidence or outer confidence what happens to you?

Margaret: You just get lost.

Lydia: So. Yeah (said very reflectively, followed by a very long pause)"
(20050628-2-A, p. 9, lines 197-202).

When To Pray

When to Pray is the third of the themes that was uncovered. This theme examined the times the women interviewed felt they needed to pray. When to Pray consist of *In weakness and in strength...*, *...and in death*, "*Okay Lord, whatever,*" and *The Test*.

In Weakness and In Strength...

Monica slowly, but surely moved in closer to her husband. Soon she was standing in the crook of his arm, however she still crossed her arms across her chest. As her husband noticed this he reached down for her sweater and placed it over her shoulders. This sweet, simple display of concern for Monica seemed to help her

relax into her husband's arms and she appeared to get a greater enjoyment from the service (20050814-11-NO, p. 4, lines 40-45).

The bible states in 1 Corinthians 4:10, “We are weak, but ye are strong” (The Holy Bible, King James Version) and the woman interviewed echoed this sentiment as they spoke of their prayers. Clarice expressed this concept saying,

I continue to put it all out there and say, ‘Lord, I am weak in this area, I am such a, I am such a...’ Sometimes I feel like I am such a disgrace to Him, because He is so... so mighty, and I... I am so... so weak, I am so... so... small in His eyes (20050626-1-A, p. 17, lines 379-383).

While speaking about her divorce, Maya responded similarly, “There was no way that I would have even... I... I couldn’t have done it. I would have crumbled under the... you know. If I would have tried it myself and not said, ‘Okay God, You’ve empowered me to do this’”(20050807-8-A, p. 26, lines 579-581). Laura and Amy discussed going to God in prayer when they were feeling weak and wounded, as well. Laura stated, “I don’t have the words to tell God how bad I’m hurting, but my tears will show Him” (20050807-8-A, p. 26, lines 590-591), and Amy said the following:

Especially when you’re feeling wounded. Especially then because when you are wounded, when somebody said something to you. When I’m looking at who I am in all my frailty, in all my helplessness. The Apostle Paul also says in another place that he glories in his infirmities. He says when he’s weak, he’s strong because of God. He’s going to remind me of the truth of God (20050814-12-A, p. 6, lines 121-122, 124-125, 127-130, & 133).

In my observations of these strong African American women I was able to discern an evidence of weaknesses. For instance, my observations of Clarice, Lydia, and Maya. “[Clarice] raised her hands over her head and just let them helplessly fall down into her lap, as if to show that she was neither capable nor strong enough to have made it through these trials on her own” (20050626-1-O, p. 3, lines 60-62); “[Lydia] might clasp her hands together and hold them close to her heart as she discusses her invisibility as a child that seemed only visible to this God she trusts so fully” (20050628-2-O, p. 3, lines 52-54).

[Maya] stated that she was ‘through.’ Her wide open arms with her palms up expressed the idea that she was out of strength, worn out, and ready to hand over the responsibility or weight of this thing to someone who could better handle it, her God (20050816-14-O, p. 4, lines 71-73).

Although these women felt and appeared frail at times, they expressed giving their problems and stressors to God in prayer was what helped them to gain what was needed for them to cope, to continue on and be strong in spite of their circumstances. Lisa expounded such a situation,

I was so down one time, I actually felt like I was being held or comforted in the arms of the Lord. I felt this when I was actually in prayer. I mean He was literally holding me. I was just in the room by myself, praying, in communion with the Lord. But, that was what I felt (20050818-15-A, p. 7, lines 144-147).

Lydia spoke of this instance,

‘Okay Lord, you’re going to help me do this.’ I needed the... I needed the... ah, the brave... the bravery? I needed to be brave so I could call him, cause

everything within me did not want to call him. And God helped me to have that, praying helped me to have that (20050628-2-A, p. 14, lines 297-300).

While talking about the death of her husband, Cindy stated, “Everything you do is praying to God. Everything I did was a prayer. And it was a prayer for substance. I needed to be, I needed to be sustained” (20050707-3-A, p. 11, lines 242-244). Maya explained that even at the moment she felt too tired to pray, that because of prayer, God was still her sense of strength.

Sometimes you ain’t got the strength to pray. At that particular time, I didn’t have the strength to pray, didn’t want to pray. Matter of fact, forgot God. You know, being prayed up, you know. Because going through a situation like that, you ain’t got no strength to pray. And that’s why God said, ‘My grace is sufficient, and my strength is made perfect in your weakness.’ So, I was weak, and didn’t have no strength at that particular time (20050816-14-A, p. 6, lines 114-116 & 127-130).

In discussing her own ability to cope, Lynn also gave credit to God for getting her through. “I also have such a sense a source of strength from Him. Some of the things I go through, I go through alone. It’s just me and God. So, He’s been a really strong source of strength for me” (20050815-13-A, p. 13, lines 277-280). Just as I was able to discern these women’s frailties, I could perceive a powerful force of strength from them as well. For example, as I wrote in one of my observations, “Sharon, like the other African American woman I’ve spoken to is definitely stronger and resilient as a result of her prayer life” (20050710-4-O, p. 4, lines 84-86).

The woman interviewed utilized their prayers and relationship with God as a type of support system. Due to prayer and God’s presence in their lives, they have something

stronger, or someone to run to in times of stress. To them, they didn't have to face their problems alone. As Cindy stated, "I pray... to always feel that there is someone, something with me to... um, I'm not alone. I use prayer as a companion" (20050707-3-A, pp. 1-2, lines 23-25 & 27).

...and In Death

As Cindy spoke doing the ceremony she told us the backpack she carried on her back all morning contained the urn containing the ashes of her husband. She then spoke on how she had carried the weight of his passing on her back for the past two years, and how she felt she was ready to release him. As she talked she shared with us how he, like her God and the Saints she asked to join her in prayer, would always be there for her. Inside of her, loving her, and guiding her in her future (20050723-3-NO, p. 5, lines 104-109).

Four of the 15 women interviewed discussed the death of a close family member when asked to describe one of the greatest stressors they have had to cope with. Cindy described the lost of her husband; Amy, the lost of her father; Lynn, the lost of her nephew (whom she had helped raise); and Monica, the loss of her mother. Two of these four women spoke in detail of their anguish, their pain, and their prayers. Cindy stated, "When my husband died, I... um, I prayed constantly. I... I... I woke up in the morning singing prayers. I... I went out in the... um, out here in the yard just praying, praying, praying" (20050707-3-A, p. 10, lines 219-221); and Lynn said, "I was just praying and asking God, you know, of course to... to um, to heal him, to make him be okay, and all of that kind of stuff. I even asked God to take me instead of him" (20050815-13-A, p.9,

lines 194-196). However, Monica and Amy choose to take on a different mindset. They told me about a different perspective, a different way they choose to view death.

Every time I have a moment... uh, even now, it's once again. I tell you for any type of downside I can see or come across a depressed feeling, its like, it's like the Holy Spirit says, 'We see that, now here's the flipside of that. We see that...' and it's just not... and He quickly gets me there. So, I made confessions out of my mouth that I would celebrate her (she giggles). I'll just keep celebrating her.

When she [died], I could see her in my mind, and she was like dancing. She began to dance, dancing for the victory on her life, dancing as far as the spirit, like I was doing. She would begin to laugh at the devil. In times when those things come against me, when I feel like I might become depressed or sad, I begin to laugh at the devil and I dance. And what I would do is, I embrace those good thoughts that would come. It's almost like the cartoons that you see, when the devil is whispering in one ear and the angel is whispering in the other. That's really happening on the inside where those thoughts come against you and etc. What I've learned to do is... I reject that. I don't listen to the negatives. I won't resist a factual, something that happened in our lives. I won't resist her death. Or believe that she's singing, 'I, John saw the number,' or that she's in the kitchen cooking fish and grits, which is the breakfast we used to eat. I don't try to stay away from anything that happened. But, I celebrate her. If the enemy (Satan) tries to pull the switch to make me depressed about that, I tap into what the Holy Ghost tells me about it. That it was a good thing, it's a good thing that happened, cause she's moving on (20050813-11-A, pp. 22-23, lines 505-522).

Amy too, chose this way to view her father's death, "Now he's on higher level, he's cheering us on. He's one of that great crowd of witnesses. To me... those things, it was... it was strength for us to go on" (20050730-6-A, p. 5, lines 97-99).

Through prayer each of these four African American women deal with the death of someone close to them. Cindy, Lynn, Amy, and Monica actually found a peace with which to deal with these deaths through prayer. Cindy stated, "Prayer kept me going. Because I wasn't holding it in, I was letting it go! I offered it up to the Lord" (20050707-3-A, p. 17, lines 380 & 382-383). Lynn described this scene,

One Saturday morning, I woke up and I remember not really speaking anything and just thinking to myself, you know, 'God just help us,' you know. I was just like... like pleading to Him. In total distress, and then... it's like all of a sudden, I just felt this... I don't even know how to describe it. I just felt this... this feeling all over me and I just started to cry. I was just like, 'Okay.' I didn't really hear any voices or anything like that. But afterward, I just knew that everything was going to be okay. At the same time, I knew he was going to pass, but it was going to be okay. I didn't feel bad about it anymore. (20050815-13-A, p. 10, lines 206-215).

Lynn continued on, saying, "We actually got closer as a family. Even though we were up there for something sad, it wasn't always sad. You know, there was some happiness, some joy, and some light-hearted conversation. There were some breaks in it (p. 11, lines 240 & 243-245).

Monica stated,

‘Father,’ I asked God to show me, ‘Show me! Show me what’s happening with my mother.’ Once again in my spirit, according to what the scripture says. When I start meditating on that, it brings up all the goodness. So that takes the dominant place in my spirit. If I’m feeling down or something, if I begin to feel down or something, I immediately ask for that. I don’t wait and just like stay around and fester on the fact she died. Because, then I could easily have a pity party and there’s no need for that, because good things are happening in her life and in mine. So, it’s no need for that, so I don’t even entertain it. (20050813-11-A, p. 27, lines 602-609).

She also made the following comment:

“I have the liberty to laugh. I have the liberty to go with what emotion I want because God is the God of liberty. I haven’t cried that much, but I cried. I’m just free to do it, if I want to”(p. 25-26, lines 563-565, & 584-585).

It took me a while to understand exactly what Monica was trying to tell me. I knew she *had* to grieve. I *was* the one about to become a psychologist and... my mother had recently passed. I knew what was supposed to happen when someone we loved died. We needed to grieve. However, this was my response once I allowed her words to sink in,

Yes, normally people do these steps...these grieving steps. But you’re saying... what I’m getting from you is... through your prayer, and through the Holy Spirit in you, that you get to *choose* how you’re going to feel, how you’re going to respond. You can cry if you want, but you really just choose not to. You choose instead to celebrate the good things about your mother and her good memories. Your good memories of her that you want to enjoy (p. 26 lines 587-592).

The Test

Lynn stayed kind of surface at first. She kept the conversation about her job and very vaguely about “things happening in the family.” While talking to me, Lynn was sizing me up. I think maybe she knew what she was about to talk about was still a sensitive area for her, and she had to decide whether or not she wanted to allow that level of intimacy with me. Perhaps at this point she said a small prayer. Could she trust me with this deep-felt pain? Whatever process Lynn went through, she chose to go there with me. She described her varied emotions regarding the death and dying of her nephew. A child she felt as if he were her own. As she talked about it, her voice got gruff and deep. At the point she spoke of her own denial with what was happening, she developed a lump in her throat and had to take a deep swallow in order to keep going. She stated shortly after these events happened, she gave her life to God. He was the one that had rescued her, and she was grateful (20050815-13-O, p. 2, lines 33-45).

As when one attends school, at the end of the training there is a test. Likewise in life’s lessons, according to the African American women interviewed, there are also tests that God allows us to go through. Sharon commented on this, “Perhaps He tests our faith. Maybe that was... I can chalk that up to that. If it doesn’t come right now, am I going to doubt? Or will I stand on His word and believe that He’s going to answer? (20050710-4-A, p. 14, lines 316-318). Amy reminisced that she had felt this way as well,

He’s not moved away from me. He wants me to follow him, but it’s like I’m going through a test. ‘Are you going to still believe what I said even though you

can't see it, you can't hear it, you can't feel it?' (20050730-6-A, p. 7, lines 156-158)

Maya discussed her divorce as her being tested, "At that particular time... yeah, I went through all of that as a test. At the time, I could only say, 'Oh yeah, God's got me. Yeah, oh yeah. He's got me regardless'" (20050816-14-A, p. 6, lines 123-124). Later in the interview she stated this same idea somewhat differently, "I'm telling you that the only way you going to get to the Promised Land. I'm telling you, I know. That's the only way to get to the Promised Land is to go through that wilderness" (p. 28, lines 693-695).

During these times of testing, the women stated that they frequently felt alone or distant from God. Pamela discussed this idea with me, as follows:

He'll never leave you and never forsake you. But, He has a way of withdrawing His... your awareness of Him, from you. He pulls away, just a little bit, just enough for me to say, 'What's happening? I can't feel You. You're not there.' When He does that, it's for us to come seek Him, because it's something that we're missing (20050814-12-A, pp. 19-20, lines 429-430 & 433-436); and "He didn't draw away, it was I... I did" (p. 20, lines 449-450). Amy explained this idea of being alone during the time of testing in this manner, "When he's giving a test the teacher does not answer questions. The teacher does not... the teacher is there. But the teacher is not answering questions, you just go on finish the test" (20050730-6-A, p. 6, lines 127-129). Nancy and I discussed this in her interview as well.

I went through that period. 'I couldn't hear anything from you or I couldn't see you. I couldn't get a word from you...' They say when a teacher's giving a test he doesn't talk he's quiet (20050805-7-A, p. 11, lines 236-238).

The women interviewed did not feel that these testing times were to punish them or make them suffer. They remarked that they went through these things so that they could mature and grow. Tammy stated, “A lot of times, the Lord will allow situations to happen in your life to work out some stuff in you, so that you can see what’s... what’s really in you” (20050726-5-A, p. 11, lines 235-237). While Maya explained, “I understand that it was God. When He said, ‘I will try you in the fire.’ He was making me. You know. He... He was making me or breaking me” (20050816-14-A, pp. 28-29, lines 632-634). Through the tests and trials these women suffered, they did apparently grow. Maya was a good example of this, as I wrote in my observation of her. “She was kind of lost and tentatively groping through the dark or unknown. She had seen troubles and been broken, but had somehow found her way back” (20050816-14-O, p. 1, lines 11 & 23).

How To Pray

The last of the four themes examined was *How to Pray*. How to Pray discussed the characteristics the women attributed to themselves regarding how they prayed. How to pray consists of *Passionate and Fervent Prayers, Becoming A Woman of Prayer, Prayer Also Includes...*, “*Holy Spirit*” / “*Holy Ghost,*” *Hearing from God*, and *A Living Sacrifice*. The subheading *Prayer Also Includes...* is further broken down into *Faith and trust; Clearing the mind and getting past the flesh;* and *Talking, listening, and being quiet*. The subheading *Hearing from God* is also broken down further into *How do you hear?* and *When the answer is NO!*

Passionate and Fervent Prayers

Turning right, I tenderly approached the far left corner of the alter and again kneeling I began to pray in one accord with those already at the alter. A different

woman was now speaking, simply saying over and over, "I love you, Lord." Many of us took up the refrain. Softly, gently, we professed our love toward our God. "I love You, Lord. I love You." Different women stepped to the front and prayed, each praying a different prayer. Souls were prayed for, families were prayer for, health, prosperity, and guidance were prayed for. The up-coming anniversary festivities were prayed for. But, mostly the individuals there just poured their love, honor, and praise upon God (20050819-14-NO, p. 4, lines 62-69).

The African American women interviewed within this study prayed intensely, they prayed with passion, with emotion, and with reverence. One of the women, Tammy quoted the biblical scripture to express this thought, "God says that the 'fervent prayers of a righteous man availeth much'" (20050726-5-A, p. 14, lines 306-307). Lisa explained the meaning of fervent, "Fervency is when you actually get in, before God" (20050818-15-A, p. 8, lines 181-182). Pamela stated this as an example of the passion and fervency, "I'm going to Him, spending so much time acknowledging Him for who He is that I... I... I forget I have a need. I'm like 'Oh!' Sometimes it doesn't matter at this point" (20050814-12-A, p. 1, lines 59-61). While Lisa expressed her emotions in the following way:

Almost the passion or the consistency and the steadfastness of the prayer. The passion or the seriousness, I would say more so. The passion and the seriousness of what I'm praying about. What I feel... actually passion and feel are the same words, but I actually feel this thing that I'm in. I'm feeling what I'm praying about (20050818-15-A, p. 9, lines 89 -192).

Although these women's words attempted to explain what they were feeling about their prayers, the actions they displayed said far more. In several of my observations I refer to their fervor. For example, my observations of Pamela were,

Pamela had to clap her hands two or three times during the interview as her emotions threatened to overwhelm her. Reminiscent of a young child that gets so excited that they have to clap their hands, jump up and down, or just sit there and shake. As she became even more excited about the topic of prayer to the being that she loved so much, she spoke even faster and gestured even larger. As Pamela's voice slowed, her voice became soft as a whisper, and she leaned in close as if to share a secret with a childhood girlfriend. This was when she described the words from God to her, telling of His love for her son and that He wanted to show her son His love through her (20050814-12-O, p. 3, lines 47-51, 62-64, & 66-69).

and,

When she spoke of 'His favor' she would use her hands as if pulling up from her own being, her own heart His kindness and gently rolling them over, as if placing it in front of her own eyes to be able to perceive Him (20050813-11-O, p. 3, lines 52-54).

Three more examples of my observations of the passion these women displayed were the interviews with Debra, Amy, and Lydia: "I could almost see it myself as she described the event in her soft voice, which was filled with the love, honor, and awe she re-lived from her vision (20050810-9-O, p. 2, lines 31-33).

Amy came to share with me her passion, her prayer, and her relationship with God. When Amy spoke about God, her voice became as rich, as soft, and as comforting as black velvet. Her voice would fill with awe as if she couldn't believe that this great creator and ruler of everything had chosen her to be his daughter (20050730-6-O, p. 1, lines 88-90).

As she spoke of her prayer life she would frequently look up into the heavens (or in this case, the ceiling). When she would get hold of a new insight or revelation she would look at me with eyes wide open and eyebrows making half moons on her forehead.... Lydia was very animated as she spoke about her God, her prayers, and her relationship with Him using gestures, her facial expressions, and her entire upper body" (20050628-2-O, p. 2, lines 31-37).

Even in my role as participant / observer, I was able to feel what it was these women experienced and I attempted to describe it. As in my comments regarding a prayer meeting I attended, "All eyes were closed and many of the women, such as Lisa and myself swayed back and forth with the intensity of what they felt, heard, or said (20050702-15-NO, p. 2, lines 40-41).

Becoming Women of Prayer

I then began to praise Him, with a song in my heart and spirit, filling my chest, feeling as if it had burst out of me. Out into the atmosphere it rose, as if on the backs of pure, white doves to be delivered to our Heavenly Father sitting upon His throne. Using my 20/20 supernatural, spiritual vision, I could see the Father making eye contact with me, nodding as He did so in acknowledgment and receipt my gift of praise. My heart and my mind, being lead by the spirit of God within

me, then began to thank my Heavenly Father for all the things He has done and had yet to do in my life. At this point, I backed away from the pew I rested on and still sitting on my feet, brought my elbows and forearms to the floor, resting my bowed head on my hands. The position I assumed was similar to that of the fetal position, although vertical. Because my whole life was dependent upon Him and the very reason for my existence was to do His will, I felt that no amount of surrender and subservience to Him could ever be enough to give Him the honor due Him (20050819-14-NO, p. 3, lines 45-58).

Many of the women interviewed stated they became women of prayer due to the influence of their families of origin. Amy reminisced, “My mother didn’t pray out loud. ‘I’m praying for you.’ They were traditional prayers” (20050730-6-A, p. 42, lines 954-955); and “My grandmother, we would go down to her house. She would have these prayer meetings and she would watch Oral Roberts” (lines 957-958). Cindy was also one of these women whose family members prayed:

At night, my father... we would all be in our bedrooms. We had a three-bedroom apartment. My father and my mother were in their bedroom and my sister... my older sister and I were in ours. And my father would be... the last thing we would hear was a prayer from my father. Sometimes I would fall asleep on my knees with my head on the bed while my father was still praying. My father prayed for us (20050707-3-A, p. 32, lines 709-713).

Lisa stated this about her childhood, “Prayer, I started as a little child, watching [my mom]. She would involve me in family issues, we were praying for certain things. That changed the way... once I got saved, how I would pray” (20050818-15-A, p. 8, lines 178-

180). Due to the difficulties within Lydia's family, her relationship with God was particularly important to her. "A lot of things I look back on... um, even before I ever heard... There's this scripture that says, 'Cast all your cares upon God, whom cares for you.' I *know* that's how I got through as a kid" (20050628-2-A, p. 8, lines 162-164).

Lydia and Amy had relationships with God as young children that they discussed with me during their interviews. These women reminisced how, even then, their prayers would bring them peace and reduction of stress within their lives. These are Lydia's touching comments,

I was just ten, or eleven and I was walking by myself to school. We didn't live that far from the school. I was just talking to God. Just looking up, and feeling like He was walking with me. I mean sometimes I would trip over the curb, because I was not looking where I was walking. Just talking to Him, and it felt like He was there with me (20050628-2-A, p. 1, lines 11-14).

Amy's statements about her childhood were also emotionally moving.

I was a little girl. I was probably about six. We lived out in the country, and I... ah, was standing out on the porch and I had my hand up. I was looking at the stars, the moon, and the clouds and my mother leaned out the door and said, 'girl what are you doing?' I said 'I'm talking to God,' and she said, 'Oh...okay.' I remember telling her that 'I'm holding His hand, and He's holding my hand' (20050730-6-A, p. 1, lines 11-16).

Some of the women interviewed stated that they began to pray upon encountering difficult and stressful situations as an adult. These traumatic events had reminded them of the prayers of their family members. These women had either not developed a

relationship with God of their own previously or had spiritually distanced from Him.

Clarice stated:

I was raised in the church, and I knew of His goodness because of the teaching that I had. So I held on to that. I had strayed away, but I remembered the teaching and I knew that He was good. I knew that He didn't make mistakes, so I knew that that one-pound baby was a not mistake. I knew that she had a mission. So I, as the mother, knew I had to pray. And that's when I started praying (20050626-1-A, p. 11, lines 238-240 & 242-244).

Monica discussed similar events that occurred in her own life, "I grew up singing what a friend I have in Jesus. But I mean, they were just words, you were taught them. But now I have a revelation and a light that there is no better friend" (20050813-11-A, p. 2, lines 29-31).

As the women grew older, they also became more mature spiritually, and began to turn more frequently to prayer. As Alice explained,

We evolve in our prayers, you know. I think that the more understanding we get as of who God is and what the scripture say that we can have. Things that we can pray about and the more we see answers to our prayers, the more confidence we receive (20050811-10-A, p. 11, lines 247-250).

Clarice stated:

The more I learn of Him, the stronger my prayer becomes. Sometimes I can just... sometimes I just go to scripture, and I can just read, over and over again. Immediately, or maybe within a day or two, that scripture will come into my prayer (20050626-1-A, pp. 14 & 15, lines 316-320).

Speaking of her level of maturity, she later said, “Then the more I learn, I... I grow. Maybe I’m a little farther than I think, but I still feel like I’m at the beginning” (p. 19, lines 421-422).

Prayer Also Includes...

As I walked past the seemingly empty pews, I saw women on their knees facing the pews or in prone positions on the polished, hardwood floor in the rows between. As I got nearer to the front, I also saw that there were several women on, at, or near the alter. They were on their knees, prone, and sitting on the steps of the podium, bowed in prayer. (200508819-14-NO, p. 3, lines 32-36).

While interviewing these strong, African American, praying women, there were occasions in which the women would mention things which were required in order for them to pray and feel assured that their prayers were heard and answered. During my interview with Tammy she stated, “I always start off with redemption, with the power of the blood of Jesus” (20050726-5-A, p. 2, line 38) and “I just begin to worship God for who He is and what He is to me and what He has already done, regardless of the situation around me” (20050726-5-A, p. 3, lines 52-54). Sharon stated, “Prayer involves a reverence and acknowledgement that there is a God and that He’ll answer my prayers” (20050710-4-A, p. 2, lines 37-38). While, Amy stated, “It (prayer) encompasses God’s word.... and Jesus as our model, because He was moved to compassion” (20050730-6-A, p. 11, lines 242-244).

Like Amy, many of the women incorporated biblical scripture /God’s Word into their prayers. Alice stated, “I believe that bible is God’s will, then I believe that He’s

going to hear and answer that prayer. It's almost like I'm speaking His language"

(20050811-10-A, p. 7, lines 146-147), and Alice stated,

When we pray God's word... I remember He told me. God told me. He said in the scripture... He said, 'My words will not return void, it will accomplish that it was sent out to do' and He told me that 'My word in your mouth, is just as powerful as my word in my mouth, because they still are my words' (20050730-6-A, p. 11, lines 239-242).

Tammy stated, "Praying the will of God is praying the word of God" (20050726-5-A, p. 8, line 176 & 177), and "For every situation that you face on Earth, there is an answer in the word of God to give you guidance in how to get through this thing" (lines 206-207).

Lisa also addressed the topic of scripture as well, saying, "Sometime I'm in a mode where I just pray His word back to Him" (20050818-15-A, p. 3, line 50), while Alice's stanch beliefs regarding prayer and scripture required a more in depth explanation, as follows:

I believe that the Bible lets us know why Christians... even Christians can experience sickness and disease in our body and have mental illness, if we haven't learned how to use His scriptures to overcome and deal with thoughts. Those thoughts that come against our mind (p. 15, lines 333-336).

Monica clarifying explanation went even deeper,

So, the word of God, when I say the word of God, meaning the Old Testament and the New Testament, meaning that the new covenant are God's promises. His covenant. His words of life to us. I own His life, I own His word. The scripture also says in Romans 8 that we can... that I'm an heir of God. I claim myself as an

heir of God, because the word says that I could. As an heir of God, and a co-heir with Jesus. I'm not only a child of God, but I'm an heir. And everything that the Lord owns, I own; because I am a joint heir with Him. So I own the word of God. And the word of God is on the inside of me (20050813-11-A, pp. 9-10, lines 200-209).

Faith and trust.

In regards to other important factors of prayer, according to each woman that was interviewed, were those of faith and trust in God. The women expressed the idea that the level of faith and trust one has in their prayers was directly related to the probability of having one's prayer answered. Tammy said, short and to the point, "It comes down to a matter of trust" (20050726-5-A, p. 11, line 248). Nancy's response upon receiving the member's check of her interview, wrote that faith was, "having the security in knowing that you can always depend on God" (20050805-7-MC). In regard to this, Pamela stated,

Every prayer that I've prayed in faith with the awareness that God is able to answer, my prayers have been answered. There are prayers that God won't receive. I believe that. If the prayer is prayed without faith, God will not answer it. You have to know the will of God before you can pray the will of God. Before you can pray, you have to have the faith to believe that He will answer you (20050814-12-A, pp. 23-24, lines 516-517, 522-523, & 525-526).

Alice expressed similar sentiment,

Praying and knowing that you're going to receive an answer to your prayer can make the difference between praying and hoping that you get an answer to your prayer. And so, if you're praying and hoping that you're going to get an answer to

your prayer, you're more likely to try to do things with your own strength as opposed to totally relying on God to help you in that situation and to work those things out (20050811-10-A, p. 16, lines 345-350).

A number of examples were shared with me that demonstrated the level and strength of these women's faith and trust in God. For example, Clarice's words concerning her premature child were:

When the doctors told me she would not live, I said, 'Oh, No! I know God! and I know God is going to do this!' I never would listen to them, and I would say, 'Oh, No! They say this, but God says THIS! (20050626-1-A, p. 11, lines 235-237).

Similar was the following statement made by Cindy:

If it hadn't been for my faith, to let go and let God, I probably would have had a nervous breakdown, or something. It was very painful, very, very painful. If it hadn't been for my faith and my prayer life, I don't know how I would have gotten through. Without prayer, without faith, without my spiritual... uh, life (long pause), I could not have survived (20050707-3-A, p. 16, lines 319-320, 331-332, & 342-343).

Sharon's recounting of her husband's illness also echoed this theme: "God hadn't fixed the problem yet and I may have prayed two, three, five, or ten times, you know. But I had to keep telling myself, 'He heard you the first time, He's going to work it out. It looks bad but I know He's going to work it out, it's going to be okay'" (20050710-4-A, p. 4, lines 74-77). The strength of Debra's faith and trust were also in her words, "It was like it took me *faith*, to push those doors open. Because they were huge, they were bigger than me" (20050810-9-A, p. 16, lines 349-350); and in Tammy's words, as well, "Regardless

of what the situations looks like, I trust you. I choose to trust you” (20050726-5-A, p. 11, lines 233-234).

It was through their faith and trust in God, once they communicated in prayer with Him, that the African American women I interviewed found their release from stress. Prayer in faith enabled these women to move on, in spite of the circumstances, as seen in Sharon’s statement, “I know through Christ I can do all things. So, I know that whatever obstacle is before me, we can get over it. You know, through Him we can get passed whatever is presenting at the time” (20050710-4-A, pp. 2-3, lines 45-46).

Likewise, Alice said, “I really have confidence that anything that I ask God, in reference to what the Bible says, that He’s going to hear me” (20050811-10-A, p. 7, lines 143-144).

Laura stated, “This time it meant more to me because I literally was just stepping out on nothing, but Him. He was like, “But that’s enough” (20050807-8-A, p. 20, lines 451-452). I could see Cindy’s faith, even within my own words as I wrote regarding my observations, “She knew she could depend upon Him. She knew He would never leave her or let her down” (20050805-7-O, p. 3, lines 53-54).

Clearing the mind and getting past the flesh.

The African American women interviewed also impressed upon me the need for them to focus while they prayed. Amy stated, “You need to empty yourself from the world and get ready and get tuned in before you get in prayer” (20050730-6-A, p. 31, lines 689-690). Tammy stated pretty much the same thing, “When I have taken the time to clear my mind from the clutter of the world, I believe it frees my mind up, so that I can hear from God” (20050726-5-A, p. 4, lines 74-76). Lynn shared what time of day was

best for her to pray, “I’ve tried praying during the day. Like when I get home from work I’ve tried praying, but there’s so much noise, you know. So, in the morning, it’s quiet. At night, it’s quiet” (20050815-13-A, p. 4, lines 73-74 & 76-77).

Maya described what it was like “*to get pass the flesh.*”

First of all, I’ve got to get pass my flesh. I’ve got to get pass these bills.... I’ve got to press pass all these bills, got to press pass life, you know what I’m saying. I’ve to press pass my kids. By my kids, by my daughter, you know you’ve got to press pass all of that. All the affairs of the world. So, once you get pass all of that, you know, once you get pass all of that... once you get pass and get out of your flesh, then I ask God to take me to a secret place. Once God takes me to a secret place, and I’m behind the veil, that’s it! (20050816-14-A, p. 7, lines 148-155).

Debra discussed this process as well.

Sometimes we go into prayer with the answers already in our hearts. So, when you’re quiet you’re not rushing. You’re pretty much making your body slow down and be still, which is something the *body* cannot do all the time, unless it is tired and ready for bed. The body does not know how to be still in the presence of the Lord. We have to bring our flesh under subjection. We have to literally take authority over this body, spiritually and make it sit still in the presence of the Lord. That rushing in, yeah. It doesn’t go along with silence. It’s a discipline, it’s a discipline (20050810-9-A, p. 4, lines 79-88).

Lisa said it simply, “Sometime I can just get down in prayer position and just get before the Lord and get my mind pulled in” (20050818-15-A, p. 2, lines 38-39) and Debra expounded, “Your flesh can’t get in the way. You’ve got to do your flesh like this (uses

her hand to hold an imaginary thing down and back). ‘No! Uh-um. You’re not interrupting me. You’ve got to be still’” (p. 20, lines 440-442). Lynn stated, “I do ask Him to intercede for me, for Him to step into the situation and help my flesh to decrease so that He’ll increase. I’ll get in the background so that He can do what He needs to do” (pp. 3-4, lines 67-69).

Talking, listening, and being quiet.

Many of the African American women interviewed stated that true prayer allows for conversation between them and God. Sharon said, “It involves a quiet time. I mean it involves conversation with God. Um, talking, listening” (20050710-4-A, p. 2, lines 34-35), and Nancy stated, “Some people think you always just have to talk to God, you don’t always have to talk to God. Sometimes you just need to be quiet” (20050805-7-A, p. 2, lines 27-28). Laura also felt this way, “Even when you’re praying, there’s a part that you have to learn, just not say nothing” (20050807-8-A, p. 17, lines 376-377). Lisa agreed, “Petitioning, listening, uh, yeah, just talking to, or conversation with the Lord, I guess” (20050818-15-A, p. 3, lines 47-49). However, Nancy said this in the most direct manner, “If I’m always talking, unless you just cut me off, am I ever going to hear anything you’re saying to me? (lines 30-31).

Debra explained why there was a need for silence in prayer, “It’s a place of silence where you allow God to reveal to you all the Holy Spirit has to reveal” (20050810-9-A, p. 2, line 30). She later said, “Silence! Don’t rob yourself of the silence of prayer. Because that’s where God speaks. That’s where He speaks” (p. 20, lines 439-440). Monica’s statement were in agreement, as follows:

I listen first. Because... um, and this listening part... I must say in this last year, I've learned to listen more. Prayer is communication, it's a two-way street, and it's a time to listen. It's like the Lord is showing me how to be quiet and listen to what He'll bring back to my spirit and to my heart, and then I'll receive those things. And then... receive them, keep them, and act on those things as I should (20050813-11-A, p. 6, lines 111-119 & 123-124).

Debra also stated in regards to the need for a time of silence:

Sometimes is the still small voice within that's giving us the answers to everything that we are asking God with our... Sometimes He already knows what we need, so if we would just be silent before Him, He'll answer those questions before they fall out of our mouth (p. 4, lines 62-65).

“Holy Spirit” / “Holy Ghost”

Monica stated she would ask God what could she be ‘blessed’ to do for Him each day. As she sat there she demonstrated by raising her hands in a motion of surrender. Later in the interview, she would demonstrate for me ‘her dance’ to her Lord (this included her standing up and ‘stepping,’ while she holds her hands in surrender to God), which she also did daily. Following her inquiry, thanks, and dance, she stated that next she listened. She said she would stop all movement and become quiet, in order to enable herself to hear what He had to say to her. She did this prior to addressing her own agenda or asking Him to work on her behalf for anything. She also quickly pointed out to me that she was a speaker of tongues, or as she phrased it, ‘a tongue talker’ (someone who prayed to God using

an unknown, spiritual language, 'giving utterance to things unknown by the human mind') (20050813-11-O, p. 2, lines 29-39).

Each of the African American women interviewed stated they prayed with the help of the Holy Spirit or Holy Ghost. Tammy spoke regarding this aspect of prayer, "Praying in the Holy Ghost is unadulterated, it's a pure language that the Lord has given us that we can truly... It's a language that He has given us to pray the will of God" (20050726-5-A, p. 11, lines 251-253). Pamela said, "When I enter into prayer, the Holy Spirit knows my heart. He knows what my burden is when I come" (20050814-12-A, p. 9, lines 185-186). Debra described the workings of the spirit in this way, "When you pray it's more traditional, 'now I lay me down to sleep.' Whereas when you pray through, you press in, you get in the spirit, and you experience the presence of God" (20050810-9-A, p. 6, lines 128-131).

Speaking in this Holy Spirit or Holy Ghost, which the women spoke of, is considered to be another language. I had the opportunity to observe many of the women speaking in tongues in each of my naturalist observations, such as my observation of Maya and the women at her church, "Speaking some in English and some in the language of the Holy Spirit, tongues, or glossolalia" (20050819-14-NO, p. 2, lines 43-44). Alice discussed with me what this meant to her,

The evidence of being baptized in the Holy Ghost is speaking with other tongues. There are times where not only am I speaking in English, but sometimes even in the spirit of God, by the spirit of God. I believe that gives us direct contact with God as a heavenly language. The spirit of God knows the perfect prayer to pray (20050811-10-A, pp. 2-3, lines 43-49).

Debra made a similar point.

Sometimes when we pray, we pray from our mind, amen. But when you pray in your spirit, amen just doesn't seem to come out. You can pray from your mind, that's where the vain repetition comes from. But when you pray from your spirit, a whole other level of prayer is reached (20050810-9-A, pp. 6-7, lines 33-37).

Monica also explained, "We may have exhausted everything that we know to pray for in English, but when we pray in this language that God has given us, that perfect prayer is coming up" (20050813-11-A, p. 31, lines 703-704).

Monica discussed the reason the Holy Spirit was needed, "The Holy Spirit has come, the scripture says, 'He [the Holy Spirit] comes to remind us, to comfort us, to help us'" (20050813-11-A, p. 10, lines 224-225). Pamela also explained why she felt the Holy Spirit was considered necessary,

If I pray out of my need, my prayers are really limited. But if I pray out of what the Holy Spirit speaks to my heart, and He will come. Jesus says when the Holy Spirit comes, when the Comforter comes, He will testify of me. So, when the Holy Spirit comes, He's coming to me with the truth of God (20050814-12-A, p. 7, lines 139-141 & 144-146).

Tammy mentioned the benefits of praying with the aid of the Holy Spirit, "Praying in the Holy Ghost can open up roads and avenues for us" (20050726-5-A, p. 12, lines 262-263). Debra also spoke of how the Holy Spirit benefited her,

I look to the spirit of God that dwells on the inside of me. Jesus said that He would send another Comforter. He's my advocate, He's my... anything that I need. He's my counselor, so if I need counsel for a particular situation then I look

on the inside to the Holy Spirit for His guidance (20050810-9-A, p. 1, lines 11-15).

In agreement with Tammy's statement, the women interviewed felt the Holy Spirit was something that was inside of them and always available with help for them. For example, Cindy stated, "It was... it was led from something deep within. It wasn't really me thinking of the words to say or saying them. It wasn't always me praying, but the spirit within me" (20050707-3-A, p. 11, lines 235-236 & 239-240). Monica stated, "I always ask the Holy Spirit to help me" (20050813-11-A, p. 26, lines 582-583). Even in the small things, she said she would ask for help from the Holy Spirit, "If I'm going through the house and I can't find my car keys, okay, "Holy Spirit please help me" (p. 3, lines 62-63). Pamela remarked, "Even when you don't feel like praying get in an attitude of prayer and the Holy Spirit will come and help you" (20050814-12-A, p. 21, lines 476-477).

Hearing from God

However, in response to my asking Laura if she felt her prayers were answered, a deep, heartfelt, belly laugh came forth and she answered, "Oh yes! Most definitely!" (20050807-8-O, p. 4, lines 78-80).

The African American women interviewed felt their prayers had been heard and responded to. In my observation of Laura, I wrote, "In response to my asking if she felt her prayers were answered, a deep, heartfelt, belly laugh came forth and she answered, 'Oh yes! Most definitely!'" (20050807-8-O, p. 4, lines 78-80). Each of the women expressed it slightly differently, but related a sentiment similar to Laura's. In the completed member check from Sharon, she wrote, "Just this morning He answered my

prayer even before I finished praying. He loves me so much that it seemed as if He was just waiting to hear from me. As soon as I called out to Him, He let me know He was right there” (20050710-4-MC). Amy stated, “He’s always talking to us, He really is and we should be listening and receiving” (20050730-6-A, p. 1, lines 7-8). Alice explained it this way:

When you hear... when you pray and then you receive an answer to those prayers, it gives you such confidence and such trust, that He is hearing what you ask Him, you know. It is those situations that cause us... You know, He builds a track record (20050811-10-A, pp. 9-10, lines 205-208).

How do you hear?

Of the 15 women involved in this study one woman, Lisa stated, “He (God) has spoken to me in an audible voice” (20050818-15-A, p. 7, line 144). However, she went on to say that this had happened to her only once, and it was during, what she termed “a difficult situation in my personal life” (line 154). The other times she and the other women ‘heard from God,’ were usually more of a conscious revelation or epiphany. Such as her statement, “He speaks to me, to my spirit” (p. 2, line 40). Similarly, the other women stated similar ideas, Cindy stated:

God’s communication to me is not... for me. I do not feel that is prayer. He doesn’t pray to me. Um, but He does make me feel that there is a communication. It’s a confirmation, it’s letting me know that we have communicated, that what I’m feeling is concrete (20050707-3-A, p. 12, lines 253-257).

Debra explained it, as follows:

When I use the term ‘speaking to me in the spirit’ I’m saying He puts His word or will in my heart. It’s like words that I hear within myself from the Lord. But you have to be still to hear them. The bible said, ‘In a still, small voice’ (20050810-9-MC).

Tammy said, “He brings ideas, concepts to me” (20050726-5-A, p. 8, lines 181-182); Amy stated, “The Lord... I don’t know with everybody, but He shows me stuff. And when He shows me stuff, I know it’s so” (20050730-6-A, p. 5, lines 101-102); and Lynn said, “After I’m in prayer, and I just sit and be quiet, you know, He shows me things” (20050815-13-A, p. 8, lines 165-166).

Laura also spoke of a different way God would sometimes speak to her, The phone will ring when I’ve just been praying, ‘God, help me.’ The person on the phone will say, ‘Put on TBN” and I’ll put it on and there it is (snaps fingers). ‘Okay God, however you want to speak to me and through whatever means you want to speak to me. I just want to be sensitive enough to know that’s You talking to me.’ Regardless of whose voice or body it is, I can hear it, I can say, ‘Okay, You’re answering me.’ (20050807-8-A, p. 5, lines 105-107 & 109-112).

When the answer is NO!

In response to my question whether their prayers having been heard and responded to, Nancy stated, “I think all of them have been heard. All haven’t been answered, but I can say that I have peace about it” (20050805-7-A, p. 17, lines 385-385); Lisa said, “Sometimes, they weren’t what I expected. Or, sometimes not what I even want to deal with. But, it was His perfect will, for me” (20050818-15-A, p. 7, lines 137-

138). Pamela explained the negative answers she had received through these next two statements. She first said the following:

[God] says, 'But understand this, when you pray to me and ask me for something, you might want something at point Z, but you're at point A.' He says, 'I can't jump over and go to point Z and give it to you. I have to take you through the whole alphabet.' It's a process" (20050814-12-A, p. 16, lines 359-363)

Later she stated:

It's like us giving our children everything that they ask for. We would be doing them a disservice if we gave them everything they asked for. In their young minds and limited understanding of life they don't know a lot of the danger, which is the same thing with God" (p. 24, lines 534-537).

Sharon put all these answers into perspective for me. "I know, sometimes the answer is no, and sometimes the answer is not now. Sometimes the answer can be 'that's really not what you need.'" (20050710-4-A, p. 8, lines 169-171). Additionally Amy stated, "Then sometimes He has just told me, 'You've never asked me for this. You've thought about it, but you've haven't asked me for it. Ask me for it'" (20050730-6-A, p. 33, lines 742-745).

A Living Sacrifice

Due to Debra's demeanor, as well as her words, I think this interview was the 'sweetest' of all. Debra, with her deep, rich, dark chocolate skin reminded me of that bittersweet, dark chocolate that I love. This interview touched me deeply, more deeply than of any of the other interviews I had done, both for this study and the pilot study, a total of eighteen women. She shared with me (for the first time with anyone) her vision of herself as Esther. Experiencing Debra's humble, non-

assuming assurance, selfless love for God, and for those God placed before her, I can fully understand why God would choose to share with her the royal splendor of Esther. For she, as was her biblical mentor, was beautiful both inside and out. Her concerns were not for herself, but always for Him. She seemed to not be able to get enough of Him. But, as I stated, in her vision she did not approach Him with what He could do for her or for what she might receive from Him. As a matter of fact, when asked in her vision what was her desire, it was only to see Him. Debra went instead to God with her love and offered herself on a silver platter. There was no greater gift she could present to Him. As was bequeathed unto Esther, Debra was, likewise, shown the Golden Scepter (20050610-9-O, p. 2, lines 34-46).

Of the African American women that participated in this study, all had reached one distinct awareness within their lives. Pamela said it the most simply, “Its not about me. Its about God and His will” (20050814-12-A, p. 26, line 579). Earlier in the interview she had shared with me her daily prayer.

I come today to do your will. Oh, Father God. I offer up myself as a living sacrifice to you today. Show me what You want me to do today. I come to do Your will. Not my will, but Yours. I lay aside myself. I lay myself down at your altar (p. 18, lines 387-388, 390-391, & 393).

Monica shared her prayer with me as well, “Father God, what may I do for you today?” (20050813-11-A, p. 5, line 114). These 15 women spoke, acted, and lived their lives to serve God. They felt this was their purpose in living. They felt that their service to Him was reasonable due to the many things God had done, and was still doing in their lives.

Debra's shared prayer gave more detail, "Lord, I'm laying down my life because I love you. Not for any other reason. Not to gain anything, or to be popular or famous. But, because I love you, I'm laying down my life for you. A living sacrifice" (20050810-9-A, p. 22, lines 479-482). Lynn explained this sacrifice, "You basically have to let go of something. You have to be willing... [My pastor] was just talking about that this past Sunday, that you have to sacrifice" (20050815-13-A, p. 7, lines 146-148). My observations concerning Debra and Laura were applicable to each and every one of the 15 women I interviewed. Concerning Debra, I wrote, "She offered herself on a silver platter, and there was no greater gift she could present to Him" (20050810-9-O, p. 2, lines 44-45) and my words regarding Laura were, "This strong, black sister didn't subject herself to very many things in life, but when it came to the God she served, she gladly bowed her spirit, and her body in subjection to Him, doing so gracefully, even gratefully" (20050807-8-O, p. 5, lines 93-96).

A Change of Attitude: "The Good, The Bad, and The Ugly"

Alice was the same in this meeting, as she was during her individual interview - very optimistic. Which kind of nagged at me during both of our get-togethers. I thought, 'She's always so positive, she must have not experienced much hardship.' She certainly did not address any major difficulties with me. I began to wonder if Alice was really so positive because she had experienced few difficulties, or, if instead she currently had few difficulties in her life because she was indeed so positive (20051217-1-GO, p. 3, lines 56-60 & 64-66).

While the women agreed that their relationship with God was one in which they felt privileged to be a part, they consistently reported that their relationships with God

also had extremely positive, life-changing aspects inherent in them. They reported that their prayers and relationship with God enabled these praying African American women to effectively cope with and reduce their daily stress. Monica said simply, “Everything that looks so horrible, it's not” (20050813-11-A, p. 2, line 33); and Tammy succinctly stated, “Prayer a way of renewing my mind” (20050726-5-A, p. 2, lines 36-37).

While discussing the subject of maintaining good mental health Clarice explained how she accomplished this. “I start thinking about the good, positive things. I start thinking about all the GOODNESS that He has put in my life” (20050626-1-A, p. 2, lines 31-34). Tammy articulated a similar point as follows:

Negative thinking can bring about stress, which can bring about health problems. You know worry is just wrong meditation, bottom line. It's wrong, it's not thinking on things that are lovely and good, and of a good report. So I have to make up in my mind that I'm not going to worry about it. I just have to trust God that He'll take care of those situations for me. Worrying about it is not my job to do. I have to make up in my mind that I'm not going to think on these negative things. I'm going to replace it with the word of God (20050726-5-A, p. 6, lines 121-123, 128-131, & 139-138).

The women in this study explained that, in many instances their perception of a situation would change following prayer. Clarice enumerated,

So, I immediately started praising Him and thanking Him for all the good things. Because at this particular time, I was thinking about all the bad things. If you think about all the bad, then the stress just keeps going up. But, if you think of the

goodness that He does, then that brings about the peace that comes into your life (20050626-1-A, p. 5, lines 102-104 & 106-108).

Monica stated, “God has been teaching me, and showing me things, and having me look at things differently from how I’ve seen them” (20050813-11-A, p. 11, lines 233-235).

Sometimes changing their outlook was something the women didn’t particularly feel like they wanted to do at that time. Monica described such a situation to me, as follows:

I had a mindset with just going in, on what I was going to do. I calculated it. I’m going in to have my little quiet time in prayer. But, that wasn’t the direction things were going. It was something totally different. So I had to adjust, I had to adjust. It needed to be done (20050813-11-A, p. 17, lines 378-381).

Prayer helped these women to look at themselves first. It allowed them to see their own faults or hindrances, and to transform their thoughts and their actions to those that were edifying to both themselves and others. Amy explained, “He wants it (prayer). When we get in His presence, we can go out and we can see things like He does. We can act like Him, and be more like Him” (20050730-6-A, p. 27, lines 612-613). Nancy stated, “One thing about prayer and keeping in contact with God is that He will show you... you! (she giggled), the good, the bad, and the ugly” (20050805-7-A, p. 8, lines 162-165). Amy also stated, “I had to learn to pray for [me]. I cannot change anybody else and only He can change me in my life, and He’s changed me. That prayer connection to Him keeps me... I want to say, it keeps me in line. Not that I’m always in line, but it sure shows me where the line is” (p. 16, lines 350-353). “I’m thinking, ‘Oh Jesus, you have changed me.’ That is from being closer to Him. That’s His purpose, to make us like Him. When we

commune with Him, we will become like Him” (20050730-6-A, p. 18, lines 396-398).

Debra said the following:

The Lord made me see inside me. Of course, you won't see everything, but you'll see what you need to see. And when your prayer life is consistent with that, then you have a prayer life. Then you can say you have a personal relationship. When you begin to pray and you allow God to see into you, but then wait. Now, you need to see Him (20050810-9-A, p. 23, lines 484-488).

These women of prayer repeatedly expressed the conviction that they knew how to change their perceptions of a situation for the better by the use of prayer, their relationship with God, and their beliefs. They claimed that these actions and beliefs resulted in their effectively coping with stressors in their daily lives. If one had to state in one sentence why this was so, perhaps Lynn said it best, “So, I said, ‘What the devil means for my evil, God’s going to turn it out for good.’ I said, ‘I know that, that’s what the word of God says, and I believe in that. So, I’m not going to worry about that!’” (20050815-13-A, p. 3, lines 46-48). In writing up my observation of one of the women, the words I used easily applies to each of the African American women interviewed and perhaps to many women of prayer. “It was her faith in Him that gave her a future and an outlook from which to continue living” (20050707-3-O, p. 3, lines 60-61).

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION, SUMMARY, CONCLUSION, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

For those who regard a transcendental explanation as inadequate, or feel that an appeal to supernatural explanations involves a sacrifice of intellectual integrity, the phenomena of religious observance must be aligned with what is known of other aspects of human functioning.

Hinde (1999)

(Spilka et al., 2003)

Summary

The review of the literature has revealed that the coping strategy utilized most successfully and frequently by African American women has been that of prayer (Jackson & Sears, 1992, p. 185). The purpose of this research study has been to investigate the prayer experiences of African American women in order to isolate and identify some common aspects of this coping strategy. The African American women in this study were selected because they were identified by a key informant and identified by themselves as “a spiritual person that utilized prayer as a method of managing her daily stress.” In this study 15 women were selected and agreed to participate. Using qualitative, ethnographic research practices these women were interviewed, observed, and met together in a focus group format. The use of ethnography provided the rich description of their “experiences and ideas” required when applying a feminist epistemology (Collins, 2002, p. 332).

Bunch (2000) also referred to this process of obtaining rich descriptive data as “the first stage of feminist methodology.

Chapter II also reviewed the literature of Lazarus (1966), Lazarus and Cohen (1977), Lazarus and Folkman (1984), Pargament (1997), and Folkman and Moskowitz (2004) regarding Stress and Coping Theory. According to this evolving theory the utilization of coping strategies, such as prayer, has the goal of increased manageability to a harmful or potentially harmful encounter between the person and the environment. The level of one’s ability to cope is “based on the personal agendas and coping resources the person brings to it” (Gruen et al., 1988, p. 744). The literature indicated that when threat occurred coping behavior is activated for the purpose of mitigating or eliminating the threat (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, pp. 33-34).

Regarding cultural values and beliefs, the literature reviewed also revealed that the phenomenon of African American women’s use of prayer in coping with the stressors of daily life is “a culturally-derived technique used for survival” (Jackson & Sears, 1992, p. 188). This technique is considered to be a vestige from an African worldview and the experiences that African American women have had to undergo since their arrival in America. Jackson and Sears label this phenomena an “Africentric worldview” (p. 185). According to Bunch’s (2000) description of feminist methodology, determining the origin of African American women’s use of prayer in coping the second stage of feminist research (p. 18). Patricia Hill Collins (2002) affirms this idea, as she states “through their retaining and reworking significant elements of their ancestral West African cultures, African American women maintained positive coping mechanisms” (p. 327).

Bunch (2000) considered the third stage of feminist research to be “vision and the actions made to make our vision a reality” (p. 18). As stated throughout, the goal of this research study has been to provide factual information that may lead to the framework of a cultural-relevant method of working with African American women in stressful situations. According to Bunch, the fourth stage is strategy. The method in this study has been (as previously stated) qualitative ethnography. Utilization of ethnographic methods has not only provided the necessary descriptive data, but has also provided the method of data analysis for this research study.

In Chapter V, the collected data that was formed into thematic narratives in Chapter IV was addressed. The thematic narratives regarding the method in which these African American women coped with stress according to stress and coping theories was analyzed through the lens of Black Women’s Critical Social Theory’s epistemological tenets, as developed by Patricia Hill Collins (2000). The motivation of using Black Women’s Critical Social Theory is that through knowledge of themselves, African American women can be of assistance in the development of tools with which to empower themselves (Collins, 2002, p. 325). In this study, the information gained from the analytic processes undertaken may potentially lead to psychological insight, methods, and interventions in the areas of stress and coping. The use of Black Women’s Critical Social Theory has provided psychology the “why we believe what we believe to be true” (Collins, 2000, p. 252) about the African American women interviewed and the way they cope with daily stress. As discussed in Chapter III, the four epistemological tenets of Black Women’s Critical Social Theory are:

- 1) Lived experience as a criterion of meaning,

- 2) the use and dialogue in assessing knowledge,
- 3) the ethics of caring, and
- 4) the ethic of personal accountability.

These four tenets are the lenses with which the thematic narratives regarding stress and coping were viewed and analyzed.

Discussion

A process of repeated readings and analysis of the transcribed interview data in which the 15 African American women shared their lived experiences, thoughts, and actions transpired. Through this process it became apparent that common threads or concepts within the participants' coping experiences existed. However, each women's perspective was unique, in regards to which experiences she chose to share with the researcher.

Initially, 62 threads or commonalities of coping experience were identified. As the process of repeated readings and analysis continued, it became evident that many of the commonalities within the participants' experiences could be combined into a common coping topic or theme from which the thematic narrative was written. The thematic narratives developed in this study incorporated several commonalities of coping linked by a common topic or theme and these were then organized into a coherent story about these women's prayer and coping experiences (Emerson et al., 1995, p. 170). Through this process, the 62 commonalities were recognized and reduced further into 25 commonalities. Eventually 11 major commonalities emerged regarding the prayers of the African American women interviewed. For example: "*That little oomph,*" *A Release*, and

“*He views us all as special*” all ultimately became component parts of the major phenomena identified as *Results: “It reeealllly works!”*

As the re-reading and re-analysis continued these 11 major phenomena were again reduced and 4 themes emerged. The four themes that were accountable for these women’s success in coping with stress through prayer were:

- What is Prayer?
- Why Pray?
- When To Pray, and
- How To Pray.

In our earlier example, the major phenomena identified as *Results: “It reeealllly works!”* was then again condensed and became part of the theme *Why Pray?* Each of these themes has been scrutinized regarding stress and the effectiveness of the women’s coping through the lenses of Black Women’s Critical Social Theory using the religious coping assumptions, as designated by Pargament et al. (1998) are as follows:

- MEANING: Finding meaning in the face of suffering and baffling life experiences,
- CONTROL: Providing an avenue to achieve a sense of mastery and control,
- COMFORT/SPIRITUALTY: Finding comfort and reducing apprehension by connecting with a force that goes beyond the individual,
- INTIMACY/SPIRITUALTY: Fostering social solidarity and identity, and
- LIFE TRANSFORMATION: Assisting people in giving up old objects of value and finding new sources of significance (p. 521).

Application of Stress and Coping Theory

What Is Prayer?

According to the African American women interviewed, prayer was basically their relationship with God. They described this relationship with God as the most important relationship within their lives. These women stated it was their prayers that created the relationship and sustained it. They considered their prayers to God as their communication with Him. Patricia Hill Collins (2000) postulated that it is within relationships that one gains an understanding of 'self,' through daily conversation and affirmation and as the African American woman seeks to define her 'self,' she also empowers herself (pp. 102 & 112). A very important way in which the women interviewed formulated their own identities was through their relationships with God.

For the African American women interviewed during this study, the theme 'what is prayer' also addressed how their relationship with God was similar to other caring relationships in their lives, such as a husband or father. These women continuously talked with God about their thoughts and their situations, as they would to a father, a husband, or a friend. Taylor et al. (2004) stated, "Prayer cannot be separated from relationship. The relationship between God and believers mirrors, in important ways, the loving and nurturing relationships that exists between humans" (p. 79). According to attachment theory, much abnormal behavior can be traced back to difficulties in early relationships with key attachment figures, typically one's parents" (Oltmanns & Emery, 1995, p. 86). Individual Psychology and Interpersonal theories of psychological development contend that corrective, familial experiences may replace dysfunctional or missing relationships from early in an individual's life (Schwartz & Waldo, 2003, p. 110). These statements

imply that the relationship these women have with God may provide a stage of belongingness and acceptance not achieved earlier in their lives.

The African American women that participated in this study found consolation in the idea that they did not face their problems alone, but that there was something or someone more capable of handling what to them first appeared unmanageable. Gubi's (2001) quantitative study findings agree with the women's statements in the current study. He wrote the following concerning his study, "Prayer involves some sense of connectedness with 'otherness.' Prayer is 'I' connecting with, or communicating with 'other', where 'other' relates to a non-physical object or being, e.g. God, Higher Being, Inner light, Spiritual Self, etc'" (pp.427-428). According to the women interviewed, these thoughts empowered them and directly reduced their level of daily stress.

The African American women that participated in this study expressed they could find rest in the fact that they had given their problem to God through prayer. They stated prayer reduced their stress level and allowed them to see the issue in question with greater detachment and therefore react less emotionally. This is in agreement with Smith's (2003) research, which determined that it was not religiousness that provided help in coping, but a personal relationship with, and reliance in a divine being (God) that was maintained through prayer. In Nooney and Woodrum's (2002) research prayer was found to be strongly related to religious coping and they made the following statement:

The generic measures of private religious behavior (e.g., prayer and other devotional activities) serve primarily psychological or social psychological functions for mental health outcomes. They are theorized to aid in the development and reinforcement of a framework with which to interpret life,

enhance self-worth through relationships with a divine other, and provide hope for change and healing (p. 361).

According to Pargament et al.'s (1998) determination of religious coping assumptions, these concepts of prayer served to assist the women interviewed in "finding comfort and reducing apprehension by connecting with a force that goes beyond the individual" (p. 521). This is the coping assumption of Comfort/Spirituality, "the most basic function of religion" (p. 521). These woman's praying actions of connecting with a divine being and self identify formation were also of benefit to them in "fostering social solidarity and identity," which is Pargament et al.'s Intimacy/Spirituality coping assumption (p. 521).

Under the theme *What is Prayer?* also included the women's statements that with prayer, they were able to "speak directly to a situation" (20050726-5-A, p. 12, lines 260-261). The ability to do so was found to be of assistance to the woman in the way they viewed and confronted their situations, similar to that of cognitive reframing and threat appraisal (Taylor et al., 2004, p. 107).). Folkman and Moskowitz (2000) referred to this process phenomenon as *positive reappraisal*.

Positive reappraisal refers to cognitive strategies for reframing a situation to see it in a positive light, both of which refer to cognitive coping strategies that enable the individual to appraise a difficult situation more positively. Positive affect may also serve as a buffer against adverse physiological consequences of stress (p. 766).

This form of religious coping through prayer assisted the women in "providing an avenue to achieve a sense of mastery and control" according to Pargament et al.'s (1998) assumptions (p. 521).

Why Pray?

The second theme deduced from the analysis of data examined the reasons the African American women interviewed prayed. These women stated they prayed to give God praise and thank Him, to worship Him, out of reverence, as well as in accordance with established religious ritual. Additionally, they considered their prayer to be very necessary and integral to their lives, even to the point of being their *lifeline*. These women stated they prayed for direction in their lives, for their families, and for others. Using Pargament et al.'s (1998) definition of key religious assumptions, these aspects of prayer in the women's lives aided them to "find comfort and reduce apprehension by connecting with a force that goes beyond the individual" (p. 521).

The women interviewed also revealed in times of sudden adversity their immediate, first response was that of prayer. They reported that they prayed when feeling overwhelmed, distressed, or when worn out from dealing with the daily concerns of life. They indicated they frequently used prayer in an attempt to regain a feeling of control. From the women's accounts, prayer seemed to also have a cathartic effect for them, as well. Oltmanns and Emery (1995) describe catharsis as "when individuals talk feely about problems in their lives.... caused by pent-up emotions... and previously unexpressed feelings [which], reduces psychic strain" (p. 84). The women discussed feeling a release, calming, or lessening of stress following prayer. This allowed them to continue in their situations.

The prayers the women interviewed prayed regarding themselves and others allowed them to do something. They discussed that often in stressful times there is little or nothing one can do in one's own ability. That is to say, they felt no physical action

could be taken against the things that were creating the problems in their lives, the stressors. Through their prayers, these women felt that they have taken action to correct, modify, or alleviate the problem, thereby reducing the impact of the stressor upon them. According to Pargament et al.'s (1998) determination of religious coping assumptions, these concepts of prayer also provided the women interviewed "a sense of mastery and control" (p. 521). The woman's actions of praying with and for others also assisted them in "fostering social solidarity and identity" (p. 521).

The African American women interviewed in this study stated they received feelings of peace, of energy and empowerment as a result of their prayers. The women also discussed receiving feelings safety, love, and comfort as a result of their prayers, freeing them to continue their course. Their ability to persist despite difficulties also heightened levels of self-efficacy and self-esteem. As the women's self-images improved, they felt special and privileged that God had chosen them as His daughters. This also helped them to reach a greater level of confidence within themselves. In accordance with these ideas Collins (2000) maintains that through the relationship they retain with God, "these women are empowering themselves by creating independent self-definitions that become essential to their daily survival" (p. 112). These prayer outcomes, according to religious coping criteria by Pargament et al.'s (1998) assist the women interviewed in "giving up old values and finding new sources of significance" regarding their self-images. Pargament terms this religious coping process "life transformation" (p. 521).

As the African American women learned to view themselves as special, they also learned to better care for themselves. Baker (2003) stated, "To take adequate care of ourselves, we must continue learning throughout life about what facilitates, deepens, and

strengthens our sense of personal well-being and peace of mind” (p. 59). He described well-being as “a feeling of vitality, of energy, of ability to do. Only we ourselves can decide what is essential to our own being” (p. 59). His statements coincide with those of the women interviewed in this study. The statements made by them expressed that one important method to care for themselves was as a result of their prayers. These actions are also included as a part of Pargament et al.’s (1998) life transformation coping assumption (521).

When To Pray

For the 15 African American women interviewed, their first response when feeling frail was to pray. In the effort to pray, they felt as if they were calling in stronger forces to support them than themselves. So that, in effect, they became stronger through their weaknesses. In this regard, the women utilized their relationship with God as a support system. God was someone to whom they could turn to in times of need or in times of joy. To the women, He accepted them as they were, forgave them (in their eyes), and encouraged them to move ahead in their lives. They felt as if they could approach Him in prayer regarding any area of their lives, even feelings of guilt or unworthiness.

Interestingly, several of the women interviewed had recently dealt with the death of a loved one. Pulling from the strength they perceived to be in God, these women faced death with what came close to that of joy. Joy for the person that had *passed*. The use of the word ‘passed’ is very appropriate, as this exactly states what these women were expressed within their interviews. They knew their loved one had died, but their perception of them was not just of them lying in the ground, unmoving and unknowing. The women’s thoughts of their loved ones were of them having moved on, or passed over

into a better place. According to Pargament et al.'s (1998) determination of religious coping assumptions, these aspects of the women's prayers served to assist them in "finding meaning in the face of suffering and baffling life experiences" (p. 521).

How To Pray

The African American women in this study discussed being passionate and fervent in their prayers. This referred to the reverence and acknowledgment they gave to God. I refer to Pamela's statement as an example of her passion and fervency, "I'm going to Him, spending so much time acknowledging Him for who He is that I... I... I forget I have a need. I'm like 'Oh!' Sometimes it doesn't matter at this point" (20050814-12-A, p. 1, lines 59-61). The women also discussed how they became women of prayer, generally through a significant life experience that overtaxed their normal coping abilities. They stated that during such times, they learned to pray more intensely and with newly formed faith, hope, and expectation, knowing innately within themselves that the God they prayed to could do far greater things than they themselves could.

The African American women involved in this study talked at length about clearing the mind and getting past the flesh. These words referred to the process of attending. Their prayers acted as a 'safe place' meditations, and afforded the women a sense of escape from whatever stressors might be disturbing their serenity at that time. The cares of the day are purposely set aside during this time and not allowed to enter in to this peaceful place that each woman has formulated in her mind. During this time of prayer the women make their petitions known to God, but they also quiet their minds in silence. The women acknowledge an ability to hear from God at this time. By clearing

their minds of the clutter, the ruminating, and the worst-case scenarios, the women's minds are then free to hear and/or formulate a possible answer to their dilemma.

Folkman and Moskowitz (2000) refer to these types of actions as problem-focused coping. They state the following:

Problem-focused coping can be very meaningful, first, because it involves identifying situation-specific goals that engage the individual and focus his or her attention, and, second, because the enactment of problem-focused coping makes it possible for the individual to feel effective and experience situational mastery and control. Both of these meaning-based functions of problem-focused coping are critical for positive well-being (p. 651).

Hearing from God directly was not the only method the African American women stated that they "hear from God." The women also stated they may hear the answer to a question asked in prayer through a friend, the television, or in a preached message at church. Regardless of the method in which they hear from God, all the women assert that they did, indeed hear from Him. Many of the women interviewed remarked at times they felt their answers from God were "No." At these times the women state they still acknowledged Him, through their acceptance of the negative answer. They believe it to be, as Lisa stated, "His perfect will for me" (20050818-15-A, p. 7, line 138). This perspective of negative outcomes helped the women prevent prolonged rumination and negative, depressing cognitions. The women also discussed their willingness to move beyond themselves. According to many psychological theories of development, such as Maslow's self-actualization, Erikson's generativity, Kohlberg's social contract, etc. as an individual matures, they become less self-absorbed and more concerned about the welfare

of others (Crain, 2000). These women were employing prayer and their thoughts concerning prayer in “finding meaning in the face of suffering and baffling life experiences” (Pargament et al., 1998, p. 521).

Black Women’s Critical Social Theory

Using the framework of Black Women’s Critical Social Theory by Patricia Hill Collins (2002), as discussed in Chapter III, the four dimensions of Black feminist epistemology as lived experience as a criterion of meaning, the use of dialogue in assessing knowledge claims, the ethics of caring, and the ethic of personal accountability. The African American participating in this research acknowledged their own lived coping experiences as knowledge. Collins (2000) states, “Stories, narratives, and Bible principles are selected for their applicability to the lived experience of African Americans and become symbolic representations of a whole wealth of experience” (p. 258).

Collins (2000) discusses dialogue as “talk between two people” (p. 260). She contends that new knowledge claims are usually developed through dialogues with other members of a community. Black Women’s Critical Social Theory (Collins) has, as “one of its criteria for methodological adequacy... this belief in connectedness and the use of dialogue” (p. 260). As the women discussed their experiences, thoughts, and actions regarding stress and coping; they connected with me, the interviewer. I, in turn, as the “seeker of connections, interactions, and meetings” helped to make the African American women I interviewed “become more human and empowered. The power of the [spoken] word generally, and dialogues specifically, allows this to happen” (p. 261).

“The ethic of caring suggests that personal expressiveness, emotion, and empathy are central to the knowledge validation process” (Collins, 2000, p. 261). The first

component of the ethic of caring is “the emphasis placed on individual uniqueness” (p.261). Although the women interviewed approached the phenomenon of prayer and coping in similar ways, they each approached their spirituality, relationship with God, and their sharing of these things with me by unique means. This was evident even in the variety of churches they attend. The “second component in the ethic of caring concerns the appropriateness of emotions in dialogues” (p. 261). For example, during the interview held with Clarice, she became quite flabbergasted while trying to tease out her feelings regarding her relationship with God and her relationship with her children (20050626-1-A, p. 20, lines 439-445). The third component of the ethic of caring is, “developing the capacity of empathy” (Collins, p. 261). This was evident in the women’s discussions involving their praying regularly for others, even as Monica phrased it: “Areas of the world” (20050813-11-A, p. 2, line 24).

The ethic of personal accountability states that “people are expected to be accountable for their knowledge claims” (Collins, 2000, p. 265). Within the scope of this research study, the women’s assessments of this researcher’s knowledge claim included an evaluation of my character, my values, and my ethics. In regards to this, “many African Americans reject prevailing beliefs that probing into an individual’s personal viewpoint is outside the boundaries of discussion” (p. 265). Throughout every interview, the women interviewed asked questions of me, the researcher. Questions regarding myself in regards to what I was asking them. Within this area I had to tread quite cautiously, as I did not want to the women interviewed to perceive from me expected answers. In turn, I subjected each potential interviewee to a similar evaluation process in regards to their knowledge claims regarding prayer.

According to Collins (2000) within Black Women's Critical Social Theory "Emotions, ethics, and reason are used as interconnected, essential components in assessing knowledge claims. In this alternative epistemology, values lie at the heart of the knowledge validation process such that inquiry always has an ethical aim" (p. 266).

Conclusions

*The ability to maneuver and negotiate through the stresses of life
and still be psychologically intact with a mature point of view
is a manifestation of positive mental health.*

J. K. Grady, 2003, p. 29

This study has revealed four themes regarding the coping strategies of the African American women interviewed. These themes are: What is Prayer? Why Pray? When to Pray, and How to Pray. Within each of these four themes, specific psychological concepts and processes have been uncovered. The findings have also revealed these psychological concepts and processes intensify the coping effectiveness of the African American women interviewed. Within the first theme, *What is Prayer?* I addressed the women's nurturing relationship with a 'Higher Being,' which has resulted in increased feelings of belongingness, acceptance, and connectiveness for the participants. Also discussed in this theme was the concept that prayer afforded the participants the opportunity to appraise and cognitively reframe their situations, resulting in a greater sense of mastery and control. Within the second theme, *Why Pray?* I discussed the participants' reasons to pray. This theme included the processes of finding comfort and reduction of apprehension through catharsis and an ability to take action in difficult situations. These outcomes of prayer served to help the participants to increasingly empower and care for

themselves. Within the third theme, which was *When to Pray*, the concept that the relationships the women maintained with God served as methods of validation and emotional support. In addition, within this theme the concept of finding existential meaning while dealing with suffering and/or confusing life experiences was addressed. Within *How to Pray*, the fourth and final theme, I examined the intensity and significance of the participants' prayers. I also addressed the women's ability to attend, focus, and clear their minds within this theme. These actions by the women resulted in less rumination and negative thought processes. As the use of prayer by the participants increased, so did their expectation of increased serenity, their ability to move beyond themselves, and their effectiveness of coping with daily life stress.

The findings of this research are particularly relevant to psychology as it has defined an area of stress and coping in which cultural variables have not been readily used by mental health providers. In this study, prayer as a coping strategy has been effective in managing external and internal demands that would otherwise exceed these women's resources. The use of prayer has been shown to be pertinent and applicable in the participants' efforts to increase manageability in times of psychological stress. In addition, African American women may feel more accustomed to the use of prayer as a coping strategy than a more conventional intervention that is novel to them. Due to many African American women's familiarity with prayer, if offered as a means to modify stress, they may engage in it more readily when facing overwhelming stress in their lives. Encouraging the use of the prayer as a coping strategy for some African American women can provide the psychological benefits not attained elsewhere.

Throughout my training, the area of specialization I have chosen within Counseling Psychology has been that of Diversity. The experiences I encountered while researching this study have strengthened my resolve that we, in the field of psychology, must recognize and utilize all aspects of an individual, as they are, to aid them in their search for good mental functioning. We must also acknowledge that there are still areas within the realms of culture, psychology, and stress and coping that still remains unstudied. This study has also helped to reduce the chasm between the Science of Psychology and Religion, as well as the chasm between minority cultures and the dominate Western European culture upon which psychology has been founded.

Recommendations

*When your little stuff... your little scientific stuff doesn't work,
you zap prayer from them.... What else do they have?*

Laura (20050807-8-A, p. 29, lines 658-659)

As Laura (an interviewee) inferred, using prayer as a therapeutic intervention may be the only coping strategy some African American women are familiar with or are willing to use. Rather than take away or discredit the use prayer in these women's lives, utilization of this culturally-relevant coping strategy may prove to be very effective in the reduction of daily stress. The derived concepts of this research study regarding the effectiveness of prayer in coping by African American women may now begin to be incorporated into frameworks that are used effectively to treat overly stressed, African American women. Further interviews and observations that continue to emphasize these same and similar themes will only add to methods currently used to enable and empower

individuals, African American women, as well as anyone seeking to better cope with daily stress.

Recommendations for future research include the expansion of coping and stress theory to coping by means of prayer to African American men, to other minorities, or to the dominant culture. As the current study only focused upon prayer and coping by Christian, African American women, future research should also include other denominations and/or faiths. In addition, this study did not account for differences in age, education, or social economic levels, additional studies in these areas would be of use in psychology, as well. Quantitative studies, such as utilization of the RCOPE (Pargament et al., 1998), regarding prayer and coping within specific diversities may discover correlations and validate the variables and the psychological attributes that result in good mental health found within this study. As Folkman and Moskowitz (2004) state, “Despite the complexities inherent in the study of coping, the area continues to hold great promise fro informing effective interventions to help people better handle both acute and chronic stress” (p. 768).

Footnotes

¹ During the 1970s there were few psychological studies conducted on spiritual effects physical and mental health. One of these few was Cohen and Lazarus' (1973) study on coping.

²The 1980s brought forth more studies finding a positive relationship between variables of health, stress, and coping. However, the variables of religion and prayer were still mostly overlooked. Some of these studies were: Almquist (1989); Antonovsky (1981); and Folkman et al. (1986).

³With the arrival of the 1990s, studies on religion and mental health increased and the effects of culture was beginning to be recognized. Examples of these studies that were conducted are: Bingham (1992); Brown, (1993); Burnette, (1994); Francis and Gibbs, (1996); Jackson and Sears (1992); Mack (1994); and Magaletta and Brawer (1998).

⁴Since the late 1990s and into the 21st century a paradigm shift in psychology occurred. This shift came about around the Mental Health Report of the U.S. Surgeon General. Since then, the positive impact of a client's spiritual and cultural commitment is now accepted. Among the numerous studies that have aided in the recognition of these factors are: Anderson (2001); Anderson-Scott (1997); Baldacchino and Draper (2001); Campbell-Burden (2001); Constantine, Lewis, Conner, and Sanchez (2000); Davis (2001); Ellison and Taylor (1996); Ellison, Boardman, Williams, and Jackson, (2001); Grady (2003); Gubi (2001); Harrison, Koenig, Hays, Eme-Akwari, and Pargament

(2001); Hawley and Iruita (1998); Hays (1996); Henderson, Gore, Davis, and Condon, (2003); Hill and Pargament (2003); Jabbra (2001); Levin, Chatters, and Taylor (2005); McCullough and Larson (1999); McLennan, Rochow, and Arthur (2001); Miller (2003); Miller and Thoresen (2003); Nooney and Woodrum (2002); Pargament (1997); Pargament, and Brant (1998); Plante, Saucedo, and Rice (2001); Robinson (1997); Robinson (1999); Robinson (2000); Smith (2003); Schwartz and Waldo (2003); Stokes (2002); Taylor, Chatters, and Levin (2004); Utsey and Ponterotto (2000); and Van Hook, Huguen, and Aguilar (2002).

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Appendix A
Purpose of the Study
(script for ministers)

Hello,

My name is Margaret Morris, and I am a graduate student currently attending school at Oklahoma State University in the School of Applied Health and Educational Psychology, pursuing my Ph.D. in Counseling Psychology. I have a Master of Science degree in Community Counseling and am licensed with the state of Oklahoma as a Licensed Professional Counselor (LPC).

Prior research has shown prayer to be the most common method of reducing stress for African American women. The purpose of this study is to research prayer and coping as used by African American women. I would your help in identifying five or six women you believe to be an a African American female, over the age of 18 that identifies as a spiritual person, and that you believe utilizes prayer in her daily life to reduce stress. I will personally be interviewing the women myself, asking them about 8 questions or so. After I've completed analysis of the data, the women and myself will meet as a group, if they agree to.

Before you give me any information on the women, please check with them to make sure it is all right for me to call them.

Appendix B
Nature of the Study
(script for participants)

Hello,

My name is Margaret Morris, and I am a graduate student currently attending Oklahoma State University in the School of Applied Health and Educational Psychology, pursuing my Ph.D. in Counseling Psychology. I have a Master of Science degree in Community Counseling and am licensed with the state of Oklahoma as a Licensed Professional Counselor (LPC).

Your pastor has identified you, as an African American female, over the age of 18 that might agree to participate in a research study. I asked him to identify a few women he felt that might utilize prayer in their daily life to reduce stress, and you were one of the women he chose. The purpose of this study is to research prayer and coping as one of the methods in which African American women deal with stress in their daily lives. Prior research has shown prayer to be the most common method of reducing stress for African American women and I'd like to ask you some questions regarding that.

If you agree to continue, we will begin with an interview, in which I'll ask you about 8 questions. The interview will take about an hour to an hour and a half, and will be taped. If agreeable to you, I may ask to observe you while at a prayer meeting or church service. Shortly after the interview, you will receive a transcript of the interview, which may include a few questions concerning clarity. Once you have agreed that it is accurate and have answered any questions regarding it, please return the transcript to me.

Following my analysis of yours and your co-participants interviews, observations, and transcript checks, a final group meeting will be held with all the participants and myself.

Appendix C

INFORMED CONSENT

Project Title: The Effectiveness of Prayer in Coping: An African American Female Perspective

Investigator: Margaret A. Morris, MS

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this research study with the student researcher, a graduate student at Oklahoma State University. This form outlines the purposes of this research activity and provides a description of your rights and responsibilities as a participant.

Purpose: The purpose of this project is to research prayer and coping as one of the ways in which African American women cope with stress in their every day lives. Your participation is requested because you have been identified as an African American female that utilizes prayer in your personal efforts copes with stress in your daily life.

Information gained from your participation in this study will be used to develop common themes of coping used by African American women. Individual quotes may be used as examples of these themes. When examples are stated, an anonymous pseudonym will be used in place of the actual name.

Procedures: You will be asked to complete a self-report (demographic) form (5-15 minutes) and submit to a personal interview (60-90 minutes) with the researcher concerning your use of prayer. You will also be asked do you agree to be observed while at a religious function, and to review written materials regarding your interview and observation (if applicable) for purposes of clarification (60-90 minutes). In addition, you will be asked to attend a focus group interview (60-90 minutes), along with the other women that have participated in this study. Interactions will take place at your place of residence, the church you are affiliated with, or at Oklahoma State University within the Counseling Psychology Clinic, Tulsa campus. The interviews will be video and/or audio taped (tapes will be used for research analysis only).

Risks of Participation: There are no known risks associated with this project that are greater than those ordinarily encountered in daily life.

Benefits: The collected data from the examination of the words and experiences of African American women and how they use prayer to cope with daily stress may lead to the following benefits:

- Improved culturally sensitive understandings of the coping strategies of African American women.
- Information leading to the possible formation of conceptual frameworks and related models of effective mental health strategies for use with African American women.
- Improved relationships between the communities of African American women and Mental Health Professionals.

Confidentiality: All subject data, including video and audio recordings, transcriptions, and forms will be double locked in a secured file. Video and audiotapes will be transcribed and

coded for identifying purposes. The transcriptions will be identified by code as the only identifier. All tapes will be stored separately from the coding data and any identifying information. Following analysis of the focus group interview all identifying information linking names and participant codes will also be destroyed, no later than June 2006. All tapes will be stored separately from any identifying or coding information and will be destroyed upon completion of the study. Access will be limited to that of the researcher.

The OSU IRB has the authority to inspect consent records and data files to assure compliance with approved procedures.

Compensation: There is no remuneration or compensation proved to research subjects.

Contacts: If questions arise about the project, feel free to contact:

Margaret A. Morris, MS Oklahoma State University, 404 Willard Hall (918) 527-8008 margaret.morris@okstate.edu	Al Carlozzi, Ed.D Oklahoma State University, 434 Willard Hall (405) 744-6040 alcar@okstate.edu
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For information on subjects' rights, contact Dr. Sue C. Jacobs, IRB Chair, 415 Whitehurst Hall, 405-744-1676.

Participant Rights: Participation in this study is voluntary and you may discontinue the research activity at any time without reprisal or penalty. Feel free to ask any questions at any time about the nature of the research activity and the methods I am using. Your suggestions are important to me.

Although there are no known risks associated with participation in this study, if undue discomfort or anxiety is experienced as a result of this study, referral for counseling is available.

Signatures: I, _____, consent to serve as a research subject in the project "The Effectiveness of Prayer in Coping: An African American Female Perspective." The project is conducted by Margaret A. Morris, a graduate student and supervised by Dr. Al Carlozzi. Both represent the Department of Education at Oklahoma State University.

I have read and fully understand the consent form. I sign it freely and voluntarily. A copy of this form has been given to me.

Signature of Participant

Date

I certify that I have personally explained this document before requesting that the participant sign.

Signature of Researcher

Date

Appendix D Demographic Information

Please answer all the questions as best as you can. This survey has no right or wrong answers. Furthermore, all of your answers are confidential and will remain anonymous, this information is for research purposes only. Any questions concerning this form may be asked of the researcher.

1. Age _____
2. Marital Status:
Single _____ Married _____ Cohabiting _____ Divorced _____ Widowed _____
3. In what residential area do you live?
Urban/City _____ Suburban _____ Rural _____ Other: _____
4. What is your current religious affiliation? _____
5. How long have you been affiliated with your current church? _____
6. How spiritual do you consider yourself?
Not at all _____ Somewhat _____ Very _____ Extremely _____
7. How religious do you consider yourself?
Not at all _____ Somewhat _____ Very _____ Extremely _____
8. How often do you pray?
Occasionally _____ Weekly _____ Daily _____ Multiple times a day _____
9. What is your level of education?
Elementary School _____ Junior High/Middle School _____ High School _____
Some College _____ Associates Degree _____ Bachelors Degree _____
Graduate Degree _____ Unsure _____
10. What is your employment status?
Full time employed _____ Part time employed _____ Unemployed _____
Homemaker _____ Student _____ Retired _____
11. What is your annual household income?
\$0 – \$4,999 _____ \$5,000 – \$14,999 _____ \$15,000 - \$24,999 _____
\$25,000 - \$34,999 _____ \$35,000 – 49,999 _____ \$50,000 - \$74,999 _____
\$75,000 - \$99,999 _____ \$100,000 or more _____

Appendix E

The Effectiveness of Prayer in Coping: An African American Female Perspective Interview Questions

by
Margaret A. Morris

- ❑ You've said that you use prayer to help reduce your daily stress, could you please describe that role of prayer in your life?
- ❑ What types of stress tend to elicit prayer the most?
- ❑ What does praying include as you see it?
- ❑ What feelings are you left with after you've finished praying?
- ❑ In the past, how has prayer worked for you in dealing with day-to-day life?
- ❑ Do you feel like your prayers have been heard and responded to? How? By whom?
- ❑ What would you say has been your most significant experience involving prayer?
- ❑ Have you been influenced by the prayer experiences of friends and family? Has this resulted in change or modification of your own personal prayer?
- ❑ Those are all of my questions, is there anything you'd like to add that I didn't ask about?

One-shot Question

- ❑ Tell me about your use of prayer in dealing with day-to day life?

Appendix F

Oklahoma State University Institutional Review Board

Date: Tuesday, May 31, 2005
IRB Application No ED05115
Proposal Title: The Effectiveness of Prayer in Coping: An African American Female Perspective
Reviewed and Exempt
Processed as:

Status Recommended by Reviewer(s): Approved Protocol Expires: 5/30/2006

Principal

Investigator(s)

Margaret Morris
102 N. Univ. Place #11
Stillwater, OK 74075

Al Carlozzi
434 Willard
Stillwater, OK 74078

The IRB application referenced above has been approved. It is the judgment of the reviewers that the rights and welfare of individuals who may be asked to participate in this study will be respected, and that the research will be conducted in a manner consistent with the IRB requirements as outlined in section 45 CFR 46.

The final versions of any printed recruitment, consent and assent documents bearing the IRB approval stamp are attached to this letter. These are the versions that must be used during the study.

As Principal Investigator, it is your responsibility to do the following:

1. Conduct this study exactly as it has been approved. Any modifications to the research protocol must be submitted with the appropriate signatures for IRB approval.
2. Submit a request for continuation if the study extends beyond the approval period of one calendar year. This continuation must receive IRB review and approval before the research can continue.
3. Report any adverse events to the IRB Chair promptly. Adverse events are those which are unanticipated and impact the subjects during the course of this research; and
4. Notify the IRB office in writing when your research project is complete.

Please note that approved protocols are subject to monitoring by the IRB and that the IRB office has the authority to inspect research records associated with this protocol at any time. If you have questions about the IRB procedures or need any assistance from the Board, please contact Beth McTernan in 415 Whitehurst (phone: 405-744-5700, emct@okstate.edu).

Sincerely,


Sue C. Jacoby, Chair
Institutional Review Board

Appendix E

Oklahoma State University Institutional Review Board

Date Tuesday, March 28, 2006 Protocol Expires: 3/27/2007
IRB Application No: ED05115
Proposal Title: The Effectiveness of Prayer in Coping: An African American Female Perspective
Reviewed and Exempt
Processed as: **Continuation**
Status Recommended by Reviewer(s): **Approved**
Principal Investigator(s) :
Margaret Morris Al Carlozzi
102 N. Univ. Place #11 434 Willard
Stillwater, OK 74075 Stillwater, OK 74078

Approvals are valid for one calendar year, after which time a request for continuation must be submitted. Any modifications to the research project approved by the IRB must be submitted for approval with the advisor's signature. The IRB office MUST be notified in writing when a project is complete. Approved projects are subject to monitoring by the IRB. Expedited and exempt projects may be reviewed by the full Institutional Review Board.

The final versions of any printed recruitment, consent and assent documents bearing the IRB approval stamp are attached to this letter. These are the versions that must be used during the study.

Signature :



Sue C. Jacobs, Chair, Institutional Review Board

Tuesday, March 28, 2006
Date

VITA

Margaret Alyse Morris

Candidate for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Thesis: THE EFFECTIVENESS OF PRAYER IN COPING:
AN AFRICAN AMERICAN FEMALE PERSPECTIVE

Major Field: Counseling Psychology

Biographical:

Personal Data: Born in Chicago IL, daughter of John A. and Francis P. Watson.
Raised and educated in Long Beach, CA.

Education: Graduated from Long Beach Polytechnic High School, Long Beach,
CA. Received a Bachelor of Science degree in Psychology from Oral
Roberts University, Tulsa, OK and a Masters of Science degree in
Counseling and Student Personnel from Oklahoma State University,
Stillwater, OK. Completed the requirements for the Doctor of
Philosophy degree with a major in Counseling Psychology at Oklahoma
State University in December 2006.

Experience: Completed doctoral internship at Veterans Affairs Medical Center,
North Chicago, IL and doctoral practicums at Veterans Affairs Medical
Center, Oklahoma City, OK; University Counseling Center, Oklahoma
State University, Stillwater, OK; and Associated Centers for Counseling,
Inc., Tulsa, OK. Received License as Professional Counselor (LPC)
from Oklahoma State Department of Health. Completed Master's
internship and practicum at Central High School, Tulsa Public School
District, Tulsa, OK.

Professional Memberships: American Psychological Association, American
Counseling Association, Phi Kappa Phi Honor Society, Oklahoma State
Alumni Organization.

Name: Margaret A. Morris

Date of Degree: December, 2006

Institution: Oklahoma State University

Location: Stillwater, Oklahoma

Title of Study: THE EFFECTIVENESS OF PRAYER IN COPING:
AN AFRICAN AMERICAN FEMALE PERSPECTIVE

Pages in Study: 173

Candidate for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Major Field: Counseling Psychology

Scope and Method of Study:

The purpose of this study was to investigate prayer and coping in the daily lives of African American women. This research was based on the evolving theories of stress and coping presented by Lazarus (1966), Lazarus and Cohen (1977), Lazarus and Folkman (1984), Pargament (1997), and Folkman and Moskowitz (2004). Participants in the study were 15 African American females from a moderately sized midwestern city, which were identified as individuals who utilized prayer in their daily life to reduce stress. Subject selection was accomplished by a combination of criterion and snowball sampling. Each participant was interviewed and observed in individual and group formats according to ethnographic, qualitative procedures. The data was also analyzed in accordance with ethnographic methods, as viewed through the lens of the feminist framework of Black Women's Critical Social Theory by Patricia Hill Collins (2002).

Findings and Conclusions:

Qualitative methods have been used in this study to investigate the phenomena of prayer in coping with daily stress. This study has revealed valuable information that is commonly utilized by African American women in their efforts to cope. Thematic narratives, which incorporated several commonalities, were developed from the generated qualitative data. Four themes were uncovered that accounted for the participants' success in daily coping with stress through prayer. These themes were: what is prayer, why pray, when to pray, and how to pray. Using the five religious coping assumptions of meaning, control, comfort /spirituality, intimacy/spirituality, and life transformation as presented by Pargament, Koenig, and Perez (1998), each theme was examined to reveal and account for the coping resiliency of the participants (p. 521). Within each of the four themes, specific psychological concepts and processes were found that have intensified these women's coping abilities. Revealing and examining these psychological concepts have brought enlightenment regarding the prayer experiences of these African American women and explains the methods in which prayer enables them to effectively cope with stressors within their daily lives. This study has helped to enable psychology explain and enhance the understanding of prayer as an effective coping mechanism for African American women.

ADVISER'S APPROVAL: _____ Alfred Carlozzi