

BOSTON COLLEGE
School of Social Work

SUICIDE AND SPIRITUAL RESISTANCE AMONG BLACK PEOPLE IN THE U.S.:
FROM DEATH CONSCIOUSNESS TO DIVINE CONSCIOUSNESS

A dissertation
by

Melissa Wood Bartholomew

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Dissertation Chair: Dr. Thanh V. Tran

ABSTRACT

Suicide is an escalating public health crisis for Black people in the United States, yet the majority of the suicide research in the United States is based on the European American population. The psychological impact of the centuries of persistent stress and pain Black Americans have endured in the U.S., fueled by racism since the tragic period of slavery, is well-documented. However, despite the unrelenting historical and contemporary manifestations of racism and other systems of oppression in U.S. society, Black Americans have chosen death by suicide at rates lower than White Americans. Previous research has established the complexity of suicide and revealed that there are multiple personal and societal stress factors that contribute to creating risk factors for Black suicide. Research has also established that Black Americans historically have cultivated a resistance to the desire to take their own lives, seemingly linked to religious/spiritual and cultural coping resources that have served as a protective factor against suicidal behavior. Yet, there is a lack of scholarship that explores the impact of these resources on suicide in this population. Suicidologists are calling for suicide to be examined within a multidimensional contextual framework and for there to be a shift from a deficit approach to a strengths-based approach. There is a need for greater

research focus on the factors that influence suicidal behavior in Black Americans, as well as the factors that are associated with creating a shield of protection against this self-destructive behavior.

Through a convergent mixed-method approach, and guided by a robust cluster of theories, with Critical Race Theory and the Afrocentric Worldview as the overarching theoretical and philosophical approaches, this dissertation aims to address the gaps in the literature by examining several research questions. The following questions are examined through quantitative research: (1) Do racial discrimination and personal stress influence suicide attempts among Black people in the U.S., and does religion/spirituality serve as a protective factor and moderate the relationship between attempted suicide and racial discrimination and personal stress?; (2) Do post-incarceration status and personal stress influence suicide attempts among Black people in the U.S., and does religion/spirituality serve as a protective factor and moderate the relationship between attempted suicide and post-incarceration and personal stress?; (3) Do veteran status and personal stress influence suicide attempts among Black people in the U.S., and does religion/spirituality serve as a protective factor and moderate the relationship between attempted suicide and veteran status and personal stress? The data for this study were drawn from the cross-sectional National Epidemiologic Survey on Alcohol and Related Conditions (NESARC) III which covers April 2012-June 2013. Logistic regression was employed to analyze the data.

The quantitative research explores the impact of personal and societal stressors on the mental health of Black people and the role of religion/spirituality in cultivating a healthy emotional and mental environment that insulates them from suicide. The

qualitative data include interviews with three adult Black men from the researcher's family across three generations. Through three generations of Black men from one family, this dissertation further aims to examine whether religion/spirituality is a protective factor insulating Black people in the U.S. from developing suicidal behavior as they navigate societal stress factors including racial discrimination, post-incarceration status, and veteran status and whether religion/spirituality as a protective factor is passed down intergenerationally. If so, it aims to explore whether there are any intergenerational patterns and/or differences in the utilization of religion/spirituality as a source of protection against developing suicidal behavior.

Assessed together, the findings from the quantitative and the qualitative research underscore the potential impact of stress and societal stress factors on suicidal behavior among Black people. Specifically, the quantitative research shows an association between personal stress and societal stress factors including racial discrimination, post-incarceration status, veteran status, and suicide attempts. The quantitative research also underscores the complexity of the role of religion/spirituality as a protective factor, as the findings from the quantitative research show that religion/spirituality was not a buffer against suicide attempts for the participants in that study. The findings from the qualitative research reveal that religion/spirituality can serve as a buffer and illustrates religion/spirituality functioning as an extension of Afrocentric culture and serving as a protective shield enabling some Black people to resist the full psychological impact of personal and societal stressors.

This dissertation provides the foundation for the broader work highlighted through this study encapsulated in the Ubuntu Relational Framework for the Study of

Black Suicide, an Afrocentric framework I developed that emerged as a guide for exploring the risks and protective factors of Black suicide. The constructs of death consciousness and Divine consciousness emerged during the analysis of the qualitative research as a way of conceptualizing the influence of societal stressors and protective factors on suicidal behavior, and they are an expression of Afrocentric culture. This framework highlights the need to equally prioritize the concern of what animates Black people's desire to live, which was illuminated through the qualitative research, along with the question of what factors make them at risk for cultivating a desire to die. It further attends to the need for social workers to address the conditions of the racist U.S. environment these factors are assessed within.

This dissertation also includes my autoethnography which serves as an analytic review and critical analysis of key concepts related to the study of Black suicide. It is a resource for further grounding in the historical and contemporary context of the Black experience and the Afrocentric worldview incorporated in this work. Autoethnography is an epistemological site for exploring Divine consciousness and the role of religion/spirituality and culture passed down intergenerationally as a protective factor against suicidal behavior. It further outlines a methodology for employing spiritual and cultural resources and operationalizing spiritual resistance.

Finally, this dissertation goes beyond identifying risk and protective factors for suicidal behavior in Black people. It outlines a structure for training social work clinicians and researchers in this Afrocentric framework that would expand social workers' knowledge of African-centered social work, and a method appropriate for responding to this multidimensional mental health problem that requires a creative,

culturally rich approach. The training includes a methodology for employing religious/spiritual and cultural resources that operationalizes spiritual resistance that will equip social workers for supporting Black people in developing a healthy holistic mental and social environment within an oppressive racist environment.

DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my grandfather, the late Rev. Marcus Garvey Wood.

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“Blessed is she who has believed that what the Lord has said to her will be accomplished.”

Luke 1:45

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT.....	I
DEDICATION.....	VI
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	VII
TABLE OF CONTENTS	X
LIST OF TABLES	XII
LIST OF FIGURES	XIII
CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION	1
CHAPTER II: THE HISTORICAL, CULTURAL, SPIRITUAL CONTEXT OF BLACK PEOPLE IN THE U.S.	16
CHAPTER III: THE AFROCENTRIC FRAMEWORK-UBUNTU RELATIONAL FRAMEWORK FOR THE STUDY OF BLACK SUICIDE	68
CHAPTER IV: PHENOMENON OF SUICIDE	91
CHAPTER V: THEORY & RELATED EMPIRICAL STUDIES HIGHLIGHTING RISK & PROTECTIVE FACTORS.....	130
CHAPTER VI: METHODOLOGY	150
<i>Study Design</i>	150
<i>Quantitative Research.....</i>	157
<i>Data Source & Sampling Strategy.....</i>	157
<i>Measurement.....</i>	158
<i>Statistical Analysis</i>	163
Qualitative Research	167
<i>Data Collection.....</i>	167
<i>Sample Rationale</i>	168
<i>Coding and Analysis</i>	174
Human/Animal Subjects Review	184
CHAPTER VII-FINDINGS OF QUANTITATIVE RESEARCH.....	185
CHAPTER VIII-FINDINGS OF QUALITATIVE RESEARCH	194
Divine Consciousness	195
Darrell’s story: From Death Consciousness to Divine Consciousness.....	224
CHAPTER IX-AUTOETHNOGRAPHY – ANALYTIC REVIEW & CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF KEY CONCEPTS	244
CHAPTER X-DISCUSSION	304
Integration of findings, theory, approaches & literature.....	304

<i>Limitations</i>	335
CHAPTER XI - IMPLICATIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS FOR SOCIAL WORK & THE LAY COMMUNITY	339
CHAPTER XII - CONCLUSION	363
REFERENCES	368
APPENDICES	401
Appendix 1 Tables & Figures	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Appendix II Consent forms and Interview Questions.....	422

LIST OF TABLES

Table 1 Descriptive statistics, frequency & percentages for all variables (N=7,766)	401-402
Table 2 Association between racial discrimination in health care and suicide attempt adjusted for personal stress.....	403
Table 3 Association between racial discrimination in public and other situations and suicide attempt adjusted for personal stress.....	404
Table 4 Association between racist names and threats and suicide attempt adjusted for personal stress.....	405
Table 5 Association between post incarceration status and suicide attempt adjusted for personal stress & interaction terms.....	406
Table 6 Association between veteran status and suicide attempt adjusted for personal stress.....	408
Table 7 Association between racial discrimination in health care and suicide attempt adjusted for personal stress and religion/spirituality and interaction terms.....	409
Table 8 Association between racial discrimination in public and other situations and suicide attempt adjusted for personal stress and religion/spirituality and interaction terms.....	410
Table 9 Association between racist names and threats and suicide attempt adjusted for personal stress and religion/spirituality and interaction terms.....	411
Table 10 Association between post incarceration status and suicide attempt adjusted for personal stress and religion/spirituality.....	412
Table 11 Association between veteran status and suicide attempt adjusted for personal stress and religion/spirituality and interaction terms.....	413

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1 Predictive Margins of Jail and Personal Stress.....	407
Figure 2a. Prevalence of Suicide from Slavery to 2018.....	414
Figure 2b. Prevalence of Suicide from Slavery to 2018 (continued).....	415
Figure 3 Maturana & Verela’s Criterion of Validation.....	416
Figure 4a. Ubuntu Relational Framework for the Study of Black Suicide Death Consciousness.....	417
Figure 4b. Ubuntu Relational Framework for the Study of Black Suicide Devine Consciousness.....	418
Figure 4c. Ubuntu Relational Framework for the Study of Black Suicide Components	419
Figure 4d. Chart of Frames & Theories Guiding the Study.....	420 to 421

CHAPTER I: Introduction

Study Background

“The valley of the shadow of death gives few of its pilgrims back to the world.”

W.E.B. DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, p.160

Suicide is an act that awakens death from its sleep. It jettisons death out of the shadows and into the reality of the one whose pain has called it forth. Death that comes before its time is hard to accept. Even when accompanied by an explanation, it never sits right. The primary aim of this dissertation is to prevent Black¹ people from calling forth their own death. Suicide is a psychosociological threat that manifests into a decision to end one’s suffering (Poussaint & Alexander, 2000). It is defined in the Western world as a conscious act of lethal self-harm by an individual trapped in a “multidimensional malaise” who perceives death as the only way out of acute pain (Shneidman, 1985, p. 203). There is a path that precedes one’s decision to die. The path for many Black people in the United States is replete with unrelenting, psychosociological threats that too often stalk them to death. These threats contribute to conditions that help cultivate a desire in one to die.

Suicide is a growing public health crisis for Black people in the United States (CDC, 2019), yet the amount of research exploring this phenomenon is woefully

¹In this dissertation, the population being studied will be primarily referred to as Black people in the U.S. The terminology will shift to Black Americans or African Americans at times, including when aligning with terminology researchers used in articles. Each term refers to Black people who are of African descent within the African diaspora. The U.S. Census Bureau defines Black or African American as “A person having origins in any of the Black racial groups of Africa” (US Census, 2020).

insufficient (Joe, 2018; Borum, 2014; Joe, 2008). The majority of the suicide research is based on the dominant European American population and culture (Leong & Leach, 2008). Historically, despite the multitude of psychosociological threats Black people have experienced in the U.S. through centuries of enslavement, lynching, segregation, mass incarceration, and the fight to stay alive in the midst of the consistent struggle against racial oppression, Black people have managed to resist the threats and evade suicide at rates lower than White Americans (Gibbs, 1997; Davidson & Wingate, 2011). However, since the late 1960s, the rate of suicide among Black people has fluctuated inconsistently (Utsey, Hook, & Stanard, 2007). Since the mid-1980s, the patterns of suicide among Blacks have changed substantially (Joe, Ford, Taylor, & Chatters, 2014). Suicide is the 2nd leading cause of death for Black boys age 10-14 (CDC, 2020). Suicide is the 3rd leading cause of death for Black men age 15-24 and 25-34 (CDC, 2020). Suicide is the 5th leading cause of death for Black men between the ages of 35-44 (CDC, 2020). For young Black girls age 10-14, suicide is the 4th leading cause of death (CDC, 2020). For Black women age 15-24, it is the 3rd leading cause of death. It is the 5th leading cause of death for Black women age 25-34 (CDC, 2020). Unlike so many other diseases, suicide is preventable.

Integral to helping to prevent Black people from calling forth their own death, is identifying risk factors that contribute to conditions that create a desire for death. Equally important is exploring protective factors which contribute to conditions that animate a desire for life. Suicide is a mental health concern that calls for a holistic approach through an examination of risk and protective factors within a comprehensive contextual framework exploring multiple dimensions of the Black experience in the U.S. (Poussaint

& Alexander, 2000; Burr, Hartman, & Matteson, 1999). This dissertation is grounded in Afrocentric Worldview and critical race theory and places race and racism and culture at the center of the interrogation of Black suicide among adults in the U.S. within a sociohistorical, cultural, multidimensional contextual framework grounded in an Afrocentric worldview. Other researchers exploring suicide among this population have centered their research in an Afrocentric worldview (Utsey, Hook, & Stanard, 2007; Gibbs, 1997; Morrison & Hopkins, 2019; Borum, 2014). This is a worldview that is gaining prominence in the field of social work. Bent-Goodley, Fairfax, & Carlton-LaNey (2017) contend that “African-centered social work practice, education, and research have important roles to play in solving contemporary and historical problems” (p. 4). This present work explores the association between personal stress and the societal stress factors racial discrimination, post-incarceration status, and veteran status, and suicidal behavior, and the role of religion and spirituality (religion/spirituality) as a resource for Black people to cope with these stressors and to resist a desire to take their own lives.

Religion and spirituality

Literature shows that religion and spirituality are common coping resources among African Americans (Watlington & Murphy, 2006) and have been associated with protecting against suicidal behavior among this population (Chatters, Taylor, Lincoln, Nguyen & Joe, 2011). In the present quantitative research, religion and spirituality were assessed by combining two questions, one that inquired of frequency of attendance at religious services and another that assessed intrinsic religiosity and spirituality through a question about the importance of religious or spiritual beliefs (Watlington & Murphy, 2006). In the present qualitative research, religion and spirituality were assessed through

questions regarding religion and spirituality. In the literature, religion and spirituality are often discussed as separate but related constructs (Hodge, 2000), which is particularly true among some in the Black community where religion and spirituality are terms that are used interchangeably (Gayle, 2011). Hodge & Williams (2002) assert that many people embrace them as one and that this is particularly true for African Americans whose spirituality is often expressed through robust religious engagement (Hodge & Williams, 2002). (Throughout the dissertation, religion and spirituality will be written in both ways – religion and spirituality and religion/spirituality). Utsey et al., (2007) assert, “For African Americans, both internal and external coping resources are derived from strategies borne out of centuries of negotiating racism and oppression, a strong religious and/or spiritual orientation, and supportive social networks” (Utsey, Bolden, Lanier, & Williams, 2007, p. 77-78).

A Multidimensional Context

Framing this dissertation as an exploration from death consciousness to Divine consciousness creates space for the breadth and depth of the analysis of the impact of racism and other oppressive societal forces on the risk of suicide among Black people, and religion/spirituality as a protective factor, within a multidimensional context. This framing, as well as the contextual analysis, are consistent with the call from critical suicidologists for the research of suicide to extend beyond identifying suicide primarily as a pathological act of an individual with a psychiatric disorder, to understanding it within a more comprehensive multidimensional context, and to develop more creative research and intervention strategies (White, Marsh, Kral, & Morris, 2016). In their text,

Critical Suicidology: Transforming suicide research and prevention for the 21st century, editors White, Marsh, Kral, & Morris (2016) assert:

...suicide and suicidal behaviors are deeply embedded in particular social, political, ethical, and historical contexts. As such, they are rarely amenable to cause-effect reasoning, quick fixes, or technical solutions. In short, suicide is a complex problem that is always ‘on the move.’... We contend that this provides an opening for fresh thinking and justifies the consideration of alternative approaches (White, Marsh, Kral, & Morris, 2016, p. 1).

This dissertation seeks to respond to the aforementioned directive by embedding the examination of Black suicide and spiritual resistance within social, political, ethical, and historical contexts through a limited exploration of the history of the descendants of enslaved Africans in the U.S., with a specific focus on the trajectory that has led to the current mass incarceration crisis. This contextual framework is especially critical for Black suicide. According to Poussaint & Alexander (2000), “Any statistical analyses of black suicide, therefore, is virtually meaningless without considering the cultural and historic context of an individual’s particular circumstances” (p. 26). Prudhomme (1938) an early researcher of Black suicide, noted the importance of historical and environmental factors in assessing suicide in Black (Negro) people. He found that explanation of suicidal behavior in the Negro could not be adequately explained by being “measured entirely by the yardstick of the white majority’s background and culture” (p.388). He asserted that “the different historical background” and the “psychosocial setting of the Negro in America” were important considerations, and that “the phenomenon is the result of a number of diverse factors found in the life of the American Negro” (p. 388).

The contextual analysis also includes the role of the African value of interdependence, operationalized through cohesive family and community support networks, and religion and spirituality in maintaining the psychological well-being of Black people in the U.S. Sexual orientation and gender identity are also important dimensions of the sociopolitical context. Research shows that LGBTQ-based discrimination is associated with increased suicide risk among people of color (Megan, Perrin, 2016), with research suggesting that Black LGB individuals are at an increased risk for suicide attempt relative to white LGB persons (O'Donnell, Meyer, & Schwartz, 2011). However, due to the limitations of this dissertation, this area will not be addressed but is noted as an area for future research. Finally, the contextual analysis is also critical for acquiring a deeper understanding of the role of religion/spirituality in the lives of Black people in the U.S., and as a barrier against suicide. Black scholar Cornell West (1991) asserts, "...as a people who have had to deal with the absurdity of being Black in America...given the absurdity and insanity we are bombarded with daily...the belief in God itself is not to be understood in a noncontextual manner. It is understood in relation to a particular context, to specific circumstances" (hooks & West, 1991, p. 9). Religion/spirituality will be explored through the primary context of the evolution of Black Christian religion from the period of enslavement through contemporary times, and with a brief discussion of Islam. However, this is not to minimize the significance of Islam in the Black experience.

The multidimensional contextual framework this dissertation is embedded within is relevant. According to Joe (2008), there is a significant body of research that

substantiates the relationship between the unyielding social and economic disparities Black people face and the risk of suicide.

Purpose and Specific Aims

While there is a growing body of research exploring Black suicide and the impact of racism and other societal stressors and religion/spirituality, there is a lack of studies that explore these factors together. The present dissertation covers this ground through quantitative and qualitative research. This work is accomplished through a convergent (Creswell & Clark, 2018) transformative mixed methods research approach (Mertens, 2007) incorporating quantitative research and qualitative research.

Research Questions

Quantitative research

The quantitative research is an empirical investigation that examines the association between reported suicidal behavior among Black people in the U.S., personal stress and three societal stress factors--racial discrimination, post-incarceration status, and veteran status--and whether religion/spirituality moderates the relationships between suicidal behavior in Black people in the U.S. and these stressors. The quantitative data was drawn from the cross-sectional National Epidemiologic Survey on Alcohol and Related Conditions (NESARC) III which covers the period of April 2012-June 2013 and contains variables for exploring personal stress, racial discrimination, post incarceration status, veteran status, suicidal behavior, and religion/spirituality. It utilized data from the participants who identify as Black, non-Hispanic.

The quantitative research addressed the following research questions and hypotheses:

RQ1: Do racial discrimination and personal stress influence suicide attempts among Black people in the U.S., and does religion/spirituality serve as a protective factor and moderate the relationship between attempted suicide and racial discrimination and personal stress?

H1: Racial discrimination and personal stress influence suicide attempts among Black people in the U.S. and religion/spirituality serve as a protective factor and moderates the relationship between attempted suicide and racial discrimination and personal stress.

RQ2: Do post-incarceration status and personal stress influence suicide attempts among Black people in the U.S., and does religion/spirituality serve as a protective factor and moderate the relationship between attempted suicide and post-incarceration and personal stress?

H2: Post incarceration status and personal stress influence suicide attempts among Black people in the U.S., and religion/spirituality serve as a protective factor and moderates the relationship between attempted suicide and post-incarceration and personal stress.

RQ3: Do veteran status and personal stress influence suicide attempts among Black people in the U.S., and does religion/spirituality serve as a protective factor and moderate the relationship between attempted suicide and veteran status and personal stress?

H3: Veteran status and personal stress influence suicide attempts among Black people in the U.S. and religion/spirituality serve as a protective factor and moderates the relationship between attempted suicide and veteran status and personal stress.

Qualitative Research

The qualitative research explores the impact of personal and societal stressors on the mental health of Black people and the role of religion/spirituality in cultivating a healthy emotional environment that insulates them from suicide. The qualitative data include interviews with three adult Black men from the researcher's family across three generations. Through three generations of Black men from one family, this dissertation further aims to examine whether religion/spirituality is a protective factor insulating Black people in the U.S. from developing suicidal behavior as they navigate societal stress factors including racial discrimination, post incarceration status, and veteran status and whether religion/spirituality as a protective factor is passed down intergenerationally. If so, it aims to explore whether there are any intergenerational patterns and/or differences in the utilization of religion/spirituality as a source of protection against developing suicidal behavior.

Autoethnography-Analytic Review & Critical Analysis of Key Concepts

This dissertation also includes my autoethnography, a reflective method of inquiry and interpretation of cultural phenomena (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011). This autoethnography is an analytic review and critical analysis of the key concepts related to Black suicide explored in this study. The aim of autoethnography is to utilize the researcher's personal experiences as an epistemological site to explore phenomena more deeply (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011). My autoethnography explores the phenomena

of Divine consciousness and the role of religion/spirituality passed down intergenerationally as a protective factor against suicidal behavior passed. The autoethnographic research is a reflective component that seeks to engage social work researchers at a deeper level to close the distance between the researcher and the social context within which research problems emerge (Jensen-Hart & Williams, 2010). Reflexivity is a critical exercise for social work practice (Jensen-Hart & Williams, 2010) and research (Probst, 2015). Autoethnographic research is an appropriate method for closing the distance as according to Jensen-Hart & Williams (2010), it allows the social work researcher to engage in a process where they are “continually examining the complexity of the self in the midst of social and cultural contexts” (p. 466). The social work profession is grounded in the assumption that humans are connected to their social context and environment (National Association of Social Workers, 2020). This does not exclude social workers. As members of society, social workers are connected to social structures and systems, and the people, we are working to support and accompany. The core of social work is the work of transformation at the societal level and on the personal level (National Association of Social Workers, 2020). Social work research must contribute to transformation, but social worker researchers cannot be facilitators of a process they are not personally engaged in themselves. The autoethnography provided a space for this researcher to engage in critical reflection on the role of spirituality/religion, family, community, and history in fortifying spiritual resistance against suicidal thoughts and behavior. It was written through the framework of Divine consciousness and death consciousness, the framework that emerged during the qualitative interviews. The autoethnography chapter is meant to serve as an interpretive lens and to contribute to the

contextual foundation for the overall dissertation. It is the context for the requisite epistemological sites (historical, social, cultural, political, ancestral, spiritual) for researching Black people and developing culturally appropriate and effective interventions. It also outlines a methodology for employing spiritual resources and operationalizing spiritual resistance.

These explorations illuminate Afrocentric cultural factors that include the role of the Spirit of God and family, community, and ancestors, in resisting a desire to die, and cultivating a longing to live. This dissertation is facilitated through a liberatory lens, one that is rooted in Paulo Freire and Ignacio Martín-Baró that, as Kant (2015) asserts, some in the social work field are applying in alignment with social work core principles to acquire a more comprehensive understanding of the factors of oppression, as well as factors for healing and liberation, to help to create a better life for the individual, and a better society (Kant, 2015).

Additionally, multiple theoretical frameworks and approaches guide this Afrocentric Critical Race mixed methods research project. Lester (1998) contends that there is no single theory capable of explaining the complexity of Black suicide. The following theories and approaches undergird this dissertation: Critical Race Theory (CRT), Afrocentric worldview, grounded theory, strengths-based approach, psychospiritual approach, social integration theory, interpersonal-psychological theory of suicide, and stress coping theory.

Statement of Urgency & Significance

The work of preventing Black people in the United States from taking their own lives is an urgent matter. The persistent societal stressors that contribute to suicidal behavior in this population are not easing up. Suicide and other mental health concerns are shrouded in stigma which keeps this community, and the clinical community, from being fully aware of the risks (Poussaint & Alexander, 2000). According to Poussaint & Alexander (2000):

If suicide is anathema to the American doctrine of strength in the face of adversity, it is doubly antithetical to the black experience and to the accepted burden of bearing up under monumentally difficult circumstances, as encoded in African-American work songs, spirituals, and the blues (p. 26).

Suicide thrives in secret and must be exposed. Accordingly, the target audience for this project is social work researchers and practitioners, and people outside the field who support the mental health of Black people. However, the primary medium is not social science journals. The net must be cast wider. The distance between the research projects that advance knowledge in the field of social work, and the clinicians that address the mental health needs of people, is far too vast (Fong & Pomeroy, 2011). The difficulty in translating research into practice is a prominent concern in the medical and public health fields (Lenfant, 2003). Researchers assert that the trends and priorities in federal funding, along with empirical data, substantiate the challenges in the process of transferring research findings to the clinicians in practice (Brownson, Kreuter, Arrington, & True, 2006). According to Balas & Boren (2000), studies suggest that it takes an average of 17 years for research to impact people through clinical practice. Commenting on the disconnect between social work research and practice, Fong & Pomeroy (2011) assert,

“Although research is important, it seldom exerts much influence on the daily choices of social work practitioners” (2011, p. 5). They note that the National Institute of Mental Health is promoting translation science and championing the need for science to be relayed in a way that reaches the practitioners on the ground rather than restricting the research to journals (Fong & Pomeroy, 2011). Black people cannot wait for social work research to catch up. The urgency is too great to risk this work being lost in a journal that will never reach the people who are working hard to resuscitate Black lives.

Barriers to suicide awareness and research

Barriers are impeding the spread of awareness of Black suicide and more robust research. In addition to the failure of suicidologists to prioritize exploration of risk and protective factors in Black populations, the stigma associated with mental health challenges has been an impediment to suicide research in this population (Poussaint & Alexander, 2000). For some, the stigma associated with mental health challenges in the Black community is rooted in a fear that some Blacks have in White people labeling them as inferior (Poussaint & Alexander, 2000). This fear is traced back to slavery and the practice of White slave owners labeling enslaved people as “crazy” when they resisted enslavement or tried to run away (Poussaint & Alexander, 2000, p. 67). The stigma is also associated with a fear of medical treatment which stems from a history of a poor relationship between Blacks and the medical community, a relationship that contains examples of “unethical and occasionally abusive practices by White doctors” (Poussaint & Alexander, 2000, p. 64). A belief common in the Black community is that Black people do not commit suicide or engage in suicidal behavior (Joe & Niedermeier, 2008; Spates, 2018). Many Black people reject the idea of suicide as a response to

contemporary challenges as they believe their current circumstances do not compare to the weight of oppression and struggle their ancestors endured for many generations (Spates & Slatton, 2017). Additionally, for many Black people who hold Christian beliefs, suicide is seen as “taboo” and is “a sin that will prevent one’s soul from gaining entrance to heaven” (Poussaint & Alexander, 2000, p. 46). These perspectives prevent the wide circulation of information and resources that will help prevent suicidal behavior within this population.

This dissertation aims to amplify the call for more research on the risk and protective factors of Black suicide. Additionally, it seeks to highlight the value of engaged research practice within a contextual framework that utilizes the researcher’s experience through autoethnography as an interpretive lens to contribute to the contextual analysis. The seminal work of Black Sociologist W.E.B. DuBois, *The souls of Black folk* (1903/2003), the majority of which integrates history, sociology, religion/spirituality, political analysis, and memoir (Seresin, 2016), informs this dissertation. Through the integration of history, social science research, religion/spirituality, culture, political analysis, and memoir (autoethnography) this Afrocentric Critical Race dissertation project grounds the study of Black suicide in a proper multidimensional context from a preventive, strengths-based perspective that explores the role of religion/spirituality, family, community, ancestors, and culture in fortifying spiritual resistance against suicidal thoughts and behavior. Researchers contend that there is a need for better models of Black suicide (Walker et al., 2017). This dissertation seeks to contribute to the growing body of literature exploring Black suicide. It highlights the importance of not being rooted in a deficit model and applying a strengths-based approach by incorporating

data from Black Americans who have not demonstrated suicidal behavior and highlighting strategies to promote the psychological and spiritual well-being of Black people as a method of understanding cultural protective factors against suicide.

CHAPTER II: The Historical, Cultural, Spiritual Context of Black People in the U.S.

Introduction

Researchers have noted that to properly investigate the risk factors which animate Black suicide, and the protective factors and practices that promote the well-being of Black people in the U.S. and insulate them from suicide, the analysis must be imbedded within the proper historical and contemporary contexts (Borum, 2014; White, Marsh, Kral, & Morris, 2016). The U.S. government has also recognized the importance of centering the assessment of the mental health of African Americans within a historical context. In a 2001 report from the U.S. Surgeon General, *Mental Health: Culture, Race, and Ethnicity: A Supplement to Mental Health: A Report of the Surgeon General*, it states,

Historical adversity, which included slavery, sharecropping, and race-based exclusion from health, educational, social, and economic resources, translates into the socioeconomic disparities experienced by African Americans today. Socioeconomic status, in turn, is linked to mental health (p. 57).

Accordingly, the contextual framework appropriate for this analysis is a U.S. racial ecology (Tyler, Brome, & Williams, 1991) which highlights the influence of race and racism on the psychosocial condition of Black people. There will not be empirical data linking social and historical elements to the risk of Black suicide (outside of the variables examined in the quantitative study). However, there is research supporting the association between racial inequality and Black suicide (Burr et al., 1999). The background analysis is intended to provide context and an interpretive lens for the exploration of Black suicide. This contextual framing is according to Critical Race Theory and is in alignment with the social work person-in-environment principle

addressed later. Understanding the context: African and Black culture (including the value of interdependence (connection to family, community, and ancestors) and intergenerational transmission of values); living history – particularly slavery and racism (including the intergenerational transmission of the psychological impact of racism); and religion/spirituality (including intergenerational transmission), is required to examine the paradox of suicide among Black Americans.

The Scope

This chapter will begin with a discussion of African and Black culture that comprise the Afrocentric worldview, and the intergenerational transmission of interdependence and other values. The scope of the trajectory of this chapter will also include a brief discussion of suicide among the enslaved Africans who were brought to the region now known as the U.S., the psychological impact of police killings of unarmed Black people, and the impact of stressors, including the stress of COVID-19, on their mental health and well-being. The primary focus of the historical analysis here will be on the impact of racism and the trajectory of slavery to mass incarceration as one of the societal stressors explored in this study is post-incarceration status. There are many periods and examples within the history of the impact of racism on Black people in the U.S. that warrant exploration, such as Jim Crow segregation, lynching, racial disparities, and discrimination in education, housing, employment, and generational wealth. While the scope of the problem of the impact of institutional racism extends beyond incarceration (Taylor, 2016), this trajectory is in accordance with Tyler et al., (1991)'s assertion regarding the significant impact of slavery on human ecology, and it exemplifies the weight of this effect. Additionally, the systems of slavery and mass

incarceration have been highly effective methods of sustaining the psychologically harmful messaging that Black people are inferior and are criminals, making the work of humanization ongoing for this population. It is also a trajectory that traces their struggle for social integration throughout the generations since slavery.

This discussion will illustrate how racism manifests through systems, policies, and individual practices to create the path of oppression from slavery to mass incarceration which has helped to build and sustain a psychological stronghold in the minds of people in the U.S., and throughout the globe, affirming the inferiority of Black people and creating a “psychological risk” for suicidal behavior (Poussaint & Alexander, 2000, p. 15). It will also address the intergenerational transmission of the psychological impact of racism. It will highlight how systems, policies, and individual practices help to create psychological and social barriers that prevent Black people from fully integrating into U.S. society. Durkheim (1897/2012) and researchers since have affirmed that social integration is a protective factor for suicidal behavior (Durkheim, 1897/2012; Kuramoto, Wilcox, & Latkin, 2013). This section will also examine the role of religion and spirituality in sustaining the psychological well-being of many Black people throughout the time since the first enslaved Africans were in this part of the world that is now the United States through intergenerational transmission.

Afrocentric worldview

This dissertation is rooted in an Afrocentric worldview. Afrocentric world view encompasses the African and Black/African American worldviews affirming the connection of Black/African American people to their African heritage and culture and their Black/African American heritage, history, and culture (Noble, 1991; Myers, 1991;

Asante, 1989). This worldview is essential to ensuring that the research process and analysis is grounded in frameworks and theories appropriate for assessing the psychological health of Black people and that it incorporates a cultural analysis. Parham (2009) asserts, “it is a cultural rather than a racial analysis that best illuminates the psychology of a people” (p.5). This approach is also critical for ensuring that the intervention which emerges from the research is culturally appropriate and addresses the mental health needs of Black people in a way that promotes their collective liberation (Noble, 1991; Asante, 1989). Morrison & Hopkins (2019) assert that “...deviations from spiritual-centered and culture-specific practices are often associated with poorer health and quality of life among African Americans” (Morrison & Hopkins, 2019, p. 7). In a 2001 report, *Mental health: culture, race, and ethnicity*, the U.S. Surgeon General recognized the vital role of culture in mental health treatment asserting that culture and society impact the mental health of individuals and the quality of services they receive, and that “this understanding is key to developing mental health services that are more responsive to the cultural and social contexts of racial and ethnic minorities” (p. 25). A comprehension of the African world view that is the foundation of the Afrocentric worldview is imperative for assessing the characteristics and qualities at the core of Black American identity and that are required for sound research and interventions for this population (Nobles, 1991).

Black psychologist Wade Noble (1991) outlines the core dimensions of the African worldview that comprise the foundation of Black psychology. He describes it as the African/Black ethos that is rooted in African philosophy (Noble, 1991). The African/Black ethos is distinct from the Eurocentric ethos animating traditional

psychology which was not developed with a sensitivity to the particularities of the culture of people of African descent (Noble, 1991). This distinction is critical for appreciating the import of this dissertation which centers the analysis of the risk and protective factors of suicide for Black people within a framework grounded in the African worldview which prioritizes the protective role of spiritual consciousness as a barrier against suicide. As Noble (1991) explains, the African/Black ethos can be described as a “collective consciousness...a kind of faith in a transcendental force and a sense of vital solidarity” and is the “operational definition of African philosophy (Noble, 1991, p. 48). Noble (1991) describes the core dimensions of this ethos as follows: (1) religion and spirituality; (2) unity of all things & kinship; (3) concept of time; and (4) death and immortality.

Religion and spirituality

Noble (1991) explains that in West Africa, before slavery, there were many tribes (groups or clusters) and many philosophical systems but they shared one overarching philosophical system expressed through religion which was an integral part of every dimension of life. It was a system of beliefs that bound them together as a community, and each tribe had its own religious expression (Noble, 1991). While diverse, they were linked through their common belief in the union of the physical and spiritual (Noble, 1991).

Unity of all things & kinship

They believed in the complete unity of all living things in the environment, animals, plants, and nature, and that every part was integral to the function of the whole (Noble, 1991). God created and sustained man and was the force or energy that infused the entire universe (Noble, 1991). God was the unifying force that connected and

animated all the living (Noble, 1991). This concept of unity engendered an appreciation for “collective responsibility” and there was less focus on the individual apart from the tribe, as the individual was an extension of the tribe (Noble, 1991, p. 51). It also views human beings as an integrated whole system and does not separate the mind from the body (Noble, 1991). Noble (1991) explains that such a division is antithetical to the African philosophical assumptions that unity implies oneness with nature and the survival of all people. Kinship was an expression of “collective unity” which “bound together the entire life system of the tribe” (Noble, 1991, p. 54). The kinship system extended from the ancestors to the unborn (Noble, 1991). Under this cohesive system, all tribes shared a collective belief in the “survival of the tribe” and understood the tribe to be one with nature (Noble, 1991, p. 54). Noble (1991) identifies slavery as an example of an “experiential communality,” an experience that helps shapes a group of people and defines their beliefs and values. He asserts the system of slavery forced Africans to separate as individual tribes were forced to mix (Noble, 1991). He contends that as a result, the philosophy of the survival of the tribe was extended to the survival of the African more broadly, across tribes, which led the enslaved to adopt African or Black as the primary definition of a tribe (Noble, 1991). Africans were able to retain elements of the African ethos and pass down language, values, customs, and rituals through the oral tradition as a result of their forced isolation on plantations in the New World which kept them distant from full Western indoctrination (Nobles, 1991). This separation continued post-slavery through isolation sanctioned through legal segregation in the U.S. (Nobles, 1991). He posits that this was evidence that the core African philosophy expressing collective survival, “I am because we are” was not destroyed, and continued to be

displayed in various ways in the Black community throughout the generations post-slavery through such examples as benevolent societies and the Negro church (Noble, 1991, p. 60).

Concept of time & death

The concept of time was a phenomenon to be experienced through one's own life and through the life of the tribe, which extended back to generations before one's birth, and through fluctuations in the environment (Noble, 1991). Regarding the notions of death and immortality, "...the African ontology was endless...nothing ever ends" (Noble, 1991, p. 54). As long as someone was alive to share memories of the person who died, that ancestor lived on amongst the living, and after the last person who knew the person died, the ancestor transitioned to the realm of the spirits (Noble, 1991).

Intergenerational transmission of culture and values

These philosophical assumptions are at the root of the Afrocentric worldview. As Myers (1991) explains, the Afrocentric world view embraces an ontology which affirms a reality where there is no separation between the spiritual and material worlds; and an epistemology that assumes self-knowledge as the foundation of all knowledge; an understanding that one knows through imagery and rhythm; and an acceptance of the interdependency of all things through human and spiritual networks. Enslaved Africans retained these core values, and they have been transferred through the generations of African descendent people in the U.S. As Noble (1991) explained, elements of the African ethos were retained as a result of the forced isolation on the plantations. Cannon (1996) describes the transfer of this rich "cultural inheritance" and the cultivation of a Black/African American worldview. She explains:

...my ancestors had the hours from nightfall to daybreak to foster, sustain, and transmit cultural mechanisms that enabled them to cope with such bondage. In spite of every form of institutional constraint, Afro-American slaves were able to create another world, a counterculture within the White-defined world, complete with their own folklore, spirituals, and religious practices. These tales, songs, and prayers are the most distinctive cultural windows through which I was taught to see the nature and range of Black people's response to the dehumanizing pressures of slavery and plantation life. Even with cultural self-expression outlawed, my ancestors never surrendered their humanity or lost sight of a vision of freedom and justice they believed to be their due...Against all odds, Afro-American slaves created a culture saturated with their own values and heavily laden with their dreams (p.33).

This cultural transfer continued post-slavery through the Black Church, family, and other institutions within the Black community, therefore ensuring the emergence of an Afrocentric worldview.

Why is this important? Noble (1991) asserts, "Certainly particular people cannot be meaningfully investigated and understood if their philosophical assumptions are not taken into account" (p. 57). Empirical research has highlighted and established the presence of Afrocentric cultural values at the foundation of protective factors shown to reduce the risk of suicide and support the psychological well-being of Black people in the U.S. (Utsey, Hook, & Stanard, 2007; Gibbs, 1997; Morrison & Hopkins, 2019; Borum, 2014). Scholars who study Black suicide have found that these values translate into "culture-based strengths, such as spiritually-based coping, broad social support networks, flexible family roles, strong kinship bonds, positive ethnic group identity, and a high level of psychological and emotional hardiness" protective against suicide (Utsey et al., 2007 p. 406). An understanding of the underlying African culture from which these values emerged, and the mechanisms through which they have been transferred and retained through Black/African culture, helps to explain their potency and provide a critical context for the analysis and development of interventions. Evidence of the

persistence of these African values is confirmation of Noble's (1991) assertion that African ontology is "endless," and that "nothing ever ends" (p.54).

Additionally, the Afrocentric worldview which sees the individual as an extension of the community and environment is aligned with the person-in-environment principle critical to social work which affirms the importance of assessing individuals within their social and environmental contexts (Hutchison, 2013). Finally, through this worldview, the scope of the history of Black people in the U.S. is expanded to a time before enslavement. Parham (2009) contends that limiting the study of African-descendent people's psychological well-being to a period of slavery and beyond is "an inaccurate space and time" (Parham, 2009, p.5). He asserts the analysis only reveals how they responded and adapted to racial oppression and fails to show much about "who" and "how" they were before they were tragically displaced from their homeland (Parham, 2009). This is a critical observation. While this dissertation does center the analysis of suicide of Black people within a context exploring Black suicide as a response to a racist environment, it also broadens the analysis to explore West African cultural beliefs regarding death and ancestors that helps to explain suicide among the enslaved. Enslaved Africans are then repositioned as occupants of a liminal space between Africa and the New World which highlights their cultural ties to their original home. Additionally, the analysis of the cultural values and practices characteristic of the African/Black ethos identified as protective factors against suicide for Black people also provides insight into the "who and how" Black people of African descent were before enslavement. These values and practices illuminate their way of being as people of African descent who have managed to retain elements of the African cultural ethos that shield them from thoughts

of death and defy space and time. While Parham (2009)'s critique is valid, one must also appreciate how much is gleaned from an assessment of the capacity of a people to endure and resist. Enslaved Africans and their descendants survived a multitude of horrific experiences, from the Middle Passage and centuries of enslavement to the ongoing contemporary fight against racial injustice, and have resisted the very human urge for collective mass retaliation. These are particular qualities inherent in this group, and others like it, that are likely beyond measure.

African value of interdependence

Within the racial ecology replete with oppressive forces, Black people, since enslavement, have manifested a capacity to endure that defies logic. Slavery was a system designed to control the mind, body, and spirit of the people. As outlined above, qualities of that system linger, as do other effects of the centuries of institutional racism that animates this nation. Yet this people group has persisted through slavery, Jim Crow segregation, lynching, and relentless racial violence, and historians, theologians, social scientists, and psychologists have attributed their endurance to strategies and values rooted in their African heritage which include the value of interdependence operationalized through family and community support networks, and their prioritization of religion and spirituality (DuBois, 1903/2003; Cannon, 1995; Cone, 1970; Thurman, Parham, 2009). Black sociologists and historians have debated whether or not and to what extent enslaved Africans and their descendants retained traces of African heritage and culture after living in the U.S. (Franklin & Moss, 1988). Yet Franklin & Moss (1988) contend that despite the debate, there is enough evidence to affirm there was a mixing of cultures among the African peoples that were brought together under the trade which

created diverse practices and customs grounded in the African experience, and evidence of the culture remain today in various social structures and religious practices.

The African value of interdependence is rooted in the traditional West African kinship system which dictates that all individuals are interconnected to each other, to their ancestors, to those yet born, and to all living things, and this connection is the source of their survival (Nobles, 1991). Nobles (1991) explains interdependence as an understanding amongst West African tribes where:

The individual owed his very existence to other members of the ‘tribe,’ not only those who conceived and nourished him but also those long dead and still unborn. The individual did not exist unless he was corporate or communal; he was simply an integral part of the collective unity (Nobles, 1991, p. 54).

An appreciation for the value of interdependence and connection to family and community as a source of support and a commitment to provide support illuminates a “survival orientation that is collective, as opposed to individualistic” (Parham, 2009, p.6). This value is also known as the philosophy of Ubuntu, an ethically principle found in many cultures throughout the continent of Africa, and particularly expressed in the Southern region of Africa as “a person is a person through others” (Mupedziswa, Rankopo, & Mwansa, 2019, p. 22). This philosophy, which is discussed more fully in chapter 4, promotes an understanding of humanity to mean that one cannot flourish as a full human unless one recognizes one’s connection to other humans. Ubuntu theology, promoted by former Archbishop Desmond Tutu of South Africa, emphasizes the vertical dimensions of Ubuntu acknowledging that despite their connection to each other, people can only fully flourish when they also realize they are extensions of God as well

(Ntamushobora, 2012). This value is at the root of the Black American worldview (Utsey, Bolden, Lanier, & Williams, 2007; Grills, 2002).

African value of Interdependence - Family and community cohesion as protective factors

Throughout their experience in the U.S., along with the Black church, family, including extended family networks, and community support systems, have been key survival resources for Black people (Cannon, 1996). Barnes (1991) describes this vital link between family and community. He asserts, “Considering the mutual interdependence of the black family and the black community, it is of critical importance to assess the status of black people in terms of extent of group unity, identification, sense of peoplehood...” (p. 176). Barnes’ (1991) assertion highlights the Afrocentric value of interdependence, the notion of the family being an extension of the community and reflecting the unity of all things. In addition to providing spiritual support, the Church has historically been a source of community cohesion through supports for families, and social activities, and organizations, as well as through political engagement (Early, 1992).

As stated previously, research has shown cultural factors and social support systems to be negatively related to suicide risk among Black people (Morrison & Hopkins, 2019; Utsey, et al., 2007; Gibbs, 1997). Research suggests that social support systems may provide a shield against the effects of psychological stress (Marion & Range, 2003). Compton, Thompson, & Kaslow (2004), in their study exploring social environmental factors associated with suicide attempts among under-resourced African Americans and the protective impact of family and social support, noted the historical significance of the family unit in African American families. They found that “alienation from family” and weak social support may be critical risk factors for suicide in this

population (Compton et al., p. 184). They also found that “social embeddedness may be a particularly important aspect of the social environment in relation to protection from suicide attempt” (Compton et al., 2004, p. 184). This is consistent with the empirical evidence that supports the integration of cultural values and practices into positive coping mechanisms that Black Americans utilize to successfully navigate adverse conditions (Utsey, Bolden, Lanier, & Williams, 2007). In a qualitative study with a sample of 33 Black women, Spates & Slatton (2017) found that for the women in the study, their social networks as a means for survival was a prevailing theme. Multiple women in the study expressed concerns about not being able to honor their commitments to their family and friends if they chose suicide (Spates & Slatton, 2017). Their sentiments reflect the value of interdependence and collective survival indicative of the Afrocentric worldview. One woman expressed suicide was not an option for Black women because they believe they have to keep going for the sake of their loved ones (Spates & Slatton, 2017). She explained, “It sounds kinda corny to say, but when you asked me about suicide, my mind immediately replaced that word with the word sisterhood” (Spates & Slatton, 2017, p. 5).

Kaslow et al., (2005) found that social support was an independent significant predictor of suicide attempt in their sample of African American men and women, which reinforces the understanding of the positive impact of one feeling supported when experiencing life challenges. Palmer (2001)’s study examining perceived social support and serum cholesterol levels as predictors of suicide found that having a strong support network was critical in decreasing depressive symptomatology for African Americans, thus reducing suicide risk. Palmer (2001) stressed the social nature of suicide

Family & Intergenerational Transmission

The value of interdependence can be seen operating through the Black family, which includes networks of extended family, including fictive kin, people who are as intimate as family but not blood-related. Fictive kin family systems were critical amongst enslaved Africans whose blood relatives had been sold away (White, Bay, & Martin, 2013). They cultivated relationships with people who were nonrelatives and cared for children who had lost parents who were sold to different plantations (White, Bay, & Martin, 2013). This model of care extending across families highlighting collective survival continued post slavery. McAdoo & Younge (2009) assert that extended family systems and fictive kin, are key components of the Black family. Black parents utilize these extended family and fictive kinship networks consisting of grandparents and close relatives and friends to help support and nurture their children, thus strengthening families (McAdoo & Younge, 2009). According to McAdoo & Younge (2009), “This support is an adaptive strategy that allows for the sharing of resources and the opportunity for extended kin to provide social capital to help influence children’s growth” (McAdoo & Younge, 2009, p. 105). Hill (1999) contends that research shows that the contemporary extended family system within the Black community focuses less on co-residence, and functions more as “systems of mutual aid and support, and it generally argues that extended family ties continue to be strong” (Hill, 1999, p. 133). Hill (1999) asserts that while the extended family system is rooted in traditional African understanding of family there is research that shows that this system has continued due to economic factors. However, Hill’s (1999) research shows that this system is one that African Americans continue to appreciate and rely on. The extended family system also

benefits the elders in the family, and respect for the elders is also characteristic of African heritage (McAdoo & Younge, 2009). There is a significant number of grandparent-headed households within the Black community, and research shows that the presence of grandparents in the life of their grandchildren impacts their “psychological well-being and social adaptability among children” (McAdoo & Younge, 2009, p. 106). McAdoo & Younge (2009) assert, “For many Black families living in intergenerational and extended family networks, the reciprocal process of helping each other and exchanging and sharing resources and support is an important cultural and survival mechanism model that can be used by social service practitioners as a cultural strength” (p. 106). This network of support highlights the strength of Black families at the core and a key element of their resistance and sustainability in a hostile racial world.

Waites (2009) asserts that African American family networks comprised of at least three or more generations have strengthened the foundation of the African American family throughout its presence in the U.S. These multigenerational family networks, rooted in African traditions, have been a vital resource for containing and transferring life-affirming spiritual and cultural factors since enslavement (Waites, 2009). Gleaning intergenerational wisdom is in alignment with the Afrocentric worldview and is part of culturally appropriate practice for Black people (Waites, 2009). As Waites (2009) asserts, “Embracing the legacies and wisdom of past generations and the hope and promise of the future is a framework for best practice” (p. 279). It was a way of adding the cultural and spiritual elements of the Black family experience and strategies of survival that have been passed down through generations. This could not be captured through the quantitative data. The

intergenerational lens also provides a helpful structure for interpreting the past and the present and (Waites, 2009).

Racism: The fuel for Slavery to Mass Incarceration

Race & Racism

Williams & Mohammed (2013) assert that although there has been a marked decline in the explicit public expressions of racism in the U.S., there continues to be ongoing evidence of its unfaltering presence. The contemporary understanding of race is that it is a social construction used to distinguish people based on various factors including physical features such as the color of their skin (Carter, et al., 2007). Jones (1997) describes race as a construction that is deeply embedded within our society; a way groups organize and assign value to each other, and a lens through which society determines group differences and social hierarchy. He asserts, “The concept of race persists in our society because it is the point around which many important psychological and social processes revolve” (Jones, 1997, p. 364). Race is the foundation of racism. According to Jones (1997), “By adding an -ism to race, we imply that there is something organized, systematic, and usually undesirable about it” (Jones, 1997, p. 367). Williams & Mohammed (2013) define racism as “an organized system premised on the categorization and ranking of social groups into races and devalues, disempowers, and differentially allocates desirable societal opportunities and resources to racial groups regarded as inferior” (Williams & Mohammed, 2013, p. 1153). The work of categorizing groups of humans as inferior and superior began at this country’s inception to justify the genocide of Native Americans and the enslavement of Africans (Alexander, 2011). It explains how racism operates at an individual level and on an institutional level. Jones

(1997) asserts that individual racism “suggests a belief in the superiority of one’s own race over another and in the behavioral elements that maintain those superior and inferior positions” (Jones, 1997, p. 13). It clarifies the motivation to develop laws and policies that maintain systems of control reaffirming a racist belief that people who are Black are inferior non-human beings. According to Jones (1997) institutional racism,

is the institutional extension of individual racist beliefs, consisting primarily of using and manipulating duly constituted institutions so as to maintain a racist advantage over others... It is the byproduct of certain institutional practices that operate to restrict-on a racial basis-the choices, rights, mobility, and access of groups of individuals (Jones, 1997, p. 14).

Individual racist belief of Africans as less than human fueled the institutional racist system of enslavement, and it is a belief that persists to some degree. In his text, *Faces at the bottom of the well: The permanence of racism*, Derrick Bell (1992) describes the endurance of racism that fueled America’s institution of slavery. He asserts, “...the fact of slavery refuses to fade, along with the deeply embedded personal attitudes and public policy assumptions that supported it for so long. Indeed, the racism that made slavery feasible is far from dead in the last decade of twentieth century America...” (Bell, 1992, p. 3). The impact of the notions of Black inferiority and White superiority on the psyche of Black people is a critical element of this contextual analysis. DuBois’ (1903/2003) double consciousness theory discussed previously poignantly describes the psychological impact of Black people in the U.S. forced to resist seeing themselves through the White gaze of inferiority. His theory further substantiates the need for the examination of Black suicide to be rooted in an understanding and analysis of the social, political, and historical contexts. In his earlier writing, *The study of the Negro problems*, DuBois (1898) underscores the requirement for this approach. He writes:

Before we can begin to study the Negro intelligently, we must realize definitely that not only is he affected by all the varying social forces that act on any nation at his stage of advancement, but that in addition to these there is reacting upon him the mighty power of a peculiar and unusual social environment which affects to some extent every other social force (DuBois, 1898, p. 19).

Slavery and the oppressive laws and policies enacted since that have carved out a path to mass incarceration are reflective of the varying social forces that have been pressing on Black people for centuries. Williams & Mohammed (2013) assert that the extraordinary level of incarceration of Black people and other people of color is an expression of institutional racism. These layers of oppression formed the racial ecology within which questions of suicidal behavior among Black people must be examined (Poussaint & Alexander, 2000). For many Black people in the U.S., the decision to end one's life is a culminating response to the culture of oppression sustained through unyielding societal stressors circulating within the U.S. racial ecology (Poussaint & Alexander, 2000). This racial ecology is the social environment DuBois (1898) was describing as affecting every other social force Black people encounter in this country.

Slavery's Function

It is estimated that between 10-12 million Africans were taken from Africa and transported to the New World to be enslaved during the period of the 16th century to the 19th century on a horrifying journey known as the Middle Passage (Lewis, 2020). The first twenty Africans brought to Jamestown, Virginia in the English North American colonies in 1619 were indentured servants (Franklin & Moss, 1988). By 1661, the need for free "perpetual servitude" led the Virginians to enact slave codes, which, as Jones (1997) explains in his seminal text, *Prejudice and racism*, "not only bonded Africans to their white masters in perpetuity, but the codes of enforcement established a social order

that ensured that slaves could not enjoy the status of freedom of mind, spirit, or body” (Jones, 1997, p.27). Colonial America categorized the Africans as uncivilized and having diminished intellectual and social capacities, as they had Native Americans, in order to justify enslaving them (Alexander, 2011). As Michelle Alexander (2011) asserts in her text, *The new Jim Crow: Mass incarceration in the age of colorblindness*, “The notion of white supremacy rationalized the enslavement of Africans, even as whites endeavored to form a new nation based on the ideals of equality, liberty, and justice for all. Before democracy, chattel slavery in America was born” (Alexander, 2011, p. 25). The enslaved Black people were inferior non-humans in the imaginations of their White enslavers as they integrated them into their new society as their chattel (White, Bay, & Martin, Jr., 2013). At the root of this country’s historical imaginings, is the notion of Black people being synonymous with slave, and White people being synonymous with power and superiority. As White, Bay, & Martin, Jr., (2013) contend, “By the end of the seventeenth century, slave labor had become crucial to southern colonies such as Virginia and common in European settlements throughout North America” (White, et al. 2103, p. 56). The Africans were vital to the development of the English North American colonies. The source of free labor from various parts of the continent of Africa ensured that the colonies did not collapse (White, et al., 2013). The gift of free labor extracted from the Africans became embedded in the social, political, and economic structures of this new society (White, Bay, & Martin, Jr., 2013).

The duration of chattel slavery and its full integration into the new world society as an acceptable practice of institutional racism must never overshadow its horrors. Enslaved Black people had to endure unspeakable physical and psychological pain that is

beyond what any human being should ever experience. In her narrative entitled, *Incidents in the life of a slave girl: Written herself*, Harriet Jacobs (1987) describes her life under the control of the White man who owned her. She explains:

He told me I was his property; that I must be subject to his will in all things. My soul revolted against the mean tyranny. But where could I turn for protection? No matter whether the slave girl be as black as ebony or as fair as her mistress. In either case, there is no shadow of law to protect her from insult, from violence, or even from death; all these inflicted by fiends who bear the shape of men (Jacobs, 1987, p. 27).

Jacobs describes a quality of tyrannical oppression that led some enslaved to decide to end their own lives to relieve their suffering.

Slavery & Suicide in Early America

Suicide was prevalent amongst the enslaved Africans on the ships that transported them across the Atlantic to the New World and continued to be an option many chose in response to the torture they experienced on the plantations (Synder, 2015); including occurrences of mass suicide (Lester, 1998). While the meaning of suicide differed within the early British American slave colonies, it was commonly viewed as a political act of resistance, and it remained a “visible and significant” feature within the institution of slavery from the beginning of the slave trade throughout the centuries leading up to the Civil War (Synder, 2015).

Synder (2015) contends that suicide reflects the toxic relationship between the enslaved and the traders and enslavers and was an outgrowth of colonization. The system of oppression manifested through colonization and slavery generated constant hypervigilance and fear and self-hatred. These early roots of oppression were strong and they endure. Hendin (1969) contends that the rage and self-hatred that stem from the Black experience of racial discrimination which rejects their humanity and interferes with

their fulfillment of the attainment of their aspirations, can cultivate feelings of self-hatred and cause one to turn against oneself. Tyler et al., (1991) contend that the legacy of the master-slave relationship continues to impact dynamics between Black people and White people. As such, for many Black people, racism manifested through various mechanisms is a constant, haunting presence like the slave master was to the enslaved (Tyler et al., 1991). Tyler et al. (1991) assert, "...the relationship dynamics emanating from a master-slave history remain and have influenced the ways Americans—blacks, whites, and others---experience their ecology and themselves" (p. 79). Racial oppression, whether on the plantation or in contemporary society, can cultivate a desire for self-destruction (Lester, 1998).

End of Chattel Slavery

In 1863, President Abraham Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation which freed enslaved people in states that were rebelling against the United States (White, Bay, & Martin, Jr., 2013). In 1865, the 13th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution abolished slavery throughout the country. The nearly 300 years of enslavement of Black people in the U.S. authorized by the U.S. government was an official denial of their humanity. The centuries of this inhumane system which allowed White people to own Black people and control their bodies and infect their minds, successfully embedded the notion of Black inhumanity and inferiority in this new society, which reinforced this belief in the minds of the masses. It conveyed the clear message that the Africans were welcome in the society as slaves, but not as citizens, as they were not considered fellow human beings. The depth of this phenomena will never be fully captured or understood. The identity and status of Black people in the United States emerged in the context of this system (Birzer

& Smith-Mahdi, 2006; Jackson, 2005) that labeled them as movable property (White, et al. 2103, p. 56). This meant that for centuries, no one in this country was legally required to care about the humanity and suffering of Black people. This social and legal framework has helped to shape the consciousness around the way Black people and their blackness are perceived, and how they see themselves. This ideology of disregard for the needs, pain, and suffering of Black people which became a part of the nation's identity as it gained its economic strength from their free labor did not go away after the signing of the Emancipation Proclamation, or with the passage of the Thirteenth Amendment. This mentality, which reflects a death consciousness as it nurtures the belief that people of African descent are non-human, remains in the ethos of the nation today. As noted previously, it infects everyone-the oppressor and the oppressed. The 13th Amendment ended one form of slavery, but it failed to explicitly denounce and repeal the statement of death which had legally declared Africans as non-human property.

The Paradox of the 13th Amendment-the path to mass incarceration

The drafters of the Thirteenth Amendment incorporated a provision that ensured that the country retained its ability to access free labor. The Thirteenth Amendment states: "Neither slavery nor involuntary servitude, except as a punishment for crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted, shall exist within the United States, or any place subject to their jurisdiction" (U.S. Constitution, 1865). The amendment clearly prohibits slavery but allows it to be enforced if someone commits a crime and then is convicted of said crime. Although the amendment is written in neutral language and does not single out any particular group of people, as the following analysis will show, it has provided the framework for institutional racism to flourish through the creation of

policies and practices which have contributed to the inability of many descendants of the enslaved Africans to break free from a system of state and federally-sanctioned bondage in this country (Gilmore, 2000). This framework has also been effective in sustaining the psychological stronghold which affirms Black inhumanity and prohibits Black people from fully integrating into society.

From Slave to Criminal

The aforementioned provision contained within the Thirteenth Amendment is, as Gilmore (2000) describes, “state authorization to use prison labor as a bridge between slavery and paid work...This stipulation provided the intellectual and legal mechanisms to enable the state to use ‘unfree’ labor by leasing prisoners to local businesses and corporations desperate to rebuild the South’s infrastructure” (Gilmore, 2000, pp. 197-198). The country could not break free from its free labor; it needed to design a way to recover from the loss of slave labor (White, et al. 2013). The platform the Thirteenth Amendment provided gave the nation the ability to technically free itself from the moral stronghold of sanctioning the right of its citizens to own other people. But the Civil War, the Emancipation Proclamation, and the Thirteenth Amendment had each failed to eliminate the ideology of white racial superiority which animated the system of chattel slavery in the country. This ideology continued to fester and manifest through social and criminal policies heralded as policies designed to promote and maintain social order but resulted in ongoing psychological and physical oppression for the former enslaved Black people.

Methods of Control: Black Codes, Peonage, & Convict leasing

Institutional racism, preserved through individual racist beliefs about the inferiority of Black people, persisted through the policies and laws which emerged after the Thirteenth Amendment resulting in a new state of bondage for Black people. State legislatures passed laws known as black codes which enforced restrictive labor contracts between Blacks and Whites and resulted in Black people being bound to the land of the White owners and limited in their freedom (White, et al. 2013). These codes also expanded penalties for petty crimes including vagrancy and loitering and were an example of the effort of some whites to “rebuild the pre-emancipation racial order by enacting laws that restricted black access to political representation” (Gilmore, 2000, p. 198). Convict leasing laws were a part of the black codes system (Alexander, 2011) and were an additional system of control designed to mimic slavery (White, et al. 2013). Many Black farmers were forced into debt through a crop lien system where they had to borrow against their expected harvest to get seed and supplies (White, et al. 2013). This led them into prison when they could not pay, and states contracted prison labor to landowners and businesses in need of labor (White, et al. 2013).

It is hard for a country to recover from a mentality that created a system of oppression like chattel slavery when it continues to perpetuate systems of oppression that subjugate Black people as in the methods described above. These methods were designed to facilitate psychological control as well as physical control and strengthened the barrier prohibiting social integration. Without a method of societal transformation that engages the nation in reengaging the imagination of its people around the meaning of blackness that dislodges the impression of Black inferiority that has been imprinted in the nation’s

ethos since slavery, policies that continue the life of chattel slavery in different forms will continue to reinforce the barriers to full social integration.

The Message of Black Criminality

As Khalil Gibran Muhammad (2010) explains in his text, *The condemnation of blackness: Race, crime, and the making of modern urban America*, the link between blackness and criminality was intentional. He notes that, between 1890-1940, racial crime statistics became known as a “strategy of communication” regarding the humanity of black people (Muhammad, 2010, p. 2). Muhammad (2010) contends that black criminality was an attractive label that appealed to a wide range of whites including radical racists from the south, and progressives from the north after the Civil War. He asserts they were able to use it to continue to support their prejudicial mentality and discriminatory behavior and embrace racial violence as a means of social control (Muhammad, 2010). These strategies were also successful in reinforcing the psychological stronghold which kept thoughts of black inferiority pervasive in the minds of many Black people who internalized this negative messaging which was a form of internalized racial oppression and an extension of earlier strategies of the slave master (Bailey, Williams, & Favors, 2014).

From Civil Rights to the War on Drugs

Methods for controlling free blacks which simulate slavery such as the black codes and convict leasing outlined above lingered until the 1940s (White, et al. 2013). While those particular methods phased out, the connection between blackness and criminality remained, and so did its appeal to whites who held on to it in response to their fears of black activism during the civil rights movement in the 1960s and the loss of

economic opportunities (Western, 2006). In his text, *Punishment & inequality in America*, Bruce Western (2006) explains that while the “prison boom” which emerged during this time was partly a response to an increase in crime, it was also a response to troubling race relations and the social activism that “fueled the anxieties and resentments of working-class whites” (Western, 2006, p. 4). The Republican party laid the foundation for a successful law and order campaign by characterizing the civil rights protestors as “a strain of social disorder” and linking them to the nation’s crime problem (Western, 2006, p. 59). Western (2006) asserts that the urban violence which erupted during this period fueled the “racial fears of whites” who were already concerned about desegregation, and the voting rights and other civil rights victories blacks achieved (Western, 2006, p. 59). Much like the response of Whites who instituted black codes and other means to push back the political and social advances free blacks made during Reconstruction following the Civil War (Gilmore, 2000), the advances Blacks were making through the civil rights movement were just as alarming to some Whites (Western, 2006). The more Black people fought for integration and to be treated as full citizens, the more resistance they received in the form of more restrictive policies such as the “war on drugs” which disproportionately impacted Black people (Alexander, 2011).

Alexander (2011) notes, researchers began discovering in the 1970s that it was white people’s attitudes about race and not their concern about crime rates or being a victim of crime that was a key factor in their support of the “get tough on crime” agenda (Alexander, 2011, p. 54). Alexander (2011) explains that the War on Drugs which President Richard Nixon’s rhetoric helped fuel and President Ronald Reagan and President George H.W. Bush carried out, was popular among white voters, and

particularly those who resented the civil rights movement (Alexander, 2011). President Reagan had successfully nuanced the War on Drugs campaign rhetoric in “race-neutral language” which allowed whites who resisted “racial reform” a vehicle to oppose the advancements black people were making without being labeled racist (Alexander, 2011, p. 54).

The 1994 Crime Bill & the Road to Mass Incarceration

The War on Drugs continued under President Bill Clinton, and a major component of the so-called war was the Violent Crime Control Act and Law Enforcement Act of 1994 (amended in 1996). The main aim of the Act was to reduce crime and violence and to continue President Clinton’s tough-on-crime agenda (Mauer, 2016). The Act provided prison construction funds to states and directed funds from higher education to corrections (The Justice Policy Institute, 2001). A 2001 report by The Justice Policy Institute report notes that “By 1995, state expenditures for prison construction grew by \$926 million, while expenditures for university construction fell by an equivalent \$954 million...under President Bill Clinton, the number of prisoners under federal jurisdiction *doubled*, and grew more than it did under the previous 12-years of Republican rule, *combined*...” (The Justice Policy Institute, 2001, p. 6). The report further asserts that the policies passed under President Clinton’s Administration “resulted in the largest increases in federal and state prison inmates of any president in American history” (The Justice Policy Institute, 2001, p. 3). The Truth-in-Sentencing laws incentive grants (TIS) contributed to this massive increase (The Justice Policy Institute, 2001). Truth-in-Sentencing laws (TIS) incentive grants were a part of an enormous funding package under the Act for \$30 billion federal dollars that was funneled to the states and

enhanced the economic strength of many local economies (The Justice Policy Institute, 2001). The grants enabled states to build prisons which resulted in jobs and opportunities for thousands of Americans throughout the country (Alexander, 2011). The incarceration boom is fueled by a prison industry that relies on these TIS laws and other aspects of the criminal justice system to supply the bodies it needs to sustain its growth (Travis, Western, & Redburn, 2014). Non-violent drug offenders have filled up the prisons in this country and this trend has disproportionately impacted African Americans and the Latinx community. At the turn of the century, 90% of individuals incarcerated for drug offenses in many states throughout the country were African American or Latinx (Alexander, 2011).

By 2000, there were more than 2 million people incarcerated in the United States (Alexander, 2011). According to Western (2006), “Empirical evidence for large-scale incarceration justifies the term mass imprisonment—an incarceration so vast as to draw entire demographic groups into the web of the penal system” (Western, 2006, p. 12). Mass incarceration has had a disproportionate impact on the African American community as African American men are six to eight times more likely to be incarcerated than whites (Western, 2006). By 2000, nearly 8 percent of African American men of working age were in prison or jail (Western, 2006). Western contends that the “prison boom transformed the institutional landscape” for poor African American males transitioning from childhood to young adulthood (Western, 2006, p.12). He further asserts that imprisonment became more common to young African American males than military service or college (Western, 2006).

The effectiveness of these methods of control is staggering. Alexander (2011) reports that there are more African American adults under correctional control which includes prison or jail, on probation or parole, during this contemporary period, than there were enslaved in 1850 (p. 180). She bases this on the data from the Pew Center on the States report, *One in 31: The long reach of American corrections* which notes that one in eleven Black adults (approximately 2.4 million) was under correctional supervision at the year ending 2007 (Alexander, 2011, p. 288; Pew Charitable Trusts, 2009). Alexander (2011) notes that this exorbitant increase in the prison population is not due to a rise in crime, it is the result of changes in the laws and policies discussed above. With approximately 2.3 million people currently incarcerated, the U.S. incarcerates more people than any other country in the world (Sawyer & Wagner, 2020).

These laws and policies have contributed to a hostile social environment for Black people and have led to a new form of enslavement for many. According to Nellis (2016), “Evidence suggests that some individuals are incarcerated not solely because of their crime, but because of racial disparate policies, beliefs, and practices...” (Nellis, 2016, p. 3). Research shows that Black skin is associated with criminality (Eberhardt, Goff, Purdie, & Davies, 2004). Eberhardt et al., (2004) assert that “Black faces and Black bodies can trigger thoughts of crime” (Eberhardt et al., 2004, p. 876). Fear of blackness fuels the racial disparate policies, beliefs, and practices that breeds mass incarceration. As the above trajectory illuminates, the institutional racism that built and sustained the institution of slavery endured and reaffirmed itself through various laws and policies that created the pathway to mass incarceration. As Taylor (2016) contends, mass incarceration is not the worst byproduct of the systemic devaluing of Black people. Taylor (2016)

asserts, “This crisis goes beyond high incarceration rates” it extends to “the perpetuation of deeply ingrained stereotypes of African Americans as particularly dangerous, impervious to pain and suffering, careless and carefree, and exempt from empathy, solidarity, or basic humanity...” (Taylor, 2016, p. 3).

Intergenerational transmission of the psychological impact of racism

Because the country has not eradicated racism and healed from the impacts of its various, destructive iterations, it continues to thrive. As a result, mass incarceration can be seen as a symptom of historical trauma. Brave Heart, Chase, Elkins & Altschul (2011) define Historical Trauma as “cumulative emotional and psychological wounding across generations, including the lifespan, which emanates from massive group trauma” (Brave Heart, Chase, Elkins, & Altschul, 2011, p. 283). The complexities reflect the unresolved relationship between the master and enslaved (Tyler, Brome, & Williams, 1991). Historical racial trauma can be passed down through generations through various methods (Coleman, 2016). These ways can include a transference of learned aggressive or violent behavior which can be conveyed consciously or unconsciously through clinical symptoms such as hypervigilance which parents, caregivers, and family members can relay to those in their care, or through verbalized negative messages which communicate that the world is a dangerous place to be feared (Coleman, 2016; DeGruy, 2005). This legacy of trauma and racism has multiple implications. Franklin, Boyd-Franklin, & Kelly (2006) note that the disproportionate numbers of African-American men incarcerated in America result from “endemic societal racism” and is a “source of ongoing psychological trauma for many African Americans” (Franklin, Boyd-Franklin, & Kelly, 2006, p. 19, 20). Normally, the focus is only on the trauma impact on Black people, however, White

people also received a transfer of negative patterns and behaviors from enslavers that they need to heal and recover from. The lingering effects of emotional and psychological wounding from White enslavers viewing Black people as non-human property must also be prioritized.

The psychological implications of condemnation

This path from slavery to mass incarceration in the U.S. provides a compelling account of the history of “the condemnation of blackness” (Muhammad, 2010) in the U.S. It describes a racial ecology replete with relentless aggressive social forces designed to keep Black people oppressed. It is a narrative that leads to a question the title of Muhammad (2010)’s book provokes. What is the psychological impact of the institutional racism that fuels the condemnation of blackness? This is in alignment with the questions DuBois (1903/2003) asks in *The souls of Black folk*: “How does it feel to be a problem?” “Why did God make me an outcast and a stranger in mine own house?” (p. 8). There are deadly consequences of institutional racism, such as police shootings (Taylor, 2016). Each year, police in the U.S. kill more than 300 Black Americans, and at least a quarter of the people killed are not armed with weapons (Bor et al., 2018). This represents a rate that shows that Black Americans are nearly three times more likely to die at the hands of police than White Americans (Bor et al., 2018). Killings of unarmed Black people by police reinforce the racist notion that Black humanity is not valued (Taylor, 2016; Bor et al., 2018), and it represents the most violent act of condemnation towards Black people. Research (Bor, Venkataramani, Williams & Tsai, 2018) shows that these police killings of unarmed Black Americans were associated with adverse mental health effects among Black Americans who learned about the shootings. The

findings in the study by Bor et al., (2018) suggest that the adverse mental health impact of police killings on Black Americans is almost as high as the adverse mental health burden associated with diabetes. Tyler et al., (1991) contend that the values and beliefs that sustain a system like slavery for over 200 hundred years were deeply embedded within the human ecology, and assert that “the development of slavery necessitated that Americans psychologically encode new standards for defining humanity” (p. 81). Thus, a psychological consequence of being condemned is the fear of being killed by police, an act of state violence that mimics killings of enslaved Africans by White slave masters (Taylor, 2016). This fear is triggered by each police killing (Bor et al., 2018). Bor et al. (2018) assert that there are many vehicles through which racism can impact Black people through these violent acts. They contend:

Racism, like trauma, can be experienced vicariously. Police killings of unarmed Black Americans might compromise mental health among other black Americans through vicarious mechanisms, including heightened perceptions of systemic racism and lack of fairness, loss of social status and self-regard, increased fear of victimization and greater mortality expectations, increased vigilance, diminished trust in social institutions, reactions to anger, activation of prior traumas, and communal bereavement (Bor et al., 2018, p. 302).

All of these mechanisms permeate the U.S. racial ecology that Black people are immersed in and contribute to their psychological dis-ease. It requires extra effort to resist these non-life affirming forces and cultivates an environment where thoughts of self-harm can flourish. These mechanisms also create strong barriers to full social integration.

Racism & Stress

Psychological distress is a risk factor for Black suicide (Utsey, Hook, & Stanard, 2007). Racism can trigger psychological distress. Research Williams, Lawrence, & Davis

(2019) shows that structural, cultural, and individual racism can impact physical and mental health. A substantial body of research shows that routine experiences of perceived racial discrimination, an extension of racism, activate physiological responses that lead to a variety of health and mental health challenges for Black people (Williams, Lawrence, & Davis, 2019; Paradies, Denson, Elias, Priest, Pieterse, Gupta, et al., 2015; Borrell, Kiefe, Williams, Diez-Roux, Gordon-Larsen, 2006; Williams & Mohammed, 2009; Williams & Williams-Morris, 2000; Clark, Anderson, Clark, & Williams, 1999). Research shows that racism permeates the life course of African Americans (Williams et al., 2014) and all people of color in that “race and racism are involved in the developmental process, in presenting problems, life adjustments, and the stress of social status---any of which can compromise mental health” (Carter, 2007, p. 82). Research illuminates some of the mechanism through which racial discrimination is associated with disease and mortality, they include such physiological responses as high blood pressure and heart rate, hypervigilance, and biochemical reactions (Mays, Cochran, & Barnes, 2007), leading to large racial disparities (Williams & Mohammed, 2009). Clark, Anderson, Clark, & Williams (1999) note that there are many possible psychological stress responses that may emerge in response to perceived racism, including anger, anxiety, fear, and hopelessness. Williams & Mohammed (2009) report that African Americans die at higher rates than White Americans for most of the 15 leading causes of death, including heart disease, diabetes, kidney disease, cancer, stroke, hypertension, and homicide. Helms, Nicolas, & Green (2012) contend that racism should be considered as a potential factor causing PTSD, yet it is not included as a criterion in the DSM.

Racial discrimination & Suicide

Impact of perceived racial discrimination on health and mental health

Racism, through its multiple manifestations, has been shown to have a negative impact on the physical and psychological well-being of Black people (Clark, et al., 1999; Williams & Mohammed, 2013). The contemporary understanding of race, as noted above, is that it is a social construction used to distinguish people based on various factors including physical features such as the color of their skin (Carter, et al., 2007). Racism, which is premised on the superiority of the dominant group, operates on multiple levels, individual and institutional (Jones, 1997). Jones (1997) describes individual racism as a way “in which people devalue, disadvantage, demean, and in general, unfairly regard others” based on the premise that their race is superior (Jones, 1997, p. 7). Institutional racism can be defined as “an organized system premised on the categorization and ranking of social groups into races and devalues, disempowers, and differentially allocates desirable societal opportunities and resources to racial groups regarded as inferior” (Williams & Mohammed, 2013, p. 1153). Racial discrimination can be defined as unfair treatment rooted in racial or ethnic bias or prejudice (Castle, Connor, Kaukeinen, & Tu, 2011), which is an outgrowth of racism (Williams & Mohammed, 2013). It is how racism is operationalized (Williams & Mohammed, 2009; Jones, 1997). Perceived racial discrimination describes the subjective experience of unfair treatment and is not limited to objective determinations of unfair treatment based on race or ethnicity (Clark, Anderson, Clark, Williams, 1999). It has been found that experiences of racial discrimination can affect individuals through the development of a negative internalized schema regarding one’s self-concept (Williams & Williams-Morris, 2000).

The internalization of these experiences can have a significant impact on the mental health of Black people. Clark, Anderson, Clark, Williams (1999) contend that racism, particularly institutional racism, may impact one's health even if it is not perceived, through the form of poor health care treatment.

Williams & Mohammed (2013) report that there is a substantial amount of strong scientific evidence which reveals that racial discrimination continues to be embedded within U.S. society. Black Americans are experiencing the stress of discrimination at high rates (APA, 2020). According to the American Psychological Association, the proportion of Black Americans who responded to its annual Stress in America survey and reported that experiences of discrimination are a significant source of stress increased substantially between May 2020 to June 2020. At the start of May, 42% of the respondents reported that discrimination was a significant source of stress, and 55% reported the same in June (APA, 2020). This is the highest proportion reported since 2018 (APA, 2020). It is important to note that from May to June 2020 as the country was grappling with the reality of COVID-19 which disproportionately impacts Black Americans, there were high-profile cases of racial violence against Black people in the U.S., including the police killing of George Floyd, an unarmed Black man, which sparked wide-spread national and global protests (Flowers & Wan, 2020). Research shows that there were increased signs of anxiety and depressive disorders in Black people during the week following the video of Floyd's death was disseminated (Flowers & Wan, 2020). Significant empirical research supports the substantial effect of perceived racial discrimination on psychological outcomes (Williams & Mohammed, 2009; Anderson, 2013). Williams & Mohammed (2013) report that research also shows that

discrimination impacts the physical health of African Americans in a variety of ways including that they are more likely than whites not to see a decrease in blood pressure when they sleep which can have potential life-threatening implications. Williams & Mohammed (2013) further assert that when determining the dimensions of discrimination that are pathogenic for different groups, it is important to evaluate the various contexts within which individuals experience discrimination and to assess the individual's socialization and capacity for resilience.

Racial Discrimination & Suicide

Racism and racial discrimination have existed for centuries in the U.S. Scholars have theorized that racism is a critical risk factor for suicide among people of color, including Black Americans (Wong, Maffini, & Shin, 2014; Joe, Canetto, & Romer, 2008). Studies have revealed an association between perceived racism and suicidal thoughts in African Americans (Walker & Salami, et al., 2014). Research shows that it is important to explore systemic, ecological manifestations of racial inequalities as precursors to suicide-related outcomes (Wong, et al., 2014). Researchers have noted that the combination of contextual factors associated with discrimination exposure creates an elevated risk for suicide for Black youth and adults susceptible to toxic social stressors (Walker, Francis, Brody, Simons, Cutrona, & Gibbons, 2017). Research shows that racial discrimination has a direct and indirect impact on the mental health of Black people (Walker, Salami, Carter, & Flowers, 2014). The indirect impact emerges from “the sense of diminished self-worth” associated with “discrimination and helplessness” (Walker, Salami et al., 2014, p. 550). The association between perceived racial discrimination and suicide among Black people has not been widely explored (Walker, Francis, Brody,

Simons, Cutrona, & Gibbons, 2017). Walker, Francis, Brody, Simons, Cutrona, & Gibbons (2017) proposed that racial discrimination is associated with increased death ideation in young Blacks (Walker et al., 2017). Their underlying assumption is that the racial discrimination Blacks experience creates a “unique contextual vulnerability” beyond the general day to day life stressors that impacts their behavior (Walker & Francis, et al., 2017, p. 87). The study’s findings of direct and indirect effects of racial discrimination on death ideation were consistent with “theories that posit that alienation and interpersonal rejection fuel suicide vulnerability” (Walker & Francis, et al., 2017 p. 95).

Oh, Stickley, Koyanagi, Yau & DeVyllder (2019) report that research on the association between discrimination and suicidality among Black Americans has been inconsistent. In their study which examined the National Latino and Asian American Survey and the National Survey of American Life and utilized a discrimination scale capturing everyday discrimination, they explored the association between discrimination and suicidal behavior among racial and ethnic minorities in the US, including Black people. They found that for people of color, everyday discrimination increased the odds of lifetime reports of suicidal thoughts and behaviors when adjusting for socio-demographics and major lifetime psychiatric disorders (Oh et al., 2019). They assert that their study underscores “the role of discrimination as a factor that may influence one’s sense of belonging in workplaces, neighborhoods, public places, and the larger society” (p8). Hollingsworth, Cole, O’Keefe, Tucker, Story, & Wingate (2017) explored the relationship between racial microaggressions and suicide ideation among African Americans. The researchers found that “for African Americans, the everyday experience

of verbal, behavioral, and environmental racial slights or insults was associated with increased perceptions of being a burden on others, which in turn was associated with increased thoughts of suicide” (Hollingsworth, 2017, p. 107). In their study examining everyday discrimination, depressive symptoms, and suicide ideation among African American men, Goodwill, Taylor, & Watkins (2019) found that everyday discrimination was associated with increased rates of depressive symptoms in African American men and that only race-based everyday discrimination was significantly associated with suicide ideation.

In Borum's (2014) qualitative study involving forty African American college students via seven focus groups examining the perceived sociocultural determinants of suicide of African Americans, racism, discrimination, and stereotyping emerged as a theme. When asked, “What might make African Americans attempt suicide?” a respondent replied, “racism, that’s always a factor” and there was agreement within the group. The psychological effects of the racism and racial discrimination Black people have endured in the U.S. have been recognized in the robust literature that continues to grow. This focus on the impact of racism and racial discrimination on suicidal behavior is an important dimension as it highlights the depth of the impact of racism on the psychological well-being of this population. Researchers contend that there is a need for better models of Black suicide and suggest that future studies explore how racial discrimination independently contributes to suicide risk (Walker et al., 2017).

Religion & Spirituality

Definitions

Religion has been defined as a tradition or practice based on revelations, scriptures, laws, and ethical teachings (Fowler, 1981). Mattis & Jagers (2001) define religion as “as a shared system of beliefs, mythology, and rituals associated with a god or gods” and religiosity as, “an individual’s degree of adherence to the beliefs, doctrines, and practices of a religion” (Mattis & Jagers, 2001, p. 522). Religion as an institution and a personal resource for restoration and healing has been a significant factor in the lives of Black Americans throughout the centuries of their time in the U.S. (Chatters, Taylor, Lincoln, Nguyen & Joe, 2011). Spirituality has been defined as a “non-material force” (Mattis & Jagers, 2001, p. 522) and a mechanism for tapping into one’s inner resources to find strength and to connect to oneself, to others, and God (Newlin, Knafl, & Melkus, 2002). It has also been defined as representing “the divine expression and belief of a higher power that governs one’s existence” (Bowen-Reid & Harrell, 2002, p. 21). Religion and spirituality are understood to be relational phenomena (Mattis & Jagers, 2001, p. 520). Religion and spirituality are separate but related dimensions (Mattis & Jagers, 2001). As noted previously, in this dissertation, religion and spirituality will be referred to as joint, interrelated terms. While there is a distinction made in recent literature, there is also precedent for the combining of the terms as researchers have used the terms religiosity and spirituality interchangeably (Mattis & Watson, 2009). Their interrelatedness is seen in the way they have been used among Black Americans to cultivate a “sense of community” (Mattis & Jagers, 2001, p. 529).

Statistics on Blacks and Religion

Based on data from the 2014 Religious Landscape Study by the Pew Research Center, Black Americans at 79% are more likely to identify as Protestant Christian than whites 70%, Latinx 77%, and 34% Asian Americans (Masci, Mohamed, & Smith, 2018). According to 2014 Religious Landscape Study by the Pew Research Center, 47% of Black Americans surveyed reported attending religious services at least once a week; 36% reported attending once or twice a month/a few times a year, and 17% reported seldom/never; 83% report they believe in God with absolute certainty; 75% report religion is very important. 73% reported praying at least daily (Religious Landscape Study, 2014). According to the 2014 Religious Landscape Study, 79% of African Americans self-identify as Christian; approximately 53% are affiliated with historically Black Protestant churches; 14% identify with evangelical Protestantism; 5% Catholicism; 4% mainline Protestantism; and 2% Islam (Religious Landscape Study, 2014). The percentage of African Americans identifying as religiously unaffiliated (includes atheist, agnostic, or “nothing in particular”) has increased from 12% in 2007 when the first Religious Landscape Study was conducted to 18% in 2014 study (Masci, 2019). According to the 2014 Religious Landscape Study, 63% of the Silent Generation (1928-1945) report identifying with historically black denominations, and 41% of Black Millennials report identifying with historically black denominations (Masci, 2019). According to the 2014 survey, Black women are more religious (80% report religion is very important to them) than Black men but Black men (69% report religion is very important) Cox & Diamant, 2018. According to the 2017 Pew Research Center survey,

20% of the population of Muslims in the U.S. are Black Americans with about 49% of them being converts to the faith (Mohamed & Diamant, 2019).

Black Religion and spirituality

Religion and spirituality have historically been at the root of Black American culture and community since slavery (Mattis & Jagers, 2001; Brown-Reid & Harrell, 2002; Cannon, 1995). However, there is a complexity and diversity of beliefs and ideologies within the Black American experience that must be acknowledged (Mattis & Jagers, 2001). While the intent of this work is not to essentialize the meaning of the Black American religious experience, this dissertation cannot cover the breadth and scope of this diverse landscape. Mattis & Jagers (2001) caution to be aware of a bias in research regarding the religious and spiritual lives of African Americans as there is a prominent focus on Christianity, and little research on Islam, Buddhism, or other faith traditions. Although this work will not explore non-Christian religion in-depth, it does discuss the role of Islam in the Black community and includes an interview with a Black man of the Muslim faith. Because, according to the 2014 Religious Landscape Study, 79% of African Americans self-identify as Christian and approximately 53% are affiliated with historically Black Protestant churches, the focus in this dissertation is on Black religious expression primarily as it is expressed through what is known as the Black Church.

Evolution of the Black Church

Below is a concise discussion of the stages of the development of the Black Church beginning with its emergence during slavery, and how the value of interdependence was revealed through evidence of the church as a site for social cohesion (Frazier, 1963) and connection to God.

“Invisible Institution”

Douglas & Hopson (2000) describe the Black Church as “a multitudinous community of churches, which are diversified by origin, denomination, doctrine, worshipping culture, spiritual expression, class, size, and other less-obvious factors” and asserts that while it is diverse, there is a common history, mission and culture which culminates into a collective identity (Douglas & Hopson, 2000, p. 96). The roots of this vibrant religious expression extend back to the enslaved Africans brought to the New World (Hopkins, 2003). Before being brought to the New World as enslaved property, Africans possessed their own religious identity and “forces of theological habit” rooted in their indigenous religions (Hopkins, 2003, p. 3). Although the violence of the trade which included the forced separation of Africans and the denial of the use of their indigenous languages weakened their connection to their African theology, they did not lose sight of their view of God (Hopkins, 2003). Jesus was known on the continent before the Christian enslavers (Hopkins & Cummings, 2003). As Hopkins (2003) asserts, “...it was their structural religious worldview of God, Jesus, and human action that sustained them against the racist assaults of European slavers and their descendants in the New World” (p. 3). Their slave theology included a “theological anthropology” which shaped their understanding of themselves as God’s human creation which helped to buffer them against the lies of the European Christian enslavers who deemed them subhuman (Hopkins, 2003, p. 3).

Over time an “invisible institution,” a religious society enslaved people organized as a site for the cultivation of their “slave theology,” emerged amongst communities of

enslaved people in the British North America colonies, (Hopkins, 2003). Because it was illegal for enslaved people to gather for worship without the supervision of a White person, the invisible institution was a free space where they could worship God through their own cultural expression, and it was a space where they could cultivate their theology devoid of whiteness, which was a political act (Hopkins, 2003).

As Goatley (2003) explains, West African religious convictions heavily influenced the theology of the enslaved, particularly “the concept of God as essentially spirit with transcendent power and immanent presence...constant among humanity, and...involved with the affairs of God’s creation” (Goatley, 2003, p. 154). In their process of integrating a “reinterpreted white Christianity” with their own indigenous religions, they maintained elements of their African religious worldview and the sacredness of interconnectedness (Hopkins, 2003). Hopkins (2003) asserts:

African traditional religions shared a belief in a dynamic and interdependent relation between the individual and the community. The latter defined the former. Individualism proved anathema. To be human meant to stand in connection with the larger community of invisible ancestors and God and, of course, the visible community and family. Africans recognize life as life-in-community (Hopkins, 2003, p. 4).

Intimacy with God was a prominent theme in their theology and remains central to Black theology (Hopkins, 2003). According to Hopkins (2003), they believed that God dwelled with them operating on a personal level and a systemic level. God’s presence through Jesus enhanced their capacity to experience a relationship with God. As Hopkins (2003) asserts, “Jesus assumed an intimate and kingly relationship with the poor black chattel” (Hopkins, 2003, p. 2). The invisible institution provided a safe space for the enslaved to connect and care for each other out of the view of the slave master, connect to God, worship, and engage in spiritual practices such as prayer (Hopkins, 2003). Prayer was a

lifeline for many enslaved African Americans. Their prayers were a symbol of their faith and represented the vibrancy of their relationship with God. They prayed to God for their needs and the needs of others. Prayers to God were uttered and sung through spirituals which often conveyed a combination of hope and pain (Hopkins & Cummings, 2003). The spirituals are one of the most important cultural expressions to emerge from the invisible institution. The value of interdependence, exemplified through their intimate connection to God and each other was the foundation for the social cohesion experienced through the common beliefs and practices and their common political struggle to maintain this secret space to build their own theology. Black sociologist E. Franklin Frazier (1963) in his work, *The Negro church in America* contends that the slave religious culture provided a critical source of social cohesion, but that it was the Christian religion and not the remnants of African culture or religion that was responsible for the cohesion. He asserts that over time, “common religious beliefs and practices and traditions tended to provide a new basis of social cohesion in an alien environment” (Frazier, 1963, p. 16). Nevertheless, it is firmly established that slave theology, rooted in African theology is the foundation of contemporary Black Theology (Hopkins, 2003).

Negro Church

The Negro church developed from Black people (Negroes) who had free before the Civil War (Frazier, 1963). After the war, it merged with the invisible institution and became the primary vessel through which “organized religious life became the chief means by which a structured or organized social life came into existence among the Negro masses” (Frazier, 1963, p. 36). The church was also a where mutual aid societies emerged to help support those in the community who were in need, and it was also a site

for political expression where Black people, who did not have the right to vote, could vote in church elections and exercise their agency and authority (Frazier, 1963). Nobles (1991) contends that the way in which the Black church functions as a site for Black people to engage in mutual support and collaborative efforts to aid each other is an expression of their retention of the African ethic of concern for collective survival and interdependence. Barber (2014) asserts that during the period of Reconstruction following the Civil War (1865-1877) the Negro church expanded to include social institutions which were sites for schools, meeting, social clubs, and community kitchens serving “every role needed by the newly emancipated community” (Barber, 2014, p. 252). It was the primary space for social connection outside of the family (Frazier, 1963). Frazier (1963) describes it’s utility and the psychological support it provided:

Since the Negro was not completely insulated from the white world and had to conform to some extent to the ways of white men, he was affected by their evaluation of him. Nevertheless, he could always find an escape from such, often painful, experiences within the shelter of his church (Frazier, 1963, p. 51).

The church is where they could experience a sense of community is cultivated through “church work” which includes visits to the elderly, sick, and those in need, as well as spiritual practices such as prayer (Mattis & Jaegers, 2001; p. 530). Cannon (1995) describes the Black prayer tradition as “the authentic living bridge between Black people’s stories, Black people’s music, and Black people’s source of faith” (Cannon, 1995, p. 36). Mattis & Jaegers (2001) assert that intercessory prayers which are prayers for the needs of others are an important method for cultivating a sense of community among African Americans as they are making requests for God to help friends and family as well as intervene in community concerns. They assert it is “an act of intimacy and

relational commitment...and are considered important in securing community and individual well-being” (Mattis & Jaegers, 2001, p. 530). The church work is an example of the extrinsic or outward religious expression and the private prayer is an example of the intrinsic or internal religious conceptualization (Mattis & Jaegers (2001).

But as Frazier (1963) explains, as Black people began to assimilate there was an impact on the church which triggered a shift in its ability to serve as a site for social cohesion. It struggled to address the needs that emerged as people moved from the rural communities in the South to urban settings up North. As they were engaging in urban social life they were relying less on the church as their primary source of community and political engagement (Frazier, 1963). He asserts, “In a word, the Negroes have been forced into competition with whites in most areas of social life and their church can no longer serve as a refuge within the American community” (Frazier, 1963, p. 76). Frazier’s observations signaled the impact of the shift that was happening among Black people as they were navigating a world where they were beginning to gain access to more parts of society, yet they were far from total acceptance. Frazier (1963) notes that the church continued to be a required safe space. He explains, “...for the masses of Negroes, the Negro church continues to be a refuge, though increasingly less of a refuge, in a hostile white world” (Frazier, 1963, p. 85). Despite the shifts in social dynamics of the church, the Negro church continued to exemplify the value of interdependence, demonstrated through Black people’s intimate connection to God and each of which continued to cultivate social cohesion experienced through the common beliefs and practices and their common political struggle against racial oppression.

Black Church 1960s to 1990's

According to Lincoln in his text, *The black church since Frazier* (1963), the Negro Church died in the 1960s in the midst of the Negro's call to full personhood that rejected the Negro identity. Lincoln (1963) asserted that the Black Church must be the "characteristic expression of institutionalized religion for contemporary Blackamericans" as it was to reflect their new relationship with themselves, God, and white people which reflected their freedom from the former limitations of their Negro status. Black theologian James Cone (1970) describes Black Theology as "black people reflecting religiously on the black experience" asserts that the Black church in America in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was a site where Black people could grapple with the oppressive conditions of the society they lived in (Cone, 1970, p. 53). He asserts, "The early black religionists knew that the world was not as it ought to be and that its imperfection was to be found in white oppression of the blacks...At a time when an affirmation of blackness made death a 'live' possibility, they said 'no' to whiteness and 'yes' to blackness" (Cone, 1970, p. 54). While Cone (1970) argues that the post-Civil War black church did not maintain the same level of commitment to the affirmation of blackness as the earlier church did, he affirmed the Black church as a critical resource for mobilizing the masses for the black revolution. Cone (1970) contends that the Black church is a community that is completely concerned with the liberation of all oppressed people, as an extension of the work of God. This reflects the value of interdependence. Churches during the civil rights movement were centers for strategizing and organizing around the Black freedom struggle (Morris, 1984). Morris (1984) describes the church as

the “institutional center of the modern civil rights movement” and a site from where Black people could escape the harsh realities of racism and oppression through “singing, listening, praying, and shouting” (Morris, 1984, p. 4). As womanist theologian Katie Cannon (1995) contends, the Biblical teachings in the church shape the way Black people respond to injustice and enable them to engage in the challenging work of activism in the midst of violence while confident in their identity. Describing the period following the Second World War, she asserts, “The ministers’ expositions of the biblical faith corresponded to the efficacious ways that the Black community dealt with contingencies in the real-lived context. The Scriptures made a significant difference in the notions Blacks used to see and to act in situations that confronted them” (Cannon, 1995, p. 54).

Another religious institution that was prominent during the period of the civil rights movement and addressed the crisis of alienation and oppression of Black people was the Nation of Islam, also known as the Black Muslims (Franklin & Moss, 1988). Some of the enslaved Africans had practiced Islam in Africa and brought Islam with them to the New World (Genovese, 1974). The Nation of Islam sought to provide security and support by addressing the spiritual and economic and social needs of Black people (Franklin & Moss, 1988). Like the Black church, the Nation of Islam was also a site for reinforcement of Black identity and power, which was most powerfully facilitated through the work of their most prominent leader, Malcolm X who served in the organization for many years before forming his own group (Franklin & Moss, 1988). The Black Church during this period fueled people’s intimate connection to God and each other which continued to cultivate social cohesion experienced through their common

beliefs and practices and their common political struggle for liberation grounded in a Black identity that exuded their power.

The Black Church Today-The Changing Role of Religion

The role of religion in the lives of Black people has changed throughout time (Nelson, 1988). According to a 1983 Gallup Poll, Black people had a higher rate of church membership than White people (76% v. 69%), yet according to the 1978 Gallup Unchurched American Study, Black people who lived in the metropolitan non-South region had the highest rates of “unchurched” Blacks, followed by the Black people in the metropolitan South and Blacks in the nonmetropolitan South (Nelson, 1988). Research shows that residence in the South is a protective factor for Black people (Joe et al., 2006; Gibbs, 1997). In 2007, the first Pew Research Center’s Religious Landscape Study showed that 12% of Black Americans claimed to be unaffiliated with a religion (e.g. atheist, agnostic, or “nothing in particular”) (Pew Research Center, 2015). In 2014, the Pew Research Center found that the number increased to 18%. Younger Black adults were more likely than older Black adults to claim the unaffiliated status (Pew Research Center, 2015). The Pew Research Center found that 29% of young Black Americans between the ages of 18 and 29 reported as unaffiliated as opposed to 7% of older Black adults age 65 and older (Pew Research Center, 2015). These numbers reflect a declining presence of the Black church in the daily lives of Black people, meaning that the church is less of a prominent protective resource against suicide.

Douglas & Hopson (2000) note that while the Black Church today maintains a constant presence in the lives of Black people, its collective ability to serve as a constant

social and religious center is challenged by how it is “sometimes appearing prophetic and liberating and other times appearing stagnant and proscriptive” such as in the way that it can “at the same time, fight for racial justice and oppose gay and lesbian rights” (Douglas & Hopson, 2000, p. 102). Mattis and Jagers (2001) contend that while many argue that the role of African American churches in social movements has shifted, churches continue to be sites for mobilization around social, political, and economic concerns with ministers and pastors serving as facilitators and voices for encouragement and social change. However, some theologians argue that today’s Black Church needs to make critical shifts to effectively respond to the contemporary needs of its population, including recognizing the shift in its cultural climate (Walker, 2011). The Black community in the 21st century is more internationally diverse (Walker, 2011). Walker (2011) who examined challenges and opportunities facing the Black church in the 21st century contends,

Unlike their forerunners who lived in a social space defined by a black/white racial and social discourse, the 21st century requires a spiritual and political understanding that exists alongside a myriad of languages, racial backgrounds, and religious traditions. In this new reality, the common denominators must be a love for humanity, search for truth, and embrace of justice-not just for African Americans, but for all of God’s people. It is this faith space that the African American church must inhabit if it expects to remain relevant” p.15

The diversity of the people and the competing forces within a more inclusive social environment impede the church’s ability to be the same source of social cohesion it was in very earlier generations. While the outside world remains hostile, the church is struggling to provide the cohesive refuge it did during earlier generations when there were fewer alternatives for social and political organizing and the movement for

liberation/against oppression was at its core. Religion and spirituality, for many Black people throughout their existence in the U.S. and before, have been vehicles for cultivating their connection to God and rooting their identity in God, enabling them to transcend the message of inferiority and dehumanization from the world. As Black theologian Howard Thurman (1949/1976) explains, “If a man’s ego has been stabilized, resulting in a sure grounding of his sense of personal worth and dignity, then he is in a position to appraise his own intrinsic powers, gifts, talents, and abilities” (Thurman, 1949/1976, p. 53). Relationship to God affirms their dependency and connection to God and others, cultivating a commitment to liberate the oppressed within their community, and those outside of their community. Along with providing protection from the world’s violent forces, it provides a source of connection to values of justice and love that they are able to hold on to with authority in the face of tyranny. Cannon (1995) describes this capacity expressed through Black veterans following World War II who faced racial violence when they returned home. She asserts, “In their cry against the ideological supremacy of racist practices and values, they appealed to the religious heritage of Blacks that began in the invisible church during slavery” (Cannon, 1995, p. 55). The traditions and teachings of this institution were passed down through the generations and continue to be a source for the cultivation of Black people’s faith and resistance (Cannon, 1995).

Religion and spirituality and the value of interdependence operationalized through family and community, are all important elements of the culture of Black people in America. Cannon (1995) contends that “Black religion and the Black church served as a sustaining force, assuring boundless justice” (p. 54). This can also be said about Black community organizations and spaces where Black people can breathe and organize,

which includes the Black church. According to Parham (2009), culture is a critical component of the analysis of a people. He asserts, “It is culture that describes the ethos of a people. It is culture that colors and shapes a people’s design for living and patterns for interpreting reality” (Parham, 2009, p. 6). While structural forces have impacted the dynamics of the Black community system over time (Hill, 2009) as well as the Black family system (McAdoo & Younge, 2009), these continue to be core components of Black America. Culture is a framework for helping people to understand who they are, where they come from and what their life’s trajectory is, and this is important to understand as it relates to suicide in any population, particularly a historically oppressed population such as Black Americans (Leenaars, 2008).

Conclusion

The historical, cultural, and spiritual dimensions of the Black American experience explored in this chapter provide the necessary context for understanding the mixed method design approach to this study and for interpreting the findings. This study is anchored in the salience of racism and Afrocentric culture, religion and spirituality. This chapter illuminates the importance of imbedding all research regarding the Black American experience within an Afrocentric framework.

CHAPTER III: The Afrocentric Framework-Ubuntu Relational Framework for the Study of Black Suicide

Together, the quantitative and qualitative research enhance the breadth and depth of the analysis of Black suicide. This mixed-method study created an intellectual and spiritual environment throughout the research journey which facilitated the emergence of a relational framework to undergird the study of Black suicide. Grounded theory guided the qualitative study with the three men. It is a theory designed to lead to the emergence of new theories rooted in data and to reevaluate existing theories (Malagon, Huber, Velez, 2009). Accordingly, the overall analysis of this work is positioned within a conceptual, Afrocentric framework that emerged from the qualitative research and data analysis. The framework is entitled the Ubuntu Relational Framework for the Study of Black Suicide. Its rootedness in the African philosophy of ubuntu reflects a decolonized approach to social work. Social work scholars in Africa contend that the philosophy of ubuntu has great potential to be an impactful framework for social work in Africa, and it is being deployed in efforts to decolonize social work in Africa (Mupedziswa, Rankopo, & Mwansa, 2019; van Breda, 2019). This chapter explains the components of the framework, the concepts of death consciousness and Divine consciousness, which emerged from the analysis of the qualitative interviews and are expressions of Afrocentric culture, and the concept of spiritual resistance which is also an expression of Afrocentric culture. It concludes with a discussion of strengths-based and psychospiritual approaches which are part of the overarching frames through which this study was conducted and of which the Ubuntu framework reflects.

This dissertation illuminates that to study Black Suicide holistically and with integrity, one must apply this type of framework. The Ubuntu Relational Framework for the Study of Black Suicide includes the following key components: (1) the commitment to the understanding of the historical, cultural, and spiritual context of Black people in the U.S. which includes the history of the impact of slavery and racism (including the intergenerational transmission of the psychological impact of slavery and racism); the African roots of Black culture (including the value of interdependence-connection to family, community and ancestors- and the intergenerational transmission of values); and the intergenerational transmission of religion/spirituality; (2) the commitment to the social work person-in-environment (PIE) principle and to addressing the racism and oppression imbedded within the U.S. social environment that influences suicidal behavior; (3) the commitment to reflective practice to eradicate and heal from one's own internalized racism and oppression as a spiritual/relational practice of reconnecting to one's self, community family, ancestors, and society, and engagement in work in society to eradicate racism and oppression and to cultivate healing from its effects; and (4) the commitment to understanding the African philosophy of ubuntu. The first two components have been explained in the previous chapters. The third component regarding reflective practice is amplified through my Autoethnography in chapter 10 where I reflect on my own internalized racism and the role of Afrocentric culture and spiritual and religious practices in my healing. The fourth component, understanding ubuntu, is addressed below.

Ubuntu

Ubuntu refers to an African philosophy expressing that a human is only fully human through one's connection to the humanity of all other humans (Mupedziswa, Rankopo, & Mwansa, 2019). Mupedziswa, Rankopo, & Mwansa (2019) assert that it is a philosophy found in many cultures throughout the continent of Africa, expressed through different names and that there is no consensus regarding where it originates. It has been said that the term ubuntu emerged from an isiXhosa proverb in the Southern region of Africa which says, "a person is a person through others" (Mupedziswa, Rankopo, & Mwansa, 2019, p.22). It is a philosophy that asserts that one is only able to live fully through one's connection to humanity. This connection affirms one's commitment to the care of the needs of others and to collective liberation. Additionally, ubuntu interpreted as a theology expresses a belief in the interdependence between humans and God (Battle, 1997). The values inherent in ubuntu, including a strong commitment to working toward building unity among people of diverse backgrounds (e.g. race, language, culture, religion, gender, sexuality, age, socioeconomic) and eradicating divisions (van Breda, 2019) are aligned with social work values in the U.S. which make it applicable to social work in the U.S. context.

Ubuntu is in alignment with PIE (van Breda, 2019). van Breda (2019) asserts that ubuntu expands the social work principle of PIE to focus on the quality of relationships between individuals and the impact on the individual. There is an ethic of care for others – family, friends, neighbors, those who are vulnerable, and the community as a whole, embedded within ubuntu (Mupedziswa, Rankopo, & Mwansa, 2019). This ethic is in alignment with the strengths perspective and the communitarian ethic that is counter to

the Western value of individualism (van Breda, 2019). It also extends the relationships to the unborn and to the ancestors, who, in African cultures, are an important part of the community (van Breda, 2019). van Breda (2019) argues that ubuntu can be extended to include an understanding that a person is a person through all persons, past, present, future, and those not yet born. He argues that it “calls us to consider our history (in our ancestors) and our future (in our descendants) and to live our lives in the world in a way that honours the former and ensures the wellbeing of the latter” (p. 447). van Breda (2019), who identifies as a White male, and was raised in Africa, acknowledges that those “whose ancestors colonised, enslaved or oppressed...need to engage in critical discourse with our ancestors and find mindful ways to contribute to the undoing of the harm they have done” (p. 444). Through this interpretation, ubuntu can be understood as a way of remembering the value of connecting with our ancestors and accessing an ancestral shield and ancestral wisdom as a part of the protection against suicide.

Mupedziswa, Rankopo, & Mwansa (2019)’s description of ubuntu illustrates why an understanding of the philosophy is a critical element of this Afrocentric framework. It underscores the second component that calls for addressing the racism and oppression embedded within the U.S. social environment that disconnects people from each other and influences suicidal behavior. They assert:

The philosophy of ubuntu promotes teamwork and collaboration, meaning this principle promotes group cohesiveness and group support. Its cornerstone is a deep sense of belonging to a group, be it the extended family, the clan, or the community. This principle further seeks to promote the worth and dignity of all human beings, with an emphasis on self-respect. *Ubuntu* works on the premise that everyone must contribute towards community initiatives and aspirations and, by implication, towards national development (p. 23).

Applying Ubuntu to the study of Black suicide helps social workers to cultivate a certain consciousness around collective liberation to keep the social work researcher and the clinician from distancing themselves from their ethical mandate to engage in social and political action to improve social conditions to advance our nation (NASW, 2017). The research and clinical work of addressing Black suicide cannot be separated from the critical work of addressing racism and other systems of oppression in the environment.

This relational framework guides the understanding of the risks and protective factors of Black suicide. The ethic of ubuntu illuminates the importance of exploring predictors and protectors of suicide within a context that emphasizes the role of one's connection to society and community and highlights it as work aimed at the collective healing of individuals and society. Death consciousness and Divine consciousness are constructs that emerged from the analysis of the qualitative data as a way of conceptualizing the influence of societal stressors and protective factors on suicidal behavior. To speak about Black suicide in these terms is an expression of Afrocentric culture.

Mattis & Jagers (2001)'s analysis of the utility of a relational framework in understanding the role of religion and spirituality in the relationships of African Americans, informs this framework. It is rooted in the assumption that religion and spirituality are relational phenomena describing one's relationship with God (Mattis & Jagers, 2001). The separation from God and one's self, community family, ancestors, and society, creates an opening in one's interior environment that makes one more vulnerable to risks for suicide. Additionally, the work of Afrocentric Black psychologists and suicide researchers informs this framework. Borum's (2014) study, "African Americans'

perceived sociocultural determinants of suicide: Afrocentric implications for public health inequities” reveals that when applying the African philosophy—a person is a person through other persons – it highlights that when Black people kill other Black people, they are killing an extension of themselves. As Noble (1991) explains, this African notion of “extended self” and the “survival of the tribe” is fundamental to the psychology of African/Black people. These are expressions of Ubuntu. These are cultural understandings that must be exalted and reinforced to deepen the understanding of predictors and protective factors of Black suicide. Framing this work through Ubuntu highlights these critical philosophical underpinnings. It reminds the social work clinician, and anyone working with Black people who have demonstrated suicidal behavior or concerning emotional or psychological symptoms, to explore the quality of their relationships with others including their family, community, and ancestors, the impact of their connection to society, and their relationship to God. Thus, ubuntu also helps illuminate the impact of suicide on the family and community by highlighting that when one takes one’s own life, one is also taking the life of someone in one’s family and community, as the lives of all persons are interconnected. The goal of this relational framing is to effectively respond to the urgent need to address Black suicide by making the discourse more accessible to social workers, social work researchers, people outside of the field, and particularly to Black people.

Spiritual Resistance: Death Consciousness to Divine Consciousness

Spiritual resistance

Spiritual resistance is the appropriate framing for this work. It describes the ability of individuals to identify stress and avoid internalizing the harmful effects of various societal stressors through engagement with spiritual coping mechanisms which create a shield of protection against self-destructive thoughts and desires (Bowen-Reid & Harrell, 2002; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Resistance is distinguishable from resilience as it signals something greater at work (Guo & Tsui, 2010). Guo & Tsui (2010) assert, “Strength, ... is not only found in resilience; it is also evident in resistance and strategies for survival despite adversity” (Guo and Tsui, 2010, p. 239). They acknowledge resistance as a strategy used by people who care about facilitating social justice and transformation (Guo & Tsui, 2010). Resistance reflects action and determination. Guo & Tsui (2010) assert that people increase their strength through their resistance to power. This framing is a particularly applicable appropriate way to describe the way Black people have utilized religion/spirituality in response to oppression throughout their experience in the U.S. since enslavement (DuBois 1903/2003; Cannon, 1995; Copeland, 2010; Cone, 1970).

Spiritual resistance is a construct that reflects an understanding of religion and spirituality rooted in African and Black culture. According to Gayle (2011), Black people’s utilization of spirituality as a form of resistance has been well-documented by Black scholars. Within an African ethos, spirituality is the mechanism through which the Divine transmits power to resist oppression (Gayle, 2011). This principle applies to the act of employing spiritual resources to resist the internalization of death-affirming

thoughts and practices that could lead one to take one's own life. It also extends to the act of employing spiritual resources to enhance one's well-being and to flourish. Spirituality as a form of resistance is an "anti-colonial discourse" that is lacking in the Western academy (Gayle, 2011).

The framing of the analysis of the data, from death consciousness to Divine consciousness, is a way of capturing spiritual resistance. It is aligned with African psychology, which Parham (2009) asserts is concerned with the cultivation of a healthy consciousness that facilitates a healthy connection to oneself, to others, and to everything, which is a spiritual paradigm that directs attention within oneself and beyond what is seen. It guides the analysis and interpretation of the role of religion/spirituality as a resource for psychological protection against societal stress. The field of social work recognizes the importance of exploring the spiritual dimension of the person's environment (Hutchison, 2013). The death consciousness construct describes the state of one's unawareness of the possession of God's Spirit, or one's divinity. This state of unawareness makes one vulnerable to the impact of the societal toxins in society such as racism and other systems of oppression that create barriers to one's full integration into society. One's feeling of disconnection from society is a risk factor for suicide (Durkheim, 1897/2012; Burr, Hartman, & Matteson, 1999). The Divine consciousness construct describes the state of one's awareness of the possession of God's Spirit or of one's divinity. This state of awareness decreases one's vulnerability to the impact of the societal toxins in society such as racism and other systems of oppression that create barriers to one's full integration into society. Both constructs are defined more fully below.

Death consciousness

Death consciousness is the state of one's unawareness of the possession of God's Spirit or of one's divinity. It is the antithesis of Divine consciousness where one is in alignment with God's Spirit. According to theologian Leloup (2002), "death is the expression of a disordered intellect that has long ago identified your *self* with your mortal body, along with its thoughts, emotions, and mortal attachments" (Leloup, 2002, p. 58). Leloup (2002) asserts that the early Church Fathers of the Christian tradition explained that when one is not connected to God's Spirit, one becomes an "unbalanced" troubled human being who becomes ruled by the soul (psyche) and becomes consumed by its "passions" or "pathologies" (Leloup, 2002, p. 123). This identification with the mortal self and lack of awareness of one's true self which emerges through one's connection to God's Spirit can create an environment where one experiences isolation. Isolation is a commonly cited risk factor for suicide (Olfiffe, Broom, Popa, Jenkins, Rice, et al., 2019).

This state of unawareness and isolation makes one vulnerable to the impact of the toxic societal forces in a world that is preoccupied with death. Black people in the United States have been formed in an environment rooted in a preoccupation with death. A society's preoccupation with death can be evaluated through "various domains of culture and social life" (Miradamadi, 2018, p. 59). Death preoccupation describes a society steeped in levels of violence including everyday gun violence, racism, and other systems of oppression, that can contribute to the creation of an internal environment within someone which cultivates despair, and stifles hope, (Miradamadi, 2018). When one is in a state of death consciousness, one is susceptible to developing "psychological

constriction”, the cognitive state that is common in people who choose suicide (Shneidman, 1985, p. 138). This state causes one to appraise their challenging circumstances in a limited way (Shneidman, 1985). Shneidman (1985) describes constriction as “a tunneling or focusing or narrowing of the range of options usually available to *that* individual’s consciousness when the mind is not panicked into dichotomous thinking: either some specific (almost magical) total solution or cessation; all or nothing” (Shneidman, 1985, p.138). Living in a state of death consciousness and processing personal stress and societal stressors such as racial discrimination, post-incarceration challenges, and difficulties associated with being a veteran through a narrow lens, could contribute to one’s belief that there are no better options than to end one’s own life.

For Black people in the U.S, death preoccupation must be assessed through the historical analysis of racism, and racial violence, trauma, and oppression which characterized the beginning of the experience of enslaved African people in the society that became the U.S., and through the lens of the contemporary manifestations of the racism and violence that held the system of slavery together. Miradamadi (2018) explores the impact of death preoccupation culture in Iran, stemming from a history of war and violence, on experiences of depression and suicide vulnerability in Iranian society. She explains how society’s death preoccupation cultivates a consciousness of death:

Arguably, with the immense shared sense of loss, and with daily reminders of death, this relationship with death goes a step further than the existential feeling every human being, regardless of culture and society, is preoccupied with in their lives. This constant awareness and consciousness of death, as seen in Iranian society today, however, despite being amplified by the effects of war and the devastation it inevitably brings and which lasts for years after it ends, is also traceable to other elements of Iranian culture with a much longer history. It is the

combination of historical context and current sense of life and experiences that gives rise to the culture of death-consciousness in Iran (p. 61-62).

Miradamadi (2018)'s description of death consciousness culture in Iran frames death consciousness as one's preoccupation with constant reminders of death. This helps to illustrate how one's consciousness can become flooded with corrosion from societal toxins when one is in a state of unawareness of one's divinity. This corrosion can help animate one's disconnection from God and ultimately society. The same lethal combination of historical violence and contemporary madness Miradamadi describes, persists in the U.S. through various strains of racial oppression including mass incarceration, police violence, and economic inequality, all disproportionately impacting Black people (Alexander, 2011). It has helped to sustain a societal death preoccupation in the U.S., which began with the disregard of life through the genocide of the Indigenous people who inhabited the land that became the U.S.

Daily reminders of death are pervasive throughout the U.S. and are particularly acute in urban centers such as Baltimore, MD, the birth place of the researcher, and the home, or former home, of the Black men interviewed in the qualitative study. Baltimore has a predominantly Black population (62%) (U.S. Census Bureau, n.a.), where in recent years violent deaths have occurred with alarming frequency. The Baltimore Sun newspaper, the city's prominent newspaper, maintains a database that tracks the number of homicides reported in Baltimore each day. In 2019, there was a total of 348 reported homicides in Baltimore, and 167 of the people who died were Black (Baltimore Sun Media Group, 2020). The data show that there have been over 300 homicides in Baltimore every year for the last several years, since 2015, and over 200 homicides a year

since 2012 (Baltimore Sun Media Group, 2020). Some argue that in many ways, this phenomenon of Black people killing other Black people is an expression of the historical trauma of enslavement, and the internalization of dehumanization (Poussaint & Alexander, 2000; DeGruy, 2005). The centuries of enslavement of Black African people in the U.S. was a denial of their humanity. Their enslavers dissociated them from the category of living humans when they captured them in Africa, to ship them across the Atlantic to the Americas as cargo ready to be sold (White, et al., 2013). The generations birthed afterward were born into a society that had declared the lives of their ancestors void of value to justify their chains and subsequent oppression following slavery. This denial of their humanity is a death-affirming mentality and practice that nurtures the belief that people of African descent are non-human. The remnants of this mentality are still present in U.S. society and infect everyone-the oppressor and the oppressed. There has been no formal eradication of this government-sanctioned crime against their humanity. The 13th Amendment ended one form of slavery, but it did not explicitly repeal the statement of death which declared Africans to be non-human property. Since then, racism has continued to thrive as an active mechanism within our society operating within people and in systems. The layers of oppression built through other systems in society such as mass incarceration, have cultivated an environment that operates through division and separation. This is the racial ecology (Tyler, Brome, & Williams, 1991) within which questions of suicidal behavior among Black people must be examined (Poussaint & Alexander, 2000). In their book, *Lay My Burden Down: Suicide and the Mental Health Crisis among African-Americans*, Black psychiatrist Alvin Poussaint and Black journalist Amy Alexander (2000) contend that the relentless presence of racism in

our society has “created a psychological risk for black people that is virtually unknown to white Americans” (Poussaint & Alexander, 2000, p. 15). Poussaint & Alexander (2000) assert that this is called “...posttraumatic slavery syndrome” (p. 15). They explain:

Specifically, a culture of oppression, the byproduct of this nation’s development, has taken a tremendous toll on the minds and bodies of black people. We see the increasing rates of black suicide in the United States—and the remarkable fact that blacks comprise less than 13 percent of the U.S. population but represent the overwhelming majority of those doing time in the nation’s prisons for violent or drug-related crimes—as part and parcel of that oppression (Poussaint & Alexander, 2000, p. 15.)

For many Black people in the U.S., the decision to end one’s life is a culminating response to the relentless pressure of societal stressors that are intensified within the U.S. racial ecology (Poussaint & Alexander, 2000).

Freire (1970/2000), in his seminal text, *Pedagogy of the oppressed*, contends that oppressive environments place a particular burden upon the oppressed. He asserts, “The oppressed who have been shaped by the death-affirming climate of oppression, must find through their struggle the way to life-affirming humanization” (Freire 1970/2000, p. 68). Freire’s assertion describes the impact of an oppressive social environment. It forces the oppressed to have to not only resist the death consciousness which can emerge within an oppressive climate, but it also requires one to struggle to claim one’s humanity. For Black people living within the racialized U.S. social environment, there is an extra effort required to reclaim one’s humanity within a society that did not originally acknowledge them as human. This is the “double life” that produces the “double consciousness” DuBois (1903/2003) describes. In his seminal text, *The souls of Black folk*, W. E.B. DuBois asserts, “It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a

world that looks on in amused contempt and pity” (DuBois, 1903/2003, p. 9). DuBois (1903/2003) explains that the double life of a Black person involves the interplay between a Black person’s life as an American and as a Black person (Negro during his era). He contends:

From the double life every American Negro must live, as a Negro and as an American, as swept on by the current of the nineteenth while yet struggling in the eddies of the fifteenth century, --from this must arise a painful self-consciousness, an almost morbid sense of personality and a moral hesitancy which is fatal to self-confidence...Such a double life, with double thoughts, double duties, and double social classes, must give rise to double words and double ideals, and tempt the mind to pretense or to revolt, to hypocrisy or to radicalism. (p.143)

Double consciousness is the foundation of the framing from death consciousness to Divine consciousness. Double consciousness describes the shifting that occurs within the lives of some Black people as they navigate between worlds within a racist society. From a psychospiritual perspective, death consciousness to Divine consciousness framing reflects the interior layer of that struggle and the way it can manifest into a tension between death-affirming thoughts and thoughts of life that are affirmed through God.

However, it is important to note that the meaning of death is not limited to an interpretation of a negative experience. As Goatley (2003) explains, enslaved Africans in the U.S., rooted in their West African cultures, did not fear death. He asserts that they saw it as integral to life and dealt with it directly even though sometimes feeling frustration or reluctance. Many who were Christian endeavored to die with dignity like Jesus (Goatley, 2003). On May 11, 2020, Rev. Wood, the eldest participant in the present qualitative study, transitioned a little over a month shy of his 100th birthday. How he transitioned revealed insights regarding death consciousness that are consistent with the

West African principles noted above. I had the opportunity to be present with him via Zoom during the final hours of his life. His actions and demeanor communicated his readiness for death and his intention to die with dignity after a full nearly 100 years of life. He had stopped eating, and I watched him reject receiving even a drop of water the nurse was trying to give him via a small sponge. His transition demonstrates that one can decide to end one's own life at the natural end of one's journey ultimately as an expression of one's Divine consciousness.

Divine Consciousness

Divine consciousness describes the state of one's awareness of the possession of God's Spirit or of one's divinity. This state of awareness decreases one's vulnerability to the impact of the societal toxins in society such as racism and other systems of oppression that create barriers to one's full integration into society. This state of awareness can keep one from experiencing the psychological constriction described above. Living in a state of Divine consciousness can help one to appraise oneself and one's problems through a lens that reveals broader options and support and reduces feelings of isolation. More fully, it is an awareness of God's full presence within and around oneself, bringing one's whole being into harmony (mind, body, and spirit) with God and every living entity within the environment, through one's spirit's connection to God's Spirit (Ruiz & Nelson, 1997/2009; Leloup, 2002). Freire (1970/2000), quoted Brazilian intellectual Alvaro V. Pinto who asserted that "The essence of consciousness is being with the world...Consciousness is thus by definition a method" (as cited in Freire, 1970/2000, p. 69). Framing consciousness as a method describes Divine consciousness as a way back to God within one's self while in the world. Divine consciousness is a

recognition of one's own divinity and one's true identity as a spiritual being. When one is in this state of awareness, one is more likely to appraise one's challenging circumstances through a broader lens where one experiences accompaniment and support through God, and through God working through the supportive network of people around them. This is an expression of a way Black people have operationalized religion/spirituality to protect them from mental and physical terrorizing they have endured as Americans in this country.

Religion/spirituality has been a powerful resource for enslaved Africans in the U.S. and their descendants to cultivate and maintain Divine consciousness and to overcome the message of dehumanization (Thurman, 1949/1976). Research has shown that historically, this resource has equipped many Black people for navigating through the toxic, non-life-affirming oppressive environment in the U.S. and avoid thoughts of suicide (Chatters, Taylor, Lincoln, Nguyen & Joe, 2011). Their resources have also included familial and community supports. Utsey et al., (2007) assert, "For African Americans, both internal and external coping resources are derived from strategies borne out of centuries of negotiating racism and oppression, a strong religious and/or spiritual orientation, and supportive social networks" (Utsey, Bolden, Lanier, & Williams, 2007, p. 77-78). The religion and spirituality that has sustained them enabled them to cultivate intimacy with the God who reminds them of their true identity as human beings made in God's image. For many, their religion and spiritual practices helped them to hold on to their awareness of the Divine within and around them, and to develop a Divine consciousness that reflects the connection of one's spirit to God's Spirit. This connection, in conjunction with their connection to their African roots and cultural values of family,

community, and ancestors, most strongly translated through their belief in interdependency-connection to God and others-builds an environment of spiritual resistance that insulates their consciousness from a preoccupation with death. This focus on consciousness is rooted in African Psychology. Black psychologist Thomas Parham (2009) explains:

If one examines what was indigenous to African folks before contamination from European influences, one realizes that there is a wealth of information, knowledge, and wisdom that African Psychology and African-centered psychologists have helped us reclaim. Looking back across space and time, African Psychology, like African thought, was concerned primarily with the development of one's consciousness and with the development and sustaining of positive relationships. It is clear that the ancients thought these elements of consciousness and proper conduct in relationships were central to sustain a 'right ordering' of the world (Parham, 2009, p. 8).

This "right ordering" of the world through the development of a healthy consciousness that facilitates healthy connection to oneself, to others, and everything, is a spiritual paradigm that directs attention within oneself and beyond what is seen. As Parham (2009) further asserts,

the science and practice of psychology in ancient times were fundamentally about the study of the soul or the spirit...a proper ordering of the world and one's psyche required a movement and sustained momentum characterized by the alchemic notion of 'being and becoming'... Thus, elevated human consciousness (i.e. mental health) was related to a mastery of fundamental sets of knowledge and skill that signified a person's growth and development... (p 8)

As Parham (2009) explains, in ancient African psychology, the work of nurturing one's mental health is equated with expanding one's human consciousness through attending to one's spirit. This spiritual force field of protection is what this study seeks to examine and elucidate to equip social work practitioners and others with the understanding and tools necessary for not only appropriately responding to suicidal behavior in Black

people, but also supporting their efforts to develop a holistic mental and social environment within an oppressive racist environment.

The way in which intimacy with God transforms Black people's consciousness and elevates their thinking beyond the reality of their oppression is important to capture and understand. Additionally, through the lens of the philosophy and theology of ubuntu, we understand the importance of the cultural elements of family and relationships with ancestors and community as key contributors to this healthy, Divine consciousness. This is beyond spiritual resilience; it is formidable resistance.

Strengths-based approach

Suicidologists recognize the need to apply a broad approach, including strengths-based, to understanding and treating suicide due to the complexities of the etiology of suicide (Hirsch, Rabon, & Chang, 2018). The transformative mix method approach of this dissertation is a reflection of awareness of the need for a strengths-based approach which is in alignment with the need for "fresh thinking" and "alternative approaches" to suicide research (White, Marsh, Kral, & Morris, 2016, p. 1). Hjelmeland (2016) advocates for more qualitative suicide studies and asserts that many quantitative studies could be enhanced through the addition of a qualitative component. The qualitative interviews with the three Black men expand the scope of the project and apply a strengths-based approach (Saleeby, 2008). Hirsch, Rabon, & Chang (2018) contend that there is a need for a new paradigm in the prevention and treatment of suicide which addresses risk and pays equal attention to the role of growth, resilience, and adaptation, an approach they call Positive Suicidology (p.301). Saleeby (2008) powerfully describes the work that social work practitioners accomplish when utilizing the strengths

perspective. He asserts that “Appreciating and stimulating the heroic in clients is to assist them not only in confronting their circumstances, but to make an alliance with the robust and resilient in them, to consort with their dreams and hopes...” (Saleeby, 2008, p. 123). Contemporary researchers of Black suicide have begun shifting from a deficit model and applying a strengths-based approach to their research and are examining the role of cultural factors grounded in an African worldview such as religion and spirituality and cohesive family and community networks (Utsey, Hook, & Stanard, 2007; Marion & Range, 2003;). Helping the descendants of enslaved African Americans access the resource of generational faith-filled hope through such resources as exposure to the narratives and spirituals of enslaved African Americans, will help to shine a light on the strength, resilience, and resistance that is within (Cannon, 1995; Hopkins & Cummings, 2003), that for many have been overshadowed by insidious racial oppression. The enslaved’s ability to generate hope through their faith in God, even while living within an incubator of fierce racial oppression, should serve as an example of the power of the intergenerational hope to heal the existing wounds. Exploring these themes will show how religion/spirituality can help to create an atmosphere where suicidal thoughts and behavior cannot take root and flourish.

One of the men in the qualitative study is a retired Baptist pastor, one is a veteran, and one was formerly incarcerated. These interviews, and the researcher’s autoethnography, explore the phenomena of death consciousness and Divine consciousness. This strength-based approach redirects the analysis of suicidal behavior from a deficit starting point examining risk factors exhibited by people who have a known history of suicidal behavior, to a starting point of strength by exploring

individuals who have a known religious and spiritual background to see how this background has protected them from suicide. There is a movement amongst researchers and clinicians in the field of suicidology to adopt strengths-based approaches to understand and disrupt suicide (Marsh, 2016). Marsh (2016) contends,

These approaches are noticeably community (rather than service) owned and led; the experts (including ‘at risk’ groups, such as youth, mental health service users, and prisoners, as well as ‘front line’ practitioners) are taken to be in the community and are looking to build collaborative, relationally focused solutions founded on strengths-based (rather than deficit) models (Marsh, 2016, p.27-28).

Black men have a higher rate of completed suicide than Black women (Joe, 2008), and they are less likely than Black women to utilize religion/spirituality as a source of support (Gibbs, 1997; Utsey et al., 2007). The qualitative interviews provide unique access to the interior lives of Black men. The study offers an in-depth analysis of the role of religion/spirituality, as well as the African value of interdependence, throughout their lives as protective factors for resisting the full impact of societal stressors and cultivating an internal environment where suicidal thoughts and behavior do not take root and flourish. While there were no women interviewed, the data from the men offers rich findings and insights into the Black experience that inform the analysis of the role of protective factors articulated above on Black women as well. The qualitative work allows for deeper engagement with the contextual factors of racism, incarceration, the military, and the influence of spirituality and religion on the individuals’ ability to navigate stressors.

The qualitative portion of the dissertation grounds it as a strengths-based project that lays the foundation for the Ubuntu framework which is a strengths-based, proactive intervention healing framework that can help adults and even children understand and

implement coping strategies early in their lives that are framed as wellness promotion to prevent suicide. The Ubuntu framework ensures a focus on the present population as well as the needs of future generations. Suicidologist Colpe (2020) asks, “What if, for instance, we could reduce suicide rates of the future by helping kids develop and sustain healthy coping mechanisms early?” (Colpe, 2020). This question affirms support for a holistic approach focusing on ways to cultivate human beings who develop a resistance to suicide through healthy spiritual and cultural practices. Because research has shown that throughout several generations of Black people in the U.S., the risk of suicide has impacted younger generations (Joe, 2006), research which contributes to the creation of holistic, preventive interventions that can also be directed to young people is critical. The liberatory approach of this dissertation calls for the focus to not just be on suicidal behavior, but it includes the work of operationalizing spiritual resistance to promote the mental and emotional freedom of Black people.

Psychospiritual Approach

The Ubuntu framework also reflects a psychospiritual approach to the study of suicide in that it integrates elements of psychology and religion in the approach to understanding the culture, historical roots, and worldview of some Black people in the U.S. (Gleig, 2010). This integrated approach is critical for comprehending how many Black people have cultivated a shield of protection around them that helps them resist suicide. Social work has been moving in this direction. According to Smith (1995), “Social work scholars are calling for a reconceptualization of the reductionistic and dichotomizing thought of empiricism that social work has inherited from the classic sciences” and are viewing social work from a holistic perspective that reconciles science

and religion (Smith, 1995, p. 402). The psychospiritual approach is in alignment with the Afrocentric approach of this work. Tolliver (1997) describes the psychospiritual approach as appropriate for social workers and other practitioners who support Black people.

Tolliver (1997) asserts:

The approach that is termed ‘psychospiritual’ owes its origins, in part, to a synergistic interaction of principles and beliefs coming from religion, psychiatry, social work, and the spiritual life of African Americans. This synergy was incubated during a period of major change in the Black community and a period of realignment of Black intellectual thought about how to care for the mental and spiritual health of African Americans (Tolliver, 1997, p. 480).

According to Tolliver (1997), “the psychospiritual approach views human beings as expressions of divine creation” (Tolliver, 1997, p. 482) and an acknowledgment that “there is more to the person than what can be known psychologically” (Tolliver, 1997, p. 483). This work’s exploration of the social forces and spiritual mechanisms that influence the risk and protective factors of Black suicide through the constructs of death consciousness and Divine consciousness is a reflection of the need to go beyond science and psychology to understand why an expression of “divine creation” would choose to die.

Conclusion

The Ubuntu Relational Framework for the Study of Black Suicide brings together the critical components that are necessary for a proper examination of factors that contribute to a Black person’s desire to call for their own death. It prioritizes the commitment to the understanding of the historical, cultural, and spiritual context of Black people in the U.S. which includes the history of the impact of slavery and racism (including the intergenerational transmission of the psychological impact of slavery and

racism); the African roots of Black culture (including the value of interdependence-connection to family, community, and ancestors- and the intergenerational transmission of values); and the intergenerational transmission of religion/spirituality. It brings these important elements into focus along with the critical requirements for social work researchers and clinicians to remain attuned to the work of addressing racism and other systems of oppression within themselves and in society. All of this must be embedded within an understanding of ubuntu which encapsulates these components. This framework is important to apply when examining other areas related to the mental health of Black people. It is also an approach that is critical for examining suicide and other mental health concerns in other people of color.

CHAPTER IV: Phenomenon of Suicide

Introduction

This chapter contains literature regarding the current state of knowledge about suicide in general, including suicide among formerly incarcerated persons and veterans, and Black Americans in particular. It also includes literature exploring the role of religion and spirituality as protective factors. Literature shows that the association between life stressors and suicidal behavior is well-established (Liu & Miller, 2013). Stress is a key element of most theories of suicide (Stewart, Shields, Esposito, Cosby, Allen, Slavich, et al., 2019). The three societal stressors explored in this study, racial discrimination, post-incarceration status, and veteran status, along with personal stress, illuminate the impact of stress on suicidal behavior. It is important to study suicide attempts as data show that a suicide attempt is a significant risk factor for completed suicide (Castle, Conner, Kaukeinen & Tu, 2011). While racial discrimination has shown to have a negative psychological effect on Black people in the U.S., it has been significantly understudied as a risk factor for suicide vulnerability in this population (Walker & Salami, et al, 2014). Discrimination is one of the major social risk factors for suicidal behavior among people of color (Oh, Stickley, Koyanagi, Yau, & DeVyllder, 2019). Incarceration is another risk factor for suicide as research shows that people who emerge from incarceration are particularly vulnerable to increased risk of suicide shortly after release (Binswanger, et al., 2007). In addition, veterans are another group vulnerable to suicide and the suicide rate among this group is significantly higher than the rate among the general U.S. population (Villate, O'Connor, et al., 2015; Betthauser, Homaifar, Villarreal, Harwood,

2011). The role of religion/spirituality as an insulator against suicidal behavior is a popular theme among Black people in the U.S. and is well-established across various groups (Chatters, Taylor et al., 2011). The literature reveals that Black people seem to have a “suicide resilience” which is linked to religious cultural factors, yet there is a lack of studies that explore the impact of religious coping on suicide vulnerability in this population (Walker, Salami, Carter, & Flowers, 2018). This present study aims to contribute to the research on suicidal risk factors among Black people in the U.S. as well as the role of religion/spirituality as a protective factor.

Definitions

Suicide – General Population

Suicide is defined in the Western world as a conscious act of lethal self-harm by an individual trapped in a “multidimensional malaise” who perceives death as the only solution to an identified crisis (Shneidman, 1985, p. 203). According to the Centers for Disease Control (2020), it is a leading and escalating public health problem and is the 10th leading cause of death in the U.S., causing more than 48,000 deaths in 2018. It is the second leading cause of death for people in the U.S. age 10 to 34, fourth among people 35 to 54, and the eighth among people 55 to 64 (CDC, 2020). The rate has risen over the past few decades (Steele, Thrower, Noroian, & Saleh, 2018). According to the CDC, during the period 2000-2016, the age-adjusted suicide rate increased 30% from 10.4 to 13.5 per 100,000 population and the rate increased for women and men and the annual percentages began increasing after 2006. For women, the rate increased 50% in 2016 which reflects an accelerated increase in the rate of suicide among women (CDC, 2020). In 2018, 10.7 million people in the U.S. were reported to have seriously considered

suicide, with 3.3 million reportedly developing a plan to carry out the act, and 1.4 million who reported following through with attempts (CDC, 2020). Across the nation, the rates of suicide vary according to race/ethnicity, age, and other demographics, and Non-Hispanic American Indian/Alaska Native and non-Hispanic White populations have the highest rates across the life span (CDC, 2020). The suicide rate is highest among middle-aged white men and white males make up 59.67% of the suicide deaths in 2018 (American Foundation for Suicide Prevention, 2020).² Suicide disproportionately impacts other groups in the U.S. including veterans and others serving in the military, and sexual minority youth (CDC, 2020). The primary methods chosen to carry out suicide are by firearm, 7.3 % per 100,000, suffocation, 4.0% per 100,000 and by poisoning, 2.0 % per 100,000 (CDC, 2020).

Adults

The American Foundation for Suicide Prevention reports that in 2018, suicide rates were higher among adults ages 45 to 54 (20.04 per 100,000); 55 to 64 years (20.20 per 100,000); the highest among adults ages 52 to 59 (21.56 per 100,000); and young adults aged 15 to 24 had a rate of 14.45. In 2017, among women, the suicide rate was highest for those aged 45-54 (10.0 per 100,000); and among men, the rate was highest for those aged 65 and older (31.0 per 100,000) (NIMH, nd). In 2017, the suicide rate was highest for American Indian/Alaska Native, Non-Hispanic males (33.6 per 100,000) and females were 11.0 per 100,000, and the next highest group was White non-Hispanic

² Primarily, statistics for white individuals will be the only other data provided in addition to data regarding the general U.S. population. The primary focus is on Black suicide, however, there will be references to white population data as a point of comparison at certain points, although the analysis will not center the experiences or data of white individuals. The white population will be the only group noted due to the limited scope of this project. Additionally, according to Jones (1997) the black-white relational dynamic is at the root of the social psychology of race relations in this country.

males (28.2 per 100,000) and females (7.9 per 100,000) (NIMH, nd). In 2017, past-year prevalence of suicide attempts across all age groups was highest among adults 18-25 (1.9%) with 0.7% women and 0.5% men overall and white adults overall 0.5% and Black adults 0.7% (NIMH, nd).

There are various dimensions of suicide which include the following constructs defined below: (1) suicide ideation; (2) suicide attempt; (3) suicidal behavior; (4) suicidality; (5) risk of suicide. Suicide ideation is defined as seriously engaging ideas and thoughts regarding taking one's own life and can include passive thoughts about a desire to die as well as active thoughts, but does not include steps to attempt to carry it out (Lawrence, Oquendo, & Stanley, 2016; O'Connor, Gaynes & Burda, 2013). A suicide attempt describes an unsuccessful, intentional act of self-destruction (Lawrence, Oquendo, & Stanley, 2016). Suicidal behavior includes the act of completed suicide, attempts, and other intentional acts aimed at ending one's life that were unsuccessful (O'Connor, Gaynes & Burda, 2013). The American Psychological Association defines suicidality as the risk of suicide that is normally revealed through expressions of intent to end one's own life, such as through a detailed plan (APA, 2020). Experts in the field have determined that the term suicidality is not as helpful a clinical term as the aforementioned terminology (Meyer, Salzman, Youngstrom, et al., 2010). According to the Center for Disease Control & Prevention (2019), a combination of personal, relational, societal, and community factors can contribute to the risk of suicide.

Risk factors & protective factors

Risk factors are influences shown to impact the chances of an individual developing suicidal thoughts or behavior (Utsey, Hook, & Stanard, 2007). Risk factors

for suicide can be grouped into the following main categories: static risk and dynamic risk factors (Steele, Thrower, Noroian, & Saleh, 2018). Static risk factors are immobile characteristics that serve as a reference point for suicide risk and include sex, race, age, sexual orientation, and personal and family history of suicide attempts (Steele, Thrower, Noroian, & Saleh, 2018). Dynamic factors are risk factors that are not immobile and vacillate and include symptoms of mental illness, access to firearms, substance use and also social stressors, current losses, and emotional instability (Steele, Thrower, Noroian, & Saleh, 2018); alcohol abuse, feelings of hopelessness; history of child abuse, clinical depression, isolation and feeling detached from other people, aggressive behavior, physical ailments, financial, emotional, social and employment losses, access to tools to carry out lethal self-harm, stigma and other factors preventing accessing mental health support, and cultural and religious beliefs that promote suicide as a positive option (CDC, 2019).

Protective factors are influences that create a shield for individuals against suicidal thoughts and behavior (CDC, 2019). Protective factors include effective clinical treatment for mental health concerns and substance abuse disorders, proper care for physical disorders, accessible sustainable clinical supports, family and community support networks that cultivate connectedness, effective problem-solving skills, and cultural and religious beliefs that identify suicide as a negative option and encourage self-preservation (CDC, 2019). Afrocentric cultural protective factors have been identified as contributing to reducing suicide risk among Black Americans, which include religion/spirituality, and African interdependence expressed through strong, cohesive family and community support systems (Gibbs, 1997; Morrison & Hopkins, 2019;

Borum, 2014; Kaslow, Sherry, Bethea, Wyckoff, Compton, Grall, et al., 2005; Utsey, Hook, & Standard, 2007; Utsey, Bolden, Lanier, & Williams, 2007). Additionally, research has revealed that for some Black people, maintaining an appreciation for their history and the struggle Black people have endured since slavery has been a factor that keeps some from deciding to take their own lives (Marion & Range, 2005; Spates & Slatton, 2017). The discussion below examines literature exploring risks and protective factors for Black suicide.

Black Suicide

Slave suicide & early research in Black suicide

The sociohistorical context detailed above describes an oppressive U.S. society that fails to affirm the humanity of Black people and is replete with persistent psychological risks for suicidal behavior (Poussaint & Alexander, 2000). The U.S. society serves as a toxic container that fuels the expressed and unexpressed rage of a people whose daily struggle, either consciously or subconsciously, is to resist the lie that they are inferior, a lie first told to justify enslaving Africans, and retold in various iterations through policies and practices since.

Slave suicide

An important part of the contextual analysis encompassing Black suicide is slave suicide. Enslaved people, rooted in their God-power, resisted the white supremacist system of enslavement in many ways, including running from the plantation. Hopkins (2003) asserts, “Numerous slave interviews testify to black folks’ assertion of humanity by speaking with their feet” (Hopkins, 2003, p. 23). As outlined previously, many enslaved Africans believed that through taking their own life, they could set their souls

and spirits free to return to their homeland and connect with their ancestors. Suicide for them was an assertion of their humanity and their freedom. They spoke through their dead bodies. Awareness of the prevalence of this behavior among the enslaved Africans transported from Africa helps to dispel the myth that suicide is not a part of the experience of Black people in this country (Early, 1992). There is an enduring perception that Black people do not choose suicide, and that it is a “white thing” (Early, 1992, p. 42). As noted previously, there were enslaved Africans who chose suicide as a means of escape during the horrific Middle Passage journey across the Atlantic to the New World, and suicide continued to be an option many elected in response to the torture they experienced on the plantations (Synder, 2015). This included occurrences of mass suicide (Lester, 1998). According to Synder (2015), in her text, *The power to die: Slavery and suicide in British North America*, a text exploring suicide among enslaved Africans in British North America, due to the challenges of counting suicide among the enslaved, it is impossible to state definitively whether the occurrence of suicide was regular or a rarity. However, Synder (2015) asserts that the research does support an assessment that describes suicide during the Middle Passage as “visible and significant” and continued as such on the plantations in British North America through to the beginning of the Civil War (Synder, 2015, p. 6). According to Lester (1998)’s accounting, based on the 1850 census records, enslaved African men died by suicide at a rate of 1.0 per 100,000 people and enslaved African women died by suicide at a rate of .44 per 100,000 people. African men who had been freed died at a rate of 1.94, and freed women died at a rate of .44. The rates continued to increase as Black people persisted on the other side of enslavement and navigated racism and segregation Black codes and Jim Crow segregation. In 1933, the

rate of Black men who died by suicide was 6.5 and 2.1 for Black women (Lester, 1998). See Figures 2a and 2b in Appendix I.

Durkheim (1897/1951) acknowledged the occurrence of suicide among the enslaved. In his seminal text *Suicide*, originally published in 1897, he posited that his fatalistic suicide framework, which he defines as, "...suicide deriving from excessive regulation, that of persons with futures pitilessly blocked and passions violently choked by oppressive disciplines" (Durkheim, 1951, p. 276), could be applied to the suicide of enslaved people. He asserted, "Do not the suicide of slaves, said to be frequent under certain conditions...belong to this type, or all suicides attributable to excessive physical or moral despotism?" (Durkheim, 1951, p. 276). Researchers contend that this category is critical to understanding suicide within the Black population in the U.S., and the impact of racism and discrimination (Poussaint & Alexander, 2000).

Beginning the analysis of Black suicide at the point of slave suicide complicates the notion of suicide being viewed solely as an act of despair. However, it does not eliminate it from that realm. Black suicide can be viewed as a culminating site for despair, hopelessness, frustration, and rage, and as an expression of one's inability to maintain the fight of resistance. The fatal consequences of this struggle were noted by early researchers of Black suicide. Hendin (1969), in his study of suicide among Black adults in NY, assessed twenty-five case studies of attempted suicide of 12 women and 13 men in the context of racism, Black violence, and other factors, and examined the role of "the rage and self-hatred that are the outgrowth of racial discrimination in a society that stimulates the black person's desires but blocks their fulfillment" (Hendin, 1969, p. 147). Hendin (1969), whose research occurred in the midst of the civil rights movement and the

Black revolution, makes the following observation regarding Black people's engagement in rioting. He asserts,

If so much of the black man's behavior, including the riots in which he burns his own community, still seems self-destructive, the cases in this study certainly demonstrate that, in the black's attempt to cope with frustration and rage, his feelings of impotence and self-hatred often cause his anger to turn against himself (Hendin, 1969, p. 147).

Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. made a similar observation during this period when he asserted, "Black rioting can mean Black suicide" (King, 1967). Interestingly, Burr et al., (1999) report that during the period following the legislative gains resulting from the civil rights movement of the 1960s, there was a growth in the rate of suicide for Black men. In their study testing a racial inequality suicide thesis with a sample of Black men, they found that their measures of racial inequality were positively associated with the risk of Black suicide when controlling for family and religion (Burr, et al., 1999). Walker (2007) asserts the acculturation that impacted the cultural changes in this community during the civil rights period has contributed to the rise in Black suicide. Castle, Conner, Kaukeinen, & Tu (2011) found that there is an association between acculturation and suicide ideation among young Black adults. Prudhomme (1938), made a similar observation in his early research on Black suicide. He asserted, Perhaps the important point to emphasize here is that what determines the attitude is not the degree of color, as a physical feature, but the degree to which the colored individual has absorbed the culture of the white environment" (Prudhomme, 1938, p. 381). For some Black people, the effects of adopting the dominant culture can be deadly. Poussaint & Alexander (2000) contend that the self-hatred many Black people experience as a result of living in a country where they are devalued and struggle with hopelessness and cynicism can lead to self-destructive, suicidal behavior. The possibility of this risk factor

is always present for a Black person socialized in this country. The clinical implications of this risk must not be undervalued. This risk, and all of the race-based societal risk factors discussed above, must be considered along with the psychological risk factors identified for the white population, many of which have been shown to also be risk factors for Black people (Joe, Scott, & Banks, 2018).

The growth of Black suicide

While the rate of Black suicide continues to be lower than the rate of suicide among White people, it has continued to increase over the years and is a growing health challenge (Joe, Scott, & Banks, 2018). There is significant epidemiological data that show that Black American men across all age groups are 4 to 6 times more likely to die by suicide than Black women (Joe et al., 2018). As asserted above, the rates of suicide are close to the rates of homicide. Suicide is the 2nd leading cause of death for young Black boys age 10-14, and homicide is the 3rd leading cause of death for boys in this age range (CDC, 2020). Suicide is the 3rd leading cause of death for Black men age 15-24 and 25-34, and homicide is the 1st leading cause of death for men in these age ranges (CDC, 2020). Suicide is the 5th leading cause of death for Black men between the ages of 35-44, and homicide is the 3rd leading cause of death for men in this age range (CDC, 2020). For young Black girls age 10-14, suicide is the 4th leading cause of death, and homicide is the 3rd leading cause of death (CDC, 2020). For Black young women age 15-24, suicide is the 3rd leading cause of death, and homicide is the second leading cause of death for women in this range. Suicide is the 5th leading cause of death for Black women age 25-34 years, and homicide is the 4th leading cause of death for women in this range (CDC,

2020). By the end of 2018, the rate of suicide was 10.0 per 100,000 for Black men and 3.0 per 100,000 for Black women (SPRC, 2020).

The rate of suicide has increased substantially since the mid-1980s, and these rates include completed suicides and non-fatal suicidal behavior (Joe, Scott, & Banks, 2017). A dramatic increase among Black youth began in the late 1980s (Utsey et al., 2006). From 1980 to 1995, the rate of suicide among Black men aged 15-19 increased by 146, and only by 22 for Whites (Wadsworth, Kubrin, & Herting, 2014). Joe & Kaplan (2001) report that during the period of 1979-1997, the rate of suicide among Black men in the U.S. was 10.9 per 100,000 people, and 1.9 among Black women. The increase in suicide among Black men is telling. According to Joe (2008), “The rise in suicide among black males provides significant evidence of the most important societal consequence of growing up amid extreme deprivation and isolation” (p. 227). Racism is at the root of deprivation and isolation. Research shows that racial inequality that continues to persist in the U.S. is positively related to the risk of suicide among Black men (Burr et al., 1999).

During the period in the early 1980s and early 1990s as young Black Americans experienced an increase in suicide rates, the rates also increased among older Black Americans (Utsey, et al., 2006). This period corresponded with high rates of unemployment as well as limited access to critical social services (Utsey, et al., 2006), and with the height of deindustrialization (Joe, 2008). From 1999 to 2009, the suicide rate was 9.19 for Black men and 1.72 for Black women (CDC, 2020). From 2009 to 2018, the rate among Black men was 10 and increased to 3 among Black women (SPRC, 2020). Many factors have been proposed to explain the increase in the rate for Black men, including the high rates of the imprisonment of Black men, school delinquency, family

stress, violence in the community, and discrimination (Wadsworth, Kubrin, & Herting, 2014). Another report asserted the violence related to the crack cocaine epidemic of the 1980s, along with loosening of the formerly strong association with the Black church, family, and community, and living with the feeling that America does not deem their lives to be of value or worth (Wadsworth et al., 2014). An empirical study that explored the correlates of trends in the rates of suicide among Black men in urban settings found that variation in social and economic levels was the strongest predictor of the increase in suicide among young Black males between 1982 and 1993 (Wadsworth, et al., 2014). Other explanations offered include a decline in Black American's embrace of religious beliefs in the way of previous generations; isolation resulting from growing up in predominately White communities; and a rise in accessible guns (Wadsworth, et al., 2014). There has been a shift in societal culture and in the way Black people are responding to racial violence and oppression. According to Joe (2008), "Today, young men are moving toward adulthood in a developmental context that differs significantly from previous generations, making them more likely to cope with racism, segregation, discrimination, and low socioeconomic status, including extreme poverty and increasingly limited economic opportunities, in a maladaptive manner." (Joe, 2008, p. 235). The strategies that older Black people employed to navigate racism and oppression and resist the desire to die during previous generations warrant exploration to be incorporated into clinical interventions (Joe, 2008).

Explanation for low rates

Black people in the U.S. have maintained a significantly low suicide rate while navigating intense race-based societal stressors, along with many of the common

stressors associated with suicide risk among White people (Joe, 2008). Gibbs (1997) characterized this phenomenon as a cultural paradox. The low rates among this population have been attributed to various factors including misclassification of deaths as accidental or unknown possibly due to stigma or other reasons (Gibbs, 1997), homicides (Poussaint & Alexander, 2000), and cultural protective factors (Gibbs, 1997; Morrison & Hopkins, 2019).

Homicide

Poussaint & Alexander (2000) contend that the excessive number of homicides in the Black community accounts for some misclassified suicides. Black people make up approximately 13% of the population and nearly 50% of the homicides (Poussaint & Alexander, 2000). They contend that this may be “evidence of a peculiar kind of communal self-hatred, an especially virulent form of anger, self-loathing” (p. 14). They posit that the same territory of self-hatred that leads one to take the life of a member of one’s own Black community can produce the desire to take one’s own life. They poignantly describe this expression of self-hatred as “violent behavior that springs outward before turning in on itself” (Poussaint & Alexander, 2000, p. 48). Borum’s (2014) exploration of suicide among African Americans explains the association between homicide and suicide through the Afrocentric framework where, as explained previously, the self is considered to be an extension of other people in the community. Thus asserting that taking one’s own life would not be characterized as suicide, but as homicide, and homicide, as a form of suicide (Borum, 2014). Hendin (1969) also posited a connection between homicide and suicide and noted that the high rates of Black suicide and Black homicide in New York among adults age twenty-to-thirty-five was a pattern that

extended back to the 1920s. As noted below, the rates of homicide among young Black men and women are close to the suicide rates. This is a connection that warrants investigation.

Other considerations

The increase in the rates of suicide among Black people over the years, and particularly among young people, leads to the question of examining the capacity of the traditional cultural support mechanisms---religion/spirituality (the Black Church), family, and community support networks---to address the contemporary needs of this population (Poussaint & Alexander, 2000). Joe (2008) notes that the elevated suicide rates among Black men which began in 1983, occurred at the height of deindustrialization which had a disproportionate impact on the Black family and their communities. These and other societal forces, such as an increase in incarceration, contribute to the weakening of important Black community protective sources (Borum, 2014). Joe (2008) found that as younger cohorts of Black people become more assimilated, their risk of depression and other pathogenic factors that White people are also susceptible to, increases. The Black Church and other Black community networks have been an important source of social support where Black people's identity could be regularly reaffirmed. Burr et al., (1999) asserted that "suicide is partly a reflection of community context" (Burr et al., 1999, p. 1054). With the church and other community resources playing a less prominent role in the lives of young Black people assimilating into the dominant, non-affirming culture, they are missing the psychological and emotional buffer these cultural protective factors provide.

Sociocultural Risk factors

More than half of the people in the U.S. who decided to inflict fatal self-harm in 2016 did not have a diagnosed mental health condition (CDC, 2018). In recent years, scientists have become increasingly interested in the particular factors that do not involve mental health challenges that might contribute to attempted suicide and suicidal ideation in Black people (Walker, Salami, Carter, & Flowers, 2014). Research has revealed a variety of individual and social risk factors associated with Black suicide. Kaslow, Sherry, Bethea, Wyckoff, Compton, Grall, et al., (2005) contend that suicidal behavior “occurs in response to interactions between biological, psychological, and social (familial, interpersonal, environmental) risk factors” (p. 401). Their case-control study which explored risks and protective factors for suicide attempts in a group of 200 African American women and men, applied an ecological approach and found that racist events may be a risk factor (Kaslow et al., 2005). The racial ecological context grounding this dissertation outlined previously describes a complex interaction of psychological and social risk factors embedded within the U.S. society. These risk factors, along with the risk factors identified for the general population which research shows also apply to Black people, (Joe, 2018), must be considered when assessing Black people for suicide risk. According to Joe (2008), there is a significant body of research which substantiates the relationship between unyielding social and economic disparities Black people face and risk of suicide. Utsey et al., (2007), assert that known suicide risk factors for suicide among African Americans include various forms of psychological distress including depression, hopelessness, trauma, and psychotic symptoms; substance abuse; access to lethal methods including guns; social isolation; dysfunctional family and interpersonal

relationships; maladaptive coping mechanisms, racial inequality, and history of suicide attempts. Other risks include life hassles, insecure relationships, family, and community supports, financial challenges, unemployment, income inequality, accessible firearms, incarceration, low ethnic identity, and low levels of religion/spirituality (Kaslow et al., 2005). Child abuse, lack of family cohesion, domestic violence lack of resources, and social support have been risks associated with African-American women (Kaslow et al., 2005). Marital discord, occupational and income inequality, and lack of church attendance have been risks associated with African-American men (Kaslow et al., 2005). Hopelessness is a stronger predictor of suicidal ideation in African Americans than depression (Lamis & Lester, 2012). A study (Joe et al., 2006) showed that the risk of suicidal ideation and attempt was significantly associated with a low education level and residence in the Midwest region of the U.S. It found that respondents living in the Midwest were more likely to attempt suicide and develop suicidal ideation than those living in the South (Joe et al., 2006). (Joe et al., 2006) It also found that psychiatric comorbidity is a significant predictor of suicide attempts (consistent with research on the general population), and mood disorders and anxiety disorders were significantly associated with increased risk of suicide attempts (Joe et al., 2006). Other risk factors include inconsistent use of therapeutic support due to barriers to clinical services resulting from stigma and mistrust of mental health professionals (Poussaint & Alexander, 2000; Utsey et al., 2007).

A study (Joe, Baser, et al., 2006) exploring the prevalence of risk factors for suicide attempts among Black people over a lifetime found that risk of suicide attempt and suicidal ideation were significantly associated with being born in a recent cohort, a

low education level, and residence in Midwest region of the country. Additionally, the study revealed that individuals burdened with 3 or more disorders were 17 times more likely to attempt suicide and approximately 10 times more likely to develop suicidal ideation than participants without a psychiatric disorder (Joe, Baser, et al., 2006).

Borum (2014)'s qualitative study with a sample of 40 African American college students in 7 focus groups exploring the way ethnic culture and "minoritized" status influence perceptions of sociocultural determinants in understanding the rise of suicide rates among African Americans identified the following four themes for sociocultural determinants of suicide: (1) racism, discrimination and stereotyping; (2) U.S. individualism; (3) integration and cultural assimilation; and (4) the prison industrial complex. Participants' identification of individualism is telling. As Borum (2014) explains, "...an investigation of the U.S. emphasis and value in individualism and its impact on African Americans as an ethnic group would be important in understanding some of the underlying sociocultural determinants of suicidal behavior" (Borum, 2014, p. 662). Individualism is a reflection of one viewing oneself as independent and separate from one's community. The participants' responses reflected their appreciation for the value of interdependence which is antithetical to the dominant culture's emphasis on individualism. As one participant shared, "America as an institution isn't created for Black people, you know, but still being individualistic, that's the type of environment that it is...that doesn't match up because within our collective society or culture you're not supposed to be individualistic" (Borum, 2014, p. 663). This theme relates to the theme of integration and cultural assimilation that participants' identified. Borum (2014) explains that scholars contend that as African Americans become more acculturated into the

dominant culture, they will be less likely to incorporate the Afrocentric cultural values that could protect them from suicide. As one participant made the following observation about assimilation in response to the rise in suicidal behavior suggesting that it leads to the “watering down of our culture” (Borum, 2014, p. 664). This “watering down” of Afrocentric culture, or the absorption of the culture of the white environment, as Prudhomme observed almost a hundred years ago, activates a desire in some Black people to call forth their own death.

Studies examining acculturation reveal the psychological impact of Black people assimilating into the dominant non-affirming culture. In their study examining the relationships of acculturative stress and ethnic identity to depressive symptomatology and suicidal ideation in a cross-cultural sample of college students, Walker, Obasi, Wingate, & Joiner (2008) found that acculturative stress was related to suicidal ideation in African American college students and that ethnic identity was also associated with suicide ideation in this population. They further found that acculturative stress moderated the effect of depression on suicidal ideation for African American students causing suicidal ideation to be increased for those also experiencing depression and who also experience acculturative stress (Walker, et al., 2008). They assert that while challenging life events and circumstances can trigger suicidal ideation, stressors associated with acculturative stress increase this risk of suicidal ideation among African American college students (Walker, et al., 2008). According to Walker (2007), the adaptation that results from acculturation results in social, cultural, and emotional changes with long-term effects. Oh et al., (2019) note that “repeated exposures to painful and fear-inducing experiences make one susceptible to suicidal behaviors” (p. 7).

Gender

There is not a plethora of research exploring gender differences regarding suicide among Black people (Utsey, Hook, Stanard, 2007). Black males complete suicide at a greater rate than African American women who are more likely to engage in suicidal ideation and attempts, a pattern that corresponds with findings from studies on other racial groups (Utsey et al., 2007). Black men are four to six times more likely to take their own life than Black women (Joe, Scott, & Banks, 2018). Black women have a higher rate of suicide attempts than Black men (Joe, Baser, Breeden, Neighbors, & Jackson, 2006; Utsey, Hook, & Stanard, 2007). Black women have the lowest rate of completed suicide of all racial/ethnic groups in the U.S. (Utsey, et al., 2007). Some factors researchers believe may contribute to these differences are the fact that men are more likely to use lethal methods such as guns than women, and that women are more likely to be connected and utilize social supports and other protective factors (Utsey et al., 2007). According to the Pew Research Center, in the U.S., Black women are more religious than Black men (Cox & Diamant, 2018). Research (Spates & Slatton, 2017) shows that Black women self-identify as the most religious group in the U.S. and that they strongly embrace religiosity as a buffer to suicide ideation (Marion & Range, 2003). They are more inclined to maintain religious affiliation and church attendance than Black men which protects against suicide risk (Gibbs, 1997; Utsey et al., 2007). Black women have also been found to utilize alternative coping skills and the belief that the history of oppression their ancestors endured, including slavery, prepared them for their current troubles (Spates & Slatton, 2017; Marion & Range, 2003).

Age

There is a lack of research on the risk factors of suicide of Black people in all age ranges (Castle, Connor, Kaukeinen, & Tu, 2011). There is also a lack of research exploring age differences in suicide among Black people (Utsey, Hook, & Stanard, 2007). Research indicates that the rate of suicide increases significantly and peaks during the period of young adulthood among this population (Castle, Connor, Kaukeinen, & Tu, 2011). Studies show that suicide has increased among younger Black people (Joe et al., 2006). Research has revealed that Black youth are demonstrating a greater vulnerability to suicide than adults, particularly young Black men (Joe, 2008). One study found the risk for attempted suicide was highest among young Black people between the age of 15 and 24 (Joe et al., 2006). Joe (2008) reports that the increase in the rate of suicidal behavior among Black youth has reduced the racial disparities in suicidal behaviors in the nation. Research indicates that possible contributors could be the decreased stigma around suicide in this population, along with greater access to lethal methods and an increase in psychiatric disorders (Joe et al., 2006). For Black men across all age groups, epidemiological data show that they succumb to suicide at rates from 4 to 6 times higher than Black women (Joe, Scott, Banks, 2017). The suicidal behavior among older Black people is increasing (Joe, Ford, et al., 2014). A study (Joe, Baser, et al., 2006) exploring the prevalence of risk factors for suicide attempts among Black people over a lifetime found that the risk for suicide attempt was highest among the age group 15 to 24 and noted that possible factors from research point to greater accessibility to lethal methods and increase psychiatric disorders. Walker (2007) found that the rate of suicide in elderly

African Americans has been very low compared to the rates of African American youth and European American adults.

An important aspect of the culture of Black Americans to consider which has in previous generations been a protective factor is the belief that suicide is unacceptable, unsupported by religious beliefs, and something that White people do, but not Black people (Early, 1992; Marion & Range, 2003). These views may no longer be widely embraced by younger generations, a shift that corresponds with the decline in engagement in institutional religion (Joe, 2008). A study by Joe, Romer, & Jamieson (2007), exploring the association between the attitudes toward suicide of adolescents and young adults and their suicidality, found that African American adolescents and young adults who believed it was acceptable to decide to end one's own life in response to challenges were fourteen times more likely to think about ending their lives as those who did not believe it is okay. This signals a shift in attitudes regarding suicide among a younger generation of African Americans. Suicide has become more mainstream and is being normalized, which may be impacting their perception of suicide as a viable option when faced with challenges that seem unsurmountable (Joe, 2008).

Research (Gibbs, 1997) shows that in general, suicide rates tend to decline as Black adults get older, however, there has been a significant increase in the rates among Black men since the 1970s. In a study by Jordan & McNiel (2019) exploring the characteristics of individuals who die on their first suicide attempt, which included a population of people from several states in the US, the researchers found that the persons who died on their first attempt were more likely to be African American males over age 64. In a study (Joe, Ford, Taylor, & Chatters, 2014) examining the prevalence and

correlates of non-fatal suicidal behavior among older Black Americans ages 55 to 94, researchers found that on average, it took 2.5 and 5.7 years respectively to transition from suicidal ideation to attempts or from making a suicide plan to attempts. They found that among the older attempters, only a quarter had two or more attempts throughout their lifetime; and only 38.7% of the ideators followed through with making a plan (Joe, et al., 2014).

Socioeconomic status

The impact of socioeconomic status on the risk of suicide has not been firmly established (Purselle, Heninger, Hanzlick, & Garlow, 2010). In an extensive systemic review of the literature (Rehkopf, & Buka, 2006) spanning from 1897 to 2004 exploring the association between suicide and socioeconomic factors, the bulk of the significant findings (70%) reported an association between areas of higher socio-economic position and lower rates of completed suicide (Rehkopf, & Buka, 2006). It further found that among the studies that revealed significant results, 65% of the studies revealed an inverse association among women, and 79% revealed an inverse association among men (Rehkopf, & Buka, 2006). The researchers concluded that areas, where there is high poverty and high unemployment, should be a priority for suicide prevention services (Rehkopf, & Buka, 2006). Regarding studies with a Black population, there is research revealing an association between income and occupational inequality and suicide among Black men (Burr, et al., 1999).

Education

An increase in education levels and declining interest in religion have been identified as factors contributing to about 50 percent of the rise in acceptable attitudes

regarding suicide during the period 1980s through 2010 (Tong & Phillips, 2018). In a study (Phillips & Hempstead, 2017) that explored the relationship between education and suicide behavior during the period of the Great Recession, the findings revealed that men and women with a college degree make up the lowest rates of suicide, which reinforces the protective factors from education status such as human and social capital and better access to mental health services (Phillips & Hempstead, 2017). A study (Joe, Baser, et al., 2006) exploring the prevalence of risk factors for suicide attempts among Black people over a lifetime found a low level of education was significantly associated with the risk of suicide attempts and suicidal ideation.

Unemployment

In a study (Phillips & Nugent, 2014) that assessed data from 1997 to 2010 from the 50 states, the role of the economic conditions during that period was addressed (Phillips & Nugent, 2014). Studies (Phillips & Nugent, 2014) analyzing U.S. and cross-national data have assessed the impact of the Great Recession on the increase in suicide rates during that period (Phillips & Nugent, 2014). Reeves, Stuckler, McKee, Gunnell, Chang, & Basu (2012) conducted a study reviewing the trend of suicide rates from 1999 to 2010 across the fifty states and found that the nearly 4800 excess deaths from 2007-2010 could be attributed to the beginning of the Great Recession which led to an increase in unemployment and low income (Reeves & Stuckler, et al., 2012). They found that the rate of unemployment during 2007 and 2010 in the U.S. increased from 5.8% to 9.6% and that this rise in unemployment was associated with a 3.8% increase in the suicide rate which equals to about 1330 suicides (Reeves & Stuckler, et al., 2012).

Immigrant Status

There is a lack of studies regarding suicidal behavior among ethnic minority immigrants (Forte, Trobia, Gualtieri, Lamis, Cardamone, Giallonardo, et al., 2018). A study by Forte, Trobia, et al. (2018) revealed that socioeconomic factors such as low socioeconomic status, discrimination, social alienation, and deprivation are more aligned with suicidal behavior than immigrant status, and immigrants may be placed within the moderate-high suicidal risk group (Forte & Trobia, et al., 2018).

Post incarceration and suicide

There are more than 2.2 million people incarcerated in the U.S., making the U.S. the country with the highest incarceration rate in the world (Wagner & Sawyer, 2018). People of color are substantially over-represented in the nation's incarceration facilities (Wagner & Sawyer, 2018). The racial disparities are particularly startling for Black people who make up 40% of the incarcerated population, yet only 13% of the residents in the U.S (Wagner & Sawyer, 2018). Research shows that individuals who are incarcerated experience mental health challenges at a rate triple to those within the general population (Mahaffey, Stevens-Watkins, & Leukefeld, 2019). The use of correctional facilities as an alternative to appropriate mental health treatment is likely contributing to increased rates of mental health challenges among the incarcerated (Mahaffey, Stevens-Watkins, & Leukefeld, 2019). For a variety of reasons, including the lack of prioritization of mental health services in minimum to medium-security correctional facilities, many individuals leave incarceration without receiving the treatment they need to address their mental health challenges (Mahaffey, Stevens-Watkins, & Leukefeld, 2019).

Researchers (Tyler & Brockmann, 2017) contend that the status of being formerly incarcerated (as well as currently incarcerated) carries significant health risks and may be linked to health outcomes via multiple pathways similar to the way socioeconomic status functions (Tyler & Brockmann, 2017). Research (Massoglia, 2008) shows that individuals who have experienced incarceration are more likely to suffer from illness associated with stress. There is a stigma attached to incarceration status and individuals who experience incarceration are disproportionately people of color who carry the impacts of social inequality, including poverty, undereducation, homelessness, and lack of insurance (Tyler & Brockmann, 2017). Formerly incarcerated Black people endure the multiple burdens of racism, a criminal record, and the resulting consequences such as unemployment, as they attempt to re-enter society, all of which increase their likelihood for recidivism (Tyler & Brockmann, 2017). The negative impact is most acute in employment efforts, and all of these factors impact one's ability to successfully reintegrate into society through a lack of opportunity and ability to support themselves and loved ones (Tyler & Brockmann, 2017). These burdens, along with a high rate of disease and a disproportionate rate of mental illness and substance abuse, compound the stigma they face when they emerge from incarceration without having received adequate mental health treatment (Tyler & Brockmann, 2017). These burdens and barriers, and weak social and family support networks, can lead to increase health and mental health challenges (Mahaffey, Stevens-Watkins, & Leukefeld, 2019).

The impact of incarceration on the mental health of Black people is a significant contextual factor to explore (Franklin, Boyd-Franklin, & Kelly, 2006). Franklin, Boyd-Franklin, & Kelly (2006) assert that the disproportionate numbers of Black men

incarcerated in America result from “endemic societal racism” and is a source of persistent psychological trauma for many Black people (Franklin, Boyd-Franklin, & Kelly, 2006). Even being arrested without incarceration has been shown to negatively contribute to the association between discrimination and depressive symptoms in Black people (Anglin, Lighty, Yang, Greenspoon, Miles, Slonim, & Brown, 2013). In a study by Mahaffey, Stevens-Watkins, & Leukefeld (2019) involving 250 African American formerly incarcerated men which examined the relationship between socio-behavioral factors and mental health, they found that their findings indicated that accessing mental health services while incarcerated, alcohol consumption, and experiencing conflict within their social support network are significant factors associated with the mental health of formerly incarcerated persons. For formerly incarcerated Black people, social and family support networks, play a critical role in fostering strong mental health and shielding against recidivism (Mahaffey, Stevens-Watkins, & Leukefeld, 2019).

Researchers (Lize, Scheyett, Morgan, Proescholdbell & Norwood, 2015) contend that the relationship between the incarceration experience and increased risk of suicide has not been firmly established. Fox and colleagues (2019) assert that “The mechanism linking reentry with suicide is also incompletely understood, but mental illness, lack of social support, and the stress of transitioning from the controlled environment of prison to the community likely play important roles” (p. 57). The majority of published research exploring the association between engagement in the criminal justice system and suicide involves people in custody, and the investigations of suicide risk among formerly incarcerated individuals are low (Webb, Qin, & Stevens, 2011). Suicide rates are high among individuals who were formerly incarcerated (Haglund, Tidemalm, & Jokinen, et

al., 2015). Studies (Binswanger & Stern, et al., 2007) show that the formerly incarcerated are particularly vulnerable to increased risk of suicide within 2 weeks after release, and the psychological stress associated with the reentry process is shown to be a possible contributing factor (Binswanger, Stern, Deyo, Heagerty, Cheadle, Elmore, et al., 2007). A study exploring the risk of death among individuals released from a Washington State prison found that formerly incarcerated persons were at a high risk of death shortly after being released from prison, and suicide was one of the leading causes of death (Binswanger, Stern, Deyo, Heagerty, Cheadle, Elmore, & Koepsell, 2007). Mental health challenges individuals manage while incarcerated, coupled with the intense social challenges they face when they leave incarceration, as described above, contribute to the higher rate of suicide among released incarcerated persons than the general population (Pratt, Piper, Appleby, Webb & Shaw, 2006). The risk of suicide following incarceration increases for those who were identified as having mental health challenges while incarcerated (Lize, Scheyett, Morgan, Proescholdbell & Norwood, 2015). One contributing factor could be the challenges they face in maintaining a connection to care providers as they are transitioning back into the community (Hopkins, Evans-Lacko, Forrester, & Thornicroft, 2018).

The need for further exploration of the impact of incarceration on suicide risk among Black people is even greater (Utsey, Hook, & Stanard, 2007). In Borum's (2014) qualitative study discussed previously involving focus groups with 40 African American college students exploring perceived sociocultural determinants of suicide, the prison industrial complex emerged as one of the themes. Participants expressed a belief that some African-American formerly incarcerated persons may choose to end their own lives

to avoid returning to prison (Borum, 2014). Describing the impact of the challenges that weigh heavy on formerly incarcerated African-American men, one participant shared, “I definitely think it’s like, ‘What do I do now?’ I’m gonna go to jail anyway, I might as well be, you know, something---just like a crazy thought process behind it” (Borum, 2014, p. 666). Binswanger, Nowels et al., (2011), conducted a qualitative study involving formerly incarcerated adults within two months of their release from a correctional facility which included a population of white adults and people of color, including adults who identified as African American. They found that participants in the study expressed experiencing a myriad of challenges during their transition from prison back into the community, including struggling to find safe and stable housing, strong employment, health, and mental health care, all of which produces a variety of emotional responses including fear, stress, and anxiety, and enhanced psychiatric symptoms (Binswanger, Nowels et al., 2011). They found, “Participants described a clear link between these emotions and the risk of both overdose and suicide during the post-release period” (Binswanger et al 2011, p. 253). The researchers also noted a lack of continuity in medication likely contributed to an increase in psychiatric symptoms (Binswanger et al 2011). In addition, some participants expressed that they felt safer in prison than they did in the community (Binswanger et al 2011).

There is a need for more exploration of risk factors for suicide for this population beyond the psychopathologies (Majer, Beasley, & Jason, 2017). In a study (Majer, Beasley, & Jason, 2017) involving 270 adult formerly incarcerated men and women, the majority of whom were African American (74.1%) which explored whether a personal need for structure would predict an increase in suicide beyond the typical

psychopathological predictors, the researchers found that personal need for structure was a significant predictor of suicide attempts. The risks associated with being formerly incarcerated and Black warrant further study.

Veteran status & suicide-general population & Black veteran

A veteran is defined as one who had previously been engaged in federal military service and was not actively engaged in the military at the time of death (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2019). According to a 2017 Minority Veterans Report, in 2014, men made up most of the Veteran population, and 52% of minority veterans are non-Hispanic Black veterans (U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs, 2017). Black Americans have participated in every war the U.S. has been involved in, including the wars preceding the founding of the nation, and many endured racial violence during their time in service, and as they reintegrated back home (Johnson & Johnson, 2013). Over 200,00 Black Americans, including formerly enslaved persons, served in the Civil War (Johnson & Johnson, 2013). While Blacks only make up 13.60% of the U.S. population, they make up 17% of the total U.S. military combat force (Johnson & Johnson, 2013). The majority of the minority Veterans that are alive served in the Vietnam war (Department of Veteran Affairs, 2017). Black soldiers and veterans experience a combination of stressors that impact their mental health including the horrors of war, institutional racism, and the challenges of trying to access resources that will help them transition home well (Johnson & Johnson, 2013). Data from the National Vietnam Veterans Readjustment Survey (Kulka, 1990) reveal that Black combat veterans showed higher rates of PTSD than their White counterparts (Johnson & Johnson, 2013).

Suicide among veterans is a well-known mental health challenge (McCarthy, Blow, Ignacio, Igen, Austin & Valenstein (2012). The rate of death by suicide is higher among noncombat veterans than combat veterans (Krause-Parello, Rice, Sarni, LoFaro, Niitsu, & McHenry-Edrington, et al., 2019). Johnson & Johnson (2013) report that according to the Pentagon, in 2012, the suicide rate among active military eclipsed the number of troops dying in combat. The suicide rate among veterans is significantly higher than the rate among the general U.S. population (Villate, O'Connor, et al., 2015; Betthausen, Homaifar, Villarreal, Harwood, 2011). According to a 2019 National Veteran Suicide Prevention Annual Report, 45,390 adults in the U.S. died from suicide in 2017, and 6,139 of them were veterans. The report indicates that there were more than 6,000 veteran suicides each year from 2008 to 2017 (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2019). The rate is increasing and maybe greater among women (Villate, O'Connor, et al., 2015). The military has increased its efforts to discover the risk factors and characteristics of suicidal behavior among those in the military (Villate, O'Connor, et al., 2015). A study (Nock, Stein, Heeringa, Ursano, Colpe, Fullerton, & Zaslavsky, 2014) involving U.S. Army soldiers found that one-third of post-enlistment suicide attempts are associated with pre-enlistment mental disorders.

Many veterans who are at risk for suicide do not access mental health supports for a variety of reasons, including lack of economic resources and stigma associated with mental health challenges (Krause-Parello, Rice, Sarni, LoFaro, Niitsu, & McHenry-Edrington, et al., 2019). According to the U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs, risk factors include mental health conditions, stress, unaddressed effects of military service, substance abuse disorders, and struggles with aging and psychosocial stressors (U.S.

Department of Veteran Affairs, n.d.). In a study by Krause-Parello, Rice, Sarni, LoFaro, Niitsu, & McHenry-Edrington, et al., (2019) with over 70 stakeholders from diverse backgrounds within the veteran community exploring protective factors against veteran suicide employing community engagement methods, a range of protective factors were identified. They include family, personal connection with someone who genuinely wants to be in the veteran's life; belief that one's life has meaning and purpose within and outside of the military; a strong connection to society outside of military; forgiveness for self and others; strong relationships with people and/or pets; structure and routine such as through employment; a combined approach to trauma healing through science, spirituality and personal connection; and prayer and meditation (Krause-Parello, Rice, Sarni, LoFaro, Niitsu, & McHenry-Edrington, et al., 2019).

Past-year occurrence of suicidal ideation and attempts have been shown to be significantly greater among veterans than the general population, warranting ongoing focus on suicide-related outcomes for veterans (Ashrafioun, Pigon, Conner, Leong, & Oslin, 2016). However, the risk factors revealed in recent studies involving suicidal behavior among military persons (e.g. stress, mental illness, hopelessness) are also found in the general population (Villate, O'Connor, Leitner, Kerbrat, Johnson, & Gutierrez, 2015). Thus, more studies are needed to identify more risk factors specific to veterans (Villate, O'Connor, et al., 2015).

A study by Ursano, Kessler, Stein, Naifeh, Aliaga, Fullerton, & Cox (2015) revealed that enlisted soldiers constituted 83.5% of active-duty regular Army soldiers and made up 98.6% of all cases of suicide attempts with risk being particularly high among soldiers with new mental health diagnosis. The researchers (Ursano, Kessler, Stein,

Naifeh, et al., 2015) recommend a “conservation of risk strategy” which incorporates multiple factors including sex, rank, age, length of service (Ursano, Kessler, Stein, Naifeh, et al., 2015, p. 925). Past suicidal behaviors are among the most significant predictors of completed suicides, and this may be particularly prevalent among those in the military (Villate, O’Connor, Leitner, Kerbrat, Johnson, & Gutierrez, 2015). Service members have disproportionately higher incidence of premilitary suicide attempts (Villate, O’Connor, et al., 2015).

Research shows that Black veterans are less likely to choose to take their own life (Holliman, Monteith, Spitzer, & Brennar, 2018). In a qualitative study (Holliman, Monteith, Spitzer, & Brennar, 2018) involving 16 African American women Veterans exploring resilience and culture among African American women veterans and protective factors against suicide, the researchers found that religiosity, social support, and resilience were important protective factors. The researchers assert that the findings underscore the role of cultural beliefs and practices in protecting against suicide (Holliman, et al., 2018). The impact of the accumulation of multiple stressors of Black active soldiers and veterans has not been widely documented (Johnson & Johnson, 2013) and there is a need for further examination of risk and protective factors for Black suicide.

Role of Afrocentric cultural factors of religion & spirituality as protective factors against suicidal behavior

Religion and spirituality are integral to the culture and Afrocentric worldview of Black Americans which is rooted in a collective social consciousness, strong family/kinship bonds, and community orientation (Utsey et al., 2007). Utsey et al., (2007)

assert, “For African Americans, both internal and external coping resources are derived from strategies borne out of centuries of negotiating racism and oppression, a strong religious and/or spiritual orientation, and supportive social networks” (Utsey, Bolden, Lanier, & Williams, 2007, p. 77-78). Religion as a protective factor against morbidity and mortality and problematic health behaviors is widely established through a range of multi-disciplinary research (Pezzella & Vlahos, 2014). Fowler (1981) defines religion as a tradition or practice based on revelations, scriptures, laws, and ethical teachings. Religion has also been defined as a “shared system of beliefs, mythology, and rituals associated with a god or gods” (Mattis & Jagers, 2001, p. 522). Spirituality has been defined as a “non-material force” (Mattis & Jagers, 2001, p. 522) and a mechanism for tapping into one’s inner resources to find strength and to connect to oneself, to others, and God (Newlin, Knafl, & Melkus, 2002). It has also been described as representing “the divine expression and belief of a higher power that governs one’s existence” (Bowen-Reid & Harrell, 2002, p. 21). Religion has been argued to be one “practical manifestation of spiritual life” (Mattis & Jagers, 2001, p. 522). Religion and spirituality are distinct but related dimensions (Mattis & Jagers, 2001). Religion and spirituality are used interchangeably among some in the Black community (Gayle, 2011). Here, the terms are used together (religion/spirituality) and interchangeably.

The Black church has been an integral part of the lives of Black people in this country since the time of slavery (Frazier, 1963; Early, 1992). However, research on the role of religion and spirituality in the lives of Black Americans within the social sciences is not robust (Mattis & Jagers, 2001). Religion/spirituality as an insulator against suicidal behavior is a popular theme among this population and is well-established across various

groups (Chatters, Taylor, Lincoln, Nguyen & Joe, 2011). It is one of the factors that researchers have identified as a factor contributing to the low suicide rates in this population (Gibbs, 1997; Chatters, et al., 2011; Early, 1992). Black women are reportedly more religious than Black men (Cox & Diamant, 2018), and have greater rates of religious affiliation and church attendance than Black men, all of which protect against suicide risk (Gibbs, 1997; Utsey et al., 2007).

Historically, the prevailing view of suicide taught in the Black church was that it was immoral and it was not something that Black people did (Early, 1992). In a qualitative study exploring protective factors of suicide for Black women, this teaching about the immorality of suicide, along with the support from the church family, was described as a double layer of protection against suicide (Spates & Slatton, 2017). In a study (Wiley, 2017) of Black women who exhibited repeated suicidal behavior, religion and spirituality were found to be strong protective factors for suicidal behavior (Wiley, 2017). Religion and spirituality are “deeply rooted cultural values in the Black community” (Bowen-Reid & Harrell, 2002, p. 21). Religion as an institution and a personal resource for restoration and healing has been a significant factor in the lives of Black Americans throughout the centuries of their time in the U.S. (Chatters, Taylor, Lincoln, Nguyen & Joe, 2011). Judaism, Christianity, and Islam view suicide as a crime against God and nature and dictate that only God can determine death (Poussaint & Alexander, 2000). In the U.S., Christianity ranks the highest among African Americans (Masci, 2018). According to the Pew Research Center, 79% of African Americans self-identify as Christian and approximately 53% of them are affiliated with historically Black Protestant churches; 14% identify as believing in evangelical Protestantism; 5% identify

as Catholic; 4% identify with mainline Protestantism; and 2% identify as Muslim (Masci, 2018).

Research has shown that religion and spirituality have provided a pathway for some to utilize God as a personal source of support. In a study (Marion & Range, 2003) examining suicide buffers in a group of 300 African-American college women, the practice of collaborating with God to work through solving problems was uniquely related to suicide ideation. A qualitative study of 33 Black women exploring protective factors against suicide revealed that a strong faith in God and a belief that God would not be pleased with their decision to end their life and would send them to hell for eternity were protective factors (Spates & Slatton, 2017).

Religious and spiritual supports have been an accessible and effective resource for Black people to turn to in the face of a variety of personal and societal challenges. In one study, a quarter of the Black people who attempted suicide reported to have seen a non-health service professional, including religious or spiritual practitioners, as well as massage therapists, for therapeutic support, as opposed to clinical treatment (Joe et al., 2006). These types of resources reveal the breadth of necessity for outlets for managing stress, such as racist events. Religion has been shown to be a source of resilience for Black people in America as they manage the impact of social stressors such as racism (Walker, Salami, et al., 2014). These coping strategies can be life-saving. In a study (Bowen-Reid & Harrell, 2002) that explored the role of spirituality as a protective factor against negative health outcomes for Black Americans who experience racist encounters, it was found that people who are characterized as being highly spiritual are more prone to rely on spiritual practices such as prayer and meditation and trust and faith in God as a

way of coping and responding to racism. Those with a less active spiritual life who were less likely to engage spiritual practices to cope with racist encounters were found “likely to have internalized the negative effect due to inadequate coping mechanisms” (Bowen-Reid & Harrell, 2002, p. 33). One theory offered by scholars to explain the disparity is a phenomenon known as the “secondary appraisal process” which describes one’s discernment regarding their ability to disrupt a racist situation (Bowen-Reid & Harrell, 2002, p. 33; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Those who are able to appraise the matter through their lens of faith and trust in God have been found to experience less negative health outcomes (Bowen-Reid & Harrell, 2002). Spirituality filters the racist experiences in a way that distinguishes the impact from those with no or low levels of spirituality (Bowen-Reid & Harrell, 2002).

While research shows that the role of religion and spirituality as a potential buffer for suicidal ideation and attempts is well-established, the question of the particular components of religion and spirituality which impact suicide vulnerability and outcomes is unsettled (Walker Carter, & Flowers, 2018). According to Lawrence, Oquendo, & Stanley (2016), “Existing studies have limitations. Religious variables often lack detail, which makes it difficult to identify the most active components of the relationship between religion and suicide risk” (Lawrence, Oquendo, Stanley, 2016, p. 15-16). In a study (Taylor, Chatters & Joe, 2011) that explored the relationship between multiple dimensions of religious involvement and suicidal behavior among a sample of Black people who identified as Black American and Black Caribbean, the researchers found that among the Black American population, attending religious services and prayer were spiritual resources found to be a buffer against suicidal behavior (Taylor, Chatters & Joe,

2011). In addition to attendance at religious services, the supportive relationships which emerge from those church experiences have been found to also serve as a protective factor against suicidal behavior (Chatters, Taylor, Lincoln, Nguyen & Joe, 2011).

Researchers suggest that the social support that can be available through religious affiliation is the key factor that makes it a protective factor, while other research points to the intrinsic qualities of religion as being a stronger protective factor (Davidson & Wingate, 2011). In a study (Davidson & Wingate, 2011) exploring risk and protective factors of suicide in a sample of African Americans and Caucasians, the results provided evidence that African Americans may demonstrate higher levels of hope as protective factors shielding them from suicidal ideation as well as possible attempts and completed suicide. African Americans in this study reported high levels of intrinsic religiosity and high frequency of church attendance, with women, and those from families with higher incomes, having more frequent attendance. Religion and spirituality can foster a quality of hope that can shield one's mind from depression, fear, and other emotions that can lead one to despair. In a study examining religious coping strategies among Black Americans, Caribbean Blacks, and non-Hispanic White people, religious coping resources were found to be an integral part of their stress coping maintenance, with 9 out of 10 Black Americans and Black Caribbeans identifying prayer as instrumental in managing their stress (Chatters, Taylor, Jackson, & Lincoln, 2008).

Mixed results

While there is strong empirical support for religion as a protective factor against suicide, research on the role of religion as a protective factor is mixed, with some studies showing high levels of religiosity as a protective factor and other studies revealing that it

is not a protective factor (Lawrence, Oquendo, & Stanley, 2016; Davidson & Wingate, 2011; Hamdan & Peterseil-Yaul, 2019). In a systematic review of 89 articles from across the globe exploring a variety of cultures, Lawrence, Oquendo, & Stanley (2016) sought to highlight the particular dimensions of religion (affiliation, participation, doctrine) associated with particular dimensions of suicide (ideation, attempt, completion). They contend that it is the complexities of religion and suicide that make researching these phenomena so challenging (Lawrence et al., 2016). This complexity was described above. Their review revealed evidence that religious affiliation protects against severe suicide attempts, but it did not find clear evidence that it protects against suicidal ideation (Lawrence et al., 2016). They noted the need to be attentive to the culture-specific nuances in the role of the affiliation in order to know whether or not it is protective (Lawrence et al., 2016). In some instances, the affiliation translates into a connection to community supports and resources, and in another instance, it could lead to isolation (Lawrence et al., 2016). Their review found evidence that attendance at religious services protects against suicidal ideation and suicide attempts, with social support being the key protective component (Lawrence et al., 2016). They contend that religion may help reduce a person's risk of suicide through the following: (1) impacting the person's belief system, e.g. believing that only God has the right to end a person's life; (2) encouraging a fear of going to hell; (3) and cultivating hope (Lawrence et al., 2016). They further found that in societies where there is opposition to specific religions, one's religion is less likely to serve as a source of protection against suicide. Additionally, if one's religion engenders feelings of guilt, shame, or distance from God or one's religious community, these conditions can increase the risk of suicide (Lawrence et al., 2016).

Conclusion

As outlined above, research (Walker, 2007) shows that the risk and protective factors associated with suicide of Black Americans are multidimensional and multifaceted.

Walker's (2007) assessment regarding an explanation for the increase in suicide rates among this population summarizes the above. She asserts that it is due to either a decline in the engagement with cultural traditions including religion and spirituality and in the support through extended family, which suffers as a result of acculturation (Walker, 2007). Additionally, she posits the acculturation has led to the incorporation of problem-solving methods from the dominant culture, such as suicide and a combination of the decline in the engagement in cultural practices and acceptance of suicidal behavior (Walker, 2007). As Walker (2007) asserts, a psychosociocultural approach incorporating an understanding of the role of culture is necessary to help explain the cultural paradox of Black suicide and other factors. What is missing from the current state of knowledge is a more in-depth exploration of the impact of racism and other societal stressors, including racial discrimination, the impact of incarceration, and military experience on the suicidal behavior of Black Americans. Additionally, the role of Afrocentric cultural factors, which includes religion/spirituality, through an Afrocentric strengths-based, psychospiritual approach that highlights the impact of these factors on one's ability to cultivate a Divine consciousness that affirms life as opposed to a consciousness that encourages death. This dissertation seeks to address these gaps. The next chapters explore these themes.

CHAPTER V: Theory & Related Empirical Studies Highlighting Risk & Protective Factors

Introduction

Black suicide cannot be adequately explained through one theory or approach (Lester, 1998). This investigation requires an integration of multiple theories and approaches along with a strong foundation in the historical and contemporary sociological factors that have impacted the psychological, social, and spiritual environment of Black people in the U.S. since the first enslaved Africans were brought to the part of the world that is now the U.S. This chapter will review the theories that help predict and explain variation in suicide rates among Black people in the U.S. highlighted through a discussion of risk and protective factors. They include critical race theory, social integration theory, interpersonal-psychological theory of suicide, and stress coping theory.

Critical race theory (CRT) is the overarching theory that guided the design of the study. This theory emerged in the mid-1970s from the legal field but is now applied across disciplines (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001), including social work (Daftary, 2018). It promotes the prioritization of non-dominant views and affirms the saliency of race and racism and a sociohistorical and political context in analyzing social problems (Bell, 1995). Critical Race Theory is organized around core tenets and embraced by theorists described as “activists and scholars interested in studying and transforming the relationship among race, racism, and power” (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001, p. 2). “CRT is praxis; not a standard theory” (Ford & Airhihenbuwa, 2010, p. 1397). These qualities, coupled with the call to action embedded in its framing, have led social work researchers

to embrace CRT as an appropriate theory to guide social work research involving historically oppressed populations (Daftary, 2018). CRT calls for the application of historical and cultural lenses, along with race and racism, as the context for examining the mental health and emotional well-being of Black people in the United States. It also situates these concerns in a broader context which includes “feelings and the unconscious” (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001, p. 3).

Tenets and method

Critical Race Theory has been applied in research exploring the effects of racism on health and in health equity research (Ford & Airhihenbuwa, 2010). The relevant core tenets of CRT include (1) the notion that racism is ordinary and as such is such a normal part of society that it is challenging to address; and (2) the notion that race is a subjective social construction and not based on biology and that racialization occurs as the white dominant society racializes various groups of people deemed to be in the minority “at different times, in response to shifting needs” in society (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001, p. 8). Ford & Airhihenbuwa (2010) contend that “All critical race endeavors begin with the question, “How does racialization contribute to the problem at hand?” making race consciousness integral to CRT (p.1391). Further, it incorporates an intersectional lens to illuminate multiple identities, and highlights the concept of “a unique voice of color” which refers to persons equipped to speak to concerns they are intimately attuned to based on their social position (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001, p. 9).

Critical race theory is also a method (Bell, 1995). Derrick Bell (1995), one of the legal architects of CRT, asserts that it is an unapologetic, creative interdisciplinary treatment of law that employs the use of first-person, storytelling, and narrative devices

(Bell, 1995, p. 899). It is a theoretical approach that encourages those applying it to draw upon multiple disciplines (Lynn & Parker, 2006). Applied as a research methodology, CRT prioritizes and validates the “counter-narratives” of people of color and their experiences living in a racist society (Freeman, Gwadz, Silverman, Kutnick, Leonard, Ritchie, & et al, 2017, p. 3). Race or racism is at the center of the research question and problem, and the researcher conducts the entire research project in alignment with CRT tenets and applies them throughout the process, including in the interpretation and analysis of the data, the findings, and implications (Daftary, 2018).

Critical race theory is in alignment with the person-in-environment principle critical to the field of social work (Daftary, 2018). The person-in-environment principle affirms the necessity of social work centering the analysis of the problems and behaviors of humans within their multidimensional social and environmental contexts (Hutchison, 2013). CRT contextualizes the PIE approach. Hutchison (2013) asserts, “social work has historically recognized human behavior as an interaction of person with environment” (p. 9). CRT applied to the PIE approach guides the overall understanding of the role of racism and the importance of its prominence in the analysis, as racism is embedded within the U.S. social environment and is a societal stressor for Black people (Clark, Anderson, Clark, & Williams, 1999). According to CRT and PIE, it is critical to situate the analysis of suicidal behavior and spiritual resistance within a racial ecological framework (Tyler, Brome, & Williams, 1991). Tyler, Brome, & Williams, (1991) assert that race is a “context for personal legacies” and they affirm the notion that “America’s unique history of slavery has significantly influenced her human ecology by altering individuals’ perceptions of themselves, their perceptions of others, and their psychosocial

reality” (p. 80). Tyler et al., (1991) further contend that “Examination of the contribution of race to relationships also provides sociohistorical and ecological levels of analysis as aids to understanding how historical legacies influence intrapersonal and interpersonal processes” (p. 79). Based on Tyler et al.’s (1991) explanation of the impact of race on human ecology, racial ecology is being defined here as a framework for examining the social environment within which mechanisms for institutional and individual racism flourish and impact the way individuals interact with themselves, others, and their social environment. Prudhomme (1938) highlighted the impact of the environment on Black suicide. He observed,

The lower suicide rate in the American Negro is determined by a number of confluent factors, each in its own way contributing to the reaction. These factors, on analysis, appear to be traceable to the peculiar, and psychologically vicious, environment which the majority group imposed on the minority group. As the environment approximates that of the majority, the suicide rate becomes higher (p. 391).

The racialized dominant environment is life-threatening for some Black people in America. An ecological approach has been applied in suicide research with an African American population where racism was identified as a possible risk factor (Kaslow, Sherry, Bethea, Wyckoff, Compton, Grall, et al., 2005). Framing the U.S. social environment as a racial ecology acknowledges the negative impact of race and racism on the social environment of Black people (Clark, Anderson, Clark, & Williams, 1999) and the influence on suicidal behavior (Burr, Hartman, & Matteson, 1999; Poussaint & Alexander, 2000); a framing that is supported. In their study exploring the social integration-regulation suicide thesis, Burr, Hartman, & Matteson (1999) developed and tested a racial inequality suicide thesis with a sample of Black men and found that their measures of racial inequality were positively associated with the risk of Black suicide.

This CRT approach illuminates the experiences and perspectives of members of the non-dominant populations, such as Black people, and prioritizes these particularizabilities over the pull to generalize the findings (Malagon, Huber, & Velez, 2009). It supports the approach of examining the risks and protective factors of Black suicide within a framework that is attuned to the role of Afrocentric cultural factors.

Social Integration, Interpersonal-psychological theory of Suicide & Stress Coping

Social Integration Theory, Interpersonal-psychological theory, and Stress Coping Theory are incorporated into the analysis of the quantitative study and are explained below. Emile Durkheim's (1897/2012) theory of social integration proposes a causal link between one's feeling of disconnection to mainstream society and a desire to end one's own life (Durkheim, 1897/2012; Kuramoto, Wilcox, & Latkin, 2013). Durkheim (1897/2012) explored religion as a moderating effect upon suicide. He asserted that religion served as a protection against the desire for self-destruction in the way that it serves as a society where there are common beliefs and practices that lead to stronger cohesion and integration of the religious community which enhances the protective value of the church society (Durkheim, 1897/2012). He found that the Protestant church had less consistency and cohesion and therefore had less of a moderating effect upon suicide (Durkheim, 1897/2012). While Durkheim did not believe race had any relevance to understanding suicide and interpreted it as mainly a physical characteristic (Burr, Hartman, & Matteson, 1999), scholars have applied it in suicide research with Black populations to analyze the impact of social integration on suicide risk among Black people (Burr, Hartman, & Matteson, 1999).

There is a lack of research applying theory to the examination of the influence of societal factors on suicidal behavior among Black people in the U.S. (Borum, 2014). Many of the existing suicidal behavior theoretical frameworks are untested within ethnic minority groups and/or fail to address cultural factors (Odafe, Talavera, Cheref, Hong, & Walker, 2016). This study seeks to address this gap in the application of theory to the analysis of attempted suicide among Black people by discussing Emile Durkheim's (1897/2012) theory of social integration as a foundational starting point, utilizing Joiner's (2005) Interpersonal-Psychological Theory of Suicide to assess the influence of experiences of racial discrimination, post-incarceration status, and veteran status on suicide attempts among Black people, and employing Lazarus & Folkman's (1984) theory of stress and coping to assess the influence of personal stress on the association between experiences of racial discrimination, post-incarceration status, and veteran status on suicide attempts among Black people, as well as the impact of racism-related stress (Harrell, 2000), imbedded within the racial ecology (Tyler, Brome, & Williams, 1991)) of the United States.

Social Integration Theory

Emile Durkheim's (1897/2012) theory of social integration proposes a causal link between one's feeling of disconnection to mainstream society and a desire to end one's own life (Durkheim, 1897/2012; Kuramoto, Wilcox, & Latkin, 2013). He identified various domains of the social environment as contexts within which suicidal behavior should be explored, including religious societies, family systems, political systems, and work environments (Durkheim, 1897/2012). He proposed that the central component of these environments as it relates to suicidal behavior is the quality of the cohesion of the

individuals within the environment and the capacity of the individuals to be integrated within the environment (Durkheim, 1897/2012). Durkheim (1897/2012) characterized this form of suicide as egoistic suicide, describing it as resulting from one's inability to fully connect to society demonstrated through poor social, family, religious and political connections (Poussaint & Alexander, 2000). Durkheim (1897/2012) asserts, "suicide varies inversely with the degree of integration of the social groups of which the individual forms a part" (p. 209). In his view, when a society is fully integrated, it is best positioned to be able to demand loyalty from its members which translates into a commitment to the society where one prioritizes the needs of the community over one's own needs. But when members of a society reject their position of subordination within the society, it compromises society's hold on its members (Durkheim 1897/2012). He contends,

When society is strongly integrated, it holds individuals under its control, considers them at its service and thus forbids them to dispose willfully of themselves...But how could society impose its supremacy upon them when they refuse to accept this subordination as legitimate? It no longer then possesses the requisite authority to retain them in their duty if they wish to desert; and conscious of its own weakness, it even recognizes their right to do freely what it can no longer prevent. So far as they are the admitted masters of their destinies, it is their privilege to end their lives. They, on their part, have no reason to endure life's sufferings patiently. For they cling to life more resolutely when belonging to a group they love, so as not to betray interests they put before their own (p.209-210).

This passage highlights the importance of examining the conditions of the society and barriers that impede its full integration and prevents certain social groups from becoming fully integrated and feeling as though they do not belong. Durkheim (1897/2012) posits that "collective force" is one of the best mechanisms to "restrain suicide," and "its weakening involves a development of suicide" (Durkheim, 1897/2012, p. 209). Burr et

al., (1999), assert there has been research applying Durkheim's theory that shows that strong connection to family and community is a buffer to Black people against suicide, highlighting the role of the family, church, and other community systems in protecting them from the impact of racism and oppression.

Based on the historical record regarding the way Black people have been treated within the U.S. society since the arrival of the first Africans to Jamestown, Virginia in 1619, the ongoing prevalence of racism and white supremacy which necessitates their ongoing fight for full social integration, the U.S. society is not, and has never been, strongly integrated in a manner which fully includes Black people. This group has always had to fight to belong. The first twenty Africans brought to Jamestown were indentured servants, but by 1661, the need for free "perpetual servitude" led the Virginians to enact slave codes, which, as Jones (1997) explains in his seminal text, *Prejudice and racism*, "not only bonded Africans to their white masters in perpetuity, but the codes of enforcement established a social order that ensured that slaves could not enjoy the status of freedom of mind, spirit, or body" (Jones, 1997, p.27). Scholars have applied Durkheim's (1897/2012) theory to help describe some Black people's experiences of low integration into U.S. society and detachment as a result of racism which can lead one to develop a "sense of diminished self-worth" (Walker, et al., 2014, p. 550; Burr et al, 1999). For Black people in the U.S., the nature of the supremacy the society has imposed upon them has been oppressive. It is one that specifically tethered enslaved Africans to the white master in a way that promoted a diminished sense of self and an unhealthy attachment to a society by way of bondage.

Durkheim (1897/2012) goes on to describe the particular qualities of a cohesive society which creates the collective force he identified as so pertinent to preventing suicide. He asserts:

The bond that unites them with the common cause attaches them to life and the lofty goal they envisage prevents their feeling personal troubles so deeply. There is, in short, in a cohesive and animated society a constant interchange of ideas and feelings from all to each and each to all, something like a mutual moral support, which instead of throwing the individual on his own resources, leads him to share in the collective energy and supports his own when exhausted (p. 210).

Racism (explained more fully below), by its very nature, is designed to interfere with the process of cultivating full cohesion within this society. Its enduring presence animates this society in a way that cultivates death within the divisions in the individuals, and in the systems, it creates and sustains. Absent a major societal intervention to address the early beginnings of this country's warped social order, the quality of cohesion Durkheim (1897/2012) describes is far-fetched. Based on his analysis and research Burr, Hartman, & Matteson (1999), it is evident that a major predictor of suicide in Black people in the US is the racism flourishing within the environment. The U.S. racial ecology (Tyler, et al., 1991) is not an environment for manifesting cohesion.

This is an important theory for understanding the impact of personal stress, racial discrimination, post-incarceration status, and veteran status on a societal and individual level, on the suicidal behavior of Black people, as these factors manifest as agents that weaken the ability of some Black Americans to fully integrate into U.S. society.

Joiner's (2005) Interpersonal-Psychological Theory of Suicide

Joiner's (2005) interpersonal-psychological theory of suicide posits that a person will only die by suicide if he or she desires to die and is capable of inflicting lethal self-

harm (Joiner, 2005). His theory has been widely tested and is well-validated (Hollingsworth et al., 2016), and some studies have included samples with a Black population (Odafe & Talavera et al., 2016). The component regarding one's "desire to die" will be the only aspect of the theory applied to the present study. Joiner (2005) asserts that one's desire to end one's own life can accumulate in one who perceives himself, herself, or themselves as being a burden on loved ones and/or society, articulated as perceived burdensomeness (PB), and when one is alienated and does not feel connected to a valued group or significant relationship, expressed as a thwarted belongingness (Joiner, 2005). This component of the theory is aligned with Durkheim's (1897/2012) theory of social integration.

Perceived burdensomeness is also defined as believing oneself to be a liability to loved ones because of one's inability to take care of oneself (Mandracchia & Smith, 2014). Thwarted belongingness is further defined as a subjective state of being where one is unable to cultivate a connection with others (Mandracchia & Smith, 2014). The experiences of racial discrimination, incarceration, and being a veteran, operationalize these two components of the theory. Experiencing racial discrimination in society can cultivate feelings of inferiority and isolation (Walker et al., 2017) within an individual which can cause them to perceive themselves as a burden and not a valued contributor to society, which can lead to feelings that they do not belong. Formerly incarcerated persons can perceive themselves as a burden on family members and society when they return home after a period of incarceration and struggle to successfully reintegrate into society as they cope with the stigma of their incarceration and other challenges (Massoglia, 2008). These experiences can also cause them to feel alienated and disconnected from

their loved ones and society. Johnson & Johnson (2013) explain that Black soldiers and veterans experience a combination of stressors that impact their mental health including the horrors of war, institutional racism, and the challenges of trying to access resources that will help them transition home well (Johnson & Johnson, 2013).

Researchers have noted that these two components of Joiner's (2005) theory, PB and TB, are "important culturally-relevant phenomena" and provide a helpful framework for interpreting suicide vulnerability across racial and ethnic groups considering the significance of group context for these populations (Odafe et al., 2016, p. 182).

Hollingsworth, Cole, O'Keefe, Tucker, Story, & Wingate (2016) also applied the same two components of Joiner's (2005) theory, perceived burdensomeness and thwarted belongingness, to a study exploring the association between racial microaggressions and suicide in a population of 135 young Black adults attending a predominantly White institution. They administered instruments that measured these two components. Based on their findings, they contend that for Blacks, the everyday racial insults were associated with the participants' increased perception that they were a burden to others, which was associated with increased suicidal thoughts (Hollingsworth & Cole et al., 2016). Their findings, which revealed that the everyday racial insults do not necessarily lead to elevated feelings of thwarted belongingness, are aligned with previous research that has found significant results for PB but not for TB (Hollingsworth & Cole et al., 2016). The study helped to confirm the strength of the PB component as a catalyst for the association with suicide ideation (Hollingsworth & Cole et al., 2016). Another study exploring the association between perceived discrimination, racism, and acculturation with suicide ideation and suicide attempt in a sample of young Black adults found that perceived

racism and discrimination were not associated with suicide ideation or suicide attempt (Castle, Connor, Kaukeinen, & Tu, 2011). In a recent study by Oh, Stickley, Koyanagi, Yau, & DeVlyder (2019) which explored the association between discrimination and suicidal behavior among racial and ethnic minorities in the US, including Black people, they found that discrimination increased the odds of lifetime reports of suicidal ideation and behavior adjusting for sociodemographics and major lifetime psychiatric disorders, and assert that their findings contribute to the literature regarding this theory, “by underscoring the role of discrimination as a factor that may influence one’s sense of belonging in workplaces, neighborhoods, public places, and the larger society” (p. 521).

Joiner’s (2005) theory has also been tested on a population of incarcerated persons. Simlot, McFarland & Lester (2013) conducted an exploratory study to see whether or not all three components of the theory, perceived burdensomeness, thwarted belongingness, and capacity for lethal self-harm, were positively associated with suicidal behavior in incarcerated persons. They administered the Interpersonal Needs Questionnaire to measure the three variables, along with the Suicide Behaviors Scale-Revised to a group of 48 incarcerated males (Simlot et al., 2013). The underlying assumption was that incarcerated persons who experience feelings of perceived burdensomeness and thwarted belongingness and possess the capacity to inflict lethal self-harm would exhibit negative behavior (Simlot et al., 2013). The study revealed that feelings of TB were associated with prior suicidal behavior and predictions of likely suicidal behavior in the future, but there was no association of PB with suicidal behavior (Simlot et al., 2013). The researchers contend that the study might be useful for predicting suicidal vulnerability in this population (Simlot et al., 2013). The study helped

to confirm the utility of assessing the two interpersonal elements of the theory. Thwarted belongingness was associated with prior suicidal behavior, and there was no association of PB with suicidal behavior, which was different in previous studies where PB was found to be associated with suicidal behavior (Simlot et al., 2013). The researchers speculate that this finding may be due to the fact that as offenders, the study participants have experienced feelings of being a burden to others (Simlot et al., 2013). While that study involved persons who were incarcerated, it is helpful in understanding the components of Joiner's theory and the theory's utility on a population of formerly incarcerated persons.

This theory has also been applied in studies involving veteran populations (O'Connor, Carney, Jennings, Johnson, Gutierrez, et al., 2016). In a study involving a sample of suicidal veterans, researchers found only thwarted belongingness was associated with elements of suicidal ideation, and not perceived burdensomeness (O'Connor, et al., 2016). Based on the literature, they suggest that it is possible perceived burdensomeness has a greater association with suicide attempts and other suicidal behaviors (O'Connor, et al., 2016). In another study involving veterans, where perceived burdensomeness and thwarted belongingness were tested, they were found to be the pathways through which self-directed hostility and shame were associated to suicide (Rogers, Kelliher-Rabon, Hagan, Hirsch, & Joiner, 2017). Through the application of the desire to die component of Joiner's (2005) theory, this study suggests that racial discrimination, post-incarceration status, veteran status, and personal stress may impact a Black person's perception of their sense of self and contribute to feelings of low self-worth that lead to perceived burdensomeness and feelings of thwarted belongingness and

disconnection from a racist society, or to important social groups, feelings which can contribute to the cultivation of a desire to inflict lethal self-harm.

Researchers have noted that two components of Joiner's (2005) Interpersonal-Psychological theory of suicide, perceived burdensomeness (PB) and thwarted belongingness (TB), are "important culturally-relevant phenomena" and provide a helpful framework for interpreting suicide vulnerability across racial and ethnic groups considering the significance of group context for these populations (Odafe et al., 2016, p. 182). Hollingsworth, Cole, O'Keefe, Tucker, Story, & Wingate (2016) also applied the same two components of Joiner's theory, perceived burdensomeness and thwarted belongingness, to a study exploring the association between racial microaggressions and suicide in a population of 135 young Black adults attending a predominantly White institution. They administered instruments that measured these two components. Based on their findings, they contend that for Blacks, the everyday racial insults were associated with the participants' increased perception that they were a burden to others, which was associated with increased suicidal thoughts (Hollingsworth & Cole et al., 2016). Their findings, which revealed that the everyday racial insults do not necessarily lead to elevated feelings of thwarted belongingness, are aligned with previous research that has found significant results for PB but not for TB (Hollingsworth & Cole et al., 2016). The study helped to confirm the strength of the PB component as a catalyst for the association with suicide ideation (Hollingsworth & Cole et al., 2016). Another study exploring the association between perceived discrimination, racism, and acculturation with suicide ideation and suicide attempt in a sample of young Black adults found that perceived

racism and discrimination were not associated with suicide ideation or suicide attempt (Castle, Connor, Kaukeinen, & Tu, 2011).

Stress Coping Theory

Lazarus & Folkman (1984) define psychological stress as “a particular relationship between the person and the environment that is appraised by the person as taking or exceeding his or her resources and endangering his or her well-being” (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, p.19). The multicultural mental health literature affirms that exploring stress is an important paradigm for assessing the mental health of people of color (Harrell 2000). The constructs through which Lazarus & Folkman (1984) assess the causes of stress are cognitive appraisal and coping. They define cognitive appraisal as a process of evaluation through which an individual “determines why and to what extent a particular transaction or series of transactions between the person and the environment is stressful” (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, p. 19). They distinguish between primary appraisal and secondary appraisal. They identify the following three categories of primary appraisal: (1) irrelevant, (2) benign-positive, and (3) stressful. An encounter is irrelevant when “an encounter with the environment carries no implication for a person’s well-being” (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, 32). Benign-positive appraisals occur if the outcome of an encounter is perceived as positive or as having the potential to be positive (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Irrelevant and benign-positive will not be applied here. According to Outlaw (1993), these two constructs are not applicable for the analysis of cognitive appraisal for Black Americans as, concerning benign positive appraisals, Black Americans “are constantly aware of potential negative outcomes of situations because of unpredictable and uncontrollable racist acts” (p. 403). Regarding irrelevant encounters,

because of chronic racism, Black Americans remain hypervigilant and are constantly assessing whether situations are potentially harmful or not (Outlaw, 1993). Stress appraisals, which include harm/loss, threat, and challenge (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, 32), will be applied to this analysis. Harm/loss describes a state where one has sustained injury or loss, including injury to self or social esteem, and threat refers to these harms that are expected (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). While challenge describes the situation which contains the potential for growth and can be experienced as exciting and exhilarating (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Both threat and challenge call for “anticipatory coping” (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, p. 33). Lazarus & Folkman (1984) describe the process of secondary appraisal as the experience of being confronted with a threat or challenge and having to discern what action to be taken (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Outlaw (1993) developed a model based on Lazarus & Folkman’s framework using the stress appraisal construct to describe the impact of racism on the cognitive appraisal processing of Black Americans. Outlaw (1993) contends that due to racism, it can be hypothesized that Black Americans automatically assess primary appraisals as stressful encounters and will categorize them as harm/loss, threat, or challenge. She asserts that those who appraise the racism-based stress at the harm/loss level could demonstrate withdrawal and depression (Outlaw, 1993). For threat appraisal, where the harm/loss is anticipated (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), Outlaw (1993) posits that the existence of systemic racism such as police profiling which causes Black Americans to be nervous about being targeted by police as they drive and move about is an example of threat appraisal that can have psychological and physically harmful effects. Finally, Outlaw (1993) further contends that challenge appraisals which contain positive, hopeful

emotions (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), can emerge from Black Americans from various sources including religious faith and family and social support networks.

Lazarus & Folkman (1984) define coping as “the process through which the individual manages the demands of the person-environment relationship that are appraised as stressful and the emotions they generate” (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, p. 19). This theoretical framework of stress and coping will provide the structure for analyzing the impact, or the “extent” to which the societal factors being explored are stressful, through the examination of their relationship to suicidal behavior. Lazarus & Folkman (1984) assert that this definition of stress underscores the importance of assessing the relationship between the person and their environment while considering the qualities of the person and “the nature of the environmental event” (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, p. 21). This is an ecological framework that acknowledges the importance of examining the context individuals are living in when assessing their mental health and well-being (Harrell, 2000). Harrell (2000) highlights the impact of institutional racism which for many Black people can result in challenges such as housing discrimination or being considered suspicious of criminal activity, etc, and contaminates their living environment. She asserts, “living in a society where the occurrence of any of these things is at all times a distinct possibility can create stress above and beyond the generic stresses of life” (Harrell, 2000, p. 47). Racism is a salient factor embedded within the ecological framework of this society which impacts the context within which all of the factors in this study are being explored (Harrell, 2000).

Racism-related stress

Harrell (2000) asserts that for people of color, “life stress must also include consideration of experiences that are related to the unique person-environment transactions involving race. Experiences of racism are embedded within interpersonal, collective, cultural-symbolic, and sociopolitical contexts, and can be sources of stress” (p. 44). In this study, racial discrimination is being explored as a factor influencing suicidal behavior. Harrell’s (2000) definition of racism-related stress helps to illuminate the impact of the dimensions of racial discrimination explored in this study. Harrell (2000) bases her definition of the multidimensional construct of racism-related stress in part on Lazarus and Folkman’s (1984) definition of psychological stress. She defines racism-related stress as:

The race-related transactions between individuals or groups and their environment that emerge from the dynamics of racism, and that are perceived to tax or exceed existing individual and collective resources or threaten well-being (Harrell, 2000, p. 44).

In this study, the mental health outcome being assessed is suicidal behavior, specifically suicidal attempts. This racism-related stress framework underscores the weight of the “tax” on the individual’s personal resources and its potential to lead one to desire to end one’s own life.

Stress & Suicide

Carter (2007) defines stress as “a person–environment, biopsychosocial interaction, wherein environmental events (stressors) are appraised first as either positive or unwanted and negative. If the appraisal reveals that the stressor is negative, one employs a coping mechanism, and if that mechanism fails, stress emerges (Carter, 2007,

p. 18-19).” Stress has also been broadly defined as “acute life events” or “chronic difficulties” (Stewart & Shields, et al. 2019). Life event stress is distinguished from more severe stress such as posttraumatic stress based on the degree of severity of the event and whether it was life-threatening (Carter, 2007). Carter (2007) asserts that scholars have argued that because of the degree of severity of race-based stress, it should be elevated to the level of trauma.

Carter, Anderson, Carter, Williams (1999) note that there are a variety of psychological stress responses that may emerge after one perceives racism, including anger, hopelessness, anxiety, paranoia, fear, resentment, and frustration. They assert that these responses may provoke a variety of coping responses including aggression, hostility, anger suppression, and the use of alcohol or other substances to dull the anger, and they can overlap (Carter, et al., 1999). Physiological responses may also arise in response to these psychological stressors including threats to the immune, neuroendocrine and cardiovascular systems (Carter, et al., 1999). There is a strong association between stress and suicidality (Robinson, Case, Whipple, Gooden, Lopez-Tamayo, Lambert, et al., 2016), and the relationship specifically between stress and suicidal ideation is well-established (Davidson & Wingate, 2011). Additionally, literature (Liu & Miller, 2014) shows that the association between life stressors and suicidal behavior is well-established. Stress is a key element of most theories of suicide (Stewart, Shields, Esposito, Cosby, Allen, Slavich, et al., 2019). Research has found that race-based stress such as acculturative stress is associated with suicide risk (Walker, Wingate, Obasi, & Joiner, 2008). In their study examining the relationships of acculturative stress and ethnic identity to depressive symptomatology in college students, Walker, Wingate,

Obasi, & Joiner (2008) found that acculturative stress was associated with suicidal ideation in African Americans and that the acculturative stress moderated the effect of depression on suicidal ideation for this group and increased it for those expressing depression and acculturative stress.

This dissertation rooted in an Afrocentric worldview is multidimensional and aims to explore risk and protective factors of suicide among Black people in a creative and comprehensive manner that incorporates a strength perspective and does not limit the scope to a deficit model. The above discussion reveals the robust theoretical foundation that anchors this work and explains how the theories help explain the risk and protective factors for Black suicide and shape the research questions and hypothesis.

CHAPTER VI: Methodology

Study Design

This dissertation was facilitated through a mixed methods research design. A mixed-methods approach provides the researcher with an expanded platform within which to explore the questions identified for the study (Sweetman, Badiee, & Creswell, 2010). It is a methodology that integrates quantitative (closed-ended) and qualitative (open-ended) data sources and incorporates “the rigorous and persuasive methods associated with both forms of data” and combines the data “with one building on or extending the other” (Sweetman, Badiee, & Creswell, 2010, p. 441). This process is more likely to produce a comprehensive understanding of the phenomena being explored (Mertens, 2012) and advance social change (Mertens, 2007; Sweetman, Badiee, & Creswell, 2010).

It was important to utilize a mixed-methods framework in this study because the complexity of the phenomenon of Black suicide warrants a nuanced approach. A convergent design approach was applied. Through this approach, the quantitative and qualitative research and analysis are conducted within the same timeframe to compare results and acquire a fuller understanding of the research questions (Creswell & Clark, 2018). Combining data from quantitative and qualitative research creates a stronger foundation and context for exploring the research questions (Creswell, 2014). I chose this approach primarily because I knew that the quantitative data would only provide a limited amount of information regarding the role of religion/spirituality as a protective factor against Black suicide. In the quantitative research, data were drawn from the cross-sectional National Epidemiologic Survey on Alcohol and Related Conditions (NESARC)

III which covers the period of April 2012-June 2013. It provides a numeric account of the association between reported suicidal behavior among Black people in the U.S. and personal stress and three societal stress factors--racial discrimination, post-incarceration status, and veteran status—and whether religion/spirituality moderates the relationships between suicidal behavior in Black people in the U.S. and these stressors. However, quantitative data collected through surveys do not provide the critical contextual factors (Weathers, Barg, Bowman, Briggs, Delmoor, Kumanyika, et al., 2011) necessary for fully understanding the role of religion/spirituality as a protective factor against suicide. The limited scope of the survey questions could not yield the quality of information that could come from interviews. Qualitative research can yield detailed contextual data that illuminates dimensions regarding a phenomenon being explored that cannot be obtained through quantitative data (Weathers, et al., 2011). The qualitative data extended the exploration of the role of religion/spirituality as a protective factor against suicidal behavior among Black people. The qualitative interviews in this study provide data that not only help to explain the role of religion/spirituality as a protective barrier against suicide, but also highlight the role of Afrocentric culture, placing religion/spirituality within a sociocultural framework. This data also provide important context that helps explain the societal stress factors explored in the quantitative study. As asserted previously, Hjelmeland (2016) advocates for more qualitative suicide studies and asserts that many quantitative studies could be enhanced through the addition of a qualitative component. The qualitative interviews with the three Black men provide the necessary contextual background for exploring religion/spirituality as a shield of spiritual resistance for Black people against the effects of societal stressors. I chose to interview these men,

as opposed to conducting focus groups, because they are a sample that allowed me to explore the impact of incarceration and military involvement as well as intergenerationality. This component of the research expanded the scope of the project to strengths-based (Saleebey, 2008). As noted earlier, Hirsch, Rabon, & Chang (2018) call for positive suicidology, a new, strengths-based paradigm in the prevention and treatment of suicide that addresses risk and pays equal attention to the role of growth, resilience, and adaptation. Data from the interviews draw attention to growth and resilience and the interplay of religion/spirituality and culture in the creation of a protective environment that shields Black people from suicidal behavior. Data from both the quantitative and the qualitative research bring this study within the paradigm of positive suicidology, with the quantitative study highlighting risks for suicidal behavior and the qualitative studies highlighting factors that contribute to human flourishing and enable one to resist a desire to end one's life.

Transformative mixed methods

The overall design of this mixed methods research project is a transformative paradigm (Mertens, 2010). According to Mertens (2010), "The transformative paradigm serves as an umbrella for research theories and approaches that place priority on social justice and human rights" (Mertens, 2010, p. 473). The transformative paradigm supports the utilization of the several theories and approaches that created a robust theoretical foundation for this study. This transformative mixed method is a liberatory approach. This liberatory approach is in alignment with social work core principles to acquire a more comprehensive understanding of the factors of oppression, as well as factors for healing and liberation, to help to create a better life for the individual, and a better society

(Kant, 2015). The combined data from the quantitative and the qualitative research yield a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomena being explored – suicidal behavior and the role of religion/spirituality as a resource for resistance. The Ubuntu Relational Framework for the Study of Black Suicide which emerged from the study alters the way researchers approach the study of Black suicide which has the potential to yield stronger research findings and transform our understanding of Black suicide. The framework also highlights the social worker’s ethical mandate to address the social conditions impacting the environment people are navigating which incorporates the work of societal transformation into the study of Black suicide.

Grounded Theory & Critical Race Theory – Qualitative Study

Grounded theory (GT) and critical race theory guide the methodology for this qualitative research. A grounded theory approach to research directs the researcher to engage in the process of collecting and analyzing data at the same time in ongoing ways (Thornberg & Charmaz, 2014). This process is foundational to an approach designed to lead to the emergence of new theories rooted in data and to reevaluate existing theories (Malagon, Huber, Velez, 2009). Grounded theory has been found to be well-suited for social work research as the findings stem from the “interaction of researchers with research participants, show multiple meanings and multiple dimensions of human phenomena” (Gigun, 2013, p. 108). This methodological approach provides the flexibility required to facilitate a research project with aims addressing the interior lives of three Black men within one family to help address the mental health of Black people.

Malagon, Huber, & Velez (2009) contend that although “grounded theory was not developed as a methodology for collecting knowledge and building theory from the lived

experiences of People of Color,” when applied with critical race theory, it can be utilized as a methodology for interpreting, analyzing, and prioritizing the voices and concerns of undervalued populations (Malagon, Huber, Velez, 2009, p. 259). Critical Race Theory (CRT), which was developed by a cadre of legal scholars to promote the prioritization of non-dominant views and affirm the saliency of race and racism in the law (Bell, 1995), has been applied to other disciplines, including social work, and is in alignment with the person-in-environment principle critical to the field (Daftary, 2018). The CRT approach calls for the prioritization of historical and cultural lenses, and race and racism, as context for examining the mental health and emotional well-being of Black people in the United States. It affirms that the role of race and racism are to be considered throughout the entire research process including the interpretation and analysis of the data, as well as in the development of the therapeutic interventions (Daftary, 2018). CRT legitimizes the experiences and perspectives of members of the non-dominant populations, such as Black people, and prioritizes these particularizabilities over the pull to generalize the findings (Malagon, Huber, & Velez, 2009). This GT and CRT methodology furthers the social justice aims inherent in social work. According to Gigun (2013), “Social work’s emphasis on social justice comes to life when researchers seek the meanings that research participants attribute to social issues that are part of their lived experience” (Gigun, p.108). This methodological approach, and the qualitative research practice itself, contributes to the efforts of social work scholars who are reminding the profession that social work is “an artistic and moral practice, and cannot be reduced to data for technicians” (Guo and Tsui, 2010 p. 238; Goldstein, 2006). The inclusion of the voices and spiritual coping strategies of three Black men within one family, across three

generations, animates this dissertation project in a way that is creative and hopefully transforms it into a vehicle that addresses suicidal behavior among Black people as a work of liberation (Duran, Firehammer, & Gonzalez, 2008).

Joined together, GT and CRT cultivated a synergy that directed the focus of this project more clearly to expand to include an intentional focus on protective factors for suicidal behaviors which include the components of a healthy mental environment and ways to cultivate Divine Consciousness in order to prevent thoughts of suicidal behavior from entering one's mental terrain. This sharpens the work's liberatory focus as it seeks to equip social work professionals and others with tools to help Black people foster and sustain a healthy consciousness and support their interpersonal and collective liberation work, and not just to respond to suicidal behavior.

Afrocentric Approach

The qualitative portion of the study highlights the Afrocentric elements of this dissertation. I conducted the interviews and the analysis through an Afrocentric framework where, "epistemologically, a great deal of emphasis is placed on an effective way of knowing and obtaining information, while its axiological significance underscores interpersonal relationships as the highest value" (Borum, 2007, p.121). This is a "culturally sensitive research approach" utilizing the "cultural standpoints of both the researcher and the research participants as a framework for research design" (Tillman, 2006, p. 266). Within this design approach, there is an appreciation for the shared family cultural standpoints of myself and my family members and prioritization of our interpersonal relationships.

One of the tenets of the Afrocentric approach is the holistic paradigm explained earlier which affirms that “all things exist within a network of relationships” and individual’s lives cannot be fully understood outside of the context of this network (Schreiber, 2000, p. 663). This approach calls for the evaporation of the distance between the researcher and the participants (Schreiber, 2000, p. 661). My position as a family member researcher helps to close the gap between the researcher and participants as the lines between myself and my living family members are interwoven, and these lines also connect me to my ancestors. My proximity to the participants enhanced my ability to know and interpret the realities of the three family members and to understand their lives within the context of our family network of relationships and detect any generational patterns and/or differences that may exist in the phenomena being explored. I also remained cognizant of my positionality as a descendant of enslaved Africans, and a person of faith, throughout the work.

I applied reflexivity principles and practices to my research and analysis which included writing an autoethnography and highlighted the importance of my positionality while maintaining my ethical commitments (D'Silva, Smith, Della, Potter & Rajack-Talley Best, 2016). My autoethnography provided a space for me to integrate my understanding of the phenomena of religion/spirituality as a source of spiritual resistance against suicide that was emerging from the research process. It allowed me to deeply examine my use of religion/spirituality as a source of resistance and to understand and experience the concepts of Divine consciousness and death consciousness which emerged as prominent themes during the analysis of the qualitative data. I completed my autoethnography before I completed the write-up of qualitative data, and it strengthened

my capacity to interpret the themes and codes from the data and make connections and understand what was happening in the data.

Quantitative Research

Data Source & Sampling Strategy

Data are drawn from the National Epidemiologic Survey on Alcohol and Related Conditions III (NESARC). NESARC III is a cross-sectional national survey that covers the period of April 2012-June 2013. The target population consists of non-institutionalized, civilian adults age 18 years or older who reside in the 50 United States and the District of Columbia, including adults living in noninstitutionalized group settings (i.e. college dormitories) (Grant, Amsbary, Chu, Sigman, Kali, Sugawana, et al., 2014). Individuals selected from this population were randomly selected through multistage probability sampling (Grant, Chu, Sigman, Amsbary, Kali, Sugawara, Jiao, Ren, & Goldstein, n.d.). The primary sampling units (PSUs) were identified as individual counties, with some small counties combining with neighboring counties to create an appropriate unit for sampling (Grant, Chu, Sigman, et al, n.d.). A total of 2,349 PSUs (out of the more than 3,100 counties in the U.S.) were created for NESARC-III (excluding some small and remote areas in Alaska and Hawaii) (Grant, Chu, Sigman, et al, n.d.). A total of 150 PSUs were selected from the sampling frame of 2,349 through stratified proportional-to-size (PPS) sampling (Grant, Chu, Sigman, et al, n.d.). The sampling of PSUs reflected a measure of size (MOS) that was a composite designed to yield self-weighting samples of ultimate sample units within identified substrata characterized by minority status, while simultaneously controlling PSU amounts by maintaining nearly equal numbers of ultimate sampling units per PSU (Grant, Chu, Sigman, et al, n.d.). The

sample for the present study consists of participants who identify as Black or African American (n=7,766).

Measurement

Suicide Attempt. In this study, suicide attempt was the primary dependent dichotomous variable and assessed by one item. Respondents were asked if they had ever attempted suicide in their entire life and the response options were yes or no (NESARC-III Codebook, n.d.). The variable was recoded as 1 (yes) and 0 (no) and labeled attempt. Suicide attempt is a critical risk factor for completed suicide and important behavior to research for prevention (Fernandes, Dutta, Velupillai, Sanyal, Stewart & Chandran (2018).

Personal Stress. Personal stress was a dichotomous variable assessed by one item. Respondents were asked if they had ever experienced a stressful or traumatic event personally, and the response options were yes or no (NESARC-III Codebook, n.d.). The variable was recoded as 1 (yes) and 0 (no) and labeled perstress1.

Post Incarceration Status. Post incarceration status was a categorical variable created by combining two questions. The first question asked respondents whether they had ever been to jail, prison, or juvenile detention before age 18, and the response options were yes or no (NESARC-III Codebook, n.d.). The second question asked respondents whether they had ever been to jail, prison, or a correctional facility since the age of 18, and the response options were yes or no (NESARC-III Codebook, n.d.). The variables were combined and recoded to reflect 0 (never), 1 (before18), 2 (since18), and 3 (both-before and since 18). The new variable was labeled jail.

Veteran Status. Veteran status was a dichotomous variable assessed by one item. Respondents were asked if they ever served on active duty in the U.S. Armed Forces, Reserves, or National Guard. The response options were yes, on active duty in past, but not now; no, training for reserves or national guard only; and no, never served in the military (NESARC-III Codebook, n.d.). The responses were recoded to reflect 1 (yes) to include the first option and 0 (no) to include the second and third options. The new variable was labeled veteran.

Perceived Racial Discrimination. Perceived racial discrimination was assessed through questions covering the following three dimensions: (1) perceived racial discrimination in health care, (2) perceived racial discrimination in public and other situations, and (3) experiencing racist name-calling and threats. These dimensions were measured through items in the survey that are from the 6-item Experiences of Discrimination (EOD) scale used extensively in research regarding discrimination and health (McLaughlin, Hatzenbuehler, Keyes, 2010). Each dimension combined two categories of questions (a total of 4 questions) covering the period during the last 12 months and the period before 12 months. The dimension perceived racial discrimination in health care contained the following four question: (1) During the last 12 months, how often did you experience discrimination in the ability to obtain health care because of race or ethnicity?; and (2) Before 12 months ago, how often did you experience discrimination in the ability to obtain health care because of race or ethnicity?; (3) During the last 12 months, how often did you experience discrimination in how you were treated when you got care because of your race or ethnicity?; and (4) Before 12 months ago, how often did you experience discrimination in how you were treated when you got care

because of your race or ethnicity? (NESARC-III Codebook, n.d.). The dimension of perceived racial discrimination in public contained the following four questions: (1) During the last 12 months, how often did you experience discrimination in public because of race or ethnicity?; (2) Before 12 months ago, how often did you experience discrimination in public because of race or ethnicity?; (3) During the last 12 months, how often did you experience discrimination in any other situation because of race or ethnicity?; and (4) Before 12 months ago, how often did you experience discrimination in any other situation because of your race or ethnicity? (NESARC-III Codebook, n.d.).

The dimension experiencing racist name-calling and threats contains the following four questions: (1) During the last 12 months, how often have you been called a racist name because of your race or ethnicity?; (2) Before 12 months ago, how often have you been called a racist name because of your race or ethnicity?; (3) During the last 12 months, how often were you made fun of, picked on, or threatened because of race or ethnicity?; and (4) Before 12 months ago, how often were you made fun of, picked on, or threatened because of race or ethnicity? (NESARC-III Codebook, n.d.). The construct will be referred to as perceived racial discrimination throughout which is meant to capture perceived discrimination based on race or ethnicity.

The response options for each question were as follows: (1) never (2) almost never (3) sometimes (4) fairly often (5) or very often (NESARC-III Codebook, n.d.). For each dimension, a dichotomous variable was created to capture responses from respondents who reported never experiencing the type of discrimination before 12 months ago or during the last 12 months and the response was coded as 0 for no. The responses for those who reported experiencing the type of discrimination before 12

months ago or during the last 12 months almost never, sometimes, fairly often, or very often, were coded as 1 for yes. The new variables were labeled *healthcaredis1*, *disinhctreatment2*, *publicdis3*, *othsituation4*, *calledracistname5*, and *threatened6* to capture the 6 categories. They were then recoded and collapsed into 3 categories. Experiencing discrimination in the ability to obtain health care, (*healthcaredis1*) and experiencing discrimination when receiving treatment (*disinhctreatment2*) were combined into 1 variable labeled *healthdis*. Experiencing discrimination in public (*publicdis3*) and experiencing discrimination in any other situation (*othsituation4*) were combined into 1 variable labeled *publicdiscrim*. Being called a racist name (*calledracistname5*), and being made fun of, picked on, or threatened (*threatened6*) was combined into 1 variable labeled *racistname*.

Religion and spirituality (religion/spirituality). Religion and spirituality were assessed through two questions. One question asked respondents how often they attend (religious) services (the previous question in the survey inquired whether they currently attended religious services) (NESARC-III Codebook, n.d.). The response options were as follows: (1) once a year (2) a few times a year (3) 1 to 3 times a month (4) once a week (5) twice a week or more (NESARC-III Codebook, n.d.). This type of question is frequently used in research assessing church attendance to inquire about attendance at religious services (Wingrove & Alston, 1974; Watlington & Murphy, 2006). The variable was recoded to create a new variable labeled *o_attend*. The other question asked respondents how important are religious or spiritual beliefs (NESARC-III Codebook, n.d.). The response options were as follows: (1) very important (2) somewhat important (3) not very important (4) not important at all (NESARC-III Codebook, n.d.). This type

of question is used in research to assesses intrinsic religiosity and spirituality (e.g. capturing a personal sense or feeling of the importance of religion and spirituality) (Watlington & Murphy, 2006). The variable was recoded to create a new variable labeled belief which combined the four responses to reflect (1) very important (2) somewhat important and (3) not very important.

Sociodemographic Factors. The sociodemographic control variables were gender (female or male), age (year), born in the US or outside of the US, education attainment (1-14 ordinal categories), household income in the last 12 months (1-21 ordinal categories) (NESARC-III Codebook, n.d.). The question regarding gender asked respondents to identify their sex and the options were male or female (NESARC-III Codebook, n.d.). The variable was recoded and labeled as gender. The variable education was assessed through a question asking respondents to report the highest grade or year of school completed and the response options included 14 ordinal categories ranging from no formal schooling to the highest category of completed master's degree or equivalent or higher graduate degree (NESARC-III Codebook, n.d.). This variable was recoded to collapse the categories into the following 4 categories: less than high school, high school, some college, and beyond college and the variable was labeled edu. Whether a respondent was born in the U.S. was assessed through a question asking them to identify whether they were born in the U.S. and the response options were yes or no (NESARC-III Codebook, n.d.). The variable was recoded and labeled as USBorn. Income was assessed through a question asking the respondents to identify the category that best represents their total combined household income in the last 12 months, and the response options included 21 ordinal categories ranging from less than \$5,000 to \$200,000 or more

(NESARC-III Questionnaire, n.d.). The variable was recoded to collapse the categories into the following four groupings: 0-\$19,999, \$20,000-\$34,999, \$35,000-\$59,000, & \$60,000-\$200,000+).

Statistical Analysis

Descriptive statistics were conducted to present the characteristics of the sample. Multiple logistic regression analyses were conducted to assess the association between societal stressors and personal stress and suicidal behavior and the influence of religion/spirituality. Specifically, logistic regression was employed to assess the association between perceived racial discrimination and personal stress and suicide attempts and whether religion/spirituality influences the relationship between attempted suicide and perceived racial discrimination and personal stress. Logistic regression was also utilized to explore the association between post incarceration status and personal stress and suicide attempts and whether religion/spirituality influences the relationship between attempted suicide and post incarceration status and personal stress. Finally, logistic regression was employed to assess the association between veteran status and personal stress and suicide attempts and whether religion/spirituality influences the relationship between attempted suicide and veteran status and personal stress. Survey weights were applied to the analyses to address the complexity of the NESARC-III and clustering of the sampling design and the manner in which observations are selected (Long & Freese, 2014). Thirty percent of the cases had missing values on the independent, outcome, and control variables, and were therefore excluded from the

analytic sample. Listwise deletion was relied upon for all analyses. STATA software version 16 was used for all analyses.

Thirty binary logistic regression analyses were conducted. There were six models for each of the five independent variables (racial discrimination in health care, perceived racial discrimination in public, racist name & threats, post-incarceration status, and veteran status).

Racial discrimination in health care (when obtaining health care and when receiving health care treatment)

Model 1: Explored the unadjusted association between suicide attempt and racial discrimination in health care. (Table 2)

Model 2: Explored the association between suicide attempt and racial discrimination in health care adjusted for personal stress. (Table 2)

Model 3: Explored the association between suicide attempt and racial discrimination in health care, adjusted for religion/spirituality. (Table 7)

Model 4: Explored the association between suicide attempt and racial discrimination in health care adjusted for personal stress, religion/spirituality, and sociodemographic control variables. (Table 7)

Model 5: Explored the association between suicide attempt and racial discrimination in health care, adjusted for personal stress and sociodemographic control variables. (Table 2)

Model 6: Explored the moderating effect of personal stress by testing the main effect and the interaction effect of personal stress in the association between racial discrimination, suicide attempt with the sociodemographic control variables. (Table 7)

Racial discrimination in public & other situations

Model 1: Explored the unadjusted association between suicide attempt and racial discrimination in public and other situations. (Table 3)

Model 2: Explored the association between suicide attempt and racial discrimination in public and other situations, adjusted for personal stress. (Table 3)

Model 3: Explored the association between suicide attempt and racial discrimination in public and other situations, adjusted for religion/spirituality. (Table 8)

Model 4: Explored association between suicide attempt and racial discrimination in public and other situations, adjusted for personal stress, religion/spirituality and sociodemographic control variables. (Table 8)

Model 5: Explored the association between suicide attempt and racial discrimination in public and other situations, adjusted for personal stress and sociodemographic control variables. (Table 3)

Model 6: Explored the moderating effect of personal stress by testing the main effect and the interaction effect of stress in the association between racial discrimination in public and other situations, suicide attempt with sociodemographic control variables. (Table 8)

Experiencing Racist Name & Threats

Model 1: Explored the unadjusted association between suicide attempt and racist names and threats. (Table 4)

Model 2: Explored association between suicide attempt and racist names and threats adjusted for personal stress. (Table 4)

Model 3: Explored association between suicide attempt and racist names, adjusted for religion/spirituality. (Table 9)

Model 4: Explored association between suicide attempt and racist names adjusted for personal stress, religion/spirituality, and sociodemographic variables. (Table 9)

Model 5: Explored association between suicide attempt and racist names and threats, adjusted for personal stress and sociodemographic variables. (Table 4)

Model 6: Exploring moderating effect of stress by testing the main effect and the interaction effect of stress in the association between racist names and threats and suicide attempt with sociodemographic control variables. (Table 9)

Post incarceration status

Model 1: Explored unadjusted association between suicide attempt and incarceration. (Table 5)

Model 2: Explored association between suicide attempt and post-incarceration status adjusted for personal stress. (Table 5)

Model 3: Explored association between suicide attempt and post-incarceration status adjusted for religion/spirituality. (Table 10)

Model 4: Explored association between suicide attempt and post-incarceration status, adjusted for personal stress, religion/spirituality, and sociodemographic control variables. (Table 10)

Model 5: Explored association between suicide attempt and post-incarceration status, adjusted for personal stress and sociodemographic control variables. (Table 5)

Model 6: Explored the moderating effect of personal stress by testing the main effect and the interaction effect of personal stress in the association between post-

incarceration status, and suicide attempt with sociodemographic control variables. (Table 5)

Veteran status

Model 1: Explored the unadjusted association between suicide attempt and veteran status. (Table 6)

Model 2: Explored the association between suicide attempt and veteran status adjusted for personal stress. (Table 6)

Model 3: Explored the association between suicide attempt and veteran status, adjusted for religion/spirituality. (Table 11)

Model 4: Explored the association between suicide attempt and veteran status, adjusted for personal stress, religion/spirituality and sociodemographic variables. (Table 11)

Model 5: Explored the association between suicide attempt and veteran status, adjusted for personal stress and sociodemographic control variables. (Table 6)

Model 6: Explored the moderating effect of personal stress by testing the main effect and the interaction effect of personal stress in the association between veteran status and suicide attempt with sociodemographic control variables. (Table 11)

Qualitative Research

Data Collection

The research goals and context of the study determine the type of data collected and the method applied for collection (Gibbs, Kealy, Willis, Green, & Welch et al., 2007). The aim of exploring intergenerational patterns and/or differences within a Black

family in the U.S., and the time limitations for this project, dictated the type of data collected and the method for collection. Because the study participants are members of my family, they were accessible. In addition to being able to have physical access to them, because they are family members, I was able to access and interpret their stories with greater agility.

Sample Rationale

As noted previously, I have conducted semi-structured interviews with three Black American men within my family who are from three different generational periods. The participants are my grandfather, Reverend Marcus Wood, age 99, a retired Baptist pastor who lived in Baltimore, Maryland. He passed away on May 11, 2020. He had memories of his formerly enslaved grandmother who was a woman of faith and was still alive when he was a small child. He was a living bridge connecting the past occupied by his enslaved grandparents and this contemporary moment. His son, my father, Marcus Wood, age 77, is retired from the U.S. Army and the U.S. government. He currently resides in Gary, Indiana. He served in the Vietnam War. My cousin, Darrell Brown-Bey, age 54, lives in the Baltimore area (grandson of Rev. Wood and nephew of Marcus). Darrell went to prison at the age of 17 and was incarcerated in Maryland for 16 years. Each man willingly consented to participate in this study and to have their identities revealed.

Participants

Reverend Marcus G. Wood

Rev. Wood was a Black American man. As noted previously, he passed away in May 2020 at the age of 99. He was 99 at the time of the interview. Rev. Wood was a

Christian and was affiliated with the Baptist Church. He was born and raised in Ware Neck, VA, a small settlement in Virginia near Jamestown where only Black people lived at the time. His parents had 6 other sons and their family lived in this small community in the same area where his father's parents were enslaved. His father was born on a plantation during the time when "slavery was on the edge of freedom" (Rev. Wood, interview, Summer, 2019). His mother named him after Marcus Garvey, the Pan-Africanist founder and leader of the UNIA (Universal Negro Association). The Wood family was Christian and steeped in the Baptist tradition. Rev. Wood grew up in the church and accepted his call to ministry as a teenager and soon after left Ware Neck to pursue his education. He spent over 60 years pastoring various Baptist churches, with his longest tenure as Pastor of Providence Baptist Church in Baltimore, MD. He married and he and his wife had one son, Marcus, the second participant in this study. His first wife passed away when Marcus was about two years old. Rev. Wood remarried, and his new wife had a young daughter. They became a blended family. His stepdaughter is the mother of Darrell, the third participant in this study.

Marcus

Marcus is a Black American male and is 78 years old. He identifies as a Protestant Christian who has a "fluid" religious identity. He was born in Washington, D.C. in the home of his maternal grandparents. He grew up with his father and step-mother and sister primarily in Baltimore. Marcus grew up in the Christian faith in the Baptist Church and attended church regularly with his family. He also spent a significant amount of time with

his biological mother's family in Washington, D.C. and attended church with his grandparents who were also Christian. Marcus joined the U.S. Army while in college and fought in the Vietnam war. He married a woman who is from Baltimore and grew up in Providence Baptist Church. They had two daughters, me and my older sister, and are divorced. Marcus retired from the military after 7 years and worked for the Federal Government in Washington, D.C. in various capacities for many years before retiring. Marcus is remarried and lives in Gary, IN.

Darrell

Darrell is a 54-year-old Black American man who was born in Baltimore, MD. He is of the Muslim faith and is affiliated with the Moorish Science Temple of America, a denomination of the Muslim faith. Darrell spent his early years in Baltimore City where his family lived until his parents divorced when he was in junior high school. Following the divorce, he and his brother moved with their mother to Randallstown, MD, a suburb of Baltimore City. Darrell spent his early years attending his grandfather's church (Rev. Wood) with his mother and brother, but church and the Christian faith became less prominent for him as he moved into his early teenage years. Darrell moved out of his mother's home when he was 16 and engaged in criminal activity which eventually led him to prison, where he remained for 16 years. Darrell was introduced to the Muslim faith during his period of incarceration and continues to practice Islam. He resides in Randallstown, MD, and has a teenaged daughter.

Interviewing three members of one family across generations facilitated the examination of whether religion/spirituality is a protective factor insulating Black people in the U.S. from developing suicidal behavior as they navigate societal stress factors

including racial discrimination, post-incarceration status, and veteran status, and whether religion/spirituality as a protective factor is passed down intergenerationally. If so, it aims to explore whether there are any intergenerational patterns and/or differences in the utilization of religion/spirituality as a source of protection against developing suicidal behavior.

In addition, studying Black men, and particularly their utilization of religion/spirituality as a coping resource is responsive to a recent study that explored the role of religion as a protective factor against suicide for Black women where the researchers called for the study to be reproduced to explore this theme in Black men (Spates & Sutton, 2017). Additionally, “epidemiological data” support a particular focus on suicide and Black American men as they succumb to lethal self-harm at rates from 4 to 6 times greater than Black American women (Joe, Scott, Banks, Briggs, & Miller, et al. 2018, p.340).

Because of the impact of the slave trade and the intentional work to separate families and not record the history of Africans (White, Bay, Waldo, & 2013), it is rare for a Black family descended from enslaved Africans in the U.S. to be able to trace their history back to the area where their ancestors were enslaved and to have a living relative with a memory of an enslaved relative. In my own family, this linkage that we have to our enslaved ancestors through my paternal grandfather is invaluable. It is not a connection that I have on my mother’s side of the family. In addition, because of the impact of racism and its various manifestations in the U.S., including economic disparity and mass incarceration, a disproportionate number of Black men are missing from U.S. households (Cottrell, Herron, Rodriguez & Smith, 2019). This makes it difficult to find a

family with 3 generations of Black men, including one who is two generations removed from slavery. Bengtson, Copen, Putney, & Silverstein (2009) assert in their longitudinal study of the intergenerational transmission of religion, that “The study of religion and families, across generations, is an important yet underexamined area of research” (Bengtson, et al., 2009, p. 3). There is little research that explores how religious principles and practices are passed down across generations (Bengtson, et al., 2009; Myers, 1996). This is a special sample. However, the goal is not generalization. The aim is a depth of understanding and clarity of insight into a population whose particular mental health concerns are undervalued and underexamined. This small sample size enabled me to study the data more intensely, and, as a new researcher, it allowed me to be able to effectively manage the data (Cleary, Horsfall, & Hayter, 2014).

Interviews. I conducted semi-structured qualitative interviews of the participants according to a planned interview protocol with questions. See Appendix II. The interview questions were designed to facilitate a deeper exploration of the role of religion/spirituality in coping with racial discrimination with all three men, incarceration and post-incarceration experience with Darrell, and military and veteran experience with Marcus. All three participants are men of faith and were raised in the United States. This method allowed for the flexibility to ask follow-up questions based on the responses. It is a method that facilitates a more expansive inquiry into the participant’s perspective and understanding of the areas being explored (Blee & Taylor, 2002). I conducted each interview in person. All interviews were audio-recorded and video recorded. I interviewed Reverend Wood in June 2019 at his home in an assisted living facility in Baltimore. I broke the session up over two days. I returned in August 2019 for a brief

follow-up session after I transcribed the interview to review portions and ask a few clarifying questions, which is consistent with grounded theory (DeCuir-Gunby, Marshall, & McCulloch, 2011). During my visit to Baltimore in June to interview Reverend Wood, I also interviewed Darrell at his home in Randallstown, MD, an area outside of Baltimore. I conducted the session in one sitting. I interviewed Marcus in July 2019 in Chicago in a hotel room. I conducted the session in one sitting. I transcribed all of the interviews soon after conducting them. The entire process of interviewing and transcribing occurred from June 2019 to October 2019. I listened to all of the interviews two times. I transcribed as I listened to the recordings all the way through the first time. During the second listen, I closely reviewed the transcript and made any necessary corrections, and cleaned up the transcripts. The data from Rev. Wood's interview was not as robust as the other interviewees, so I consulted the book he wrote in 1998 about his life and ministry covering 50 years entitled, *And Grace Will Lead Me Home*. After completing the transcription for Darrel, I made a brief follow-up phone call to clarify one point. After completing the transcription for Marcus, I made two brief follow-up phone calls to clarify two points.

Grounded theory guided this process in the way that I was able to remain connected to the participants and interact with them fluidly through follow-up meetings and phone calls throughout the process as I absorbed and processed the data. This interaction and connection enhanced my clarity regarding the multiple dimensions of the experience of Black men navigating societal stressors and their utilization of religion/spirituality as a coping mechanism and beyond, and specifically the concept of Divine

Consciousness. Centering the critical component of race and racism and the Black experience in the U.S. facilitated a deeper analysis of these areas.

Process

Coding and Analysis

Throughout the coding process, according to my commitment to critical race theory, I remained cognizant of the historical and cultural implications of the Black American experience and the centrality of race and racism in their social environment in the U.S. The following steps reflect the grounded theory approach: (1) prior to the interviews, I identified and defined an initial set of theory-driven codes as a way of orienting myself, but did not rely on the codes after the interviews; (2) after I transcribed each interview, I read the transcriptions of each interview carefully and closely and identified an initial list of data-driven and research goals codes (DeCuir-Gunby, Marshall, & McCulloch, 2011); I generated this initial list by developing a general understanding of the overall focus of the data while staying open to exploring what was occurring in the data (Thornberg & Charmaz, 2014); (3) I met with my qualitative research advisor, Dr. Eli Tucker-Raymond, and I provided him a list of the initial codes and a copy of the transcripts from the three interviews, and had an initial discussion about the codes and the data; (4) we met again and discussed our individual findings from our separate, focused coding process of reading through the text and identifying text that matched the codes, discussed themes, refined, and added to the list of codes; (5) we met again and continued the process of discussing our findings from our process of reading through the text and identifying text that matched the codes, discussed themes and added

to the list of codes; Dr. Tucker-Raymond proposed the following initial set of meaning units/categories from our discussions to organize the themes: The first category is sources of strength with the following themes: God, spirituality, religion, faith/record of grace, family, Bible stories, Community (religious and secular), Africa, Blackness, and I added ancestors. The second category is discrimination/oppresion with the following themes: race/racism, incarceration, and Vietnam veteran. (6) we met a final time and completed the process of reviewing and comparing our findings by reviewing a chart I had prepared which outlined our respective findings for each participant; there were 27 codes; (7) I continued the process of further refining by breaking the categories down even further into subcategories. I decided to use the themes under each category to develop the subcategories, and I decided to split the discrimination/oppresion category into oppresion and changed the Vietnam veteran category to military. There were two versions of this. The final version is as follows: Category 1 is Sources of Strength and has the following five subcategories: religion, spirituality, faith/record of grace, Africultural, and effects of sources of strength. Category 2 is Oppression and has the following four subcategories: racism, incarceration, military, psychological effects of oppression. I defined each subcategory and outlined the rules for inclusion and exclusion (Saldana, 2009). I listed the corresponding code numbers under each category and subcategory; (8) I pasted excerpts of text from each participant under matching categories and subcategories and assessed the data within that framework; (9) then I reached the point of clarity regarding how the data should be analyzed through the 5 major themes: Divine Consciousness, Faith, Connection to God's Spirit, African-centered culture and communal support, and death consciousness.

Throughout the process, the codes remained provisional and flexible to allow for modification according to the data (Thornberg & Charmaz, 2014). Our process was in alignment with the “constant comparative method” as we engaged in a process of comparing the data, comparing the data with the codes, and assessing and comparing the codes (Thornberg & Charmaz, 2014, p. 158). As a result of the process of identifying codes, and grouping them into the categories and subcategories outlined above, I was able to reach the point of clarity regarding the above 5 major themes. At a certain point during the data collection process, the themes of death consciousness emerged as a way to describe the conditions within one’s mental environment which represents the state of one’s unawareness of the possession of God’s Spirit, or of one’s divinity. This state of unawareness makes one vulnerable to the impact of societal toxins such as racism and other systems of oppression and creates a mental environment conducive to entertaining suicidal thoughts that could lead to suicidal behavior. Divine consciousness emerged as a way of describing the environment that is the antithesis of this state. Divine consciousness represents the state of awareness of the possession of God’s Spirit or one’s own divinity. This state of awareness decreases one’s vulnerability to the impact of societal toxins and creates a protective layer within the mental environment that helps one to resist entertaining suicidal thoughts that could lead to suicidal behavior. The data/text operationalizing the categories and subcategories helped to illustrate these themes. For example, reading the data/text that described the participants’ expressions and experiences of the subcategory faith illustrated their belief/faith in God. Faith in God is required in order to develop Divine consciousness, as is being connected to God’s Spirit. Under the subcategory spirituality, data/text regarding spiritual coping practices

such as prayer illustrated how the participants cultivate connection to God's Spirit. I analyzed these themes in my autoethnography, and they are in accordance with universal spiritual principles. In my autoethnography, I outlined a conceptual system for generating Divine consciousness through faith and connection to God's Spirit. In addition, under subcategory Africultural, data/text regarding connection/care for others such as how the participants expressed the importance of helping others do well and survive illustrated the African-centered culture and communal support theme.

After the first draft of the write-up of the analysis, these themes were clarified even further to reflect faith as including a subtheme of intergenerational faith, and to highlight that these two themes, and Connection to God's Spirit, are subthemes of Divine consciousness. In addition, African-centered culture and communal support were revised to the theme African value of interdependence. The final write-up of the analysis highlighted the following subthemes of death consciousness that had been revealed in the data: a lack of faith and intergenerational faith, a lack of connection to God's Spirit, and a lack of the African value of interdependence. The final themes are illustrated in Figures 4a and 4b in Appendix I.

Dr. Tucker-Raymond and I had a total of 4 in-person meetings to review and discuss the data. By the fourth meeting, we determined that I had reached a stable point in the development of the themes.

Code analysis process:

I pasted excerpts of text from each participant under matching categories and subcategories (outlined above) on a word document with the aid of two computer screens. I pasted text under the categories and subcategories. There were a few areas I decided did

not reflect the code as I had originally determined and I did not add that text. There were some codes that overlapped (e.g. code 16 Interdependence w/God(a)w/others was under Category 1 Sources of Strength, subcategory 2 spirituality, and subcategory 5 effects of sources of strength.) There was only one code that I eliminated after the initial process of categorizing and subcategorizing. Code 21, grief, did not fit under any category. This process helped me to see the data in a different format and to absorb and interpret it more deeply. It helped me to see where there was overlap, and where I could consolidate codes. It also helped the data to seep into my spirit and subconscious in a different way. Going through the data after completing my autoethnography helped me to process it within the frame of Divine consciousness and death consciousness in a clearer way. As noted earlier, through my autoethnography, I was able to outline a conceptual system capable of generating Divine consciousness that illustrates how faith and connection to God's Spirit are required components for developing Divine consciousness. (see figure #, pg. #). This framing/terminology emerged for me during the data collection process this summer. As I was absorbing the data from the interviews with each of the men, and continuing in my own daily spiritual process of prayer and meditation, my understanding of what they shared about their religion and spirituality and connection to God as a source of strength was being integrated into my own understanding about God as a source of strength and resistance to a negative pattern of thinking that can lead one into despair and to desire to end one's life. My spiritual practices helped to position me to interpret the data in a way that broaden the scope of the analysis to include the work of exploring how one's connection to God's Spirit can insulate one's consciousness from becoming contaminated with thoughts of self-harm. The autoethnography journey provided an epistemological

grounding that strengthened my understanding and interpretation of the data and my connection to the data. As I moved through to the next stage of assessing the data through the categories and subcategories, I was able to see how the categories could be collapsed into the major themes of Divine consciousness, faith, connection to God's Spirit, African-centered culture, and communal support, and death consciousness. As noted above, the final themes are Divine consciousness, faith, intergenerational faith, connection to God's Spirit, and interdependence.

Trustworthiness

Barusch, Gringeri, & George (2011) conducted a study of 100 articles from social work journals to examine methods for ensuring good qualitative research. Based on their study and exploration of a variety of sources, they identified a list of 19 strategies from which qualitative researchers can choose to employ to increase rigor in qualitative research. This list includes the eight key factors Creswell (2007) identified, and they assert that he recommended that at least two of the strategies be employed (Barusch, Gringeri, & George, 2011). I have employed two strategies from Creswell's list, reflexivity and peer-reviewing/debriefing (explained below), which are on Barusch, Gringeri, & George, 2011's list, as well as the following additional strategies from their list: epistemology identified, sampling rationale explained, limitations identified, detailed analysis provided, theory and frameworks identified, audit trail, human subjects considerations noted (Barusch, Gringeri, & George, 2011, p. 12).

Epistemology. Gringeri, Barusch, & Cambron (2013) contend that epistemology as a research praxis is critical to the advancement of knowledge in the field of social

work. My epistemology is my Afrocentric approach which is explained previously under methodology and theoretical framework.

Reflexivity. Longhofer & Floersch (2012) contend that reflexivity is essential for advancing the science of social work research. Gringeri, Barusch, & Cambron (2013) assert that reflexivity enables the researcher to engage in the important process of remaining aware of the role of our background and social and historical position as we interpret and evaluate our connection to the research throughout the process. I employed a reflexive practice throughout the research process and I reflected on my cultural, racial, and spiritual, positionality as well as my connection to my family members and my positionality and connection to the participants, and made notes regarding my thoughts and feelings (Probst & Berenson, 2014). I accomplished this by remaining attuned to my responses to various points that would come up during the process of analyzing the data and I would write memos about them. For example, during the final peer review session with Dr. Tucker-Raymond, I experienced a profound revelation as we were discussing my cousin's belief that going to prison was a good thing for him because it was where he became a man. This sentiment is a powerful indictment regarding the conditions of our society. I have heard other people, particularly Black men, talk about the ways in which incarceration transformed them, but hearing it from someone close to me really made it sink in. This is not right. It helped me to shift my gaze from his personal transformation to include the condition of our society – how we have failed.

Sharing my thoughts, observations, questions, and ideas with Dr. Tucker-Raymond during our peer review sessions was a very fruitful exchange that helped me to broaden my understanding regarding what I was learning and interpreting through the

process of analysis regarding themes and concepts that would emerge (Probst & Berenson, 2014, p. 822). I also wrote memos regarding thoughts and ideas that emerged and connections I was making. The researcher's connection and responses to the data are "not seen as a problem to be reduced or overcome but as an essential element in the co-creation of knowledge" (Probst & Berenson, 2014, p. 816). I wrote my autoethnography chapter after I had transcribed the data and read the transcripts multiple times and engaged in the peer review process with Dr. Tucker-Raymond. Autoethnography is a reaction to the data, and a response to it as well. My intimacy with the data helped to illuminate areas of my own spiritual and cultural coping processes that I was exploring. Once completed, it deepened my understanding of the data and clarified my understanding of the primary themes that had emerged. Longhofer & Floersch (2012) question, "How do social workers take up scientific discourses or narratives and do something creative and novel with them? Reflexivity is essential to a science of social work" (Longhofer & Floersch, 2012, p. 512). It is essential as it requires the social worker and researcher to acknowledge their connection and contributions to the injustices within the larger social context surrounding the individuals and systems the social work field is positioned to address (Longhofer & Floersch, 2012). My reflexive process was deeply engaging and intuitive. It was at various stages a form of epistemological reflexivity where I explored ways of knowing (Longhofer & Floersch, 2012) the phenomena of Divine Consciousness and death consciousness. It was also a form of ontological reflexivity where I was engaging in the process of thinking about "the things that we take to be 'real' or 'knowable'...and examined the "importance or 'reality' of an internal, mental life" (Longhofer & Floersch, 2012, p. 514). My process of reflexivity

which culminated in my autoethnography was a creative journey that helped to transport the research to a place beyond where I imagined it could go. Gringeri, Barusch, & Cambron (2013) contend that “Reflexivity can strengthen the validity or knowledge claims in all research” (p. 56). My reflexive engagement helped to position me as an authority on African-centered coping practices which includes spiritual practices and helps to enhance the integrity of my research findings.

Engaging in reflexive practices helped me to remain attentive to how I have come to know what I have expressed in the results and analysis of the research.

Analytic memos. I took notes throughout the process and recorded my observations and reflections in analytic memos regarding questions and feelings that emerged (Saladana, 2012). This helped me to capture ideas throughout the process and to make connections between themes across participants as well as to my own data analyzed in my autoethnography.

Member checking. I employed member checking to contribute to the process of validating the data (Birt, Scott, Cavers, Campbell, & Walter, 2016). I conducted a follow-up member check interview with my grandfather two months after I interviewed him and had transcribed his interview in order to confirm parts of the interview and review parts of his interview where some of his responses were not clear (Birt, Scott, Cavers, Campbell, & Walter, 2016). After I completed the transcriptions of Darrell’s interview and my father’s interview, I engaged in brief member checking with each of them via phone calls to confirm a couple of areas in the interview.

Peer review. I engaged in a peer debriefing process with my qualitative research advisor, Dr. Tucker-Raymond. Dr. Tucker Raymond provided peer debriefing oversight

throughout the entire project (Padgett, 2004). Throughout this process, we discussed my “perspectives, reactions, and analyses” (Barusch, Gringeri, & George, 2011, p. 13). He provided consultation via phone when I was in Baltimore conducting interviews.

Following the transcription, we had four, approximately 2 hour long sessions regarding the data. We had extensive discussions regarding the historical, social, spiritual context of the data and regarding my insights emerging from my relationships with the interviewees. We discussed my theoretical ideas and concepts emerging regarding the new interpretation and understanding of suicide among Black people (as a product of death consciousness) and the approach to addressing it through spirituality (Divine Consciousness) and interdependence. This engagement helped to establish external validation for these emerging ideas (Padgett, 2004). I took notes throughout the process regarding my response to different parts of the data, synchronicities that were occurring, new ideas and understandings that were being revealed, and my reactions to what I heard that surprised me.

Barusch, Gringer, & George (2011) found that in addition to evaluating the rigor of the research, the value and quality of research must also be assessed “on the basis of its relevance to the profession and its potential impact on social justice” (Barusch, Gringer, & George, 2011, p. 18). This research is aimed at addressing the mental health needs of an underexamined population and highlighting the implications for systems beyond the social work and mental health communities such as the criminal justice system.

Human/Animal Subjects Review

The present study involved secondary data and human participants. The Boston College Institutional Review Board reviewed and approved the study via expedited review per Title 45 CFR Pt 46 FR 60366, FR#7.

CHAPTER VII-Findings of Quantitative Research

Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics for the study sample (N=7,766) and the frequency and percentages for all of the variables used in the analysis. In general, Black survey participants included 93% U.S. born; 41% were men and 59% were women; the mean age was 43; 40% reported an income under 20,000; 33% completed high school and 43% completed some college. The remaining tables display the results from the 30 models run. There were 6 models each for the 3 dimensions of perceived racial discrimination, for post-incarceration status, and for veteran status.

Association between racial discrimination, personal stress, religion/spirituality and suicide attempt

Racial discrimination in health care

Test of hypotheses. Models 1, 2, and 5 in Table 2 revealed consistent results in the association between racial discrimination in health care, personal stress, and attempted suicide. However, contrary to the hypothesis, Model 3, 4, & 6 (Table 7) revealed that there was no significant association between religion/spirituality and personal stress, racial discrimination in health care, and suicide attempt. The dimension of experiencing racial discrimination in health care was measured through two categories, experiencing racial discrimination when obtaining health care, and experiencing racial discrimination when receiving health care treatment. For hypothesis one, the results of the analysis show that the odds are greater that those who report experiencing racial discrimination in receiving health care treatment (Odds ratio = 2.0, $p < .001$, 95% CI: 1.36-2.96) and in both experiencing racial discrimination when obtaining health care and in experiencing racial discrimination when receiving health care treatment, (Odds ratio= 2.01, $p < .001$, 95%

CI:1.34-3.23), were more likely to have attempted suicide than those who did not. The results further show that when the personal stress variable and the sociodemographic variables were added to the analysis, there continued to be a statistically significant association between the racial discrimination in health care variable and suicide attempt. Therefore, for hypothesis one, the results further show that the odds are greater that those who reported experiencing racial discrimination when receiving health care treatment, (Odds ratio=1.62, $p<.02$, 95% CI:1.10-2.42), and in both obtaining health care and receiving health care treatment, (Odds ratio=1.90, $p<.01$, 95% CI:1.20-2.92), and also reported that they experienced personal stress, (Odds ratio=5.13, $p<.001$, 95% CI:3.50-7.54), were more likely to have attempted suicide than those who did not. The data further show that women were more likely to attempt suicide, (Odds ratio =1.42, $p<.02$, 95% CI: 1.10 – 1.90) and that as individuals advance in age, (Odds ratio=.98, $p<.001$, 95% CI: .98-.99) they are less likely to attempt suicide. As the income of those reporting income between the range of \$20,000-34,999 increases, (Odds ratio=.71, $p<.05$, 95% CI: .51-.99), they are less likely to attempt suicide. There were no statistically significant associations between education and attempted suicide, or between U.S. born status and attempted suicide and those born outside of the U.S. and attempted suicide.

Racial discrimination in public and other situations

Test of hypotheses. Models 1, 2, and 5 in Table 3 revealed consistent results in the association between racial discrimination in public and other situations, personal stress, and attempted suicide. The dimension of experiencing racial discrimination in public was measured through two categories, experiencing racial discrimination in public and experiencing racial discrimination in other situations. For hypothesis one, the data show

that the odds are greater than those who report experiencing racial discrimination in public (Odds ratio = 2.05, $p < .01$, 95% CI: 1.24 – 3.40), and those who report experiencing racial discrimination in any other situation (Odds ratio = 2.25, $p < .01$, 95% CI: 1.30-3.91), and those who report experiencing both racial discrimination in public and in any other situation, (Odds ratio = 2.25, $p < .001$, 95% CI: 1.50-3.44), are more likely to have attempted suicide than those who did not. The results further show that when the stress variable and the sociodemographic variables were added to the analysis, there continued to be a statistically significant association between racial discrimination in any other situations and suicide attempt. Therefore, for hypothesis one, the results show that the odds are greater than those who reported experiencing racial discrimination in any other situation (Odds ratio = 1.88, $p < .03$, 95% CI: 1.10 – 3.34), and both in public and in any other situation (Odds ratio = 1.84, $p < .01$, 95% CI: 1.15 – 2.95), (but not in public alone, as was the case before the addition of the stress variable) and those who also reported that they experienced personal stress, (Odds ratio = 4.85, $p < .001$, 95% CI: 3.30-7.20), were more likely to have attempted suicide than those who did not. The data also show that women were more likely to attempt suicide, (Odds ratio = 1.61, $p < .001$, 95% CI: 1.19 – 2.18). As the income of those reporting income between the range of \$20,000-\$34,999 increases, (Odds ratio = .65, $p < .01$, 95% CI: .457-.914) they are less likely to attempt suicide. There were no statistically significant associations between education and attempted suicide, or between U.S. born status and attempted suicide and those born outside of the U.S. and attempted suicide.

Racist names and threats

Test of hypotheses. Models 1, 2, and 5 in Table 4 revealed consistent results in the association between racial discrimination through racist names and threats, personal stress, and attempted suicide. The dimension of experiencing racist name-calling and threats was measured through two categories, being called a racist name and being threatened based on race. For hypothesis one, the results show that the odds are greater that those who reported being called a racist name (Odds ratio=2.42, $p<.001$, 95% CI: 1.56-3.75) and both being called a racist name and being threatened because of race (Odds ratio=2.41, $p<.001$, 95% CI: 1.50-3.88), are more likely to have attempted suicide than those who did not. The results further show that when the stress variable and the sociodemographic variables were added to the analysis, there continued to be a statistically significant association between the being called a racist name variable and suicide attempt, and both being called racist name and being threatened and suicide attempt. Therefore, for hypothesis one, the odds are greater that those who reported that they had been called a racist name, (Odds ratio=1.89, $p<.01$, 95% CI: 1.21-2.96) and who reported both being called a racist name and being threatened because of race (Odds ratio=2.07, $p<.01$, 95% CI: 1.29-3.30), and who also reported that they experienced personal stress, (Odds ratio=4.53, $p<.001$, 95% CI: 2.85-7.19), were more likely to have attempted suicide than those who did not. The data show that women were more likely to attempt suicide, (Odds ratio =1.90, $p<.001$, 95% CI: 1.42 –2.53) and that as individuals advance in age, (Odds ratio=.98, $p<.01$, 95% CI: .98-.10) they are less likely to attempt suicide. As the income of those reporting income between the range of 20,000-34,999 increases, (Odds ratio=.64, $p<.02$, 95% CI: .45-.92) they are less likely to attempt suicide.

There were no statistically significant associations between education and attempted suicide, or between U.S. born status and attempted suicide and those born outside of the U.S. and attempted suicide.

Stress as a moderator

Logistic regression was also used to further test the influence of stress to see whether stress moderates the association between racial discrimination and suicide attempts in Black people in the U.S. controlling for the sociodemographic variables by testing the main effect and the interaction effect in Model 6 of each of the three dimensions of racial discrimination and stress and the sociodemographic control variables, and there was no effect (see Tables 7, 8, & 9).

Religion/spirituality as a moderator

It was hypothesized that religion/spirituality would moderate the association between racial discrimination and personal stress and suicide attempt.

Religion/spirituality was measured through two variables. One question asked how important religious or spiritual beliefs are, and the other inquired how often one attended religious services. However, contrary to hypothesis one, the results of the analysis indicate that religion/spirituality did not influence the association between racial discrimination and personal stress and suicide attempts in Models 3 and 4 of each of the three dimensions of racial discrimination (see Tables 7, 8, & 9).

Post Incarceration

Test of hypotheses. Models 1, 2, and 5 in Table 5 revealed consistent results in the association between post-incarceration status and personal stress, and attempted suicide. The post-incarceration variable was measured through two categories, whether one had

ever been to jail or prison before age 18, and whether one had been to jail or prison after age 18. For hypothesis two, the data show that the odds are greater that those who reported going to jail or prison before age 18 (Odds ratio=2.18, $p<.01$, 95% CI: 1.30-3.66), and those who reported going to jail or prison after age 18 (Odds ratio=2.84, $p<.001$, 95% CI: 1.94-4.20), as well as those who reported both going to jail or prison before and after age 18 (Odds ratio=5.03, $p<.001$, 95% CI: 3.11-8.13), are more likely to have attempted suicide than those who did not.

The results further show that when the stress variable and the sociodemographic variables were added to the analysis, there continued to be a statistically significant association between the post-incarceration variable and suicide attempt. Therefore, for the second hypothesis, the odds are greater that those who reported going to jail or prison after age 18, (Odds ratio=2.53, $p<.001$, 95% CI:1.59-4.03) and those who reported both going to jail or prison before and after age 18 (Odds ratio=3.81, $p<.001$, 95% CI: 2.09-6.95), and who also reported that they experienced personal stress, (Odds ratio=4.71, $p<.001$, 95% CI: 3.22-6.90), were more likely to have attempted suicide than those who did not. The data also show that women were more likely to attempt suicide, (Odds ratio =1.88, $p<.03$, 95% CI: 1.37–2.58) and that as individuals advance in age, (Odds ratio=.99, $p<.05$, 95% CI: .98-.10) they are less likely to attempt suicide. As the income of those reporting income between the range of \$20,000-34,999 increases, (Odds ratio=.68, $p<.03$, 95% CI: .47-.96) they are less likely to attempt suicide. There were no statistically significant associations between education and attempted suicide, or between U.S. born status and attempted suicide and those born outside of the U.S. and attempted suicide.

Stress as a moderator

Logistic regression was also used to further test the influence of stress to see whether stress moderates the association between post-incarceration status and suicide attempts in Black people in the U.S., controlling for the sociodemographic variables, by testing the main effect and the interaction effect in the model with stress and the other variables. Model 6 in Table 5 revealed there was not a strong interaction, but there are two comparisons that are significant. They are the interaction between the group who reported being incarcerated since age 18 and who reported experiencing personal stress (Odds ratio=.35, $p<.08$, 95% CI: .11-1.11), and the group reporting both going to jail or prison before and after age 18 and experiencing personal stress (Odds ratio=.31, $p<.07$, 95% CI: .08-1.12). (See the predictive margins graph in Figure 1).

Religion/spirituality as a moderator

It was hypothesized that religion/spirituality would moderate the association between post-incarceration status and personal stress and suicide attempt. Again, religion/spirituality was measured through two variables. One question asked how important religious or spiritual beliefs are, and the other inquired how often one attended religious services. However, Models 3 and 4 in Table 10 revealed the analysis indicate that religion/spirituality did not influence the association between personal stress and post-incarceration status and suicide attempts among Black people in the U.S. as had been asserted in hypothesis two.

Veteran status

Test of hypotheses. Models 1, 2, and 5 in Table 6 revealed consistent results in the association between veteran status and personal stress and attempted suicide. The variable veteran status was measured through the question whether respondents ever served in active duty in the U.S. Armed Forces, Reserves or National Guard. For the third hypothesis, the data show that the odds are greater that those who reported serving in active duty in the U.S. Armed Forces, Reserves or National Guard (Odds ratio=1.80, $p<.05$, 95% CI: 1.01-3.19), are more likely to have attempted suicide than those who did not.

The results further show that when the personal stress variable and the sociodemographic control variables were added to the analysis, there continued to be a statistically significant association between the veteran status variable and suicide attempt, although there was not statistically significant association between the veteran status variable and suicide attempt when the personal stress variable was added without the control variables. Therefore, for the third hypothesis, the odds are greater that those who reported serving in active duty in the U.S. Armed Forces, Reserves or National Guard (Odds ratio=2.48, $p<.01$, 95% CI:1.34-4.59) and those who also reported that they experienced personal stress, (Odds ratio=5.31, $p<.001$, 95% CI: 3.74-7.56), were more likely to have attempted suicide than those who did not. The data also show that women were more likely to attempt suicide, (Odds ratio =1.75, $p<.001$, 95% CI: 1.34–2.28) and that as individuals advance in age, (Odds ratio=.98, $p<.001$, 95% CI: .976-.991) they are less likely to attempt suicide. As the income of those reporting income between the range of \$20,000-\$34,999 increases, (Odds ratio=.69, $p<.05$, 95% CI: .496-.961) they are less

like to attempt suicide. As the income of those reporting income within the range \$35,000-59,999 increases (Odds ratio=.62, $p<.03$, 95% CI: .407-.954), they are less likely to attempt suicide. Those reporting to have completed high school (Odds ratio=.62, $p<.05$, 95% CI: .39, 1.00) were less likely to attempt suicide as they advanced in their education. There were no statistically significant associations between U.S. born status and attempted suicide and those born outside of the U.S. and attempted suicide.

Stress as a moderator

Logistic regression was also used to further test the influence of stress to see whether stress moderates the association between veteran status and suicide attempts in Black people in the U.S. controlling for sociodemographic variables by testing the main effect and the interaction effect in the model with veteran status and personal stress and the sociodemographic control variables. Model 6 in Table 11 revealed there was no effect.

Religion/spirituality as a moderator

It was hypothesized that religion/spirituality would influence the association between veteran status and personal stress and suicide attempt. As previously noted, religion/spirituality was measured through two variables. One question asked how important religious or spiritual beliefs are, and the other inquired how often one attended religious services. However, Model 4 in Table 11 revealed the results of the analysis indicate that religion/spirituality did not influence the association between veteran status and personal stress and suicide attempt among Black people in the U.S. as had been asserted in hypothesis three.

CHAPTER VIII-Findings of Qualitative Research

Suicide is defined in the Western world as a conscious act of lethal self-harm by an individual trapped in a “multidimensional malaise” who perceives death as the only solution to an identified crisis (Shneidman, 1985, p. 203). As illustrated in the analysis below, through the framework of Divine consciousness and death consciousness, suicide or suicidal behavior can be understood as emerging when one is in the state of death consciousness and is unaware of one’s possession of God’s Spirit or one’s own divinity. This state of unawareness makes one vulnerable to the impact of societal toxins as a result of a lack of connection to God and family and a network of support. The experiences of each of the men in this study reveal faith and intergenerational faith, connection to God’s Spirit, and the African value of interdependence. These three components are the substance of their Divine consciousness which protects them from developing a death consciousness. For Rev. Wood and Marcus, this consciousness and way of being created an environment where death consciousness did not seem to have developed in their life. They built enough of a barrier through their faith and support network where any thoughts of suicide or related behavior have either not existed or were fleeting and did not take root. For Darrell, the seeds of faith that were planted early in his life through church attendance and Bible studies did not take root and shield him from a death consciousness that manifested in non-traditional suicidal behavior as a teenager. He was not engaging in practices that connected him to God, and he moved out of his mother’s home when he was 16. However, while in prison, he converted to Islam, and his faith and community in prison nurtured those early seeds and helped him to experience a shift in consciousness from death to Divine. Divine consciousness will be explored

through the stories of each of the men. Divine consciousness through faith, including intergenerational faith, and connection to God's Spirit, and Afrocentric value of interdependence will be explored through Rev. Wood and Marcus first, and death consciousness will be addressed in the context of the analysis of those themes in their stories. Darrel's story will follow separately and will provide a more in-depth exploration of death consciousness that will describe his transition from death consciousness into Divine consciousness and will explore the themes of faith, intergenerational faith, connection to God's Spirit, and the Afrocentric value of interdependence.

Divine Consciousness

Foolish talk, all of this, you say, of course; and that is because no American now believes in his religion. Its facts are mere symbolism; its revelation vague generalities; its ethics a matter of carefully balanced gain. But to most of the four million black folk emancipated by civil war, God was real. They knew Him. They had met Him personally in many a wild orgy of religious frenzy, or in the black stillness of the night. His plan for them was clear; they were to suffer and be degraded, and then afterwards by Divine edict, raised to manhood and power; and so on January 1, 1863, He made them free.

W.E.B. DuBois, 1935

The above quote by Black sociologist W.E.B. DuBois from his work, *Black reconstruction: An essay toward a history of the part which black folk played in the attempt to reconstruct democracy in America, 1860-1880*, illuminates the long history of intimacy Black people in the United States have with the Divine. For many of the enslaved, and for many Black people today, God is not an abstract construct defined by old scriptures that prescribe rules of order. God is a personal, unseen being whose presence and power is their life force. Divine consciousness is the state of one's awareness of the possession of God's Spirit, or of one's own divinity. It describes one's

state of being manifested through one's connection to God's Spirit enabling one to manifest as one's true self. Such an acute awareness of the Divine has shielded many Black people from the full impact of the pain this country has consistently carved out for them. As will be revealed below, Rev. Wood and Marcus have faith in the unseen companion force that guides and protects them. Through their religion and spiritual practices, and interdependency with family and their network of support insulated them from developing a death consciousness and entertaining thoughts of suicide. The lives of both men reveal how these spiritual and cultural factors have been critical at important points and challenges throughout their lives and how they have experienced God's presence and power. This assurance has helped them to know they are accompanied, calmed anxieties, developed self-control, and provided psychological healing and mental protection in a toxic world. What follows are segments of their life stories that illustrate how cultivation of Divine consciousness through faith, connection to God's Spirit, and the African value of interdependence helped to shield them from suicidal vulnerability.

Faith, including intergenerational faith, refers to one's belief in the existence of God and God's power to be present in one's life to provide care and support. Connection to God's Spirit refers to one's proximity to the Spiritual essence of God or one's relationship to God's Spirit. The Spirit, also known as the Holy Spirit, is an invisible yet tangible manifestation of God's presence that can be felt in various ways depending upon the strength and quality of one's connection. These qualities, along with the African value of interdependence, help to create an atmosphere where one can cultivate a Divine consciousness, a life-affirming mentality where one realizes one's possession of God's Spirit or one's own divinity. This state of awareness decreases one's vulnerability to the

impact of societal toxins and creates a protective layer within the mental environment that helps one to resist engaging suicidal thoughts that could lead to suicidal behavior. Death consciousness will be addressed in the context of the analysis of those themes. With the exception of faith, these constructs are not terms that the men used explicitly. They are terms that emerged as a way to describe common themes and they are reflective of Afrocentric culture.

Faith

There is no simple or singular definition of faith. It is multidimensional and complex, and definitions are rooted in the human context. Theologian James Fowler (1981) illustrates this through his text, *Stages of faith: The psychology of human development and the quest for meaning*, a research project that explores the “human side of faith” (Fowler, 1981, p. 32). He articulates the following statement regarding faith, “...as we look at the data of lives of faith, our own and those of others, we are struck by the recognition that faith is *response* to action and being that precedes and transcends us and our kind” (Fowler, 1981, p. 32-33). At the root of faith is belief in the unseen God as a presence that guides and influences one’s life. According to the New Testament scripture Hebrews 11:1 “...faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen” (KJV). Research (Lawrence, Oquendo, & Stanley, 2016) shows that having a religious affiliation can protect one against deciding to take steps to end one’s life. A presence that is beyond us yet also in us. Such belief is a critical component of the process of building the shield against death consciousness which protects one’s true self. Research has also shown that core religious beliefs are an important element of the

protective shield against suicide as they can help prevent the development of hopelessness, a key risk factor for suicide (Norko, Freeman, Phillips, Hunter, Lewis, Viswanathan, 2017; Stack & Kposowa, 2011; Greening & Stoppelbein, 2002). There is no escaping the unseen. Rev. Wood and Marcus explain their experience of this God force in response to the questions below:

Do you believe in God? If so, can you describe your understanding of God?

Rev. Wood

Yes. As a Spirit...that is ever present in the world. Ever present in the world, and with an ...unknown origin. I don't care how you do it, you can't put God in a home...or a particular abiding place. We know He exists, we believe He's somewhere, but we can't find out where.

In his book, *And Grace Will Lead Me Home*, Rev. Wood (1998/2004) explicitly expresses his belief in God's place and role. He asserts, "We need the Spirit of God dwelling within, giving help as we make our decisions" (Marcus, 1998/2004, p. 162).

Marcus

I know God does things. I know God has a good sense of humor. Because sometimes I think, I think God is sitting on one cloud and the devil is sitting on a hill and the devil is saying, I'm going to mess with him and you watch what he does, and God says yeah go head, fool with him, he's Ok. We'll see what happens... And so there you go bopping up and down the street not knowing God and Satan got this thing going and you--bam for some reason you fall, for whatever reason-physically, financially, emotionally-you fall, Ok. And then you don't know they're sitting around waiting to see how you're going to get up, or not get up, how you're going to react...when you come out on the other side of an experience like that and then you say, I couldn't have made that by myself, Ok. Or, I could've taken a left instead of right and I could have ended up someplace else where Satan wanted me to be, but you don't know that until after you finish that journey.

Living a life where you know that you are surrounded and guided by God, an unseen presence that you cannot see yet you know exists, grounds one in a way that is hard to measure. Black theologian Howard Thurman (1949/1976) describes the critical impact of God's presence on the vitality of the oppressed. He asserts,

In this world the socially disadvantaged man is constantly given a negative answer to the most important personal questions upon which mental health depends: 'Who am I? What am I'...The awareness of being a child of God tends to stabilize the ego and results in a new courage, fearlessness, and power (Thurman, 1949/1976, p. 49-50).

Rev. Wood and Marcus have described their awareness of God's presence as an interactive experience of one who guides and who helps in times of trouble, which helped build a psychological shield that manifested into Divine consciousness and kept them from developing a death consciousness. They both know God as being present as one who guides and takes care of them. Rev. Wood reveals this in his book when he asserts, "We need the Spirit of God dwelling within, giving help as we make our decisions" (Marcus, 1998/2004, p. 162). Marcus reveals this in the text above where he describes God as someone who is watching over him as Satan tries to bother him, and when he gets through to the other side of a challenge, he seems to attribute his success to God. He asserts, "I couldn't have made that by myself." This awareness is aligned with Thurman's description of God as father being present in the life of socially disadvantaged men, such as Black men, which he describes provides a stabilizing force producing power and fearlessness in them.

Research (Whitehead & Bergeman, 2012) has shown that people who sense God's presence through everyday spiritual experiences (ESE), have reduced stress and identify ESE as an effective coping mechanism (Whitehead & Bergeman, 2012). Their

understanding of God as one who guides and shields highlights the dynamic multidimensional qualities that make God like a companion who accompanies one through life. These factors help to generate feelings of hope, and researchers have found that hope may be seen as a protective factor against suicide for Black Americans (Davidson, et al., 2010).

Intergenerational Faith

Faith is lived and it is shared. The family context is a place where faith practices are richly engaged. In their longitudinal study of the intergenerational transmission of religion, with data collected from members of multigenerational families over the course of 30 years, across four generations from 1971-2000, Bengtson, Copen, Putney, and Silverstein (2009) found that grandparents had an impact on the religiosity of their grandchildren and assert that “religious beliefs and practices that formed within nuclear and extended families persist into adulthood with parents and grandparents simultaneously serving as independent and joint agents of religious socialization” (p. 339-340).

The experiences of a family member can reveal the quality of one’s awareness of and connection to God, as well as belief in God’s ability to meet one’s needs. It is the substance of God as stabilizer. In the examples below, Rev. Wood talks about how he gleaned his faith practice from his parents and his grandmother. He asserts that both his parents (Frank and Julia) influenced him “by the way they lived according to their faith.” He further explains:

I was born in this country. And naturally, I was born in the faith of my parents. And that’s all I knew existed in the world at that time. I didn’t know any other religion or any other faith. I went to church because my father carried us to church.

He explained that his mother was “deeply embedded in the Baptist faith and in religion” and that she memorized many passages of scripture, and the 23rd Psalm was her favorite. He adopted these practices. In his book Rev. Wood describes how entrenched he was in church. He explains, “Union Zion Church was the focal point of our childhood. We attended Sunday school there each week, where we learned the Bible inside-out. And we also attended regular, Wednesday-night services that supplemented our Sunday marathons on the hard wooden benches” (Marcus, 1998/2004, p. 12). Each church service and each scripture embedded in his memory contributed to the layer of faith shield that materialized into his Divine consciousness. When asked whether or not his faith has helped him cope with being African American in this country, he replied, “Oh, yeah...it identifies who I am. And it helps me directly.” He asserts that his faith has also helped him to cope with feelings he has had during stressful times. When asked whether he has ever experienced times in his life when he was overwhelmed and thought about ending his life, he replied, “No, not seriously.” He affirmed that his religion helped him to cope with those feelings. “At one point you think, yes...you think you want to go on a little further.” Religion, and the faith it promotes, helps one to know one can go a little further when they reach those difficult places where thoughts of suicide can enter and breed if one has a death consciousness where there is a disconnect from Divinity.

Thurman (1949/1976) describes how his formerly enslaved grandmother instilled this important lesson into his spirit. His grandmother shared the message she heard from the “slave minister” reminding them that “You-you are not niggers. You-you are not slaves. You are God’s children” (Thurman, 1949, 1976, p. 50). Rev. Wood received the same faith wisdom from his formerly enslaved grandmother, Susan. He shared that she

was also a Baptist and that she taught his family the hymn, “Oh Happy Day.” He describes the power of his grandmother’s influence in his book. Susan and her husband Moses were enslaved on a plantation in Ware Neck, VA where Rev. Wood and his brothers were born and raised. They were both people of faith. Moses died before Rev. Wood was born. Rev. Wood recalls in his book how much Susan talked about her great love for Moses and how it impacted her love for God. He explains, “She’d tell me how old Moses---a ‘kitchen slave’ during his childhood and teenage years---had been the ‘light of her life’ and the living sign of ‘God’s love for all on this earth” (Wood, 1998/2004, p. 3). Rev. Wood details his grandmother’s extraordinary faith and how, even in the midst of the Great Depression, she “didn’t let the hard times bother her” (Wood, 1998/2004, p. 3). The Depression was a layer of struggle that could not match the days she spent enslaved as a child laboring ten to twelve hours a day picking soybean and corn (Wood, 1998/2004, p. 3). Her extraordinary faith produced a Divine consciousness that enabled her to live joyously on earth, in this midst of oppression, as if she were in heaven. Rev. Wood absorbed this faith from her. His description of his grandmother’s embodied faith, and the impact it had on his faith formation and socialization, suggests that a unique faith insight, as well as an anointing for it, can also be passed down from one generation to the next.

He describes listening to her as she rocked in her chair and smoked her corncob pipe:

Puffing and rocking, Susan would laugh joyfully, with the memories burning in her wrinkled, elderly face. And I’d watch and listen, utterly fascinated, while waiting eagerly for that inevitable moment when the joy and the love would come bursting out of her once again:

O happy day...

*O happy day...
When Jesus washed my sins away!*

I'd sit at her knee, feeling the power of her faith, the warmth of her kindness, and already beginning to understand something about the love of God that's reflected in each one of us, and that makes this great old world go around and around (Wood, 1998/2004, p.3-4).

Rev. Wood absorbed a quality of faith from his grandmother that enables one to transcend the worldly effects of trauma and oppression. This is not to suggest that his grandmother or he never felt the impact of trauma or never experienced normal human emotions such as anger and pain that flows from oppression. It describes the quality of spiritual resilience that one possesses with this level of Divine consciousness. She sang spirituals of joy which expressed her faith in Jesus and expressed her love for God, in the midst of her stories about her childhood enslaved. Rev. Wood gained access to her interior life which allowed him to see God and understand faith through her life of struggle and spiritual resilience. She did not talk about her period of enslavement in a way that expressed anger or hatred towards the White oppressor. Her focus was on a message of faith and love. This helps to explain Rev. Wood's responses to questions regarding whether or not he ever had negative experiences associated with being Black and if any such experiences impacted his mental health and well-being. He answered "no" to those questions and to the questions inquiring whether or not he had ever experienced racial discrimination. However, stories from his book regarding his role in the civil rights movement, and knowing the period of racial segregation he lived through, confirm that he did experience some forms of racial discrimination (Wood, 1998/2004). But these data point to something else that is being elucidated. The quality of Susan's

Divine consciousness that her grandson Marcus absorbed from her prevents the manifestation of death consciousness and suicidal thoughts. Susan was a woman who, although had been enslaved and endured the inhumane condition of slavery even as a child, continued to possess a strong faith in God.

Rev. Wood did not indicate in his interview or in his book that his grandmother encouraged him to hate those who oppressed them. She kept joyous spirituals in her heart. Her songs were evidence that she remained connected to God and love and passed that down to her grandchild. The spirituals he recalls her singing, “Oh happy day! When Jesus washed my sins away!” while sitting at her knee, he explains helped him feel the power of her faith and enabled him to begin to understand the power of God’s love in everyone (Wood, 1998/2004, p. 3-4). As asserted previously, the spirituals sung by the enslaved and the former enslaved and their descendants, were more than songs of contentment. They revealed power and were a reflection of an inner life stabilized through intimacy with God cultivated through a multitude of experiences with God which produce strong faith. Susan’s faith persisted as a free woman. She passed it down to her children, and to her children’s children, and it provides evidence of one who possessed Divine consciousness and whose whole being was in harmony with God. This is not a statement of her perfection. Nor is it an attempt to essentialize her faith and pretend that she never experienced hate or the full range of human emotions. It is an expression of her alignment with God.

Rev. Wood absorbed his grandmother’s liberating faith, and it enabled him to persist through racial discrimination and maintain his hold on the Gospel. This freedom was evident in the way Rev. Wood was able to work well with white leaders in the civil

rights movement and impact the dynamics in the segregated town of Woodbury, NJ early in his ministry. He was called to pastor Bethlehem Baptist Church in Woodbury, New Jersey the summer of 1949 with his wife and two young children while he continued his seminary studies at Crozer Theological Seminary in Chester, PA, (Wood, 1998/2004).

Rev. Wood describes that period:

This grueling trip took three hours, and each evening I would return the same way. It was an arduous, demanding way of life, there's no question about that. And yet I was burning with the spirit, on fire with a dream of spreading the Gospel far and wide. How well I remember those early years of tumult and struggle (Wood, 1998/2004, p.100)

Part of that tumult and struggle included getting involved in the struggle for civil rights for Black people. Although the state of New Jersey had passed a recent civil rights bill, towns like Woodbury had not begun to implement it and racial segregation persisted in places like the restaurants. Rev. Wood noted, "...they simply didn't want to see any black faces in their posh, upscale eateries" (Wood, 1998/2004, p. 101). Nor were there any Black people on their police force. Rev. Wood shares,

...it wasn't long before my arrival there that I made a very difficult and risky decision: I decided that as one of the town's leading ministers, I couldn't stand by passively while the struggle for integration went forward without me. Deep down I knew that I would have to assume the burden of leadership (Marcus, 1998/2004, p.100).

Rev. Wood worked well with one of the local white pastors and, after a year of "mostly thoughtful and amicable meetings" they were successful in getting the politicians and police officials in Woodbury to implement the civil rights bill which made the restaurants and police force accessible to Black people (Wood, 1998/2004, p. 101). His capacity to

work to persist through racial discrimination and stay focused on achieving civil rights for Black people, without developing a death consciousness, is evidence of a “secondary appraisal process” at work. He described the experience in a way that seemed pleasing and he was without bitterness.

Further evidence of this is freedom is found in his reflections at the end of his book about the future of what he calls, “the so-called ‘Black Church.’” He contends:

I believe the future of the black church is in giving up its blackness and returning to the Christ of our slave parents where Jesus was Jesus without concern about color or date of His birth or when He rose from the dead. Our blackness will not save us without a strong faith in a source of power outside ourselves. It was the God and Christ of the Christian faith which sustained our fathers and mothers through that long period of slavery
(Wood, 1998/2004, p. 191).

Here, Rev. Wood is not rejecting or denying his Blackness or the importance of Black culture. He is speaking to the Blackness constructed through struggle that left out the connection to the Spirit of God that saved his ancestors. In his interview, he shared how his father, who was born on a plantation, and his mother, “lived according to their faith” and were deeply involved in their church. He was raised in an atmosphere where Black people who were not too many years removed from slavery, were rooted in church and were in relationship with God. Through Rev. Wood’s life, the role of faith and connection to God, as well as the power of family and history are evident. The lessons he learned from his grandmother regarding her faith through her struggle as an enslaved woman were transformative and seemed to have inoculated him from a death consciousness that would entertain feelings of inferiority and allow his true self to be disconnected from the Spirit of God.

Marcus

Marcus experienced and observed the faith of his maternal grandparents whom he was very close to and spent a significant amount of his childhood with in Washington, D.C. He lived with them during the summers and spent holidays with them, and his aunt and uncle, who also lived in the home. He asserts that they demonstrated their faith, “just by the way they lived their lives...as a generous caring people.” His grandparents went to church, and while he had to attend church regularly when he was at home in Baltimore, his grandparents gave him the freedom to decide whether to go to church or not. Beyond church, he saw their faith in action through the way their home was a source of refuge and support for so many in the community.

That’s where I learned that people are people. You don’t ask what their education is, or what their background is, or who their this or that is, people are just people. Because my grandmother’s door was always open to anybody. She fed everybody that came in. She didn’t ask them any questions about anything other than, are you hungry? Ok. I never heard her talk bad about anybody nor did I hear my uncle, or my aunt, or my grandfather talk bad about anybody.

Marcus absorbed the active faith of his grandparents expressed through intimate interpersonal connections with people in the community in a way that nurtured his spirit and cultivated his Divine consciousness. This expression of their divinity helped to build his internal faith foundation. The faith that was nurtured in Marcus’ grandparents’ home is what Fowler (1981) would characterize as “human faith,” a term he applies to the faith theologian H. Richard Niebur outlines. About Niebur, Fowler (1981) asserts, “He sees faith taking form in our earliest relationships with those who provide care for us in infancy...He sees faith in the shared visions and values that hold human groups together”

(Fowler, 1981, p. 50.) Marcus' faith seeds were planted in his grandparents' home where he was born and where he spent significant time during his formative years. It grew and strengthened through various experiences throughout his life and remains embedded as a resource. His reflections illustrate it as a practice:

Faith, you gotta have faith. If you don't have faith, you might as well give it up. I mean...faith is a feeling or emotion that – this I can do...regardless of how hard it is even though the things that people, may tell you got to can't do, but I have faith that I can do this... And it's its that little extra something that you say--well I've done all I can to be successful with this, but I think I'm going to go just a little further to see what happens because I think I can get there. Well, you're not going to get there, but if you said, I've done all I can now, but I gotta go another step, I've got to take that next step, that's faith because you, I think you build up a faith habit – if you do something and you have faith in yourself and you're successful with it, then the next time you do something, it may be bigger and more complex, but you think back to when you had faith, the other time and you do it again...You could not be a part of the civil rights movement and not have faith and not be, and not be a Christian person or a follower of non-violence, um, so you had to do that.

His "faith habit" was evident through his persistence and self-control in an incident he described in high school when he experienced rejection because he was Black. He went to a desegregated high school and heard about the military academy through students at his school. He decided he wanted to become a test pilot. He shared the news with his school counselor who was White and did not support the idea because he was Black.

I went to see my counselor. And I said I just wanted to let you know that I applied to the Air force academy and he said, "for what?" and I said, I want to be a fighter pilot. He says, "No you don't. Think of something else."

It made me feel pissed off because he didn't know what he was talking about. I wouldn't talk to him anymore about anything that I wanted to do academically because he was useless to me at that point...I learned to exist without him. In other words, I became my own counselor.

This early experience of racism as a young person in high school had an impact. Walker, et al., 2017 assert that “Researchers have noted that both race-related stress and experiences of racism have profound implications for the psychological health of African American youth and adults” (p. 89). Marcus’ response to the racism he experienced from his counselor demonstrates self-control and self-esteem. His faith fueled these qualities which reflect his awareness of his identity in God and his connection to God. His assertion, “I learned to exist without him...I became my own counselor” is evidence of one who is being stabilized through an awareness of God as one’s companion and caretaker who helps him through trouble as demonstrated earlier. To be able to cut off his counselor and vow to find his own way exudes a level of confidence that comes from awareness of God’s presence in one’s life. This is a display of his Divine consciousness. Instead of allowing that interaction to discourage him, he went on to continue to pursue his goals. His faith provided stability and the assurance of an awareness of God’s presence at work in the situation which helps one maintain a sense of control, and the capacity to persist when obstacles arise. This capacity for self-control is a product of his faith. According to New Testament scripture Galatians 5:22-23, it is a fruit of God’s Spirit. “But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control” (NIV).

He has carried this faith practice, and the resulting fruit, throughout his life.

And that’s something else you have to do in life when you find that there are people that just give you wrong answers, OK? Sometimes you have to be your own automobile mechanic or pediatrician, or gastroenterologist, alright? Because if you don’t, then you may not like the outcome. In other words, your car is not working and they tell you it’s a \$2,000 bill and you don’t know its only a \$75.00 dollar bill. You have to do that. It can be life saving.

Marcus affirmed that experiences like these impact his mental health or emotional well-being. He shares:

Of course they do, of course they do, you know that. Why wouldn't they. We're all the result of our total experiences or whatever it is you know, it all comes in. The question is what you do about that. Do you fly off the handle? Do you run and shoot 17 people?

He was asked whether these experiences impacted his self-esteem and the way he feels about himself. He contends:

They all, they do, sure they do. You shrug it off and keep going. You try not to let it bother you...I wouldn't...because if you do, you'll end up beaten down. You don't want that. Nobody wants that.

The ongoing pressure of resisting racism and the impulse to internalize feelings of low-self worth that can emerge from those negative encounters builds over time and can erode one's sense of self (Walker, et al., 2014). Regarding the impact of being rejected and devalued through racism, Walker and colleagues (2014) contend that "the condition of being ostracized and dehumanized is consonant with Durkheim's conceptualization of 'egoistic suicide' that is ascribed to those who experience low integration to society and are thus detached from society" (Walker, et al., 2014, p. 550). This erosion of self creates disconnection from one's true self and the opening where death consciousness can develop. Faith interrupts this process and keeps those feelings of low-self worth from taking root.

His faith, and the faith lessons of his grandparents, helped him to remain rooted in his identity as he experienced racism throughout his life. An experience of overt racism reveals how it influenced his awareness of his cultural identification as a Black person. When asked to describe the first time he became aware that he was Black, he responded:

You become aware that you are a *Nigger* first because somebody calls you that. You don't just turn around and say, oh I guess that's because I'm black, Ok. So that's the first thing you hear.

This occurred when he was 5 or 6 years old. He experienced racial violence early. When being called a racial slur triggers your awareness that your Blackness is an object of hatred and rejection, there is tremendous psychological work required to counter that narrative in your consciousness. According to Walker, Francis, Brody, Simons, Cutrona, et al., (2017), "Experiences of racism can be problematic in childhood and preadolescence, which are critical stages of psychological development" (Walker, et al., 2017, p. 89). This work continues as one proceeds through life while also working to dismantle the systems that help racism flourish. Marcus relayed a negative experience he had as a result of being Black. He was demonstrating for civil rights. "Picketing the gas and electric company and somebody spits on you." His response when asked how this experience made him feel about his place in society reflects the ongoing stability and self-esteem that his faith produced. He shared:

That I was equal to anybody else in society...Because it never changed my perception of my concept of myself being equal to anybody else in society. You can spit on me and I'm still the same. You can not hire me and I'm still the same. You can not promote me and I'm still the same. Because I've seen people not get promoted because they're black, the white man gets promoted. And you have to learn the game that's being played...

The way he describes how his grandparents lived their faith, "as generous caring people" who did not judge people based on their appearance or backgrounds, is evidence that he was formed in an affirming environment which nurtured his self-esteem and planted seeds of awareness of how all people should be treated with dignity and respect.

Enduring being spat on and called a disgusting name as a part of your lived experience in

a country that has rejected the humanity of your people from its inception, takes tremendous self-control. His faith and the faith he experienced through his grandparents helped to nurture that. It reflects the quality of Divine consciousness that his father has and his great-grandmother Susan had. While he did not share stories of encounters of racism that his maternal grandparents had, the quality of love and openness they cultivated in the community contributed to the faith and love nurtured in him which contributed to his ability to remain rooted in response to those experiences.

When asked whether as a result of these experiences he has ever felt like he wanted to end his life, he was adamant that they had no power to overwhelm him. He asserted:

No. no. I just looked at you know, life is always a constant problem-solving process. Some problems are bigger than others, Ok. But just because there are problems doesn't mean you say Oh, this is too much, I gotta, gonna cut my throat. You gotta love yourself more than that.

His faith-fueled, self-controlled responses to these racial incidents throughout his life reveals the presence of a shield that has been a barrier to thoughts of lethal self-harm. His ability to respond in such a way supports the literature that shows that religiosity moderates the relationship between perceived racism and suicide ideation among Black American adults (Walker, Salami, Carter, & Flowers, 2014).

Connection to God's Spirit

Prayer is a spiritual coping practice that helps to facilitate the connection between one's spirit and God's Spirit. It can be a resource that helps one to feel God as a companion and guide through life's challenges and facilitates the accompaniment God provides through the relationship. Prayer can be like communicating to a friend for

companionship or for support during a time of need. Prayer has been an important resource historically for Black people. For the enslaved, it was a resource that affirmed their agency as it was activity that the enslaver could not monitor or control. Black theologian Katie Cannon (1996) says this about prayer for Black people, “I grew up understanding the Black prayer tradition to be the authentic living bridge between Black people’s stories, Black people’s music, and Black people’s source of faith” (Cannon, 1996, p. 36). Research shows that prayer helps people gain a healthy perspective on challenges which has a positive psychological impact (McCulloch, Parks-Stamm, 2018), and prayer has been shown to be a significant resource for managing suicidal ideation (Lawrence, Oquendo, Stanley, 2016; Osafo et al., 2013). Rev. Wood and Marcus incorporate prayer into their lives and reveal how it has served as a resource for guidance during critical life challenges.

Rev. Wood

When asked how he would describe his prayer life, Rev. Wood responded: “Everyday.” When asked what he believes is happening when he prays, he said he believes his prayers are answered. Prayer has played a prominent role in his life and in his ministry. In his book, he describes how important it is as a vehicle for seeking God’s guidance and counsel. As he describes in his book, during a critical period while he was pastoring Providence Baptist Church in Baltimore, he had decided that it was necessary to relocate the church to a temporary location while a new church was built as the old building was in disrepair and no longer suitable for use. Some of the membership disagreed with this decision and had filed a lawsuit against him and the congregation, and he directed the church to pray for guidance. See his statement below:

My dear friends... We are not going to decide our future this evening, as planned. We are not going to vote on the move to First Baptist, or on the proposal to build the new church on Pennsylvania Avenue. Instead, I want each and every one of us to leave this church in a few moments, and to head home, and to spend the next month in devout prayer, asking God which course of action will really be the best for us. We cannot decide a matter as grave and serious as this one until we have put it squarely in God's hands!"

(Wood, 1998/2004, p. 108).

His prayers were answered. The majority of the membership agreed with the plan and the court dismissed the lawsuit. The new, solar-powered heated church was built with a big prayer tower on the corner (Wood, 1998/2004). Here we see an example of prayer as a resource of comfort and direction for himself and for the community he leads. He relied on prayer to support him and his congregation in the midst of a tumultuous time that could have threatened his mental stability. Research shows the clergy suffer from a variety of forms of stress which impact their lives outside of the church as a result of the demanding life of ministry (Lee & Iverson-Gilbert, 2004). They have to manage the stress of addressing the emotional needs of the people they serve (Proeschold-Bell, Miles, Toth, Adams, Smith, et al., 2013). A study found that the depression rates among clergy were significantly greater than the rates of adults in the US population (Proeschold-Bell, Miles, Toth, Adams, Smith, et al., 2013). It is believed that the rate of pastors taking their own lives has increased over the last 30 years (Zylstra, 2016). Rev. Wood's utilization of prayer during a very stressful period helped to keep him connected to God and to shield him from developing a death consciousness.

Marcus

For Marcus, prayer has been a steady source of connection to God throughout his life. When asked if his prayer life has changed over time, he described a consistency in communication.

I don't think it's changed because I do it the same way I did then. I mean I just started talking. I remember my grandmother asked me one time, 'What are you doing?' I said, 'Talking to God.' and she said, "Shut up!" (laughter).

When asked why his grandmother responded that way, he replied:

Oh boy, she felt that I was not being respectful. You talk to God, you get down on your knees in order to talk to God. And that was not my concept, Ok, and still is not my concept.

Marcus describes prayer as his method of communicating with his companion. His grandmother's rebuke of what she deemed to be inappropriate prayer posture highlights his form of prayer as a product of his intimate relationship with God. There is no need for formalities. There is no need to find a special place to bend down and kneel. He can access the source of his strength through his conversation with God at any time and in any place and in the midst of any point of struggle.

Prayer was a critical resource while he was in the military when he learned that his firstborn child had been infected with a disease before she was born. He explains:

Well, I guess, probably a classic example is, we thought your sister had German measles before she was born because we had babysat for a couple, and they did not tell us that their child had German measles...I know I did a lot of praying when I first found out and I did a lot of self control when I first found out because I wanted to go and see him, the father, you know. And he and I were in Vietnam together too. But anyway, it worked out.

Prayer facilitates one's ability to surrender problems that they cannot control to the power greater than themselves. It is a coping mechanism that helps one to see through a situation like the potential death of a baby that you have not seen and have not held. For Black Americans who are not receiving therapeutic support, non-religious coping mechanisms have been found to be a potential risk for suicide ideation (Walker, Salami, Carter, & Flowers, 2018). Prayer can provide a pathway out of a way when one feels trapped so that one does not become engulfed in the belief that there is no way out but to end one's life. In a recent study by Tait, Currier & Harris (2016) that explored prayer as a coping resource for veterans who had served in Iraq and Afghanistan experiencing PTSD and depression, they found that all of the active prayer coping functions were associated with the participants' increased desire to share their trauma experiences as a way of discerning the meaning of their trauma (Tait, Currier & Harris, 2016). In addition, prayers for Assistance from God were associated with less PTSD symptoms, and prayers for Calm and Focus were shown to reduce depressive symptoms (Tait, Currier & Harris, 2016). They assert that employing prayer for Calm and Focus, "reflects a desire to access inner resources (e.g. hope, peace, and courage) to deal with difficulties in life as well as the ability to focus or meditate on what happened in a reflective manner" (Tait, Currier & Harris, 2016, p. 41). This example of Marcus praying during the time he was waiting to see if his baby would be born healthy demonstrates how he utilizes prayer to access a companion and support in a crisis.

African Value of Interdependence

As discussed previously, the African value of interdependence is rooted in the traditional West African kinship system which dictates that all individuals are

interconnected to each other, to their ancestors, to those yet born, and to all living things, and this connection is the source of their survival (Nobles, 1991). Black psychologist Nobles explains,

The individual owed his very existence to other members of the ‘tribe,’ not only those who conceived and nourished him but also those long dead and still unborn. The individual did not exist unless he was corporate or communal; he was simply an integral part of the collective unity (Nobles, 1991, p. 54)

An appreciation for the value of interdependence and connection to family and community as a source of support and a commitment to provide support illuminates a “survival orientation that is collective, as opposed to individualistic” (Parham, 2009, p.6) and is a reflection of Ubuntu. This is the root of the Black American worldview (Utsey, Bolden, Lanier, & Williams, 2007; Grills, 2002). There is research showing cultural factors and social support systems to be negatively related to suicidal ideation among Black American population (Morrison & Hopkins, 2019). This is consistent with the empirical evidence that supports the integration of cultural values and practices into positive coping mechanisms that Black Americans utilize to successfully navigate adverse conditions (Utsey, Bolden, Lanier, & Williams, 2007).

Culture is a framework for helping people to understand who they are, where they come from, and what their life’s trajectory is and this is important to understand as it relates to suicide in any population, and particularly historically oppressed populations (Leenaars, 2008). Compton, Thompson, & Kaslow (2004), in their study exploring social environment factors associated with suicide attempt among under-resourced African Americans and the protective impact of family and social support, noted the historical significance of the family unit in African American families and found that “alienation

from family” and weak social support may be critical risk factors for suicide in this population (Compton et al., p. 184). They also found that “social embeddedness may be a particularly important aspect of the social environment in relation to protection from suicide attempt” (Compton et al., 2004, p. 184). The examples below from Rev. Wood and Marcus reveal their appreciation for the value of interdependence and how it has contributed to their stability and well-being. Rev. Wood also makes his connection to Africa explicit.

Rev. Wood

Rev. Wood expressed a clear connection to his African heritage. “I was just told that I was a descendant of an African tribe... and that my background was African.” This connection to African became more concrete and clarifying after he travelled there. He shared,

Well at that time I had not been to Africa. But now that I have been there and travelled throughout.. I have a different feel about the whole thing...There’s no difference between the races...God made us all the same human being structure. We’re basically alike.

In his book, he describes his first trip to Africa. He visited several countries in 1972, starting with South Africa. He also traveled to Ghana and journeyed to the castles where the captured Africans were held before being shipped across the Atlantic into slavery. He expressed, “This was an awful sight” (Wood, 1998/2004, p. 183). Rev. Wood’s commitment to the African value of interdependence and collective survival is revealed most prominently through his idea for in the mid 1990s for Providence Baptist to build an adult day care center to care for seniors in the church and the community. He describes this effort in his book:

At that center, 50 older people will be looked after daily while their caregivers work. And it's a perfect symbol, it seems to me, of the kind of close cooperation, the kind of sharing of responsibility that has always characterized our congregation (Wood, 1998/2004, p. 110).

This collaborative spirit anchored his ministry. It extended to the support he received from his deacons who were his closest support and provided the quality of psychological support that pastors need. They were an integral part of his community which a pastor needs to thrive and persist through the emotionally challenging work of pastoring. Here from a passage in his book is how he describes these deacons:

Perhaps I should start by telling you about two of the most loyal and trusted comrades that a minister ever had—the Chairman of the Board of Deacons, John Campbell, and the Chairman of the Board of Providence Trustees, Wilton Moor. Like so many of my other deacons and volunteers and parishioners over the years, these two gentlemen gave unstintingly, endlessly of themselves again and again and again (Wood, 1998/2004, p. 105).

This text illustrates not only the strong support from his deacons but the existence of a strong network of support from the congregation throughout the years. This shows that the value of interdependence which he incorporated into the ministry work was very present in the fabric of the church community that surrounded him. Rev. Wood describes his closest deacons as “two of the most loyal and trusted comrades that a minister ever had.” This description of their relationship implies a deep connection where he could depend on receiving support and perhaps be vulnerable and process challenging matters that arose. This describes the type of longstanding social support system that research shows help protect against suicidal behavior (Compton et al., 2004).

Marcus

Marcus' commitment to the value of interdependence is revealed most prominently through his appreciation for community as a source of care which supports his collective survival orientation. He absorbed this value most intimately through his time when he lived with his maternal grandparents and experienced their home as an open refuge for people in need. His observations below describe this haven:

They were open...Now that I know that house as an adult, it is amazing how many people stayed in that house because anyone who was coming from the south so to speak and come to DC and needed a place to stay, they stopped at my grandmother's house. And at one time in one room I guess they had two adults and 3 kids in a one bedroom situation. Because they were just transient they were there trying to move on OK. And then they would leave and then somebody else would come, and then somebody else would come. Because somebody, somebody would always say you know when you go to DC you go see so and so, that's where you stay, and that's what they would do.

The active faith of his grandparents that he witnessed cultivated through their commitment to interdependence in such an intimate setting reinforced his understanding of a loving, caring God that provides and protects. He carries this interdependence and principles of care and concern for others, as he expresses below:

We're constantly evolving and hopefully we're doing it in a manner that's beneficial to us and to other people. Now, that's the other thing you have to be able to bring along other people as you go, at least you should not just take yourself along, but take somebody else along as you go.

This text reveals his commitment to the value and way of being, "I am because you are." This is a quality reflective of his faith, and it is a reflection of what was modeled around him. He knew this way as a practice of caring that he could apply in his life to help him through challenging experiences. This practice of acquiring support through a community of caring individuals has served him well since he served in the military and in the Vietnam war where he was deployed for 12 months. He receives ongoing support from

the 5 men he served with in Vietnam. He met 4 of them before the war as they were commissioned together in college at Morgan State in Baltimore. All of them have been a consistent presence in his life since then.

Marcus did not share many details regarding his experience in the war or the military. When asked whether or not being Black negatively impacted his experience in the military, he responded, “Sometimes it did, sometimes it didn’t. It’s just that simple.” But, the military for a Black man in the 1960s was far from simple. It did not provide a haven from the racism that was overt and pervasive in civilian life. In the book, *Fighting on Two Fronts: African Americans and the Vietnam War*, James E. Westheider (1997) asserts that by 1968, the racism escalated to “an unprecedented wave of racial violence in the armed forces...in every branch of the services” (Westheider, 1997, p. 93). He describes the conditions:

Factors within the military also contributed to a sense of alienation among black military personnel. They increasingly felt isolated and out of place in what they considered to be essentially a white institution...their cultural needs and amenities were largely ignored. ...This lack of cultural recognition, coupled with both institutional and personal racism, did eventually produce a cohesion and solidarity within the ranks...(Westheider, 1997, p. 67).

Marcus experienced this cohesion and solidarity which describes the African-centered value of collective survival amongst a group of his Black friends in the service. The group was his network of support during their service and has continued since, as he describes below:

It’s great to be able to have people like that to bounce things off of. We never sat around and shared war stories. We never talked about the experience over there, and still don’t. The five of us have been communicating together since...and all the personalities are different. We were a social network that just stayed together

socially. We got together whenever we could get together. We've always stayed in contact...that was my support group.

This group was a form of therapeutic support. He did not want to respond to the question of whether he had any mental health treatment when he was discharged from the military. He said he did not have any mental health treatment while he was serving in the military. Nor did he undergo any special evaluation when he returned home from war. As he explains, "Got off the plane in California; got on another plane and flew to Baltimore. That was it. No debriefing. I did my own debriefing." There was no formal debriefing, and, according to some, there had been no war. He explains, "According to the American Legions and according to the Veterans of Foreign Wars, the Vietnam vets didn't fight any war outside the country. Our fight didn't count. They didn't want us." It is very likely that his support network played a critical role in helping him to navigate feelings of rejection and all of the emotional and traumatic impacts of war. His capacity to successfully reintegrate back into society with seemingly no robust mental health support. When asked if he felt like he was a burden on his family or society when he returned from war, he responded, "A burden? Why would I be a burden?" But he would not answer the question regarding whether he had trouble reconnecting with his family when he returned home. He did not want to respond to the question regarding whether anything he experienced in the military or in the war led him to want to end his own life. But he acknowledged the role of his faith in helping him cope during his reintegration back into society and now, he asserted, "If you aren't grounded in something, um, you're going to have problems with any complex situation, I don't care what it is."

Marcus' grounding in faith and his connection to his core support team and to the African cultural ethos of collective survival orientation (Parham, 2009) helped him navigate the aftermath of war. Black soldiers and veterans experience a combination of stressors that impact their mental health including the horrors of war, institutional racism, and the challenges of trying to access resources that will help them transition home well (Johnson & Johnson, 2013). Data from the National Vietnam Veterans Readjustment Survey (Kulka, 1990) reveal that Black combat veterans showed higher rates of PTSD than their White counterparts (Johnson & Johnson, 2013). According to the Pentagon, in 2012, the suicide rate among active military eclipsed the number of troops dying in combat (Johnson & Johnson, 2013). The suicide rate among veterans is significantly higher than the rate among the general U.S. population (Villate, O'Connor, et al., 2015; Betthausen, Homaifar, Villarreal, Harwood, 2011). There is no way of knowing whether or not he had any thoughts of lethal self-harm as a result of the war or his overall military experience. However, we know what stabilized him during his reintegration home after the war and at the end of his service in addition to his faith: his commitment to the value of interdependence which has kept him tethered to his friends who are his support. As he described, "We were a social network that just stayed together socially." As noted previously, these social networks are critical components of the social environment for Black people which protects them from suicidal behavior (Compton et al., 2004).

Darrell's story: From Death Consciousness to Divine Consciousness

Death Consciousness

When I was your age the only people I knew were black, and all of them were powerfully, adamantly, dangerously afraid. I had seen this fear all my young life, though I had not always recognized it as such. It was always right in front of me. The fear was there in the extravagant boys of my neighborhood, in their large rings and medallions, their big puffy coats and full-length fur-collared leathers, which was their armor against their world...I saw it in their customs of war... I knew that there was a ritual to a street fight, bylaws and codes that, in their very need, attested to all the vulnerability of the black teenage bodies (Coates, 2015, 14-15).

Ta-Nehisi Coates, *Between the World and Me*

This excerpt by writer Ta-Nehisi Coates (2015) is from, *Between the world and me*, a book he wrote in the form of a letter to his teenage Black son. In this passage, Coates, who is from Baltimore, MD, is reflecting on the Black people, particularly the young Black men he used to encounter on the streets of Baltimore who were moving through the parts of their violent world in a manner that on the outside appeared to be in step with the rhythm of that violence. He later realized that their movements were aligned with their fear. These fear-produced full-armored moves and stances reflect what Majors & Billson (1992) call “cool pose,” a “mask” or “a strategy that many Black males use in making sense of their everyday lives” (Majors & Billson, 1992, p. xi). As was explored in the previous chapter, this fear is old. Ancient. Coates (2015) calls it “ancestral” (p. 87). It is a production of fear memories passed down through old protective practices learned on the plantation and new patterns developed inside under-resourced communities suffering from violence fueled by systemic racial inequality and chronic despair (Coates, 2015; Poussaint & Alexander, 2000; DeGruy, 2005; Thurman, 1976). This fear is a reflection

of, and a product of, death consciousness, which can emerge when one is immersed in a society preoccupied with death and lacks awareness of one's possession of God's Spirit or one's own divinity. As noted earlier, a society's death preoccupation can be evaluated through "various domains of culture and social life" (Miradmadi, 2018, p. 59). For Black people, death consciousness must be evaluated through the historical domain of the violence that marked the beginning of the experience of enslaved African people in this society, and through the contemporary manifestations of the violence and racism that held that system together (Poussaint & Alexander, 2000). The occurrence of suicide among young adults in Baltimore has been documented. Ialongo and colleagues conducted a study involving 1,157 Black Americans (506 males and 651 females) between ages 19 and 22 who were first evaluated at 6 years of age. They found that it is likely that "more severe suicidality is associated with more extreme levels of socioeconomic disadvantage" (Ialongo, McGreary, Pearson, Koenig, Wagner, Schmidt et al, 2002 p. 266).

Death consciousness is the antithesis of Divine consciousness. However, the two qualities are not binary. They represent different degrees of awareness of one's possession of Divinity. Death consciousness reflects a state of being where one is not in conversation with God's Spirit. As discussed above, Leloup (2002) asserts that the early Church Fathers of the Christian tradition explained that when one is not connected to God's Spirit, one becomes an "unbalanced" troubled human being who becomes ruled by the soul (psyche) and becomes consumed by its "passions" or "pathologies" (Leloup, 2002, p. 123). This identification with the mortal self and lack of awareness of one's own divinity and of one's true self as spirit connected to God, other people and ancestors, can

create an environment where one develops a death consciousness and becomes vulnerable to the impact of societal pressures. Suicidal behavior can emerge from one's disconnection to God and one's supports. It is the space where fear breeds death—"in the walls of separateness" (Thurman, 1976, p. 46). For descendants of formerly enslaved Africans in America, the fear that manifests as racism in these internal walls contaminates our consciousness at birth. As articulated previously, these descendants are born into fear, and their daily work is cultivating an environment that is counter to the messages that remind them of this society's original ideas about their humanity. Coates alerted his son that, "the entire narrative of this country argues against the truth of who you are" (Coates, 2015, p. 99). This argument has been raging for centuries. It has produced a myriad of psychological toxins which has created an environment that is suffocating Black people and leading some to call forth their own death.

This is the context within which Darrel's story must be told. He inherited this fear. While he did not explicitly express the language of fear in his interview, the actions he described reflect fear's behavior. Elements of his story reveal the non-traditional suicidal thoughts and moves that this fear can birth inside the consciousness when one is disconnected from God and one's network of support. There was a violent turning point in Darrell's life that helped set the foundation for this fear to grow in that space between his true self and God and cultivate potentially self-destructive, death-affirming practices and ways of being.

Lack of Faith & Intergenerational Faith, Lack of Connection to God's Spirit, Lack of

African Value of Interdependence

As stated above, death consciousness is the state of one's unawareness of the possession of God's Spirit or of one's own divinity. This state of unawareness makes one vulnerable to the impact of the toxic societal forces in a world that is preoccupied with death. Death preoccupation describes a society steeped in levels of violence including racism, crime, and other debilitating influences that can contribute to the creation of an internal environment within someone which cultivates despair, and stifles hope, (Miradamadi, 2018). It is the antithesis of Divine consciousness which is cultivated through faith, intergenerational faith, connection to God's Spirit and the African value of interdependence. Darrell's teen years reveal a lack of these qualities and the impact of negative societal influences. In his early teen years, Darrell was the victim of a violent, racial hate crime. He shared this violent story in response to the following question regarding his racial identity.

Can you describe what being Black is to you?:

Well, it's. Ooh. That's a lot there. Um, being Black to me, dealing with this society, now...I'll say, from an early age, growing up...it didn't bother me none...But then as I got older, I think I really recognized it when I moved to Randallstown and was called the N word the first time...And then, literally, right there, out here, I was walking to the carnival, some white guys drove by in a car and said, nigger, and I was like, f-u, whatever. Well, what they did, they switched cars and came around and was like, ah nigga I got you. And me not knowing, cause, I'm mean, it was a station wagon that passed me, but it was the car that came out. It was the same guy that hit me with a bottle in my groin. I laid out in the street for a half an hour...I'm just glad that they didn't jump out the car and finish me off because it was really nothing that I could do because it was so much pain, I just laid there.

This brutal act of violence was a horrific expression against the truth of who he is and arguably created an impression that distorts the perception of himself and reality. This is evidenced through the fact that he shares this story in response to the question regarding what it means to be Black. His experience of blackness is associated with being the target of a violent hate crime. That is how racism functions. It facilitates processes of internal death that run slow but steady while performing immediate harm that can make you almost bleed to death. This act occurred on top of the layer of racial violence that had already been accumulating through incidents of racial discrimination at school and from living in a neighborhood where it was deemed acceptable to be called the “N” word. Being identified as a “Nigger” shaped his awareness of his Blackness. This is articulated in part of his response to the request that he describes what being Black means to him:

Well, it's. Ooh. That's a lot there. Um, being black to me, dealing with this society, now, I'll say, from an early age, growing up...it didn't bother me none. But then as I got older, I think, I really, I recognized it when I moved to Randallstown and was called the N word the first time.

These persistent acts of racial violence were not reserved solely for him. When a white man threatened his mother, fear took over and ignited thoughts of death. When asked whether at any point during the experiences of racial violence he had suicidal thoughts or wanted to end his life, he replied:

No, I wanted to end somebody else's life, but not mine.....Well I would say it was probably a suicidal thought. I wanted to end somebody's life. Mom came home one day and she was like, I could see, I was like mom what's wrong, she was like, nothing. She was like, 'white guy called me nigger up there.' And I put on a black, a whole black sweat suit, and went up there, and I stayed up there looking for that station wagon probably 'til midnight, and I had to go to school the next day. But I was determined, I was going to find this clown. So I would say, yes, at that time, because you know I love my mother to death; you not going to disrespect my mother. Oh it's on. And, that was a suicidal thought, because I could have wound up dying.

These painful experiences of racial violence in these early years of his life impacted his psychological and social formation. According to Walker, Francis, Brody, Simons, Cutrona, et al., (2017), “Experiences of racism can be problematic in childhood and preadolescence, which are critical stages of psychological development” (Walker, et al., 2017, p. 89). When his mother was confronted with racial violence, it triggered a response that not only reflects fears for himself but fear for his mother. This act of violence, along with being subjected to the horrific hate crime where he was stabbed in the groin on his way to a carnival, harmed him psychologically and physically and had a far-reaching impact.

By the age of 16, Darrell had moved out of his mother’s home and stopped attending church (an early practice described later). In response to the question, “Can you identify and share a little about what you would consider to be the major ‘turning points’ or events that have had a significant impact on the direction your life has taken”, he shared details of his transition to life outside of his mother’s home.

...I think, um, after my mother moved and then I had a conflict with my stepfather, at the age of 15, I left home. And I wanted to move on my own. And then the state trooper said no, you can’t do it until you’re 16...I said that’s ok... that’s next year. At 16...I stopped going to school and I started working a full-time job at a nursing home. Then I met, well, I knew her...and then me and her wound up getting a town house together at the age of 16. From that, I just went off...I didn’t have the right guidance...From that point, we moved in and then a year later, I got locked up.

Darrell connects the dots that created the path disconnecting him from his family and community support and making him vulnerable to negative societal pressures. He expressed, “I stopped going to school...I just went off...I didn’t have the right

guidance... from that point, we moved in and then a year later, I got locked up.” He did not express that he was engaged in any spiritual practices during this period that connected him to God and his true self. Darrell affirmed this when asked whether he has experienced times in his life when he has had thoughts about ending his life, or if he had taken steps toward the act, and whether his religion or spirituality helped him manage those feelings. He described his “suicidal acts” with no mention of his religion.

Well, I would say as a youth. Once I, well, before...I got incarcerated. I think all youth have a suicidal path right now, like in Baltimore City. And the reason why is that they don’t understand. So, yeah we all got suicidal thoughts. This is the difference though. My suicidal thought ain’t the same as the one who lost \$100,000 at the casino and then wants to kill himself. My suicidal thought might be-I’m a sell these drugs, and if this dude come around here, I’m a lay him down, or he going to lay me down. That’s a suicidal thought. But see we don’t think about it like that, you know. But that’s a suicidal thought.

Darrell reflected on the difference between his strong spiritual life now compared to when he was a child. When asked, “Have you always had this vibrant of a prayer life?” he responded No. He shared the following when asked, “How has it changed over time?”:

“I didn’t have any direction growing up. I was rippin and runnin and really never took time to contemplate anything about religion. Truthfully, I took it for granted as a child growing up, your grandfather’s a minister, your mother’s in there...all your family growing up...in the church; I took it for granted.”

He expressed an understanding of the role of religion in one’s development from a child to an adult. When asked, “Would you say your religion and/or spirituality has evolved over the course of your life?” He responded:

Well, I think the evolving aspect is understanding, because like the Bible it teaches as a child I did childish things and when I was a man I put away childish things. Well, that’s what it has done for me because I know the difference between being a child or being a boy in religion. It’s a total difference. Like I

said, being a boy in religion, you want to run around and you don't care. But as time went out, I kept on saying, well, what is my purpose.

Below he describes the death orientation he had when he was selling drugs which reveals a death consciousness. When asked:

But did you have that kind of thought orientation when you were selling drugs?:

Yeah, when I was younger I was like, hey, do or die. You come at me, I'm a come at you. So, that's a suicidal thought, but it's not what they show on TV. It's because, they always say, well my girlfriend left me, my husband left me, I lost this, I gotta pay a bill, I'm a take these pills, cut my wrist, no. Them young guys don't care. They're on suicidal missions every day. If you selling drugs to people, trying to kill the next man whose selling drugs on the next corner, those are suicidal thoughts. Its just not what the doctor says on TV, but think about it. I can, I know I have the possibilities of killing somebody, or being killed. Is that suicidal or not? That's suicidal, but we don't look at it because, Hollywood always projects suicidal thoughts as-I lost something, I can't live in this world no more. That's not the only form of suicidal acts. Taking drugs is suicidal, um driving outrageous, that's suicidal, we don't look at none of them as that, but we do. We have the possibilities of being killed or our life being taken at any moment by us doing the reckless and dangerous things that we did as children. But, they just don't put it out that way.

This self-destructive behavior expressing his manhood is a response to that persistent argument against the truth of his manhood. The self-destructive, death-affirming behavior was a "proxy for suicide" (Day-Vines, 2007, p. 373; Poussaint & Alexander, 2000; Gibbs, 1997) and served as a form of expression of his psychological distress which poured out from the seeds of fear planted by each act of racial violence and other forms of violence he experienced and engaged in while involved in criminal activity. He was disconnected from God and his true self. He was also disconnected from the people around him and did not value the lives of others, expressed through these sentiments, "...when I was younger I was like, hey, do or die. You come at me, I'm a come at you.

So, that's a suicidal thought... I know I have the possibility of killing somebody or being killed. Is that suicidal or not? His suicidal path led him to prison at age 17.

Below he explains what led to his incarceration:

Well, um initially, I was trying to get two fur jackets and in the process, I got locked up trying to get the fur jackets, and then from that it just went on. I had a shotgun that was someone else's. And that shotgun was linked to various crimes, and because of that, instead of me saying oh, it was his, I just said, it is what it is, and no need in you coming in here because I got caught with it, so I just take whatever you going to give me. But then, Melissa, honestly, I told brothers, and brothers thought I was crazy, I said, I was so suicidal as a teenager, I didn't care. So, it was like, I really didn't care.

Darrell's suicidal path led him to a place of confinement for 16 years where he was able to reconnect to God and his true self.

Divine Consciousness

Darrell's prison sentence was an act of divine intervention. It saved his life and awakened his awareness of his possession of God's Spirit. During his 16 year sentence, he encountered men of faith who helped him find his way back to his true self. He reconnected to God, and to his African heritage and his ancestors, and his death consciousness transformed into a consciousness rooted in Divinity. He converted to Islam, specifically the Moorish Science Temple of America denomination. The religion of Islam watered the seeds of faith he had first been exposed to through Christianity.

Faith

As stated previously, there is no one way to define faith. According to the New Testament scripture Hebrews 11:1 "...faith is the substance of things hoped for, the

evidence of things not seen” (KJV). The root of faith is belief in the unseen God as a presence that guides and influences one’s life. This belief plays a crucial role in the process of building the shield against death consciousness which protects one’s true self.

Darrell’s response to the following question confirms his belief in what he cannot see.

Do you believe in God? If so, can you describe your understanding of God?

Yes, I believe the miracles. Yes, I’m alive today, so I know that it’s a God. The reason I say that is because I know everybody don’t wake up tomorrow. Everybody don’t have functions of their senses...and I’m thankful for that. It’s just like this you can feel the wind, but you can’t see it. Same thing with God. You can feel Him, you just can’t see Him. That’s the only difference. And that’s the clearest way I can explain. People say, well, how does God exist? Well, how does the wind exist? You don’t see it, but you know you feel it, don’t you? So there’s certain times when you feel him. Do I believe that, you know, angels watching over us, yes, I believe that. I believe granny watches over us.

Darrell’s sense of security and accompaniment is rooted in his belief in knowing that the unseen God is always with him as well as those spirits of ancestors who have transitioned and are a part of the heavenly realm. The gap here between thoughts of life and death is closed. He’s accompanied, and not isolated.

His grounding in Moorish Science helped him discover ways to operationalize his faith and use it to change his behavior and responses to societal stressors. Below he shares how it helped him cultivate self-control:

You know, I found myself. And even my father said, you went in as a boy and now you’re a man. But, Moorish science helped me to understand the responsibilities of a man. Not a male with a mustache, but a man...It’s like Malcolm X said, it’s not bad to be locked up, it’s bad to come out and be doing the same thing you was doing before.

You know what I can say this, it helped me for the simple fact is, when I was younger, I had a temper a bad temper. Like, I didn’t care. You say something to my mother, or my cousin, you whatever, I don’t have no problem, I’m a step to you, I didn’t have no problem. This is how it’s going to be. Now, the difference

is, I can see. Ok. I can see that individual's negative energy in them through my religion. So I know how to tackle that problem.

Islam gave him a brand of faith that was the appropriate response to the challenges he had experienced leading up to prison. His faith was enhanced through his study of the principles and laws of Moorish Science which also helped him mature as a man and gain a deeper understanding of his humanity. Islam animated the powerful gifts inside Darrell and rooted him in a clearer understanding of his identity. He describes what religion has done for him:

So through religion, now, the same way, one thing I say about the Moorish Science Religion, it broke everything down, right like. I never read any religious material that was so organized into a set structure, um, and that's what helped me; it made me understand. Understand, which is the philosophy was the first chapter, who you are, where you came from, spiritual, the soul and flesh and then from that, it unfolds through Jesus' life.

So, we know religion is what brings us back to who we are so that has to be the cap over everything for me. If we don't have it, who knows what we would be doing. I mean, I mean in reality, in humanity in general.

Islam cultivated control and stability in Darrell by keeping him connected to God. This produced Divine consciousness which helped him endure the oppressive environment of prison replete with numerous violent incidents he had to maneuver and process. Below he describes the death of a friend that could have been prevented:

When a brother in our temple died from asthma attack, name Red, good brother, and the bad thing about it, see, the correctional officers, they don't care about us, they was calling him— guard we need your help, we need your help, cardiac arrest, or whatever, and he died, and it was like, by the time they got there, it was like what's the problem, oh he's dead now. That affected me because, I was like.. he's a good brother, would help anybody, if you ain't got he would give, and like that, he was gone.

Islam helped him get through many traumatic experiences like this, including the deaths of other incarcerated men, and to not develop thoughts of self-destruction. This is revealed through his response to the question below:

Has your faith or spirituality helped you to cope with the impact of being Black in the U.S. and experiencing racial discrimination and other societal stressors over the course of your life?

When I was younger, I had a temper, a bad temper. Like, I didn't care. You say something to my mother, or my cousin, you whatever, I don't have no problem; I'm a step to you. I didn't have no problem...Now, the difference is, I can see. I can see that individual's negative energy in them through my religion. So I know how to tackle that problem...Religion is what calmed me down and made me see from a different perspective.

Darrell's religion has helped him to see others and situations through another lens which has impacted the way he responds to life's challenges.

Intergenerational faith

As noted previously, religious practices and rituals that a family engages in such as attending church impacts one's faith trajectory across the life span, and the faith practices of grandparents and parents have an impact on the grandchildren and children (Bengtson et al., 2009). As explained earlier through Cannon's (1996) description of such sacred practices as prayer and spirituals passed down from enslaved Africans through the generations, these practices helped to link their stories of faith between the past and the present (Cannon, 1996).

Islam transformed the early seeds of faith implanted in Darrell as a youth through Biblical principles and lessons he learned when he went to church and also through what he absorbed from his mother and his grandfather, Rev. Wood and his maternal

grandmother. This early foundation and intergenerational faith transfer are revealed in the text below in response to the following question about the church services he attended as a child:

Can you describe how you feel about the role the services played in your spiritual development?

Well, when I was younger, I really didn't know. I was just there. You know. I I knew I had to be there for Sunday School and I had to be there for service. I think as I got older and really I think when I converted over to Islam, that is when I had a full understanding...because if you look at the definition of religion, it'll say principles relating to God, etc. But when you really go into a deeper search of religion, religion actually means a deeper search back to God.

Darrell's reference to going to Sunday School as a child points to his early faith formation. He was exposed to God in church and through family members. Further evidence of the intergenerational transfer of faith is revealed in response to the following question:

Can you explain the role of religion or spirituality in your family?

Our grandfather, I think he was the first one...Well to me, in my eyes, he was the first one who really brought the spirituality to all of us, and to others, whether in VA, NJ or MD, he brought it to us. And from that, it just dwindled down the line – to my mother, to me, to Kevin, you know, Kevin, ... my brother. It was my grandfather who really brought that to us. Like he said something recently to us. He was like, when you pass, what will you be known for? So that's the things that he brings through his spirituality. If it wasn't for his spiritual base, we wouldn't have his guidance now.

Darrel's mother's way of being through her faith and spirituality also planted early seeds of faith in him.

My mother, it's like, her peace. I can see her peace in her life, joy-and that's what Christianity brings to my mother. So I can see it through her. I can see her dedication.

...And that's what I see; it's dedication, humility and peace, tranquility. Truthfully, I get my spiritualness from her because I've been around her my whole life, so I know what happiness is, you know; what peace is, you know; through my mother. I can see it.

Darrell's ability to "see" his mother's peace and happiness has provided an important example of the power of faith as a source of peace and stability in one's life.

Connection to God's Spirit

As stated previously, prayer is a spiritual coping practice that helps to facilitate the connection between one's spirit and God's Spirit. It is "Black people's source of faith" (Cannon, 1996, p. 36). Darrel found his way back to God through Islam, and is intentional about engaging in his practices that maintain his connection to God. He asserts,

You tap into God through your spirit. So, it's a way back to him. In a way, in Nation of Islam would say, it's a way back to who you are, to yourself, because we're made in his image and after his likeness, we're tapping into the seed of him in us.

Darrell explains that he taps into the seed of God in himself through prayer and meditation.

Prayer life. I pray when I get up. This is my routine, when I get up I pray...once I get in my car, before I turn on any music or anything, I pray. And then I take off. And then I could be at work and mentally pray because that's what keeps me focused. I try to tell people, think about prayer, meditation, contemplation, you not speaking out, you're speaking within. So, that's what I do, because, by me dealing with society everyday, out in the public, You have to have a foundation, because people will come and say things to you and boom, break you off your foundation, if you're not aware. So, if I get irritated, I just say a prayer and keep on moving. But, I do it throughout the day because that's what keeps me grounded, and if I don't, I have to have my connection, I'm sorry. I need that connection. It keeps me grounded and keeps me aware of the things I have to be conscious of.

Through his prayer practice, his meditation and contemplative practices, his study of the Quran and the Bible, and his exercise routine, Darrel is able to remain connected to God and to seek God for direction, cultivating his Divine Consciousness. He asserts, “Lot of times we have to stay still to actually hear his voice, and then he can guide us.” While incarcerated, Darrell cultivated his Divine Consciousness through his deep study of the Quran and the Bible, and the Moorish Science by-laws and constitution. He would recite these principles mentally, and it would help to facilitate his flow into a meditative state. As he explains,

...by the time I finished going through all of that mentally, I was already there and you know that’s what would put me in the state of mind...I would just constantly, you know cause what it’s doing, it’s starting to drown out any noise I hear with my own thoughts, saying, who made you, who did this...

Here he is describing the way the meditation builds a shield of protection over his mind and blocks out negative thoughts. He asserts, “...it’s starting to drown out any noise I hear with my own thoughts, saying, who made you, who did this...” These reminders of being made by God help to ground him. These practices helped him remain connected to God and cope in that violent environment.

African Value of Interdependence

As defined previously, the African value of interdependence is rooted in the traditional West African kinship system which dictates that all individuals are interconnected to each other, to their ancestors, to those yet born, and to all living things, and this connection is the source of their survival (Nobles, 1991). It prioritizes a “survival orientation that is collective, as opposed to individualistic” (Parham, 2009, p.6). These values are key components of Darrell’s spiritual resistance against death consciousness. Through Moorish Science Temple of America, Darrell is linked to Africa through the

organization's affirmation that African Americans are descendants of the Moors, the original people of the continent of Africa. When he joined, he was given the last name "Bey" which links him to Africa. Darrell has great pride in his African heritage, and in being a descendent of enslaved Africans. He shares his appreciation below for his enslaved African ancestors:

Oh I feel proud, really. I can't feel upset about that. And see, this is what people don't understand. Unless you go through the fire, you don't know how strong you are. And we went through the fire. We went through fire, we went through hell, through the Middle Passage. And we survived. So, that's what makes us survive. We are one race of people who can adapt to anything. Put us in a cold climate, it don't matter. We going to figure out how to make that igloo. It don't matter. Put us in the jungle, it don't matter. Don't worry, we'll make a tree for it, it don't matter. We will adapt. And that's one thing that our history gave us--adaptability to heat, climate, physical torture. Look at us now. Now it's starting to come to light. We were the civilizers of the world.

The men who were members of the faith demonstrated support and love for him when his stepfather passed. As evidenced through the text below, the religion gave him a critical foundation for community support for coping even before he joined. He explains:

There was one person who came to my assistance when he heard about my stepfather dying. It was a brother from Moorish Science, and he said, I need you to come down to the temple Friday, and I'm a teach you about death...

When my stepfather passed...that is what converted me over. Once I converted over to Islam---the individuals I was meeting, all of them was positive, and the whole mindset was, get an education while I was in there. I got my GED, I started college while I was in there. And they took college out. I came home, and I finished it.

The value of interdependence--care for others and support through community--are highlighted here as he describes how one person from Moorish Science came to support him during his stepfather's passing, even before he had converted. These were survival skills for Darrell and reflective of the African-centered value of collective survival. This

way of being helped to not only sustain Darrell, but to facilitate his flourishing. He observed men in the faith whose demeanors were reflective of an awareness of their Divinity. They served as role models for Darrell. He describes one who moved him:

We had a brother, he was so spiritual. I was like, wow. I mean, he was so spiritual, he was beyond us, he was talking about the spirit in the grass, the spirit in the flowers... And I kept on sayin, wow, he in prison, and he's like a Buddha or something. Don't nothing get him upset. I said, Ok. I'm a learn to be like that.

These men became his brothers and were his support system. He could turn to them, particularly the elder members when he reached his capacity and they gave him space to breathe. He explains:

I had good brothers to talk to. Like, any issue, see, one thing about that, I wasn't the ceiling, they were the ceiling because they was in it for years even before I had even thought about joining.

The men created a culture of care and collective survival that was extended to any member of Moorish Science who was being transferred into their facility. As Darell explains, they looked out for each other:

So we knew who all the grand chiefs was and we looked out for each other because, if you come in here and we know you coming in there, if that's your first night, you ain't goin have nothing to eat, this that and the other. We always have like a little pot, with toothpaste, toothbrush, food, some soup, you know what I mean, til you get yourself together. And you know, that's what we did.

Darrell's liberation was tied up in the lives of the other men in whatever facility he was in and this would compel him to intervene and advocate when necessary, as in the following incident:

Well, what took place was in the old jail, the correctional officers had a tendency of causing conflict between the inmates. They might go on the

north side to say someone on the south side said you over here telling, or you did this or whatever and then, when you go out into the yard, this guy, who you don't even know, just goes straight into the guy. And so what happened was, they transferred me because of this, and I was in school and I heard some blood shed was getting ready to transpire. So I went out there, and I said, come on man, let me holler at ya'll. So, all the big dudes or whatever...I said, look man, you know who this lieutenant is, you know he be starting trouble. He wants us to see us kill each other. The major and the colonel and them were standing right there, listening to me. So, I ain't care. Ain't nobody kill nobody, so, I ain't worried about it. Ain't no blood shed....

This incident reveals Darrell's fierce commitment to the value of collective survival, at all costs. His statement, "Ain't nobody kill nobody, so, I ain't worried about it. Ain't no blood shed" illustrates his prioritization of the well-being and survival of his brothers over his own needs. He shared multiple examples of times he intervened to break up a dispute, and it often resulted in him being transferred to another facility. His deep commitment to caring for his brothers in this way was a reflection of his deep commitment to the African cultural principle of interdependence or Ubuntu, the belief that humans cannot flourish fully without a commitment and connection to the humanity of other persons. Darrell explains this ethic:

The African or the Moorish or Asiatic concept—it's we and us, it takes a whole village to raise a child, we can accomplish this goal together. It will take *us* to achieve this--that's the difference...you can't do it by yourself. I mean, yeah, you can put gas in your car by yourself, but you ain't going to build it by yourself.

This awareness of a network of care and support to rely on in the midst of a violent society such as prison, provided an extra layer of protection for Darrell from the suicidal thoughts and behavior that could have surfaced in such an atmosphere. Formerly incarcerated persons can perceive themselves as a burden on family members and society when they return home after a period of incarceration and struggle to successfully

reintegrate into society as they cope with the stigma of their incarceration (Massoglia, 2008). These experiences can also cause them to feel alienated and disconnected from their loved ones and society. In a study of incarcerated persons, Simlot, McFarland, & Lester (2013) found that feelings of thwarted belongingness (Joiner, 2005) were positive with prior suicidal behavior and predictions of likely suicidal behavior in the future (Simlot et al., 2013). Darrell's community reinforced his commitment to his faith practices which reinforced his awareness of his connection to God and to his brothers. This cultivated feelings of belongingness and connectedness.

Islam and his community of brothers within the faith, helped Darrell to survive 16 years of incarceration, and he has remained connected to God through his faith and his community since his release. This community network continues to support him outside of prison. He maintains a close group of friends who were incarcerated with him, and they help manage the psychological effects of living post-incarceration.

Most the brothers, that was locked up, we always, we be together all the time. And one thing we figured out is, who better to talk to then someone who you spent 16 years with, 15 years with in prison. And all of us...the glue that kept us together was Islam--Nation of Islam or Moorish Science, and Sunni community. All the brothers. But we knew that in some way, each branch has a structure, and Islam is the glue that brings us together, no matter the denomination.

Studies have found that individuals coming out of incarceration are at high risk for suicide during the early period of their release (Binswanger, Stern, Deyo, et al., 2007; Pratt, Piper, Appleby, 2006; Karimina, Law, Butler, et al., 2007). His faith and his community have helped to insulate him from self-destructive thoughts and behavior and have enabled him to continue to develop his Divine Consciousness over the last 20 years since his release. They helped him to endure challenges including the discrimination he

experienced in employment settings as a result of being formerly incarcerated. Darrell had received his GED and began taking college courses in prison until they removed the college program. He enrolled in Baltimore City Community College a month after he was released from prison and remained focused until he finished. Despite having a degree, he struggled to find employment, and he experienced discrimination as a result of his former incarceration status and his racial identity in some of the positions he has held. However, his faith, which is his “cap over everything,” sustained him and kept him from despair. These experiences fuel his commitment to start his own business.

When asked if there has been a time since his incarceration if he has wanted to end his life, he replied no. Here is his explanation:

No. Because, you know, I described prison as Jonah in the belly of the beast. When the whale swallowed him up, I said, it’s the same thing as prison. The jail swallowed us up and now we have an opportunity to be rebirthed and come back out new.

Darrell has not had formal therapy. His reference to the Bible story of Jonah is an illustration of his faith as a strong source that keeps him connected to God. He gets the therapeutic support he needs through his religion. He asserts: “Moorish Science is my therapy.” Islam has been beyond therapeutic. It has facilitated his transformation and shielded him from death.

CHAPTER IX-Autoethnography – Analytic Review & Critical Analysis of Key Concepts

Between Fear and Faith: Cultivating Divine Consciousness and Resisting Death

Consciousness in a Racist Society

Preface

Autoethnographic Method

Autoethnographic research is an act of social justice (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011). It is a method of inquiry and assessment that utilizes the researcher's personal experiences as an epistemological site for understanding and interpreting cultural phenomena (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011). As Ellis, Adams, & Bochner (2011) assert, autoethnography is "one of the approaches that acknowledges and accommodates subjectivity, emotionality, and the researcher's influence on research, rather than hiding from these matters or assuming they don't exist" (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011, p. 274). This autoethnography is an analytic review and critical analysis of the current state of knowledge regarding suicide among Black Americans exploring key concepts related to the chapters on the historical, cultural, spiritual context of the Black American experience, the Afrocentric framework, approaches, and theories.

The title of my autoethnography is *Between Fear and Faith: Cultivating Divine Consciousness and Resisting Death Consciousness in a Racist Society*. The aim is to explain my understanding of the phenomena of religion/spirituality as a cultural protective factor against suicidal behavior, specifically exploring the concepts of Divine consciousness and death consciousness, through the lens of my Afrocentric Christ-centered spirituality. The objective is to deepen the scope of analysis regarding Afrocentric spiritual coping practices and cultural values, including the African value of

interdependence operationalized through family and community support networks, and to operationalize spiritual resistance that insulates many Black Americans from developing a consciousness that can lead one to desire to call forth one's own death. Research (Morrison & Hopkins, 2019; Utsey, et al., 2007) has shown that Afrocentric spiritual coping methods and cultural values have been a core factor in the ability of many Black Americans to endure and thrive despite historical and contemporary societal challenges. This autoethnographic method of inquiry and analysis enables me and the reader to examine the protective qualities of an element of Black spirituality steeped in explicit faith, ritual, ancestral wisdom, and West African and indigenous wisdom and practices, through the framework of an intimate partnership with God/the Divine which shields me from pervasive thoughts of death. Researchers (Utsey, Adams, & Bolden, 2000) have identified African-centered spiritual and ritual practices as strategies, which include connection to ancestral wisdom, that Black Americans use for coping with everyday societal environmental stressors (Utsey, Adams, & Bolden, 2000; Morrison & Hopkins, 2019). Utsey, Adams, & Bolden (2000) incorporated "Spiritual-Centered Coping" and "Ritual-Centered coping" in the their Africultural Coping Systems Inventory rooted in an "African-centered conceptual framework," which is a 30-item self-report measure of culture-specific coping strategies Black Americans use to navigate everyday stressors (Utsey, Adams, & Bolden, 2000, p. 207). This work illustrates an example of these coping mechanisms being employed in my life as resources for spiritual resistance.

Autoethnographers are "viewed as epistemic sources of new knowledge on under-examined concepts" (Henry, 2017). An Afrocentric approach to examining suicide and spiritual resistance in Black Americans is underexamined territory (Morrison & Hopkins,

2019). This narrative incorporates African-centered knowledge and wisdom gleaned from ancestral wisdom, texts, memory, experiences, and spiritual acumen. It includes an exploration of my personal experiences with God and the practices I employ to develop and sustain Divine consciousness. It will also assess the way this state of spiritual awareness has become a shield against excessive fear-based, self-destructive thoughts that could lead me to cultivate a desire to take my own life in a society where racism is imbedded in the systems of its structures and in the consciousness of its people. It is my hope that it will enhance the potential for the overall project to generate new knowledge.

My autoethnography is intended to provide a foundation for interpreting the findings of the data in this research project through the Ubuntu Relational Framework for the Study of Black Suicide to explore social forces and spiritual mechanisms that influence the risk and protective factors of Black suicide through the constructs of death consciousness and Divine consciousness. This chapter is meant to serve as the contextual foundation for my interpretive lens. It is the context for the requisite epistemological sites (historical, ancestral, spiritual) for researching Black people and developing culturally appropriate and effective interventions. It is designed to aid in the process of examining the etiology of suicide in Black people and the root causes of the conditions that create a consciousness conducive for human flourishing and preventing suicidal behavior. This work is in alignment with a liberatory framework which identifies this project as an exploration beyond predictors of suicide and sources of resistance among Black people, but as a methodology for their liberation.

Background & Application of Autoethnographic Method to Social Work Research

In his text, *Narrating social work through autoethnography*, social worker, Stanley Witkin (2014) asserts that autoethnography is a methodological expression of two movements in the social sciences that advocated new methods for understanding knowledge and approaching inquiry---the social constructionist and the qualitative research movements (Witkin, 2014). As he explains, the social constructionist approach highlights that knowledge is constructed within an analysis of the multiple dimensions of human society rooted in history and including social, political, and cultural contexts (Witkin, 2014; Gergen, 1985), and the qualitative approach which embraces “a more holistic portrayal of researchers and researched” (Witkin, 2014, p. xi). Witkin (2014) contends that autoethnography is a site where these spaces can be explored and that it is an approach located at the intersection of research and literature (Witkin, 2014). These qualities affirm its alignment with the principles of social justice and the values of the social work profession outlined in our code of ethics which implore social workers to affirm the dignity and self-worth of all human beings while recognizing the inextricable link between humans and their environments, and the imperative to address societal injustice (National Association of Social Workers, 2020). Human-centered social work warrants a human-centered research method. Autoethnography allows for an aspect of the life and experience of the social work researcher to be an epistemological site for interpreting historical and contemporary dimensions of the area of research to broaden the scope of the analysis. As a social worker, lawyer, mediator, and minister firmly committed to social and racial justice through spiritually-centered methods, this forum facilitates the integration of my perspectives across disciplines to help ensure that my

dissertation project remains committed to the critical work of dismantling systems of injustice that pervade human beings and institutions, within a spiritual framework.

Wilkins (2014) describes autoethnographic inquiry as a disruption of the dominant narrative. He asserts:

Autoethnography seems especially poignant for the social work profession. Although social work identifies with socially progressive causes and ideals, I find it to be an intellectually conservative profession. This state of affairs seems particularly characteristic of the United States, my home country, where the dominance of conventional scientific thinking—philosophically realist, method based, truth seeking, technocratic, and narrowly reflective—has kept social work a handmaiden of the dominant discourses of society (Wilkins, 2014, xii).

To be effective disrupters of the dominant discourse that sustains and fuels social inequities in this country, social workers must be willing to engage in the courageous work of self-reflection at all times, in some form, in a process parallel with their research and practice. This is an acknowledgment that social workers, as contributors to society, are also a part of the unjust societal structures they are working to transform. Social workers are connected to these social structures and to the people we are working to support and accompany. The qualities of interconnectedness embedded in this autoethnographic approach are in alignment with my Afrocentric approach to this overall dissertation, and with Ubuntu, one of my core life values.

Methodology

Because autoethnography contains elements of autobiography and ethnography, “as a method it is both process and product” (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011, p. 273). The work can be situated within two accepted subtypes – analytic and evocative (Wilkins, 2014). As an analytic method, it emphasizes “improving theoretical

understandings of broader social phenomena” (Anderson, 2006, p. 375). The aim here is to enhance theoretical understandings of the phenomena of religion/spirituality and its utility as a protective mechanism against suicide for Black people. This work offers readers entry into territory that delves beyond the surface of acknowledging religion and spirituality as resources for resistance. While analytical, it is also evocative where “understanding is sought through one’s personal story and the emotionality it invokes in readers” (Witkin, 2014, p. 8). The readers are invited to engage the text through their own interior lives and to explore the spirit and ancestral realms with curiosity and openness. Because of the blend of analytic and evocative forms, my autoethnography is a combination of personal narrative incorporating artifacts and drawing from memories of important experiences with God, and expository writing (Jensen-Hart & Williams, 2010). I employ creative strategies including dialogue, and vivid, expressive language and descriptions (Jensen-Hart & Williams, 2010; Richardson, 2000). I incorporate data from multiple sources including a letter, a journal entry, as well as an excerpt from a critical journal exercise from early in my MSW/PhD journey. It will also include a scientific method for interpreting the spiritual data extracted from my personal experiences with God. The method is from biologists Humberto R. Maturana and Francisco J. Varela’s (1992) outlined in their text, *The tree of knowledge: The biological roots of human understanding*. Because autoethnography calls for the exploration of the various dimensions of the author’s identity, a brief summary of my background regarding my identities and social positioning within cultural and religious frameworks is included to contextualize the narrative (Jensen-Hart & Williams, 2010). The work illustrates my heightened attunement to the Holy Spirit and my capacity for interpreting nuances in the

spirit and ancestral realms which are vital skills for the spiritual coding and analysis of the qualitative data. While I have outlined my methodology, it is also important to appreciate, as stated earlier, that the purpose of autoethnography is to break from the dominant patterns of practice which means that this methodology is not to be restricted to one right way (Wilkins, 2014). Integral to this process has been my complete reliance upon the Holy Spirit, with no defined order of operation. Each page of this work has been an act of devotion.

Spirituality Beyond the Surface

The urgent social dilemma addressed in this research – the escalating rise in the rate of Black Americans deciding to call forth their own death – is a psychosocial-spiritual crisis. This crisis requires a method that provides a framework for the researcher and the reader to be able to engage in a deeper exploration of suicide and religion/spirituality among Black people. It promotes a process that integrates their own experiences with the multiple layers of our social environment in an effort to imagine a new way forward in addressing the mental health and wellness needs of this population in a manner that is holistic and just. Witkin (2014) compares autoethnography to a West African principle he learned from writer Maya Angelou called “deep talk” (Witkin, 2014, p. 4). In a 1990 interview with writer George Plimpton, Angelou uses this principle to describe the reader she has in mind as she writes. She explains:

...the reader who hears, who really will work at it, going behind what I seem to say. So I write for myself and that reader who will pay the dues. There’s a phrase in West Africa, in Ghana; it’s called “deep talk.” For instance, there’s a saying: “The trouble for the thief is not how to steal the chief’s bugle, but where to blow it.” Now, on the face of it, one understands that. But when you really think about it, it takes you deeper in” (Plimpton, 1990, p. 155).

Black suicide demands deep talk. Deep talk is the kind of talk where social workers are unafraid to be vulnerable and engage in the messiness of the complexities of a society replete with racial and social inequities that contribute to the creation of an environment where people are disconnected from themselves and each other. Reconnection requires deep talk. It is spiritual work rooted in the African-centered worldview that affirms our relationships with ourselves, with each other, with the environment, and with God (Morrison & Hopkins, 2019). Writer Debra Walker King (1998) describes deep talk as a method that “seeks the discourses existing beneath or alongside the primary narratives of literary texts” (King, 1998, p. 1). As stated previously, because autoethnography as a method is both “process and product” (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011, p. 273), it is a method that facilitates the deep talk we need to do within ourselves, and with each other, to search for new meanings and insights and to hold each other accountable to the work of addressing the parts within ourselves contributing to the pain and injustice we are trying to transform. It is also a product to be utilized as a companion narrative in conjunction with the primary qualitative data to aid in the analysis and interpretation of the findings to get below the surface (King, 1998).

Closing

Autoethnographic research is a methodology for facilitating deep talk that leads to transformation, which is the aim of social work at its core. It is an approach that can be utilized for “nurturing an empathic understanding of the other and highlighting reflexivity” (Jensen-Hart & Williams, 2010, p. 451). The practice of reflexivity is critical engagement for social work practice (Jensen-Hart & Williams, 2010) and research

(Probst, 2015). Empathy and reflection are essential elements for transformation. Social workers cannot be co-facilitators of the process of transformation within individuals and institutions without being willing to engage in their own personal transformative work. The autoethnography that follows is my commitment to this transformative work.

Between Fear and Faith:

Cultivating Divine Consciousness and Resisting Death Consciousness in a Racist Society

“For God did not give us a spirit of fear, but a spirit of power, of love, and of sound mind.”
2 Timothy 1:7

Introduction

I die a little bit with each fearful thought. “Suicide” for Black people in the United States can be viewed as a culmination of fear-based thoughts. Much of this fear emerges from a toxic mixture of racism and other oppressive forces that permeate our society and penetrate our consciousness. For me, the shifting back and forth between fear and faith is like a bad habit. If I’m honest, I’ll admit it’s an addiction, because I almost feel like at times I cannot control it. I experience periods when I think I have mastered it. Then, like a haunting memory I thought I had locked out of my mind for good, it creeps back in, and I give it more space to breathe. I inherited this fear code. As noted previously, writer Ta-Nehisi Coates calls this inherited fear “ancestral fear” (Coates, 2015, p. 87). Theologian Howard Thurman describes the duality of fear as a “disease,” as well as a “safety device” for the oppressed who “make their bodies commit to memory ways of behaving that will tend to reduce their exposure to violence” (Thurman, 1976, p.40). However, while I know the power of this persistent spirit of fear, I also know the power of my inherited and personally cultivated faith code which has produced a Divine consciousness that keeps

me from developing a death consciousness and getting even close to a place where I would embrace a desire to call forth my own death.

As stated above, the aim of my autoethnography is to explain my understanding of the phenomena of Divine consciousness and death consciousness through the lens of my Afrocentric Christ-centered spirituality to deepen the scope of analysis regarding factors that protect many Black Americans from developing a consciousness that can lead one to want to end one's own life. This will include an exploration of how I develop and sustain Divine consciousness, and how it has become a shield against immense fear-based self-destructive thoughts that could lead me to take my own life in a society where racism is imbedded in the systems of its structures and in the consciousness of its people. I begin with a summary of my background, followed by an analysis of my faith foundation, and then an analysis of fear as an antecedent for death consciousness. I continue with an examination of my understanding of Divine consciousness, and I include four vignettes of interactions with God which describe the nature of my intimate partnership with God and reveal my ability to access and affirm my own divinity. Incorporated in the discussion of Divine consciousness will be a methodology for analyzing the phenomenon and how it is generated.

My Background

I am a Black American, cisgender woman who is a descendant of Africans formerly enslaved in this country. I am a follower of Jesus Christ and am committed to cultivating Christ Consciousness and to being a vessel for Christ's healing message of love through all aspects of my healing justice work. My other salient identities include

my role as a wife and mother of a teenaged boy. I have come to the field of social work in midlife in response to the need to expand my capacity to grapple with the complex problem of racism. I refer to myself as a racial justice and healing practitioner, a term that reflects my commitment to a multidisciplinary approach to healing justice that is rooted in the African philosophy of Ubuntu, restorative justice, and the ethic of love. After practicing law for nearly 10 years, I realized that the law could not facilitate the heart and mind changes required to eradicate racism from individuals and systems. This is work of the Spirit. After years in the justice field, which includes experience as a public interest attorney and a mediator, I accepted my call to ministry and went to Harvard Divinity School to pursue a Masters of Divinity. I am a minister and was licensed through the Baptist Church. My strategies are an extension of my love-centered ministry. Social work is a necessary component of my multidisciplinary approach to this work. While in divinity school, I realized that I needed more skills to address the racial trauma that comes with racism. Social work has equipped me with the tools necessary to address the emotional and trauma injuries that emerge from racism and other systems of oppression, including incarceration. Three years ago, I began supporting the restorative justice work of incarcerated men at a prison. I have participated in restorative justice circles and co-facilitated a reading group in this facility. The men's stories of generational trauma, childhood violence, and experiences navigating violent urban war zones in our U.S. cities, and their lack of therapeutic interventions at any point throughout their lives, fuel my commitment to improving mental health care for Black people. My experiences there also underscore the urgency of addressing the root causes of our country's mass incarceration crisis, which include changes in mental health policies as well as legal

changes. Social work is the bridge that connects me to both. I continue to engage in restorative justice work and consider myself a restorative justice practitioner. Finally, the other aspect of my identity that is salient to this dissertation research project is my relationship to the three participants interviewed for the qualitative study. I am the granddaughter of the Reverend Marcus Wood, the daughter of his son Marcus, and the cousin of Rev. Wood's grandson, Darrell.

Faith, Connection to God's Spirit & Interdependence: Foundation of My Divine
Consciousness

"Blessed is she who has believed that what the Lord has said to her will be accomplished."

Luke 1:45

Faith & Intergenerational Faith

The New Testament offers a clear definition of faith. According to Hebrews 11:1, "Faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen." Faith is my lifeline. It is the cord that keeps me connected to God and animates every decision to keep moving forward every day. When I am weary, frustrated, sad, angry, depleted, afraid, or a toxic blend of each, my faith in God is the fuel that resuscitates me. Exposing me to faith is one of the greatest gifts my parents have given me, and it is an extension of the gift their parents gave them. I was born a Baptist. While this statement is theologically inaccurate since one does not technically become a Baptist until one is old enough to be able to confess that one believes in Jesus and is baptized by submersion into a body of water, my exposure to the Baptist church began at infancy. It remains an integral part of my identity. Every Sunday my mother took me and my older sister to the

Baptist church in Baltimore, MD where she was nurtured, which happened to be the church my father's father, Rev. Wood, pastored. Church and family have always been intertwined. My mother brought us to church weekly, while my father stayed at home, committed to a promise he made as a child to not go to church as an adult after having endured so much of it as a preacher's kid. My faith was formed at church but began cultivating in my mother's womb. As I know my mother to be a fervent prayer warrior and a strong woman of faith, traits she inherited from her mother and father, I know that her prayers for me began before I entered the world.

My own experience as a mother privileged to have carried a child helps me to know how vibrant the connection between mothers and their babies can be. We transmit feelings and knowings that come through prayer and all sorts of ways that cannot always be traced. So, I know my faith story began before I was born. This is the intergenerational faith that the apostle Paul observes in Timothy, his protégé. In the New Testament book of Timothy, Paul asserts, "I have been reminded of your sincere faith, which first lived in your grandmother Lois and in your mother Eunice and, I am persuaded, now lives in you also" 2 Timothy 1:5. My mother's unconditional love for me and my sister undergirds her faith and gives it credibility. As I stated previously, my father did not attend church regularly while I was growing up. My parents' expressions of their faith were quite different. I grew up thinking that my father was more indifferent about God as he did not practice his faith in an open way. However, as with my mother, I experienced his unconditional love which I now understand, as a result of my interview with him, is an expression of his faith and relationship with God. His faith way of being was more covert. His stoic-like disposition masked his prayerful presence and personal devotion. I

was immersed in a household rooted in love and faith that helped shape my identity and created the scaffolding for my emerging Divine consciousness.

My belief in God's profound unconditional love for me is the foundation of my faith. I knew God's unconditional love before I ever knew any part of God's word because I experienced it through the unconditional love of my parents. God's love animates my belief in God's ability to manifest God's self in flesh into the person of Jesus Christ, and to resurrect him from the dead. Jesus' presence and power in the world remind me of my ability and call to manifest God's presence and power in the world through God's Spirit. My faith keeps me connected to God's Spirit which enlivens me. According to the New Testament book of Romans 8:15, "...those who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God." As a son/daughter of God, like Jesus Christ, I have inherited God's consciousness through God's Spirit. Maintaining my connection to the Spirit helps me to remain balanced and resist self-destructive, fear-based thoughts.

Connection to God's Spirit

Divine Consciousness

I cultivate Divine consciousness through my faith and my connection to God's Spirit. The word divine means coming from or of God (Miriam-Webster, 2020). The word consciousness has been defined as "the state of awareness of self and the environment" (Plum & Posner, 1980, p. 1). In physician and Toltec healer Don Miguel Ruiz' (1997/2009) text *Beyond fear: A toltec guide to freedom and joy*, his wife, Gaya Jenkins, also a Toltec healer, offers this description of Divine consciousness. She asserts: "All of life is about the redemption of that aspect of your consciousness that has literally forgotten its divinity, the part that holds complete Divine consciousness and feels

everything” (Ruiz & Nelson, 1997/2009, p. 173). Divine consciousness can be defined as a state of awareness of the possession of God’s Spirit and of one’s own divinity. It is an awareness of God’s full presence within and around yourself, bringing your whole being into harmony (mind, body, and spirit) with God and the environment, through your spirit’s connection to God’s Spirit (Ruiz & Nelson, 1997/2009; Leloup, 2002). My faith in God is the basis of my ability to maintain an awareness of the fullness of God’s presence in my whole being. Educator Paulo Freire (1970/2000) in his seminal text, *Pedagogy of the oppressed*, quoted Brazilian intellectual Alvaro V. Pinto who asserted that “The essence of consciousness is being with the world...Consciousness is thus by definition a method” (as cited in Freire, 1970/2000, p. 69). Framing consciousness as a method helps us to understand Divine consciousness as a way back to God within ourselves and in the world. Divine consciousness is a recognition of our own divinity and of our true identity as spiritual beings.

The Spirit of God connects me to the mind of God. In the New Testament book 1 Corinthians, chapter 2:11 asserts, “...no one knows the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God...But we have the mind of Christ” (v. 16). Jesus shows me how to live as a human being on the earth connected to Divinity as reflections of Divinity. While I believe I have the mind of Christ, and I am cultivating the mind of Christ or Christ consciousness—the same mind that is in God, in this work, I am using the framing of Divine consciousness so that it will be accessible to people who do not believe in Jesus Christ. I am also framing it as such because of my deeper understanding of the consciousness of Mary, Jesus’s mother, which developed in me during the summer of 2019 as I engaged in the qualitative research.

Divine Consciousness of Mary

Mary had a Divine consciousness steeped in a love for God and a belief in God's ability to do the impossible. She had to believe before she could conceive. Mary had the "mind of God" before she housed the body of Christ. My appreciation for the depth of Mary's faith has grown over the years. The title of my "trial" sermon which I delivered over ten years ago as a part of my Baptist ministerial licensure process was about Mary's faith. It was entitled, "Faith for a Supernatural Assignment." During the summer of 2019, through prayer and meditation, my understanding of her faith expanded, and I received greater clarity regarding her Divine consciousness. I began to reflect on the condition of her mind which created the interior environment where belief in the impossible could flourish. Our mind impacts our bodies, and our wombs, if we are women. Our consciousness affects our ability to bring forth new life—to birth new ideas, visions, and creations of all forms. When our thoughts are consumed with fear, we contaminate our minds and our wombs, preventing us from believing that we can be like Mary and like her son Jesus, and be conduits of the impossible. Mary's profound awareness of the Spirit of God living in her, and her connection to the Mind of God, was her state of being before the angel of God came to her to tell her that God had chosen her to bring Jesus into the world. We know she had been prepared and was ready for this supernatural assignment because of the way she responded. Following a clarifying question she asked the angel about how it would all work since she was a virgin (Luke 1:34), Mary responds to the angel's news with confidence and humility: "I am the Lord's servant...May it be to me as you have said." (Luke 1:38). So my faith in God's desire and ability to accomplish the impossible through me, however great or small, is an expression

of God's love and is the foundation of my Divine consciousness. The key to sustaining Divine consciousness and resisting the self-destructive fear and negative thoughts that counter this truth is to consistently engage in spiritual practices and rituals and to remain connected to the family and support networks God works through to help me sustain my connection to God's Love and Spirit.

Divine Consciousness of Mary Magdalene

Another example of Divine consciousness was also made clear to me during the summer of 2019 through the example of Mary Magdalene. Mary Magdalene was present at the Crucifixion of Jesus and at his tomb following his resurrection. Before his death and resurrection, Jesus facilitated Mary's profound transformation. Tresemer & Cannon (2002) contend that when Jesus healed her of the seven demons, He liberated her from "the seven deadly sins---pride, lust, envy, anger, covetousness, gluttony, and sloth" replaced by the virtues of love, humility and self-control (Tresemer & Cannon, 2002, p. xix). They describe Mary's condition after her healing as a place where one can experience a transcendent living while still in the world. They assert:

Imagine being completely cleansed of prejudice and old grudges, fogs of illusion, hereditary obstacles to health, all desires. Once healed, she can truly see the spiritual truth that works in all things. She can see the barbarity of other human beings, as well as the transcendent beauty of Jesus Christ's teachings. In modern terms, her heart and energetic centers are open (p. xix).

This healing paradigm provides a framework for complex spiritual healing. Black people, including myself, must be healed of all "hereditary obstacles" to emotional health and wellness including internalized racial oppression, and delivered from all "fogs of illusion" that permeate this society, with racism being one of the most deadly sources of fog. Thus, Divine consciousness represents this state of being and awareness where you

are liberated from the behaviors and mentalities that root you in the world's fear-based pattern of thinking and disconnect you from the Divine which enables you to see your life and the world with clarity and not through the lens of racism, fear, etc. Tresemer & Cannon (2002) argue that this, coupled with Mary's status as having been purified by Jesus from the seven sins that "cloud vision and energy" makes her a "human being who is open and available to true 'inner knowing,' who can 'see' in deeper, clearer ways through a unique spiritual connection to both earthly death and the Divine" (Tresemer & Cannon, 2002, xix, xxiii). This inner knowing is a reflection of Divine consciousness.

Mary's intimate connection with Christ resonates with my spirit as I am intimately tethered to Christ. I talk to Him every day, and I write to Him in my gratitude journal each morning. As Tresemer & Cannon (2002) assert, Mary's closeness to Christ demonstrated by her presence at the cross and His tomb not only highlights her love for Him, but also her "comfort and familiarity with death" and that she "understands the thresholds of death" (Tresemer & Cannon, 2002, p. xxii). I know the Holy Spirit has guided me to her at this time to support my healing work with Black people. My exploration of Black suicide includes an exploration of the manifestations of death and grief for a people who grapple with historical trauma and "unresolved grief"³ as a result of their ancestral history of enslavement that can be triggered at contemporary moments of racialized violence and interfamilial violence. I periodically serve as a per diem chaplain at a trauma hospital. I have encountered Black men suffering from gun violence. One summer after providing spiritual care to a family of a Black man who had been shot,

³ Concepts of historical trauma and historical unresolved grief and their contribution to suicide and other challenges are explored in literature regarding the trauma of Native Americans. See *The American Indian Holocaust: Healing historical unresolved grief* by Maria Yellow Horse Brave Heart, Ph.D. and Lemyra M. DeBruyn, Ph.D.

and later seeing another Black man being escorted in handcuffs and ankle chains in the hallway, the Holy Spirit confirmed within me another aspect of my work around death. The name death doula emerged. I was aware of doulas who support pregnant mothers during their process of delivering their babies, but I did not know if death doula was an established thing. I looked it up and discovered that death doulas accompany people who are in their final stages of life and help them transition peacefully. I also envision my work expanding to include support for people who have lost loved ones through violence. Unprocessed grief from the loss of our ancestors and our ancestral home, and the loss of our people who literally die every day through various forms of violence, contributes to the cultivation of a death consciousness. Black suicide can be examined through the lens of this manifestation of grief as a culmination of many factors permeating within a racist society.

Afrocentric Christ-centered Spirituality

“There are some wounds only Africa can heal.”

nayirah waheed

My Afrocentric Christ-centered spirituality has been forming for many years and resembles characteristics of the religious expression of my enslaved African ancestors who were forced to reimagine their traditional religious practices on the plantations in the land that became the U.S. (DuBois, 1903/2005). As Sociologist W.E.B DuBois (1903/2005) describes in his seminal text, *The souls of Black folk*, the religion of the enslaved African involved a reverence for nature, a “profound belief in invisible surrounding influences” and worship through ritual practices (DuBois, 1903/2005, p. 138). He asserts that this religious institution was the first “Afro-American institution”

called the “Negro church” and that it was not initially “by any means Christian” (DuBois, 1903/2005, p. 138-139). DuBois (1903/2005) contends that the Negro church transformed into a Christian church over many generations becoming primarily Baptist and Methodist in ideology (DuBois, 1903/2005). While I have not engaged in a formal study of traditional religious practices of West African cultures, the region of Africa where my ancestors are from, I have adopted ritual practices such as libation ceremony which honors the ancestors, prayer healing circles, and other spiritual cultural practices which I have learned through reading and exposure to a variety of African cultural experiences in the U.S and in different countries in Africa. For many years, my spirit has yearned to become more intimately familiar with my West African roots. I have travelled to Africa multiple times during the last twenty-plus years, including a 10-month stay in Kenya, two visits to Ghana, a visit to Rwanda, and to South Africa. On both trips to Ghana, I have visited slave castles on the coast where my ancestors were held before they were shipped across the Atlantic Ocean. Each stay in Africa has deepened my connection to the Spirit realm and to my ancestors. I recently submitted a sample of my DNA to Ancestry.com and learned that the majority of my ancestry can be traced to Nigeria. These experiences contributed to the formation of my Afrocentric worldview which is the foundation for my understanding of the manifestation of Divine consciousness. It has helped shape my understanding of the lack of separation between the physical and the spiritual world and the importance of the value of interdependence experienced through my deep connections to my family and community network of intimate friends who are like family, and my ancestors.

My spirit resonates with the aspects of my African religious and cultural traditions that have remained embedded within our American Baptist tradition, such as the practices of prayer and the singing of spirituals. The spirituals are a powerful mechanism for connecting me to the faith of my enslaved ancestors and their African homeland. They encapsulate a spiritual force that enables Black people to transcend the realities of an oppressive world and live free. Theologian Katie Cannon describes the multiple dimensions of this mystical music which her family sang in their home:

The music we listen to and sing at home is in the tradition of my ancestors, musicians who fashioned their songs from biblical lore, traditional African tunes, Protestant hymns, and the crucible of their experiences under slavery. Using their own distinct phrases, improvisational structure, polyrhythms, and call-and-response patterns, Black women and men expressed their consciousness and identity as a religious people (Cannon, 1995, p. 35).

These spirituals were sewn into our family's religious fabric as well. As described in the previous chapter, as a child, my grandfather, Rev. Wood, remembered sitting at his formerly enslaved grandmother Susan's knee and listening to her sing spirituals. She would share stories of her life on the plantation with her husband Moses and sang spirituals which animated her accounts. Grandma Susan's joy in the midst of the retelling of her experiences in slavery is evidence of the transcendent power of these spirituals.

Religious scholar Tracey E. Hucks (2012), whose text *Yoruba traditions & African American religious nationalism*, provides insights from Black Christians in America who have incorporated elements of their African traditions in their religious experiences, and discusses the reconnecting back to the pre-European Christianity that DuBois described (Hucks, 2012). She characterizes the work of one minister, Rev. Dr. Mark A. Lomax, as "negotiating spiritual liminality as both Ogun priest and ordained

Presbyterian minister,” whom she reports “speaks of the ‘beautiful struggle’ it has been to wed the best of the black Christian liberation tradition with ‘African culture and spirituality’” (Hucks, p. 254). Lomax defines his ministry as “Afrocentric Christian Ministry” that “utilizes the histories and cultures of African descended peoples as sources for biblical reflection and interpretation, ministry development and implementation, and evangelism in the community context where we exist” (Hucks, 2012, p. 254). Lomax does not believe that Jesus is God. He asserts “I don’t think Jesus is God in any sense of the word—not any more than you or I...His life did serve as a model for how one could live with such authenticity in the world that the divine in you can come out through the Holy Ghost” (Hucks, 2012, p.258). Hucks explains that “Lomax urges his congregants towards a ‘God-consciousness’ that centers on social action, collective empowerment, and the cultivation of the divine nature within them.” (Hucks, 2012, p. 258). His interpretation of God-consciousness further supports my framing choice of Divine consciousness as a more inclusive framework.

Lomax’ characterization of his work inspires me to label my ministry orientation as Afrocentric Christ-centered spirituality. This label describes my own negotiation of spiritual liminality as an unordained, licensed, Baptist minister, as well as the title of priestess which women in South Africa deemed me to be worthy of on my visit to the country in November 2019 for the Tounché Global Consciousness Summit. They said, “We see it. You’re a priestess. We all see it.” What they saw, experienced, and felt was the fruit of my prayer life. Prayer is the spiritual technology that cultivates my Divine consciousness in the most compelling way. Through God’s grace, during prayer, I feel the presence and power of the Spirit of God, and I surrender to be used as God’s vessel.

Because of what others have said about the tonality of my voice and what they feel when I pray, I know that this transfer between God and me through God's Spirit is evident through the sound of my voice as I articulate the words of praise and/or petition. I remind people that it is not me, but it is the Spirit of God in me. This is a way of demonstrating how they can also access God's Spirit within themselves through prayer. Prayer has had a prominent presence in my life. I grew up experiencing my mother's prayers, and the prayers of the members of our faith community at church, as sacred interventions where the intercessor would lead us to a place where worldly concerns could be deposited at the "throne of grace" and the heavenly realm could invade our reality. Prayer facilitates conditions of freedom and connection. As Cannon describes, "This sacred corporate event is the direct and natural successor to the oral folklore and the religious music inherited from Afro-American slaves. Hence, I grew up understanding the Black prayer tradition to be the authentic living bridge between Black people's stories, Black people's music, and Black people's source of faith" (Cannon, 1995, p. 36). Incorporating West African cultural elements into my Christ-centered spirituality helps me to treat those wounds that "only Africa can heal" (Waheed, 2013). It strengthens my connection to my African ancestors and reminds me of the truth - that I possess the same power they possessed which kept them rooted in faith and connected to the Spirit of God and enabled them to thrive through trauma. My Divine consciousness is an extension of theirs.

Afrocentric value of Interdependence

The "authentic living bridge" of the Black prayer tradition Cannon (1995) describes is one of the mechanisms that reveal the value of interdependence in my life. It is a vessel through which my ties to God, and my family, my community, and my

ancestors is strengthened. I experience my relationship with each as the expression of the kinship in West African culture that Noble (1991), as explained previously, describes as “collective unity” which “bound together the entire life system of the tribe” (Noble, 1991, p. 54). The kinship system extended from the ancestors to the unborn, and all tribes shared a collective belief in the “survival of the tribe” (Noble, 1991, p. 54). The collective unity of kinship is most profoundly expressed through my immediate and extended family. My parents and my sister have always been a constant source of unconditional love and support. Our family navigated challenges like any other family, but it was and is a strong family system that nurtures and protects me and provides the conditions for me to flourish. Our family unit has always included grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins, and close family friends who are like family. Growing up within a strong family system was a critical component of the shield of protection against acute psychological and emotional harm from the toxic elements of the world. I am blessed to continue to have that family unit which now includes my own family. My husband Edward and our son Elijah demonstrate the power and presence of God’s unconditional love to depths beyond what I ever imagined. Their support is unwavering. It mirrors the support I receive from my parents, sister, and my entire family. I experience Edward’s support and encouragement like a literal hand of God in my life. He is a constant presence. Our family unit is a critical component of the protective shield that insulates me from self-destructive thoughts.

Throughout my life, my family members have illustrated the power of their religion through their lived faith. We pray for each other and believe in the power of God to strengthen us and to help us through any challenge the world may present. When I was

a child, my mother demonstrated the effectiveness of praying with prayer partners. I remember her taking time out of many hectic mornings at home to pray with her prayer partner before leaving to take us to school and then going to work. I grew up immersed in prayer, and I maintain my own vibrant prayer life. I try to model this for my child. My husband and I pray together with our son and I pray with them both separately. I pray with my extended family members, and I have intimate prayer partners within my close community of loved ones who are like family, and I am a part of prayer groups including a group of praying mothers (MICAH-Mothers in Christ Ascending Higher). I came together with a group of mothers in Seattle to form MICAH shortly after my child was born. We continue to meet monthly for prayer via Zoom. During that time when I lived in Seattle, in response to rising gang violence, homicides of young Black people, and other concerns within my community, I co-founded another prayer group, Women United for Peace through Prayer. We led intercessory prayer walks throughout the community to pray for healing and protection at locations where there had been recent incidents of violence. I pray to my ancestors and I feel their prayers and presence. Prayer is one of the living bridges that keeps me connected and bound to my tribe. Prayer is a powerful mechanism for resistance against oppressive forces that I employ in my personal life and in society.

“Ancestral Fear”: Antecedent to Death Consciousness

It is clear, then, that this fear, which served originally as a safety device, a kind of protective mechanism for the weak, finally becomes death for the self. The power that saves turns executioner. Within the walls of separateness death keeps watch (Thurman, 1976, p. 46).

Death Consciousness

Death consciousness that emerges from fear is the antithesis of Divine consciousness. It is a state of being where one is unaware of one's possession of God's Spirit, or of one's divinity. As stated previously, according to theologian Leloup (2002), the early Church Fathers of the Christian tradition explained that when one is not connected to God's Spirit, one becomes an "unbalanced" troubled human being who becomes ruled by the soul (psyche) and becomes consumed by its "passions" or "pathologies" (Leloup, 2002, p. 123). This identification with the mortal self and lack of awareness of one's own divinity and of oneself as spirit connected to God, can create an environment where one develops a death consciousness. It is the space where fear breeds death—"in the walls of separateness" (Thurman, 1976, p. 46). These "walls of separateness" are ancient. They are external and internal, and fear has been their sustaining glue. For descendants of formerly enslaved Africans in the United States, the fear that manifests as racism contaminates our consciousness at birth. We are born into fear. From a Biblical perspective, no one can escape the contamination of fear. As told in the book of Genesis, it manifested in the Garden of Eden as soon as Adam and Eve ate from the forbidden tree of the knowledge of good and evil which introduced them to fear and ultimately death. God commanded, "...you must not eat from the tree of knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat of it you will surely die" (Genesis 2-3). Adam expressed fear of God for the first time after he ate from the tree and discovered he was naked. Responding to God's call, he said, "...I was afraid because I was naked; so I hid" (Genesis 3:10). This provides an explanation for the system that Jenkins (1997) contends awaits us all at birth. She asserts, "When we are born our divinity separates from itself so

that we come into the density of matter, into our humanness, into this place of separation. To be born is a betrayal of our divinity... That separation, that betrayal, is the seed from which our consciousness grows and that is how we enter into fear” (Ruiz & Nelson, 1997, p. 171-172). My work of manifesting and strengthening Divine consciousness is the spiritual resistance work of closing the separation between my self (humanness) and my divinity so that I become my true self expressing my full divinity.

“Ancestral Fear”

In his book, *Between the world and me* (2015), Ta-Nehisi Coates describes the inner and outer worlds of Black people in the United States who embody a haunting fear as a result of being formed in a country that enslaved their people for over two centuries. As noted previously, he describes the poison that permeates their bodies as “ancestral fear” that was passed down from their enslaved relatives whose bodies were owned by White people who subjected them to ongoing terror and torture (Coates, 2015, p. 87). Coates describes the psychological impact of this fear that some descendants of enslaved Africans harness and unleash on to their children. It translates into parenting behavior that can be stifling and oppressive, particularly in comparison to the parenting styles of some from the dominant group (Coates, 2015). He asserts, “And now when I measure this fear against the boldness that the masters of the galaxy imparted to their own children, I am ashamed” (Coates, 2015, p. 92).

This ancestral fear can be interpreted as a manifestation of internalized racial oppression. In their chapter entitled “Internalized Racial Oppression in the African American Community,” found in the text *Internalized oppression: The psychology of marginalized groups*, Bailey, Williams, & Favors (2014) describe the destructive,

psychological strategies slave owners employed on enslaved Africans in an effort to strip them of their humanity (Bailey, et al., 2014). Scholars have asserted that when this process of racial oppression becomes internalized, it may lead some oppressed people to believe they are inferior to their oppressors (Bailey et al., 2014). This internalized racial oppression built a mountain of fear in the enslaved. One pervasive strand of fear was the fear of their children being raped, tortured, or sold away. This ancestral fear creates a strong tendency in some Black parents to worry about their children whenever they are away from them, or when they interact with new white faces. I believe my mother, a woman of strong faith, is a product of this fear, and it informed her parenting style. As a result, I have been shaped by this ancestral poison that has stained my internal framework. I am aware of its ability to distort my perception of reality. One of the by-products of this distortion is that there are times when I misinterpret some situations as racially prescribed episodes of oppression. Below I explore this through an analysis of the self in the context of two incidents I experienced at local restaurants a few years ago. I will examine it through the lens of object relations theory and Winnicott's concepts of "True self" and "False self" (McCluskey, 2010, p. 436).

Racial Incidents

Several years ago, I went to a restaurant in Harvard Square in Cambridge, MA by myself for dinner. My waiter, a White male, took my order for brussels sprouts and french fries, and I never saw him again until he brought me my check. Someone else brought my food. While I was there, unattended, I watched people at the tables beside me, who happened to be White, get served and have multiple wait staff attend to them throughout their meal. No one ever came to my table to check on me to see how I was

doing or to ask me if I needed anything else. When my waiter finally returned with my check, I was extremely upset. I told him that I thought he had forgotten about me. He said, "Oh, well, I figured there couldn't have been anything wrong with brussels sprouts." This type of neglect happens to me every so often in restaurants and cafes. It happened shortly after this experience when I sat down in a café in Harvard Square and was never served. I never even received a menu. Others around me were served, including the older White gentleman who entered ahead of me. It is a really small café. The server, a White woman, literally walked right past my table, brushing alongside it to get to the White man to give him a menu. She completely ignored me. Or perhaps she did not see me. So, I left. I interpreted this as blatant racism---a product of either her conscious or subconscious mind. However, the incident at the restaurant is not as clear. My waiter could have just been rude. I was so hurt and angry after these incidents, and other similar incidents since these. Just thinking about them again makes my heart race and makes me sad. These experiences can be so painful and humiliating. I share them sometimes when people like to point out the number of degrees that I have. I tell them, I may have multiple degrees, but they do not help me become more visible to the servers who ignore me at restaurants. Below I explore my internal reactions to this treatment, and my interpretation of the first event through object relations theory.

Object Relations Theory

Object relations theory describes what happens as infants internalize the world around them and form attitudes and perceptions toward the self and others (Goldstein, 2001). The term is used to describe “the *internal* images or representations of the self and others (objects) that a person acquires in the course of early development” (Goldstein,

2001, p. 7). Pursuant to this theory, D.W. Winnicott argued that the key determinant of the quality of an infant's developmental process was her relationship with her mother (Goldstein, 2001). He theorized that there was no distinction or separation between infant and mother with respect to the infant's development (Goldstein, 2001). He described the significance of the maternal influence through his concepts of "good enough" and "not good enough" mothering (McCluskey, 2010, p. 436). The "good enough" mother contributes to the cultivation of the infant's "True self" by creating an environment where she can develop "an imagined sense of power and control" (McCluskey, 2010, p. 436). The "not good enough mother" fails to foster a sense of power and control in her infant which contributes to the formation of the infant's "False self," or the self that emerges throughout the life course covering up its "True self" with false representations (McCluskey, 2010, p. 436). I contend that "good enough mothering" can turn into "not good enough mothering" through mothering that is tainted by the ancestral fear produced by insidious, haunting racism. This leads to fear-based mothering which creates a "False self" in the mother's child.

My mother was, and is, far beyond a more than "good enough" mother, but fear did influence her mothering. Growing up, her worrying was persistent and continues to this day. It is natural for parents to worry, but I believe her worry was definitely a product of history. Her ancestral fear was solidified in her body as she was being formed within a racist culture that deemed her body a target of hate, suspicion, and lust. This has been passed down to me. I understand it acutely as the mother of a Black child in a country that gives me every reason to fear for his safety which is compromised because of the color of his skin. This race-based fear has led to the emergence of a "False self" in me

that emerges in situations when I sense a possibility of being discriminated against because of my Blackness. I do not know whether or not my “False self” misinterpreted the actions of the waiter who failed to attend to me throughout my meal. Maybe he did not ignore me because I am Black. Maybe he was just a bad waiter. I do know that regardless of the motivation for his behavior, I felt as much pain as I felt in the café when I was never seen or served. Both experiences triggered reminders of past similar experiences, and of the legacy of invisibility that I inherited from my ancestors which has a psychological impact (Franklin & Boy-Franklin, 2000). The invisible self is the “False self” that racism created. This “False self” emerges when I am disconnected to my “True Self” which is my spirit self connected to the Spirit of God. When ancestral fear, or any type of fear, animates the “False Self,” the pathway to death consciousness emerges.

This ancestral fear imparted by my mother, which she likely inherited from her mother, is embedded in me; fortunately, so is her ancestral faith passed down through the generations of people of faith in her family lineage. Her steadfast faith exceeds the capacity of any measure of her fear. She has never let fear overcome her. Her faith power ultimately extinguishes the fear executioner and protects her Divine consciousness. My work of healing from internalized racial oppression requires a constant awareness of my false, disconnected self, and a commitment to intentional spiritual coping strategies to continually strengthen my Divine consciousness and keep it away, until it is permanently put to rest and no longer able to mask my true spiritual self. The spiritual foundation that my parents helped to cultivate, and the faith transferred through my ancestors have helped me to establish has produced a quality of Divine consciousness that has prevented me from succumbing to fear and calling forth my own death.

Generating Divine Consciousness

The methodology

In their text, *The tree of knowledge: The biological roots of human understanding*, Maturana and Varela (1992) explore the biological roots of understanding how we know what we know. They provide four conditions they assert must be met when examining a phenomenon and providing a scientific explanation (Maturana & Varela, 1992). They contend that when the following criterion is met, the explanation can be deemed a scientific one (Maturana & Varela, 1992). I will be using their conditions to explain the phenomena of Divine consciousness (see Figure 3 in Appendix I) through an examination of four examples of Divine interactions.

The conditions are as follows:

- a. Describing the phenomenon (or phenomena) to be explained in a way acceptable to a body of observers;
- b. Proposing a conceptual system capable of generating the phenomenon to be explained in a way acceptable to a body of observers (explanatory hypothesis);
- c. Obtaining from (b) other phenomena not explicitly considered in that proposition, as also describing its conditions for observation by a body of observers
- d. Observing these other phenomena obtained from (b).

(Maturana and Varela, 1992, p. 28).

The phenomenon to be explained

The phenomenon to be explained here is Divine consciousness through an examination of four examples of Divine interactions. As explained previously, Divine

consciousness can be defined as awareness of God's full presence within and around oneself, bringing one's whole being into harmony (mind, body, and spirit) with God and the environment, including other people, through one's spirit's connection to God's Spirit (Ruiz & Nelson, 1997/2009); Leloup, 2002).

The conceptual system capable of generating Divine Consciousness

The conceptual system capable of generating Divine consciousness consists of the spiritual practices I engage in consistently to deepen my faith in God and to cultivate my spirit's connection to God's Spirit. These practices also include my practice of cultivating connection to my family, my community, and my ancestors. My system of spiritual engagement includes the following practices: (1) prayer, (2) meditation, (3) gratitude journaling/writing to Jesus, (4) Bible study, (5) scriptural meditation, (6) reading a variety of spiritual readings, (7) fasting, and (8) praise and worship at church and at home through listening to a variety of Christian music including gospel, spirituals, and contemporary Christian worship music, (9) affirmations-writing out and speaking statements affirming God's promises to me; (10) connection to family, community, and ancestors; (11) faith and intergenerational faith.

Summary of the system

Throughout my adult life, I have incorporated a varied combination of these spiritual practices. The most consistent practice has been my prayer life which includes quiet solitude prayer, praying out loud, writing out prayers in my gratitude journal, and praying with prayer partners and prayer groups. For many years, my consistent spiritual practice has included early morning quiet time with God where I read the Bible and or a

devotional. In the last seven years or so, I have included prayer in the form of writing to Jesus in my gratitude journal. Below is the entry from my journal on November 24, 2014:

Dear Lord,

I am so grateful that I am yours. That you are literally guiding me, every step of the way—I feel your hand – I see your hands and I thank you – not only for what it does for me, but for what it reveals to others. My goal for today – in all I do and say and write – is peace.

Thank you!

My journal practice has strengthened my faith and connection to God in profound ways. It has helped me to really internalize Jesus as my brother, companion, and beautiful manifestation of God in my life. He becomes more real with each note I write, which makes God's presence felt even greater. In January of 2014, I was trained in Transcendental Meditation and began meditating twice a day for 20 minutes each sitting. This practice helped me to distinguish petitionary and intercessory prayer where I am asking God for help for myself and others, and meditation where I am quiet and still and availing myself to God, and providing God room to speak to me. This practice has enhanced my capacity of attunement and has enabled me to hear God more clearly. I credit this practice for giving me clarity regarding the path to social work in 2014.

The morning practices ground me for the day, and I try to remain connected throughout the day through ongoing spirits of prayer, either by myself or with partners. My prayers can be as short as, "Lord help," "Thank you, Jesus," or "Jesus, keep me near the cross." Each utterance, regardless how long, draws me closer to God. In recent years, I have also become more in tune with my ancestors. My family has an ancestral altar in our home which contains pictures I took of the slave castle in Ghana, West Africa where Africans were held before they were taken from Africa; pictures of loved ones who have

passed away; along with ancestors within our Black cultural family including Harriet Tubman, Marcus Garvey, Ella Baker, and others. I also have a picture of Harriet Tubman and W.E.B. Dubois in my small office at home where I write, and I have created an altar with pictures of my family ancestors and sacred items at my desk to give me strength. These spiritual practices increase my connection to the strength of my ancestors, and my awareness of God's presence and love, which fills me with peace and hope. These practices help to change my negative, fear-based pattern of thinking. They increase my spiritual wisdom and insight and help to create the conditions in my mind and heart to experience Divine interactions.

Explanatory hypothesis

If I consistently engage in spiritual practices which deepen my faith in God and strengthen my spirit's connection to God, and to my family, community, and my ancestors, I will possess Divine consciousness.

Obtaining from (b) other phenomena not explicitly considered

I experience the following phenomena from the spiritual practices that can be observed by others: (1) a calming presence; (2) a calming voice; (3) sharpened attunement/sensitivity to the Spirit of God; (4) heightened intuitive abilities; and (5) Divine interactions – demonstrations of God's movement in my life, including through evidence of my independency with my family, community, and my ancestors. One through four are observable phenomena that describe my way of being, and the fifth phenomenon describes God's observable actions in my life.

Observing these other phenomena obtained from (b)

Due to time limitations, I am unable to provide written testimony from others to share their observations regarding the phenomena obtained from (b) outlined above. However, I can testify to what I have been told. People I encounter in various settings, including those close to me, those I engage with regularly, and those with whom I have brief encounters, have expressed that they experience my calming presence and voice which I affirm comes through my spirit's connection to God's Spirit cultivated through my intentional spiritual engagement. The four vignettes below provide examples of Divine interactions for observers to see the Spirit of God working in my life through orchestrating meetings, occurrences, and events in a way that reveals evidence of my divine partnership with God, my interdependency with God and my family, community, and ancestors, and my attunement and intuitiveness, all of which affirm this partnership. Following each vignette, I will provide a summary analysis highlighting the evidence of the movement of God and my attunement. I will explain what I sensed, observed, and the connections I made.

Four Vignettes of Divine Interactions

My connection to God, which fuels my awareness of my true spiritual self, is visible through the divine interactions I have with God. The four vignettes that follow illustrate what I call---evidence of Divine partnership. What they help me to articulate is my awareness of God's presence in my life and my reliance upon God for guidance. Each experience deepens my faith and my connection to God which helps to sustain my Divine consciousness and keep me rooted in faith and not fear. I hope they convey my intimacy with God which develops from more than casual encounters with God, but through consequential interactions that impact the quality of my life, and my life's trajectory. The

interactions symbolize my relationship with God and my interdependency with God, my family, community, and ancestors. The examples are varied and include brief interactions without anyone else involved which could include being led to a particular place or resource that was perfectly or “divinely” timed, or could involve engagement with others. They all display a move of God’s Spirit and my ability to remain attuned to the Spirit’s promptings and to interpret the results.

I will begin this section with an example of a Divine interaction that occurred during my process of writing this autoethnography. As I was reflecting on the term I should use to describe these encounters, the word interactions came to my spirit. I think it came to me because it is the term used in the quantitative logistic regression analysis in the empirical research section of my dissertation. I wrote down “interactions with the Spirit realm” in my notes and decided that Divine interactions was the right term, and was better than “Divine appointments” which I had also considered. Then I went to Maturana and Varela’s (1992) text, *The tree of knowledge: The biological roots of human understanding*, to review the scientific method I am applying to the interpretation of these encounters. I immediately opened the book to a random page 127, and there was a green sticky note where someone had written a message that begins – “History of interaction is a history of structural change-expanding possibility...” This of course intrigued me and led me to read that page. It is a chapter on Behavioral Domains and the page contained the story of an experiment about the behavior of lambs. Maturana & Varela (1992) explain that they separated a newborn lamb from its mother for a few hours and then placed it back with its mother (Maturana & Varela, 1992, p. 127). They observed the lamb’s behavior with its mother, and it appeared to continue to develop in a healthy,

normal manner (Maturana & Varela,1992). Nothing out of the ordinary was observed until they placed the lamb in an environment with other lambs (Maturana & Varela,1992). While the other lambs behaved playfully and bumped into each other with their heads in a normal manner, the lamb that had been separated from its mother briefly did not (Maturana & Varela,1992). It isolated itself because it did not know how to play (Maturana & Varela,1992). They could not provide a definitive answer regarding its behavior but were able to note that based on what they knew about the nervous system relying upon structure, the lamb's different behavior resulted from the different nervous system that it developed as a result of being separated from its mother for a period of time, a separation the others did not experience (Maturana & Varela,1992). Maturana & Varela (1992) explain the impact of the separation:

...during the first hours after a lamb is born, its mother licks it continually all over its body. In separating the newborn lamb from its mother, we have interfered with this interaction and all it entails in terms of tactile and visual stimulation and, probably, different types of chemical contacts. The experiment shows these interactions to be decisive for a structural transformation of the nervous system which has consequences apparently very remote from the simple behavior of licking (p. 127).

This story struck me as a way to help explain the importance of our intimate interactions with the Divine, and what is lost when there is a disruption in the relationship between God and humans. Many of my ancestors survived and resisted the desire to end their own lives as a result of their intimate relationship with God. My formerly enslaved great-great-grandmother, Susan Wood, who I described previously as a woman of faith whose intimacy with God emanated through the spirituals she sang, is a very present example of this phenomenon for me. I am so grateful for my grandfather's record of her in his book. Between his stories, and my visits to her grave site at the Pole Bridge Cemetery in Ware

Neck, VA, the Black settlement in Tidewater, VA (Wood, 1998/2004) where she was born and where she died, I know her. I feel her spirit at times, and I know she is guiding me through this project. My grandfather's account of her describes a woman whose life exemplifies what it means to be born free, but not into freedom. He explains:

In the beginning there was a woman named Susan. She smoked a corncob pipe, and she rocked back and forth in her old wooden rocker, and she sang joyfully, triumphantly, a song that I would never forget: O happy day... That fixed my choice on thee, My Savior and my God! (Wood, 1998/2004, p. 1).

People underestimate the value of the songs of freedom sung by the enslaved and formerly enslaved. They are not simply expressions of contentment. They denote a particular way of breathing that reflects an inner life stabilized through intimacy with God cultivated through a multitude of Divine interactions which breed strong faith and spiritual resistance. My grandmother's interactions with God, like those of many other enslaved people, were decisive for her inner structural transformation. Her faith that persisted as a free woman, which she passed down to her children and her children's children, provides evidence of one who possessed Divine consciousness and whose whole being was in harmony with God. Just like the lamb's interaction with its mother at its early stage of life helps to stabilize its inner nervous system and prepare it to engage with the world in a healthy way, I am gleaned from what I know that my grandmother's interactions with God was the stabilizing force and kept her from creating a space in her consciousness where thoughts of death could grow and overtake her. While I do not know details about her parents and whether they were people of faith, I do know that she and her husband Moses were people of faith and passed their faith and belief in God

down to their children, which included my grandfather's father, Frank Tucker Wood, who was also born on a plantation in Ware Neck, VA, when "slavery was on the edge of freedom" (M. Wood, personal interview, Summer, 2019). He and his wife, Julia Wood, passed it down to their seven sons, which includes my grandfather. That early spiritual nurturing helped to secure each generation and ground them in a violent, unstable world that denied their humanity. In his book, my grandfather describes the spiritual nurturing he received from his grandmother:

I'd sit at her knee, feeling the power of her faith, the warmth of her kindness, and already beginning to understand something about the love of God that's reflected in each one of us, and that makes this great old world go around and around (Wood, 1998/2004, p. 4).

I saw her in him. All throughout my early life, as I sat in the pew at church and listened to his sermons every Sunday, I heard traces of her in him before I even knew her name. I developed a faith, an extension of my ancestors' faith, that has been my stabilizing inner force.

Vignette One: Deciding to apply to social work school – being led to BC – Fall 2014

Receiving Confirmation

I remember the day that I decided to begin my application for the PhD in social work program at Boston University. At the time, for some reason, I was not aware of the program at Boston College. I had reached this decision after months of prayer and conversations with professors and mentors, and after my husband, Edward finally decided to support this plan. I was in my third and final year of the Master of Divinity program at Harvard Divinity School. My husband had every reason to resist this next

move. Pursuing a PhD in social work was not in the plan when we moved from Seattle to Cambridge three years prior so that I could attend HDS. But by my third year in the program, after ongoing intentional reflection, questioning and listening, I had discerned the need to go deeper in my pursuit of racial justice and healing and become equipped to address the psychological impact of racism on the mental health of Black people.

Edward initially could not understand why I needed this degree. I remember one discussion we had at home shortly before I needed to leave for a class that was particularly frustrating. After that conversation, I prayed and surrendered it all to God. I let it go and trusted God to show Edward why I needed to do this. I relied on my faith. I knew, without a doubt, that if God wanted me to pursue this path, God would reveal this to Edward. I left and started my walk to school, still feeling pretty animated about it all. As I walked down Pleasant Street to Massachusetts Avenue, I passed by a woman who was sitting on the corner by the Post Office. As I walked by, she stopped me and said, “Excuse me, are you a social worker?” I was shocked. I stopped and asked, “I’m sorry, what did you say?” She repeated, “Are you a social worker?” I couldn’t believe what I was hearing. Just moments after having an intense discussion with Edward about my desire to pursue social work, and then my intention to surrender it all to God, I encounter this woman. She looked a little disheveled and had a few bags around her. “No, I’m not a social worker. But why would you think I was a social worker?” She said, “I don’t know, you just look like a social worker – your clothes, your style – you just seem like a social worker,” she said with such clarity. I replied, “You know, it’s interesting that you would say that because I was just having a conversation about how I wanted to become a social worker, so thank you for sharing that. Take care.” I left her and continued walking to the

Divinity School. I was smiling and laughing at the way God makes God's self so known to me. It was a clear confirmation that I was on the right path and that God was working things out.

Starting the Application

It was not too long after that encounter when I decided to get started on the application. The Spirit of God had worked on Edward, and he was in support of this move. I was sitting in the computer lab in the basement of Andover Library at HDS. I decided to apply to BU even after discovering that I would not be able to obtain my MSW as a part of the PhD program. I was really disappointed, but I decided I would apply anyway and I would figure out a way to get my MSW somehow. I didn't think I had any other options, because I did not want to leave the state. For some reason, I was not aware of the social work program at Boston College and was not led to explore BC. As I began typing in Boston University School of Social Work in the Google search engine, instead of taking me to the BU site, it went right to the page for Boston College School of Social Work. It didn't go to the front page; it went to an internal page that displayed the information regarding the combined MSW/PhD program. I froze. I could not believe what I was seeing. I remember moving my head closer to the computer screen to make sure I was reading the words correctly. I remember shouting, "This is the program that I want! This is a combined MSW/PhD! Oh my goodness!" How did I get to this page? I pulled myself together and began reading the information and grew even more excited. Then I saw that the application deadline was less than a month away, and I immediately went into high gear. I emailed my recommenders and asked them if they could provide recommendation letters earlier than the original deadline I had requested.

Then I emailed the school's associate dean for research, David Takeuchi, and requested to meet with him. I needed to confirm that BC would be a place where I could explore my research interest of generational racial trauma in Black people the role of spirituality in their resiliency. I emailed him on November 18, 2014, and he responded within an hour, even though he was out of town. We met the following week on November 25, 2014. I still have my notes from our meeting. He said that research in spirituality was growing in the field of social work and that through my research in this area I could explore ways to engage the faith-based communities and the science communities. He explained that BC adopts Jesuit principles of serious scholarship in pursuit of social justice and has a broad view of religion and social justice. He suggested that I could explore faith and spirituality as a scientific approach for healing (D. Takeuchi, personal communication, November 25, 2104). I left that meeting even more confident that God had guided me to the right institution. I knew this program would help equip me for the work of developing therapeutic interventions and programs that incorporate spiritual methods that would be accessible to the clinical and faith communities. I got right to work on my application. Through God's grace, I made the deadline.

Analysis/interpretation:

Running into the woman who asked me if I was a social worker right after I had prayed and surrendered the matter to God was a direct response from God encouraging me to continue to surrender and trust. Some may think it was just a coincidence, but I know from experience that God can speak with great clarity in many ways, including through random strangers. I shared the encounter with Edward, who wasn't overtly impressed. However, soon after, he yielded and granted his blessings. I know God

worked on him on the inside. Without question, the Spirit of God redirected my internet search and led me to the BC website that day so that I would apply to the right school.

The fact that I was able to meet with David, so quickly and that my recommenders were able to supply their letters early, was God's orchestration.

Vignette Two - Homecoming – Summer of 2015 – Intergenerational Faith

A couple of months before I began this MSW/PhD journey, my family and I went to our annual Wood family reunion, which we call "Homecoming" in Ware Neck, VA, a small area in Tidewater, VA that used to be a Black settlement. Summer of 2019 was the 81st Homecoming. This is my father's side of our family. I only see most of these family members once a year at this reunion. I remember talking quite a bit about what I was about to embark upon and sharing my passion for developing effective spiritually-based therapeutic interventions to heal our people of generational racial trauma and address other mental health needs. We are blessed to be able to have information about our ancestors that extends back to the period of enslavement. My grandfather's parents, Frank and Julia Wood, had seven boys who were all born in Ware Neck, where Frank's parents, Moses and Susan Wood, were enslaved. According to my grandfather, Julia's mother was a Powhatan Indian, and her father was a White Englishman. Throughout the years, we have visited different sites connected to our family in Ware Neck including the homeplace where Frank and Julia raised their children, Union Zion Baptist Church, the church they all attended, the plantation where we know Frank and some of the older boys labored, and that may also have been where Moses and Susan were enslaved, and the Pole Bridge Cemetery where Susan is buried. We have been attending this reunion consistently since I was a child, however, I have only recently absorbed the significance

of this gathering within the last ten years or so. I understand it now as an ancestral pilgrimage that helps us to get close to our past and to remind us of the strength of those who came before us and who remain with us in the Spirit realm.

At one point during the weekend of this reunion in 2015, while I was talking to a cousin about racism and trauma that has been passed down, etc., I received a revelation in my spirit that I believe came from our great-great-grandparents. It was a reminder. The message I received was, “Yes, we have generational trauma, but don’t forget we also have generational faith that has been passed down.” I believe it was Moses who delivered that message to my spirit through God’s Spirit. I had talked to my grandfather about Moses about a year before that while I was researching my Master’s thesis on forgiveness at Harvard Divinity School. Moses was a preacher, and I wanted to learn more about his theology of forgiveness. I wanted to know what a minister, who was enslaved, thought about forgiveness. Moses died before my grandfather was born, but my grandfather shared what Susan had shared with him about Moses. He said that Moses used to say – don’t you worry about slavery; God is going to handle slavery in His time and in His own way (M. Wood, personal communication, summer, 2014). Moses’ powerful message took root in my soul and spirit. I believe he was the deliverer of that message through the Spirit – to remind me of his faith and the faith of Susan, and all our ancestors who lived by the faith that continues to sustain our people today.

Analysis/interpretation:

I remember the day that I received that revelation in my spirit like it was yesterday. There are times when I will receive messages deposited into my spirit that are full sentences shared like someone is speaking to me. I have had times when I was clear it

was God. I knew that this was from my ancestor because of where we were and because of the pronouns used – “Yes, we have generational trauma, but don’t forget we also have generational faith that has been passed down.” It was a clear directive to remember our history. I believe Moses wanted to make sure that I remembered this fact before I started the social work program to remind me not to let my conversation about the trauma that has been passed down through generations overshadow the other aspect of our powerful history. This was further confirmation that I was on the right path.

Vignette Three - Summer of 2018 – Grandpa’s Birthday

My grandfather, Rev. Marcus Garvey Wood, turned 98 in June 2018. My home church in Baltimore, the church where he pastored for over fifty years and where he is still officially co-pastor, hosted a celebration for him. I attended the celebration and was among the many family and friends who were allowed to share remarks in honor of his day. I spoke briefly about how much I appreciated the connection I have to my great-great-grandparents because he preserved their memory and lessons in his book and because we attend our family reunions where we share memories and visit sites that reconnect us to our family and history. I shared the particular importance of understanding the spiritual capacity of our ancestors to endure the psychological pain and suffering and the wisdom to navigate their way through the inhumane system of slavery and the hard life afterward. I expressed that these are lessons that are important for us to embrace and implement now. I thanked him for being the link that connects us to them. He is a living connection to slavery which reminds us that that way of life was not that long ago.

About a month after the celebration, something amazing occurred. I was riding home from an appointment on the subway and was reading a book about Pauli Murray, one of my favorite people in history. Murray is not well-known but she was a brilliant Black woman who was a human rights activist, lawyer and Episcopalian Priest. While I was reading the section about Murray's involvement in the March on Washington, I began thinking about my grandfather and how he and my mom attended the march together. It made me also think about how someone needs to write his history. Even though he had written his own book, I thought someone needed to chronicle his story. He has been interviewed by historians about his friendship with Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. and their time together as classmates at Crozer Theological Seminary, and he has so much more history and wisdom to pass on that we need to capture while he is still able to share it. These are the thoughts that were circulating in my mind as I read about Murray's time at the march, which included a reference to her marching with one of her old friends named Pat Harris. This name stood out for me because my mother has a dear friend named Patelle Harris, who is sometimes referred to as Pat, and who I refer to as Aunt Patelle. She is also a member of my home church, and that is where I usually see her when I am back in Baltimore. When I arrived at home, I retrieved the mail from our mail box, and one of the pieces of mail startled me. I sat down at the small seat by our door and stared at a piece of correspondence whose arrival was undoubtedly divinely timed. I was looking at a letter from Aunt Patelle. It took my breath away. The letter by itself would have been enough for me to know that God was speaking. While she holds a special place in my heart, I don't see her that often. She has written me before, but I believe the last letter she sent was in 2015 when I graduated from Harvard Divinity

School. So this occurrence, out of the blue, meant something more. As soon as I read her beautifully handwritten note, I knew. Here is what she wrote:

Dearest Melissa,

I think of you often. However, I just finished conversing with your beloved “mommy.” This motivated me all the more to pen this note...my primary reason for writing is to tell you that your comments at Rev. Wood’s birthday celebration were stellar. Melissa, all of us should be so appreciative of our ancestors and of our history. Your reference to the value of the aforementioned instilled in you by your grandfather did not go unnoticed! Thank you, my dear niece, for being you!...

Ever in His peace,

Aunt Patelle
July 4, 2018

I received this letter on July 24, 2018. After reading it, I wrote the date in the margin of the book about Murray where I had seen her name. She had mailed it earlier in the month, but to my former address. It was returned to her, and she mailed it again after obtaining my current address from my mother. So it arrived on the very day that I read her name in the book while having received the prompting from the Spirit regarding the need to record my grandfather’s history and wisdom. A few days later, while looking for family history information online, I found the obituary of my grandfather’s father, Frank Tucker Wood, in the Baltimore Afro-American Newspaper, dated June 28, 1975. Here is a portion of it:

Here is the obituary as the family requests:

Mr. Wood Sr., age 94, was born to slave parents, Moses and Susan Wood, July 12, 1880 in a log cabin on the plantation owned by Dr. Phil Taliaferro. He was one of nine children who worked on the plantation. When the owner asked the family to leave because freedom had come for slaves, they settled near the plantation at Back Creek, Ware Neck, Gloucester County, Va. (Obituary, 1975).

I initially thought that my mother should interview grandpa. because she is a historian and she has maintained a special relationship with him even though he is no longer officially her father-in-law. But I soon realized that this was work I was being called to do. I had already started to do some of this work informally with my cousin Sherice when we interviewed grandpa at a family reunion a few years prior. I shared the news of the letter and my experience with one of my dear friends and prayer partners, Christa. In 2011, her prophetic vision played a key role in a major turning point in my life that has led me to this point of my journey. She agreed that this was my work. I wrote down what she shared in our phone conversation. She said, “Your grandfather is a portal. Everything he says at this point is scripture. You are in the portal. Ask, ‘what am I supposed to know.’ The training you have had has prepared you for this – to ask the questions. The lens is clear and bright...” By the end of the year, I had determined that I would incorporate an interview with my grandfather in my dissertation project.

Analysis/interpretation:

Only God can move in the ways I described in this vignette. It was clear that my assignment was to formally interview my grandfather and do further ancestral work. Seeing the name Pat Harris in a book and then receiving a letter from the Pat Harris that I know on the same day, affirming the message I had received from God’s Spirit, is far from a random occurrence. God is precise and intentional. When I found my great-grandfather’s obituary soon afterward, it was very confirmation. But I was not led to it for further confirmation as I did not any more confirmation. I believe I was led to it to be further connected to my ancestors. Reading the newspaper article from 40 years ago

about my great-grandfather being born on a plantation and his parents Moses and Susan being enslaved, brought them to life and drew them closer to me. God used Christa, one of my prayer partners, to confirm that interviewing my grandfather was my part of the assignment I was brought to BC to accomplish. God also affirmed this through my aunt Patelle, a close family friend who has been a part of my family community since I was a child.

Vignette Four – Summer / Fall 2019 – Return to Africa

Ware Neck, VA is about 40 miles away from Jamestown, VA, the site where the first enslaved Africans were brought in 1619. Last year marked the 400th year since the beginning of the Transatlantic Slave Trade. The West African country of Ghana formerly acknowledged 2019 as the “Year of Return” and there were many celebrations throughout West Africa and the U.S. While I have been to Africa multiple times and maintain an awareness and connection to the continent consistently in various ways, it was special to experience a period of time when there was a collective acknowledgement across the globe of the beginning of the forced migration of Africans to this country. It was particularly meaningful to write and defend an explicitly Afrocentric dissertation proposal during this time. Although it was the year of return to Africa, I never contemplated trying to go back to Africa to visit before the year’s end until I met Swaady at a program at Harvard during the summer of 2019. During one of the evening dinners, we had an opportunity to talk in-depth about our respective paths and ministries. We discovered that we both share a deep faith in God, a commitment to our ancestors, and a call to spiritual healing work. We prayed together. In 2018, Swaady founded Touché Global Consciousness Summit to cultivate “conscious and sacred leaders” from around

the world and gather them together to address global concerns and engage in healing and reconnection (“Touché,” 2019). There had been two convenings. The first was in Johannesburg, South Africa, and the second one was in Bali. Each summit has a different theme. Swaady was excited about my work and research and invited me to participate in the third summit scheduled to take place in Cape town, South Africa. I knew, without hesitation, that I was going to South Africa. Swaady’s massive spirit left no room for doubt. Shortly before I left for South Africa, the Spirit prompted me to check my grandfather’s book. I knew that he had worked at the South African embassy in Washington, D.C. when he was a young man, and I wanted to remember what else he said about South Africa. When I checked the book, I discovered that I had forgotten that he had also visited Cape Town, South Africa. It was his first trip to Africa, and he made the trip in 1972 – the year that I was born.

The theme for this summit was “We and Earth are One: Restoring Harmony Between Humanity and Nature,” and I was asked to address how racism interferes with our ability to connect with ourselves, each other, and the earth. The summit was held on November 30, 2019. I made it back to the continent of Africa during the year of return. My ability to return to Africa, and to visit South Africa, a country that I have always wanted to visit, was an enormous expression of God’s love and grace. I have enormous admiration for Nelson Mandela and Bishop Desmond Tutu and the Truth and Reconciliation work they facilitated. I want to return and spend extended time there to do research on the TRC to learn lessons I can apply to the racial healing work in the U.S. I think about South Africa often. I refer to it when I facilitate racial healing sessions as I teach the philosophy of Ubuntu and share how it undergirded the TRC process there. At

the summit, I spoke about our challenges in the U.S. and the racial healing work that is so critical. After the session, a Black South African woman came up to me and expressed that she appreciated what I shared about the healing work I do, and she said that South Africa has more work to do. She expressed, “South Africans are in denial. We think we have come further than we really have.” She also said she appreciated my framing of the work as racial justice as opposed to racial reconciliation. I said, “Yes, because reconciliation doesn’t include justice work such as economic justice and other areas.”

When I started divinity school, I was using reconciliation terminology, but by the end, I had shifted to racial justice and healing, which encapsulates it all. Her words were encouraging. I received another encouraging message from a White woman who may have also been South African. She said that as she listened to me, she was reminded of Desmond Tutu’s work, and she encouraged me to reach out to his foundation. A Black South African man who was a Baptist pastor also blessed me. He told me he appreciated what I shared, and he then expressed a message which I know was from God. He said, “You have a lot of books in you, Melissa. Make sure you write. It would be a shame to take all of that wisdom with you when you die.”

This summit was unlike any other convening I have participated in. It was held outside at a beautiful location 120 kilometers outside of Cape Town surrounded by mountains. We were in a spiritual vortex, and it was a powerful site for prayer, healing, and ritual, along with intellectual engagement. It was a convening of leaders and change agents who are spiritually grounded and gifted and know that the power for any substantive transformation in the world starts from within ourselves. My experience in South Africa ended with a beautiful ritual experience. Ten of the organizers and

participants of Touché were all staying together at the private farm house at the site where the summit was held. Some of us were Black American descendants of enslaved Africans, and I wanted us to be able to do something special to honor our ancestors before we left the continent. Swaady agreed that it was a good idea and suggested that we expand it into a prayer ceremony where each of us could also share requests we wanted the group to pray for, as we are all at pivotal stages in our life journeys. We gathered in a gorgeous, sun-lit room with opened window doors and sat in a circle with centerpiece items consisting of a plant for our libation ritual, stones, and other items, including anything that we wanted to have blessed. I brought my notebook symbolizing my dissertation. I opened the ceremony with a libation ritual practiced in African cultures as a way to honor the ancestors. I opened with a prayer and a few words about our ancestors and then invited participants to say names of ancestors they wanted to honor. I poured water into the plant after each name was called. The entire ceremony was beautiful, and the Spirit of God manifested in a powerful way. Our connection through the Spirit of God was special, and many of us know that we have more work to do together.

Analysis/interpretation:

I still cannot believe that God allowed me to return to Africa last year. It is a reminder of the scripture that says God can bless us “exceedingly and abundantly beyond what we conceive of or ask, according to the power that works in us” Ephesians 3:20. When my spirit remains connected to God’s spirit, God’s power in me can do amazing things; things I have not even requested. Meeting Swaady was an act of grace. I originally was not supposed to stay for that evening dinner because of another commitment, but my schedule changed. If we had not connected that night, it is possible

that we may not have had a significant amount of time to connect at any other point in the four-day program. God rearranged my schedule. It was important for me to plant my feet on the soil of the African continent and engage in ritual healing practices to reinforce my commitment to the continent, my global community, my ancestors and to an Afrocentric healing approach. God also used the experience as an opportunity to affirm my call to racial justice and healing through the observations of the women, and from the pastor who prophetically announced that I have many books in me, which confirmed what God has already told me.

Summary of themes from the data

In each of these examples of my Divine interactions, I hope the observer can see evidence of spiritual factors and coping practices that insulate me from developing a consciousness that could lead me to desire to call forth my own death. The examples of Divine interactions emerging from my system of spiritual engagement through practices operationalize my spiritual resistance and illustrate evidence of my Divine partnership with God, and my interdependency with my family, community and ancestors. The following themes emerged from the data. In the first vignette regarding my path to social work and BC, there are the following: (1) prayer; (2) discernment; (3) surrender to God; (4) faith in God; (5) a “chance” encounter confirming direction from God; (6) a “chance” occurrence confirming direction from God; and (7) confirmation of God’s direction through a meeting/conversation; (8) connection to family. In the second vignette regarding Homecoming, there are the following: (1) reconnection to my ancestors through visits to family sites; (2) confirmation of God’s direction through

revelation/ancestral wisdom through the Spirit; and (3) receipt of spiritual wisdom through my grandfather; (4) intergenerational faith.

In the third vignette regarding interviewing my grandfather, there are the following: (1) connection to ancestors through the discovery of my great-grandfather's obituary; (2) a "chance" occurrence confirming direction from God; and (3) confirmation of God's direction through a meeting/conversation; (4) connection to my community. In the fourth vignette regarding returning to Africa, there are the following: (1) confirmation of God's direction through meetings/conversations; and (2) reconnection to ancestors through a return to Africa; (3) connection to community. Each vignette provides explicit examples of various ways I have received confirmation from God affirming I am moving in the right direction. They illustrate a partnership because we are both interacting with each other. God is speaking, which I "hear" or discern through God's Spirit, and I am responding to the promptings and following the leads. Each interaction builds on each other and forms a record of grace. I am then able to look back at the record of the beautiful ways God has moved alone, and through others, and provided for me. This record of grace helps me to take the next step of faith with confidence. These experiences cultivate a rich intimacy with God and those around me in the natural realm, and in the four-day ancestral spirit realm, that uproots fear, feelings of shame, guilt, despair and other emotions that can invade one's consciousness in a society replete with violence and ongoing environmental stressors. My spiritual practices, and the fruit they yield – a calm presence, sensitivity to the Spirit, and Divine interactions – increase my faith, my connection to God's Spirit, and my connection to my family, community, and ancestors. This is the substance of Divine Consciousness.

Suicide is defined in the Western world as a conscious act of lethal self-harm by an individual trapped in a “multidimensional malaise” who perceives death as the only solution to an identified crisis (Shneidman, 1985, p. 203). Through the framework of Divine and death consciousness, it can be described as a sense of separation from one's True Self, God's Spirit, and others, that leads one to view one's crisis through a lens that causes one to believe that one is isolated and alone, which can create a path for one's False Self emerge. Divine consciousness is the state of awareness of being accompanied and supported through God's spirit and one's surrounding community. Each interaction I describe demonstrates my awareness that I am accompanied by God and my tribe. When I am making a difficult decision about my life's direction, I can seek God, counsel, and prayer from loved ones and I call on my ancestors. I reflect on God's record of grace, surrender, and expect to be explicitly guided. Similarly, the record of grace reveals a multitude of examples of trials and challenges where God's presence and power, and His presence through others, helped me not to give up hope. This assurance of support calms my fears, anxieties, and worries, and provides psychological healing and mental protection required for spiritual resistance in a toxic world.

This way of living by faith produces my Divine consciousness. In his text, *Stages of faith: The psychology of human development and the quest for meaning*, theologian James Fowler (1981), defines faith in a way that helps to describe how it functions in my life and extends beyond a belief in God. He asserts: “Faith is not always religious in its content or context...Faith is a person's way of seeing him or herself in relation to others against a background of shared meaning and purpose” (Fowler, 1981, p. 4). Fowler (1981) outlines six stages of faith in human development. I believe I am at stage five.

Fowler (1981) contends that at stage five, we must grapple with our “own unconscious—the unconscious personal, social and species or archetypal elements that are partly determinative of our actions and responses...reconciling conscious and unconscious” (Fowler, 1981, p. 186). My commitment to the work of sustaining Divine Consciousness in the midst of a complex world is how I work toward reconciliation of my unconscious with my consciousness. It involves not allowing the distortions of the world---racism, sexism, and other systems of oppression and fear-based thoughts and ideas that infect our mind—to dominate the way I view myself and lead me into despair. This reconciliation work must be a priority for the psychological healing of Black Americans.

My vibrant spiritual engagement with God which develops my faith insulates me from forming a consciousness that can lead me to self-destructive thoughts and habits. This faith insulation, which is the awareness of my connection to my divine True Self, to God, and every living thing in the environment, is my inheritance from my African ancestors. We are being called to remember the ways many of them were able to navigate through the darkest times, through thoughts of fear and death, that tried to capture their minds and spirits, but failed. These spiritual and cultural practices that helped my ancestors must be relayed in a way that is accessible and practical.

Conclusion – Harriet’s Spiritual Resistance

The goal of this dissertation research study was to explore the association of various societal stressors and personal stress, racial discrimination, post-incarceration status, and veteran status, and the psychological distress that can lead to suicidal behavior among Black Americans. It was also designed to explore the role of religion/spirituality

in the ability of Black Americans to cope with these stressors and to resist the desire to take their own lives, and whether or not there are any differences in the impact of the stressors and the utilization of religion/spirituality as a coping mechanism across generations. My aim through this autoethnography was to explain my understanding of the phenomena of religion/spirituality, specifically the concepts of Divine consciousness and death consciousness, through the lens of my Afrocentric Christ-centered Spirituality. The objective was to deepen the scope of analysis of spiritual factors and coping practices that increase spiritual resistance and insulate Black Americans from developing a consciousness that can lead one to desire to call forth one's own death. The analysis and the conceptual system capable of generating Divine consciousness was intended to operationalize the strategies that I and many other Black people use against racism and other stressors. They are strategies of spiritual resistance many of our ancestors employed against the treacherous racial violence and trauma of enslavement and the horrors that followed.

Harriet's way through the dark/ness

One of the ancestors within my cultural familial ancestral group whose spiritual resistance I have been studying for many years is Harriet Tubman. I know she is guiding me, and a multitude of others. I wrote my Master's thesis for my Master of Divinity degree at Harvard on her spiritual life. As I labored through that project, I remember my thesis advisor telling me that it would not be the last time I would write about Ms. Tubman. He was right. Her spiritual capacities are replete with an abundance of lessons on spiritual resistance that are pertinent to this discussion.

Harriet Tubman was an abolitionist born into slavery in Dorchester County, MD in approximately 1820. She is widely known for her self-liberation from slavery and for her work liberating others and guiding them on the Underground Railroad, the network of liberators who worked together to assist enslaved people on the road from slave territory to freedom. Tubman embodied the African philosophy of Ubuntu. She knew that her humanity and liberation were completely connected to the humanity and liberation of others. She also possessed Divine consciousness which was illustrated in a remarkable manner. According to historian Catherine Clinton, “Her fearlessness was legendary” (Clinton, 2004, p. 91). Tubman always made those dangerous journeys back and forth between slavery and freedom at night (Clinton, 2004). She brought people to freedom in the dark. She was able to navigate the darkness through her tremendous faith in God, which “provided protective intuition” (Clinton, 2004, p. 92). Her faith was her “armor” (Clinton, 2004, p. 85) and it kept her connected to God. She moved with the Lord. She prayed and talked to him constantly as He was her intimate partner. Harriet, and those around her, knew she was accompanied by the Divine who would intervene and guide her throughout her journeys (Clinton, 2004). R.C. Smedley (1883), a contemporary of Tubman’s who wrote a book about the Underground Railroad, described her friendship with God:

A colored woman named Harriet Tubman, living near the line, was active in helping hundreds to escape...She would go fearlessly into the Slave States, talk with the slaves, tell them how to escape, direct them on the road...She could elude patrols and pursuers with as much ease and unconcern as an eagle would soar through the heavens. She ‘had faith in God;’ always asked Him what to do, and to direct her, ‘which,’ she said, ‘He always did.’ She would talk about ‘consulting with God,’ or ‘asking of Him,’ just as one would consult a friend upon matters of business; and she said ‘He never deceived her’

(Smedley, 1883, p. 250-251).

Suicide occurs in the ugly side of darkness where people cannot see their way through the “multidimensional malaise.” For descendants of enslaved Africans and others, Tubman’s journeys through the dark with God offer a roadmap to psychological freedom for those who are willing to do the work to get close. I am faithfully trying to follow her way and the way of my ancestors. It is a commitment that must be reinforced daily, as Divine consciousness is not a state where you arrive and settle. Nor is it a proclamation of perfection. It is a state of awareness and beingness that reflects ongoing engagement with the Holy Spirit through practices that reinforce your connection to God, family, community, and ancestors.

Living between fear and faith is not where I was created to be. I was created to exist free within the realm where God’s Consciousness overwhelms my consciousness, and I am fully aware of my divinity at all times. This is the realm racism cannot reach. Its odious nature is too weak for Divinity. Each intimate experience with God, including God’s expression through my loved ones in body and in spirit, strengthens our connection and closes the gap between our minds. When the gap has been sealed shut, there is no room for fear and no breeding ground for self-destructive thoughts that could lead me to desire to call forth my own death. In the midst of the unrelenting pain that obscures the truth, Black people must remember that this is our way through the dark, and back to freedom.

CHAPTER X-Discussion

Integration of findings, theory, approaches & literature

The purpose of this study was to examine the influence of personal stress and societal stressors including racial discrimination, post-incarceration status, and veteran status, on suicide attempts among Black people in the U.S., and whether religion/spirituality influenced the relationships between attempted suicide and racial discrimination, post-incarceration status, veteran status, and personal stress. It further explored whether religion/spirituality as a protective factor is passed down intergenerationally, and if so, whether there are intergenerational patterns and/or differences in the utilization of religion/spirituality as a source of protection against developing suicidal behavior. In general, it was hypothesized in the empirical investigation that racial discrimination, post-incarceration status, veteran status, and personal stress would influence suicide attempts among Black people in the U.S. and that religion/spirituality would serve as a protective factor and moderate the relationships between attempted suicide and the three societal stress factors and personal stress. Most of the findings regarding the societal stressors, personal stress, and suicide attempts were consistent with the hypothesized relationships and with findings from previous studies (Compton, Thompson, & Kaslow, 2005). However, in contrast to what was hypothesized, and to the prevailing trend in the literature, the findings from the quantitative research revealed that religion/spirituality was not a buffer against suicide attempts for the participants in the study. This finding is consistent with a strand of literature that reveals that the role of religion/spirituality is not clear cut.

The findings from the qualitative research reveal that religion/spirituality can serve as a buffer and illustrates religion/spirituality functioning as an extension of Afrocentric culture and serving as a protective shield enabling some Black people to resist the full impact of personal and societal stressors. This research goes beyond the limits of the empirical research and expands the territory of the exploration of the role of religion/spirituality as a source of spiritual resistance. It also illuminates sociohistorical factors outlined in chapter 2 of this dissertation to delve deeper to understand more clearly how religion/spirituality functions in the lives of Black Americans as a component of Afrocentric culture and heritage.

This research provides greater context for interpreting the aspects of religion/spirituality and Afrocentric culture that contribute to a healthy mental and emotional environment that buffers and helps to deter, reduce, or prevent suicidal behavior in Black Americans. It promotes the principles of growth and strength through highlighting religion/spirituality as a protective factor insulating Black people in the U.S. from developing suicidal behavior as they navigate societal stress factors including racial discrimination, post-incarceration status, and veteran status, and revealing how religion/spirituality as a protective factor is passed down intergenerationally. It further shows intergenerational patterns and differences in the utilization of religion/spirituality as a source of protection against developing suicidal behavior. Data from the interviews with the three men revealed that each of the men possesses Divine consciousness which protects them from the full impact of societal stressors including racism and racial discrimination, post-incarceration status (Darrell), and veteran status (Marcus), and that they have benefited from faith lessons passed down to them from family members

intergenerationally. Darrell's story highlights death consciousness, a consciousness he possessed as a teenager during the period that led to his incarceration. These themes (except for incarceration and veteran) were also explored in the autoethnography. This qualitative research broadened the scope of the exploration of religion/spirituality and illuminated the critical cultural component that could not be captured through the quantitative research. The most striking element of the findings from the qualitative research is the clarity it provides regarding the need to equally prioritize the question of what animates Black people's desire to live, along with the question of what factors make them at risk for cultivating a desire to die. Without the qualitative research, the present study would not have examined the full scope of the humanity of Black people through a deeper interrogation of their capacity to thrive through struggle which is illuminated through the stories of each participant.

Ubuntu Relational Framework for the Study of Black Suicide

The data from both the quantitative and the qualitative research advance the understanding of the influence of personal stress and societal stressors, racial discrimination, post-incarceration status, veteran status, on suicidal behavior of this population, and the complexities of the role of religion/spirituality. Assessed together, the findings from both provided the foundation for the broader work revealed through this study which is encapsulated in the Ubuntu Relational Framework for the Study of Black Suicide. As explained previously, this relational framework guides the understanding of the risks and protective factors of Black suicide through the constructs of death consciousness and Divine consciousness. The death consciousness construct describes the state of one's unawareness of the possession of God's Spirit, or one's own divinity. This

state of unawareness makes one vulnerable to the impact of the societal toxins in society such as racism and other systems of oppression that can create barriers to one's full integration into society. One's feeling of disconnection from society is a risk factor for suicide (Durkheim, 1897/2012; Burr, Hartman, & Matteson, 1999). The Divine consciousness construct describes the state of one's awareness of the possession of God's Spirit or of one's own divinity. This state of awareness decreases one's vulnerability to the impact of the societal toxins in society such as racism and other systems of oppression that can create barriers to one's full integration into society. Ubuntu as a framework helps illuminate the importance of exploring predictors and protective factors of suicide within a context that emphasizes the role of one's connection to society and community and highlights it as work that should be aimed at the collective healing of individuals and society. This is in alignment with the social work person-in-environment principle (Hutchison, 2013). This framework is also in alignment with positive suicidology as it helps to ensure that the protective and growth factors are equally prioritized with the risk factors (Hirsch, Rabon, & Chang, 2018).

Impact of racial discrimination, post-incarceration status, veteran status, and personal stress on suicide attempt

It was hypothesized in the empirical investigation that racial discrimination, post-incarceration status, veteran status, and personal stress would influence suicide attempts among Black people in the U.S. and that religion/spirituality would serve as a protective factor and moderate the relationships between attempted suicide and the three societal stress factors and personal stress. Most of the findings were consistent with the

hypothesized relationships and with findings from previous studies (Compton, Thompson, & Kaslow, 2005). Compton, Thompson, & Kaslow (2005) assert, “A variety of social influences interact to shape the risk of suicide, in addition to individual-level characteristics...” (Compton et al., 2005, p. 176). The main findings of the present quantitative study reveal that personal stress and three societal stressors, racial discrimination, post-incarceration status, and veteran status, are associated with suicidal attempts among Black people in the U.S. These societal stressors represent a collection of social influences interacting within the context of a complex racial environment that create a risk of suicide for Black people in the U.S.

Racial discrimination, personal stress, and suicide attempt

As hypothesized and consistent with previous studies (Walker et al., 2017), the findings show that Black people who experience racial discrimination and personal stress are more likely to have attempted suicide than those who did not. The findings show that those who reported experiencing racial discrimination when receiving health care treatment, in both obtaining health care and receiving health care treatment, and also who reported experiencing personal stress, were more likely to have attempted suicide than those who did not. However, personal stress did not strengthen the relationship between those forms of racial discrimination and suicide attempt. The findings further showed that those who reported experiencing racial discrimination in any other situation, and both in public and in any other situation, and who also reported that they experienced personal stress, were more likely to have attempted suicide than those who did not. However, personal stress did not strengthen the relationship between those forms of racial discrimination and suicide attempts. Further, the findings also revealed that those who

reported both being called a racist name and being threatened because of race, and who reported that they experienced personal stress, were more likely to have attempted suicide than those who did not, but the personal stress did not strengthen the relationship between these forms of racial discrimination and suicide attempts. Studies have found direct and indirect effects of racial discrimination on suicide ideation among African Americans (Walker et al., 2017). These findings provide further evidence for the influence of racial discrimination and personal stress on suicidal behavior among Black people.

Joiner's (2005) theory helps to illuminate these findings. One's perception of racial discrimination is a subjective experience that can culminate in very tangible emotional challenges. Previous research suggests experiencing racial discrimination in society can cultivate feelings of inferiority and isolation (Walker et al., 2017). The ways in which perceived racial discrimination can cultivate negative feelings within Black people and arouse feelings of "diminished self-worth" (Walker, 2014) and create a perception that one lacks capacity to be a meaningful contributor to society, operationalizes Joiner's (2005) perceived burdensomeness element explained previously. Experiencing these various dimensions of racial discrimination which can create feelings of diminished self-worth, can cause one to feel as if they are not a valued member of society and are therefore a burden. It also operationalizes the element of thwarted belongingness or social alienation by illustrating the impact of experiencing discrimination in the health care arena during the process of obtaining health care and in receiving treatment. Being called a racist name, and being threatened based on race, also demonstrates the potential for such harmful experiences to lead one to feel like one does not belong to society. These experiences can cause one to feel like a burden to a society,

and can also lead one to feel disconnected and alienated from society. Feelings of disconnection and alienation from society are symptoms of a society that, based on Durkheim's (1897/2012) theory of social integration, prevents a society from creating the "collective force" required to "restrain suicide" Durkheim (1897/2012, p. 209). The perception of these experiences can result in very felt realities that disconnect a Black person from the dominant society that has fostered a disconnection from this population since its early beginnings as enslaved people in the United States.

In a study (Oh, Stickley, Koyanagi, Yau, & Devylder, 2019) that examined the association between discrimination and suicidal behaviors among people of color, which included Black adults in the sample, the primary finding was that everyday discrimination increased the odds of reporting lifetime suicidal thoughts and behaviors which included suicide attempts, adjusting for sociodemographic factors and psychiatric disorders. In addition, a case-control study which explored risks and protective factors for suicide attempts in a group of 200 African American women and men, the researchers found that racist events may be a risk factor for suicide (Kaslow et al., 2005). The results in this present study are consistent with the findings in these studies and reveal the potential impact of various forms of racial discrimination in different settings on the likelihood of Black people attempting suicide.

Experiencing racial discrimination in various segments of society such as in a vulnerable setting as a healthcare treatment space and other public spaces, as well as enduring racist name calling and threats, can make the overall social environment hostile and can signal to a Black person that they are not a welcomed member of society. These feelings can create a disconnect between them and society which could lead to feelings

that cause them to believe that there is something about them and their culture that do not fit within the dominant culture, and they do not belong. A study (Klibert, et al., 2015) that explored the association between cultural congruity and suicidal behavior among Black American young adult students found that lower levels of perception of cultural congruity were associated with factors related to a desire to end their own lives, specifically, Joiner's (2005) thwarted belongingness and perceived burdensomeness and engagement in life-threatening behaviors. They asserted that if the students experienced extended exposure to unwelcoming and hostile environments that are oppressive, they may increase the rate and extent of their involvement in life-threatening behavior that could lead to lethal self-harm (Klibert, 2015). The findings in the present study highlight the impact of experiences of racial discrimination in everyday settings and the potential lethal harm if a Black person is exposed to these conditions that create a hostile environment over an extended period. They affirm the role of racial discrimination as a factor which can contribute to one's feelings of thwarted belongings or perceived burdensomeness in the midst of an environment where one experiences racist name calling or threats, or is forced to navigate racial discrimination while receiving health care treatment, and in other public settings and situations. These feelings of disconnection and burdensomeness have the potential to cultivate a desire in one to die (Joiner, 2005).

Racial discrimination as a traumatic stressor

Racial discrimination can serve as a trigger that ignites the body's stress-response system which ultimately releases stress hormones (Oh, et al., 2019). Polanco-Roman, Anglin, Miranda, & Jeglic (2019) assert that based on the model of suicide pathways outlined by Chu and colleagues (2010) racial discrimination, viewed as a race-related

stressor, may function as “a unique and common experience among racial/ethnic minority individuals that elicits specific manifestations of distress and subsequent responses to manage this distress” (p. 2024). This framework illuminates the functioning of racial discrimination as a specific form of stress that scholars propose qualify it for a category beyond societal stressor and more appropriately identified as a race-based traumatic stressor (Polanco-Roman, Anglin, Miranda, & Jeglic, 2019; Bryant-Davis & Ocampo, 2005; Carter, 2007). Polanco-Roman, Anglin, Miranda, & Jeglic (2019) assert that “race-based events like experiences of racial/ethnic discrimination—which are often distressing, unexpected, ambiguous, chronic, and out of the individual’s control---may yield emotional and psychological injury that negatively impact mental health by eliciting traumatic stress responses” (Polanco-Roman, Anglin, Miranda, & Jeglic, 2019, p. 2024). This characterization of race-based stress underscores the severity of the potential impact of racial discrimination on the mental health of Black people. Polanco-Roman et al., (2019) contend that under Carter’s (2007) race-based traumatic stress theory, an individual’s initial response to perceived racial discrimination may be a safety response such as hypervigilance and avoidance which are adaptive but may become maladaptive in other settings and lead to suicidal behavior.

The stress of racial discrimination in a racist environment

As stated previously, Lazarus & Folkman (1984) define psychological stress as “a particular relationship between the person and the environment that is appraised by the person as taxing or exceeding his or her resources and endangering his or her well-being” (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, p. 19). Harrell (2000) expands this definition to address the role of racism in the interactions between the person and environment and contends that

the race-related transactions that emerge from racism “are perceived to tax or exceed existing individual and collective resources or threaten well-being” (Harrell, 2000, p. 44). Through this framework, racial discrimination occurring through any of the three dimensions explored in this study, experienced within a racialized environment, is a form of race-related stress. The constructs through which Lazarus & Folkman (1984) assess the causes of stress are cognitive appraisal and coping (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, p. 19). They define cognitive appraisal as a process of evaluation through which an individual “determines why and to what extent a particular transaction or series of transactions between the person and the environment is stressful” (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, p. 19). The stressful experiences of racial discrimination within a racist society are heightened and can overwhelm and cause one to perceive that one’s well-being is being threatened. The experience of racial discrimination in a racist environment can impact one’s ability to correctly appraise their circumstances and can lead them to see their challenges through a lens that distorts their reality and makes them feel as if the challenge is unsurmountable. The racist environment increases the impact of the stressful experience of racial discrimination, which can cultivate the feelings of alienation and perceived burdensomeness and thwarted belongingness discussed above and can cause one to think there is no way out but to die. Through this cognitive appraisal, a person within a racist environment framework, the impact of experiences of racial discrimination is understood more fully.

Research regarding whether racial discrimination differentially associates with risk for suicidal behavior has produced mixed findings across racial/ethnic groups (Polanco-Roman, Anglin, Miranda, & Jeglic, & 2019). The present study, which

examines suicide attempts, contributes to the literature in this emerging area. It underscores the perniciousness of racial discrimination and the degree of its potential for psychological harm among Black people in the U.S. It addresses researchers' call for racial discrimination to be examined more robustly in studies of Black suicide vulnerability (Walker, 2014).

Low reporting of racial discrimination

The findings from this research reveal an association between racial discrimination in various settings and suicidal behavior. They also show that in this sample, there was not a large number of respondents who experienced overt acts of racism within a year. For example, only 15% of the respondents reported being called a racist name, only 16% reported experiencing racial discrimination in public, and only 7% reported experiencing racial discrimination while receiving health care treatment. While overt acts of racism may not be as prominent today in some parts of the U.S., the impact of racism hidden in systems and structures and individuals, remains prominent and pressing. Additionally, racial discrimination is not easy to assess. In a study exploring microaggressions in health care, Cruz & Mastropaolo (2019) assert, "racial discrimination is understood to be a complicated construct in that it occurs in both obvious as well as subtle ways" (p. 1). For example, microaggressions are forms of racism that can be subtle and unconscious and can emerge during regular interactions resulting from one's biases which the recipient may not identify formally as discrimination, but that is equally as painful (Cruz & Mastropaolo, 2019). Cruz & Mastropaolo (2019) describe healthcare microaggressions as "implicit discrimination within the healthcare setting, whereby treatment providers who are in positions of authority inadvertently marginalize members

of minority groups through culturally insensitive interactions” (p. 2). Thus, the lower number of respondents reporting racial discrimination may not accurately reflect the full scope of experiences of the various manifestations of racism among this population.

Post Incarceration, personal stress, and suicide attempt

As hypothesized and consistent with research (Binswanger, Stern, Deyo, & Heagerty, et al., 2007) the findings reveal that post-incarceration status, specifically, those who reported going to jail or prison before age 18, after age 18, and both before and after age 18, are more likely to have attempted suicide than those who did not. The findings further show that those who reported going to jail or prison after age 18, and those who reported both going to jail or prison before and after age 18, and who also reported that they experienced personal stress, were more likely to have attempted suicide. By testing the main effect and the interaction effect in the model with stress and the sociodemographic variables, personal stress was revealed to have a slight effect on the association between post-incarceration and attempted suicide, but there was not a strong interaction, between the group who reported incarceration since age 18 and personal stress, and the group reporting both incarcerations before and after age 18 and experiencing personal stress.

These findings are consistent with research that reveals that formerly incarcerated persons are at a high risk of suicide (Binswanger, Stern, Deyo, & Heagerty, et al., 2007). A study exploring the risk of death among individuals released from a Washington State prison found that formerly incarcerated persons were at a high risk of death shortly after being released from prison, and suicide was one of the leading causes of death (Binswanger, Stern, Deyo, Heagerty, Cheadle, Elmore, & Koepsell, 2007). Mental health

challenges individuals manage while incarcerated, coupled with the intense social challenges they face when they leave incarceration, contribute to the higher rate of suicide among released incarcerated persons than the general population (Pratt, Piper, Appleby, Webb & Shaw, 2006). In a qualitative study (Binswanger, Nowels et al 2011) exploring challenges of formerly incarcerated adults which included African Americans, within two months of their release, participants expressed facing a variety of stressful challenges trying to transition back into the community, including housing and employment insecurity, and researchers found participants expressed a clear connection between their fears and anxieties and the risk of overdose and suicide.

As highlighted earlier, one's post incarceration status can carry a myriad of challenges, including the burden of stigma and compromised mental health, which make it difficult for one to re-enter society (Massoglia, 2008). One's inability to successfully rejoin society and take care of oneself can foster feelings of perceived burdensomeness and social alienation. Subsequently, one's inability to successfully reintegrate into society because of one's former incarceration, can cause one to feel like one does not belong to the society. The findings of this study help to support Joiner's (2005) assertion regarding the negative impact of the feelings of perceived burdensomeness and thwarted belongingness through assessing the challenges associated with the burden of formerly incarceration status. The inability to feel like one belongs to society, as well as a belief that one is a burden to society as a result of being formerly incarcerated, is aligned with Durkheim (1897/2012)'s understanding of what can happen when one is not fully integrated into society. These feelings of disconnection can create a risk of suicidal behavior (Durkheim, 1897/2012; Joiner, 2005).

Additionally, through the cognitive appraisal, person and racist environment framework described previously, the impact of one navigating through the post-incarceration experience is understood more fully. A formerly incarcerated Black person who is trying to manage securing housing, employment, and other basic needs within a racist societal environment can become overwhelmed which could cause one to perceive that one's well-being is being threatened. The lens of the intersectional component of critical race theory highlights the impact of the multiple identities of being Black and formerly incarcerated. A Black formerly incarcerated person navigating these stressful challenges can appraise the problems as being beyond their ability to manage. These findings address the need for further exploration of the impact of post-incarceration on suicide risk among Black people (Utsey, Hook, & Stanard, 2007).

Veteran status, personal stress, and suicide attempt

As was hypothesized and consistent with research (Holliman, Monteith, Spitzer, & Brennar, 2018), the findings of this study reveal that veteran status is associated with attempted suicide in Black people. People who reported serving in active duty in the U.S. Armed Forces, Reserves, or National Guard, and also reported experiencing personal stress, were more likely to have attempted suicide than those who did not, but personal stress did not strengthen the relationship between veteran status and suicide attempt. These findings are not consistent with the literature. Research shows that Black veterans are less likely to choose to take their own life (Holliman, Monteith, Spitzer, & Brennar, 2018). In a qualitative study (Holliman, Monteith, Spitzer, & Brennar, 2018) involving 16 African American women Veterans exploring resilience and culture among African American women veterans and protective factors against suicide, the researchers found

that religiosity, social support, and resilience were important protective factors. The researchers assert that the findings underscore the role of cultural beliefs and practices in protecting against suicide (Holliman, et al., 2018).

The lens of the intersectional component of critical race theory illuminates the impact of the combination of stressors that Black veterans experience which impact their mental health including the horrors of war, institutional racism, and the challenges of trying to access resources that will help them transition home well (Johnson & Johnson, 2013). Joiner's (2005) theory helps to reveal how veterans who have particular challenges with integrating into society and who navigate through many difficulties such as untreated mental health challenges (Wheeler & Bragin, 2007), can cultivate feelings of perceived burdensomeness and thwarted belongingness. Research suggests that it is possible perceived burdensomeness has a greater association with suicide attempts and other suicidal behaviors (O'Connor, et al., 2016). The impact of the accumulation of the multiple stressors of Black active soldiers and veterans has not been widely documented (Johnson & Johnson, 2013) and there is a need for further examination of risk and protective factors for Black suicide among veterans. The findings from this study highlight the impact of challenges Black veterans face and address the need for more research in this area.

Through the cognitive appraisal, person, and racist environment framework described above, the impact of one navigating through society as a veteran is understood more clearly. Black veterans trying to grapple with the mental health effects of war, institutional racism, and the other difficulties associated with navigating civil life such as housing and employment (Johnson & Johnson, 2013) can become overwhelmed and

perceive that their well-being is being threatened which could lead them to begin to develop feelings of detachment.

Socioeconomic demographics

The findings of this study show that Black women were more likely to attempt suicide than Black men. This finding is consistent with research that shows Black women have a higher rate of suicide attempts than Black men (Joe, Baser, Breeden, Neighbors, & Jackson, 2006; Utsey, Hook, & Stanard, 2007). The findings also show that as Black people advance in age, they are less likely to attempt suicide. This finding is consistent with research Walker (2007) showing that the rate of suicide in elderly African Americans has been very low compared to the rates of African American youth and European American adults. However, as Gibbs (1997) reported, there has been a significant increase in the rates among older Black men since the 1970s.

The findings from this study further show that as the income of Black people in a lower economic income bracket increases, they are less likely to attempt suicide. These findings are consistent with the literature that shows that suicide prevention must be prioritized in areas where there is high poverty and high unemployment (Rehkopf, & Buka, 2006). Research (Burr, et al., 1999) involving a Black population has shown an association between income and occupational inequality and suicide among Black men (Burr, et al., 1999). However, the impact of socioeconomic status in the risk of suicide has not been firmly established (Purselle, Heninger, Hanzlick, & Garlow, 2010), thus this study contributes to research needed in this area.

There were no statistically significant associations between education and attempted suicide. However, veterans reporting to have completed high school were more likely to

attempt suicide than those who did not complete high school. These findings are consistent with research (Joe, Baser, et al., 2006) finding that a low level of education among Black people over a lifetime was significantly associated with risk of suicide attempt and suicidal ideation. In addition, there were no statistically significant associations between Black people of U.S.-born status and attempted suicide and those born outside of the U.S. and attempted suicide. Research shows that immigrants may be placed within the moderate-high suicidal risk group, but there is a lack of research regarding suicidal behavior among ethnic minority immigrants (Forte & Trobia, et al., 2018).

Religion and spirituality as a protective factor against suicidal behavior and intergenerational patterns and/or differences

Religion/spirituality as a protective factor

As stated previously, the findings from the empirical investigation regarding the role of religion/spirituality were not consistent with the prevailing trend in the literature. It was hypothesized that religion/spirituality would moderate the association between racial discrimination, personal stress and suicide attempt, post-incarceration status, personal stress and suicide attempt, and veteran status, personal stress, and suicide attempt. However, the findings revealed that religion/spirituality did not influence the associations outlined above.

Religion as a protective factor against morbidity and mortality and problematic health behaviors is widely established through a range of multi-disciplinary research (Pezzella & Vlahos, 2014). While the role of religion as an insulator against suicidal

behavior is a popular theme among Black people and is well-established across various groups (Chatters, Taylor et al., 2011), the results in this study proved to be contrary to this prevailing trend in the literature. Yet, the findings are consistent with another trend in the literature. While there is strong empirical support for religion as a protective factor against suicide, research on the role of religion as a protective factor is mixed, with some studies showing high levels of religiosity as a protective factor and other studies revealing that it is not a protective factor (Lawrence, Oquendo, & Stanley, 2016; Davidson & Wingate, 2011; Hamdan & Peterseil-Yaul, 2019). Research shows that if one's religion promotes God as a distant God, and one is not connected to one's religious community and feels guilt or shame, these conditions can increase the risk of suicide (Lawrence et al., 2016). Lawrence et al. (2016) contend that it is the complexities of religion and suicide that contribute to the mixed results. The findings in this present study show that the religious/spiritual engagement of respondents is not contributing to a protective shield against suicidal behavior.

Religion/spirituality as a protective factor and intergenerational patterns and differences

The interviews with the three Black men from three different generations of one family were conducted to explore two questions: (1) whether religion/spirituality is a protective factor insulating Black people in the U.S. from developing suicidal behavior as they navigate personal stress and societal stress factors including racial discrimination, post-incarceration status, and veteran status, and (2) whether religion/spirituality as a protective factor is passed down intergenerationally. This study further examined whether there were any intergenerational patterns and/or differences in the utilization of religion/spirituality as a source of protection against developing suicidal behavior. My

autoethnography also addressed these themes (with the exception of incarceration and military experiences).

The following themes and subthemes emerged from the interviews: Divine consciousness with subthemes faith and intergenerational faith, connection to God's Spirit, and the African value of interdependence (through connection to family, community, and ancestors); and death consciousness with subthemes a lack of faith and intergenerational faith, a lack of connection to God's Spirit, and a lack of the African value of interdependence. The data revealed evidence that showed each of the men incorporated religion/spirituality throughout their lives through various spiritual practices such as prayer, church attendance, cultivated faith, and a connection to God's Spirit and their community and ancestors which developed a Divine consciousness insulating them from the full impact of societal stressors such as racism, veteran status (and while active in the military) (Marcus) and post-incarceration status (and while incarcerated) (Darrell). The first research question was addressed throughout the analysis. Data addressing the second question revealed a pattern that was observed across each of the men's stories of receiving significant faith lessons from their grandparents. Rev. Wood was heavily influenced through his formerly enslaved paternal grandmother; Marcus was significantly influenced by his maternal grandparents, and Darrell was also greatly influenced by his maternal grandparents. This transmission of faith through grandparents is consistent with research on the transmission of faith through families. In their longitudinal study of the intergenerational transmission of religion, with data collected from members of multigenerational families over 30 years, across four generations from 1971-2000, Bengtson, Copen, Putney, & Silverstein (2009) found that grandparents had an impact on

the religiosity of their grandchildren and assert that “religious beliefs and practices that formed within nuclear and extended families persist into adulthood with parents and grandparents simultaneously serving as independent and joint agents of religious socialization” (p. 339-340). Two of the men, Rev. Wood and Darrell, also revealed faith influences from their parents. Each of the men Regarding the third question, the most significant difference in the utilization of religious/spiritual coping strategies across the generations was that Darrell converted to Islam. In addition, each of the men revealed an openness to and respect for other religions. Regarding the patterns, the most salient patterns were seen in their common faith orientation expressed through their belief in the unseen God as one who guides and protects them, and in their utilization of prayer as a vehicle to communicate regularly with God and to remain connected. Their faith in God stabilized their identity in a way that ensures that they each know that they are valued and that they belong to a companion who is eternal, which means they are never alone.

God for each of the men appeared personal and intimate and available as a present source of strength and guidance. A key element that emerges from this relationship is access to God’s power through connection to God’s Spirit. This connection and awareness of power do work on the inside. It conditions their minds and orders their thoughts so that through the “second appraisal” work, they can filter challenges such as racism, through God’s mind and know that God will work things out. These themes are consistent with the well-documented, enduring view of God in Black theology as an intimate partner who dwells among and within Black people operating at all levels of life to provide help personally and in the world (Hopkins, 2003). Finally, each man revealed a strong commitment to the value of community and collective survival. They each

demonstrated examples that are in alignment with the African value of interdependence through a clear articulation of care and concern for their family and support networks in their community, and the importance of these resources in helping them navigate life's challenges.

Divine consciousness as spiritual resistance

The findings of the qualitative interviews revealed that the Divine consciousness of each of the men is a powerful source of spiritual resistance against the impact of personal stress and societal stressors that could make one vulnerable to thoughts of lethal self-harm. As explained previously, framing consciousness as a method describes Divine consciousness as a way back to God within one's self, while still in the world. Divine consciousness is a recognition of one's own divinity and of one's true identity as a spiritual being. This state of awareness is not a final destination. Nor is it a statement of perfection or a suggestion that one who possesses Divine consciousness will never have days where they feel down or hopeless. What this data and analysis offer are insights into the ongoing work of healing of one's consciousness through practices that promote a healthy mental and social environment. This healthy environment infused with reminders that one is accompanied by Divine presence who also operates through a supportive network of family, community, and ancestors, is the quality of the environment that can help prevent feelings of hopelessness and despair from developing into an acute compulsion to call forth one's own death. This state of consciousness can keep one from experiencing psychological constriction, the cognitive state that is common in people who choose suicide (Shneidman, 1985). As explained earlier, Shneidman (1985)

describes constriction as “a tunneling or focusing or narrowing of the range of options usually available to *that* individual’s consciousness when the mind is not panicked into dichotomous thinking: either some specific (almost magical) total solution or cessation; all or nothing” (Shneidman, 1985, p.138). Living in a state of Divine consciousness helps one to appraise oneself and one’s problems through a lens that reveals broader options of support. Each of the men demonstrated how Divine consciousness, cultivated through faith and practices such as prayer and engagement with supportive family and friends and the application of faith and life lessons from their grandparents, help them appropriately appraise obstacles in their lives and insulate them from suicidal thoughts and behavior.

Death consciousness

The findings of the study revealed that death consciousness came to light through Darrell’s experiences as a teenager which led to his incarceration. The impact of his lack of grounding in faith and in a connection to God and family, community, and ancestors during that period of his life was highlighted through the comparison of his life during and after incarceration when he possessed these qualities. He became vulnerable to the impact of racial violence, drug dealing, and other societal challenges in a culture consumed with death, which led to his nontraditional, yet equally dangerous suicidal behavior. He engaged in non-life-affirming practices such as selling drugs which positioned himself to possibly take someone’s life or to have his own life taken. His “do or die” mentality and behavior expressed his active desire to call forth his own death.

Intergenerational faith transmission through the “hidden transcript”

Some of the most compelling data that emerged from this research were the data from what I believe can be labeled the “hidden transcript” (Kelley, p. 88). Historian

Robin D.G. Kelley defines the “hidden transcript” as data revealed through signs from the unseen world, such as “a conversation with a ghost,” that confirms the presence of God by one’s side, which he acknowledges is part of the strategy of resistance some working-class Black people utilize in their daily struggles (Kelley, p. 88). My Divine consciousness activated through my faith, my personal, intimate connection to God and my ancestors, gave me access to the hidden transcript from Rev. Wood’s grandmother Susan, my great-great-grandmother, whose presence I have felt throughout this project. The hidden transcript from Susan revealed evidence of her Divine consciousness and helped me to understand Rev. Wood’s responses to the questions regarding racism. I wondered why he did not express that he had experienced racial discrimination or suffered significant psychological impact from racism. I thought his skin color was a factor. He was very light-skinned with blue/grey eyes and had straight gray hair that used to be jet black. But the hidden data that emerged helped me to see more clearly the impact of his time at his grandmother’s knee. Listening to a formerly enslaved woman talk about her life as a child laboring for 10-12 hours daily in the fields, while in the same breath hearing her sing songs of praise to God and talk about her love of God and her husband, was profound. The impact on his psychological formation cannot be underscored enough. The healing power it unleashed to do the work of healing “hereditary obstacles” that kept the seed of fear that racism plants in so many Black people, from entering and not taking root, if it entered at all, must be examined.

The data from Susan also point to something more. To understand the quality of Susan’s Divine Consciousness, we must return to the discussion of the Divine consciousness of Mary Magdalene in the previous chapter. As explained previously,

Jesus liberated Mary Magdalene from “the seven deadly sins---pride, lust, envy, anger, covetousness, gluttony, and sloth” replaced by the virtues of love, humility, and self-control (Tresemer & Cannon, 2002, p. xix). Tresemer & Cannon (2002), describe Mary’s condition after her healing as a place where one can experience a transcendent living while still in the world. They assert:

Imagine being completely cleansed of prejudice and old grudges, fogs of illusion, hereditary obstacles to health, all desires. Once healed, she can truly see the spiritual truth that works in all things. She can see the barbarity of other human beings, as well as the transcendent beauty of Jesus Christ’s teachings. In modern terms, her heart and energetic centers are open (p. xix).

This healing paradigm provides a framework for complex spiritual healing. Black people must be healed of all “hereditary obstacles” to emotional health and wellness, including internalized racial oppression, and delivered from all “fogs of illusion” that permeate this society, with racism being one of the most salient sources of fog. Thus, Divine consciousness represents this state of being and awareness where one is liberated from the behaviors and mentalities that root one in the world’s fear-based pattern of thinking which can justify one’s hatred towards oppressors. It disconnects one from the Divine which enables one to see one’s life and the world with clarity and not through the lens of racism, fear, etc. Tresemer & Cannon (2002) argue that this, coupled with Mary’s status as having been purified by Jesus from the seven sins that “cloud vision and energy” makes her a “human being who is open and available to true ‘inner knowing,’ who can ‘see’ in deeper, clearer ways through a unique spiritual connection to both earthly death and the Divine” (Tresemer & Cannon, 2002, xix, xxiii). This inner knowing, the interior landscape, is the epistemological site for cultivating Divine consciousness.

Susan's songs and love emanating from her heart as she shares stories of her life as a child and woman enslaved are evidence of one who experienced transcendent living while still in the world. I do not know if God had liberated her from all of "the seven deadly sins," but it seems safe to glean from the material in Rev. Wood's book that she was not harboring destructive anger and hate and that she did possess the virtues of love, humility, and self-control. It takes at least all of those virtues to not hold hate in your heart for White oppressors when you were born into slavery and lived much of your life in that state where another human being has the right to own you and deny your humanity. Yet, she did not teach hate to her grandson. She taught and sang about the love of God and Christ and her love for her husband, and modeled her intimate connection as someone who was born free, but not into freedom. Her Divine consciousness reflected an acute mystical connection to God that elevated her above the worldly mess of slavery and segregation. She did not allow any of man's hateful policies to dilute her mind or mask her true self. She was that close to God. And her grandson's closeness to her during his early formative years seemed to have allowed him to experience a transfer of anointing from God for a quality of faith that produced a Divine consciousness similar to hers. In the New Testament book of Acts, the writer describes the incredible anointing of God for healing that was on the apostle Paul that people could be healed by touching what he had touched. According to Acts 19: 11-12, "God did extraordinary miracles through Paul so that even handkerchiefs and aprons that had touched him were taken to the sick and their illnesses were cured and the evil spirits left them." Susan may have transferred her faith anointing to her grandson through her voice as she sang, or through her touch as he sat at her knee. The deposit he received over the five years she was with him, seemed to have

insulated him from internalizing racial oppression and delivered him from racialized “fogs of illusion” which gave him the capacity to see through a clearer life lens. This transfer of faith was not uncommon among enslaved people. As noted earlier, Thurman (1949/1976) experienced a similar transference of faith from his formerly enslaved grandmother. He describes the protective power of this substance:

It is quite possible for a man to have no sense of personal inferiority as such, but at the same time, to be dogged by a sense of social inferiority. The awareness of being a child of God tends to stabilize the ego and results in a new courage, fearlessness, and power. I have seen it happen Again and again. When I was a youngster, this was drilled into me by my grandmother. The idea was given to her by a certain slave minister who, on occasion, held secret religious meetings with his fellow slaves....she would come to the triumphant climax of the minister: ‘You – you are not niggers. You-you are not slaves. You are God’s children.’ This established for them the ground of personal dignity, so that a profound sense of personal worth could absorb the fear reaction. This alone is not enough, but without it, nothing else is of value. The first task is to get the self immunized against the most radical results of the *threat* of violence. When this is accomplished, relaxation takes the place of the churning fear. The individual now feels that he counts, that he belongs. He senses the confirmation of his roots, and even death becomes a little thing (p.50).

Thus, Divine consciousness represents this state of being and awareness where one is rooted in one’s identity as a child of God and is liberated from the world’s fear-based pattern of thinking. Fear-based thinking can cause one to justify one’s hatred towards oppressors and disconnect one from the Divine which enables one to see one’s life and the world with clarity, and not through the distorted lens of racism, fear, etc. (Tresemer & Cannon, 2002). I observed Rev. Wood’s liberated life of almost 100 years. I never heard him express hatred towards White people or comments or statements that reflect internalized racism. Through this framework of Divine and death consciousness and the analysis of this data from the “hidden transcript”, I can see that his life reflects a freedom

from internalized racism and other “hereditary obstacles” which created an environment for his emotional health and wellness.

This is why analysis within the ancestral spiritual realm is critical. Future research in the area of Afrocentric spiritual technologies and healing strategies need to be explored through a mechanism of spiritual coding to decipher constructs that capture the unique spiritual pathways of the enslaved who transcended their traumatic, death-affirming experiences as human beings reduced to non-human property owned by dissociated humans. There are components of their interior lives that are vital to the spiritual work of resisting the societal influences and conditions that can contribute to a desire in one to call forth one’s own death.

Black Consciousness and Double Consciousness

Researchers who study suicide among Black people assert that the interventions and approaches for addressing suicide in this population must be culturally specific and that the interventions that have been tested on White sample populations are not sufficient (Walker, 2018; Day-Vines 2007). According to Shneidman (1985), it is inappropriate to think that all suicides are the same when making cross-cultural comparisons (Shneidman, 1985). Researchers have also called for the definition of suicide to be expanded to address the various ways that suicidal behavior is being expressed in the Black community, such as “suicide by cop” (Poussaint & Alexander, 2000; Gibbs, 1997, p. 121). Poussaint & Alexander (2000) contend, “Beyond suicide by cop there are other instances in which individuals place themselves in harms’ way with full knowledge that they may be killed. Although the official clinical definitions of suicidal behavior do not fully encompass all of these actions, particularly where young

Black makes are concerned, perhaps they should” (Poussaint & Alexander, 2000 p. 121). This includes the example of “suicide by proxy” revealed through Darrell’s drug-selling practices. Because there is a stigma associated with mental health challenges in the Black community (Poussaint & Alexander, 2000) and a common belief that Black people do not engage in suicidal behavior (Joe & Niedermeier, 2008; Spates, 2018), to effectively address these mental health needs for Black people, it is important to expand the definition of suicide as others have argued and to transform the framing into language and concepts that are accessible and relatable for Black people. Addressing Black suicide through the constructs of death consciousness and Divine consciousness within the framework of the Ubuntu Relational framework for the Study of Black Suicide provides accessible language and concepts for Black people to embrace.

The concept of consciousness has long roots in Black America, and in African Psychology as noted previously. Parham (2009) asserts, “Looking back across space and time, African Psychology, like African thought, was concerned primarily with the development of one’s consciousness and with the development and sustaining of positive relationships” (p. 8). This consciousness framing is building on the work of W.E.B. DuBois and Black theologian James Cone, and the many other Black revolutionaries who knew that the proper focus for assessing the challenges that emerge for Black people living in a racist society must be their consciousness – to go deeper and to elevate the understanding of the complexities of navigating a racist society (Cone, 1970). DuBois (1903/2003) termed the phrase “double consciousness” which he describes as “this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others...One ever feels his two-ness—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring

ideals in one dark body” (DuBois, 1903/2003, p. 9). Throughout the work he alludes to the impact of this divided life and the “deeper death” that lay at the bottom of the soul when one has “passed into the Valley of the Shadow Death” (p. 159). This two-ness describes the divided self one manifests when disconnected from the Divine and emerges as one’s false self. When one looks at one’s self through the eyes of others, specifically, when a Black person looks at one’s self through the eyes of white dominance and supremacism, two thoughts of oneself manifest, and the space in one’s consciousness is exposed to fear and other psychological toxins that can contribute to the emergence of a death consciousness and invite suicidal thoughts and behavior.

Cone (1970) asserts the following regarding Black Consciousness, “Black consciousness is the black man’s self-awareness. To know blackness is to know self, and to know self is to be cognizant of other selves in relation to self. It is knowing the criterion of acceptance and rejection in human encounters” (p. 50). Black consciousness is a proclamation of intent to know and hold onto and to announce thyself, thy true self, which is connected to God and to others. Divine consciousness issues an identical proclamation. The destination for both are the same – wholeness through an integrated self that is connected to God and all other living beings. Divine consciousness closes the gap between Black consciousness and double consciousness, and links Black people back to that place of transcendent living, released from heredity obstacles, and back to their true selves. This state of liberated awareness insulates one from the impact of oppressive societal pressures making one less susceptible to developing a state of psychological constriction which could lead one to desire to call forth one’s own death.

Additional thoughts on Death from an African worldview

M. Shawn Copeland (2010), in her text, *Enfleshing Freedom: body, race, and being* (2010) describes an important perspective regarding death held by some West African cultures. Some believe that those who were taken from their homeland and transported into a life of bondage through the Atlantic slave trade experienced a form of death. She explains:

For these cultural groups, the dead remained intimately connected to the living. The honored dead, the Ancestors, were capable of intervening in daily affairs, bestowing blessing, or meting out punishment. And if one had lived a good life, he or she could expect to cross the *kalunga* line, which separated the world of the dead from the land of the living, and to reemerge recognizable in the bodies of grandchildren or future generations. But the captive African disappeared into a kind of netherworld—physically severed from kin and community, ritually removed from culturally ceremonies of honorable death, metaphysically cut off from the ancestral realm. The captured were now among the dead who still lived; the Atlantic became the *kalunga* line and their bodies were carried beyond a point of no return (p. 111).

As discussed above, the culture of many of the enslaved Africans believed that death was a way to transport themselves back home and some argue that this was a motivator for their decision to take their own lives. Copeland's (2010) description of death, however, expands the scope of understanding regarding death for these cultural groups which highlight the depth of the impact of the rupture that occurred when Africans were ripped from their families and their communities. This rupture caused a spiritual death. As she explains, "The captured were now among the dead who still lived; the Atlantic became the *kalunga* line and their bodies were carried into a place beyond a point of returning back home." This adds a different dimension to slave suicide. It can be viewed as an act that is carrying out the second phase of the death process that began during the Middle

Passage, as the final response to the despair stemming from the rupture. Perhaps for some it was a pathway back home; for others it was the final act that sealed the death that had already occurred in the spiritual realm. This also expands the understanding of death consciousness to encapsulate the state of consciousness disconnected from the Divine source that animates through one's connection to kin and community and society.

Likewise, Divine consciousness is also cultivated through the Divine source that animates through one's connection to kin and community, and society.

Through this interpretation of death, several questions emerge regarding slave suicide and Black suicide that cannot be answered here but warrant being raised. Is Black suicide an extension of this predeath arrival of the enslaved ancestors? A path that millions have managed to mitigate – hold at bay – through intentional connection to the Divine, family/kin, ancestors, and community. Was slave suicide for some of the enslaved Africans an expression of spiritual resistance – a freedom response to bondage-- or was it solely an expression of spiritual lament and suffering in response to the bondage and to the break from their family/kin community and ritual traditions that were their life line? Is Black suicide today for some Black people a form of spiritual resistance--a path to another world beyond the world of oppression – to a spiritual eternal home? Does it also reflect the depth of the impact of the initial rupture from Africa – from original family/kin and community – compounded by the breaks in community ties and family/kin today – lack of social cohesion within the Black community, namely the Black Church, and the ongoing struggles against racial oppression contributing to the lack of full integration within the broader American society?

Limitations

There are some methodological limitations to this study. In the empirical study, because the dataset is cross-sectional, one cannot draw causal inferences regarding the dependent and independent variables. Additionally, the quantitative research was based on self-reported suicide attempts measured by one question. Research has found that Black Americans may be less likely to self-disclose suicidal behavior (Molock, Puri, Matlin, & Barksdale, 2006). This, and the fact that suicide and mental health challenges are highly stigmatized in this population, means that the rates of suicide attempts could have been underestimates. Also, the sample size of respondents who responded affirmatively to attempting suicide was relatively small. Researchers who engage in studies with Black populations have applied an Afrocentric theoretical approach to studies which upholds the importance of the interaction between the researcher and the participants and disfavors impersonal surveys, drawing from the African spiritual and oral tradition (Borum, 2014).

While questions regarding racial discrimination covered a range of dimensions, racial discrimination is a difficult construct to measure (Cruz & Mastropaolo, 2019). Also, there is an inability to contextualize discrimination experiences via responses to survey questions (Rice, Fish, Russell & Lanza, 2021). The variables for religion/spirituality did not explore the complexities of the dimensions of religion and spirituality such as questions that could gauge the quality of the religious community experience and cohesion and explore dimensions of spirituality such as practices like prayer. The challenges capturing and measuring these dimensions have been identified as consistent challenges in the research of religion and spirituality (Lawrence et al., 2016).

Exploration of these elements may have yielded different results regarding the role of religion/spirituality as a protective factor against suicide. Additionally, all of the measures in the NESARC III data relied on self-reports, and recall bias (Brusco & Watts, 2015) is a factor. Recall bias can occur when someone makes a mistake in the recollection of the details of the event and/or the timeframe in which occurred (Brusco & Watts, 2015).

The qualitative research is limited to three Black men and does not include Black women. Because of the limited sample size, the findings are not generalizable. While there is value in the focus on the interior lives of Black men which is a limited area of examination, a future study including Black women and a comparison of their utilization of African-centered spiritual and cultural practices to cultivate spiritual resistance to suicidal behavior will be important to explore. Additionally, while there are advantages to my proximity to the participants, there are also limitations. There were some questions that either a participant did not want to answer or that they did not want to elaborate on. For example, when I asked my father if he had any trouble reconnecting with family when he returned home from the war, he responded, “I won’t answer that.” This could have been due to the fact that I was the interviewer.

Conclusion

This convergent mixed-method study was designed to examine the influence of personal stress and societal stressors including racial discrimination, post-incarceration status, and veteran status, on suicide attempts among Black people in the U.S., and

whether religion/spirituality influenced the relationships between attempted suicide and racial discrimination, post-incarceration status, veteran status, and personal stress. It further explored whether religion/spirituality as a protective factor is passed down intergenerationally, and if so, whether there are intergenerational patterns and/or differences in the utilization of religion/spirituality as a source of protection against developing suicidal behavior. The quantitative research was intended to provide findings that would address whether there was an association between personal stress and the societal stressors and suicide attempts and whether religion influenced the association, and these questions were addressed. In general, it was hypothesized in the empirical investigation that racial discrimination, post-incarceration status, veteran status, and personal stress would influence suicide attempts among Black people in the U.S. and that religion/spirituality would serve as a protective factor and moderate the relationships between attempted suicide and the three societal stress factors and personal stress. Most of the findings regarding the societal stressors, personal stress, and suicide attempts were consistent with the hypothesized relationships. Contrary to what was hypothesized, and to the prevailing trend in the literature, the findings from the quantitative research revealed that religion/spirituality was not a buffer against suicide attempts for the participants in the study. However, the complexity of religion/spirituality was the motivation for this mixed-method design. The qualitative research was envisioned from the inception to compliment the exploration of the role of religion/spirituality in protecting the mental health and well-being of Black people in the U.S. against the harsh societal stressors. The quantitative and qualitative findings revealed the psychological impact of personal stress and racism and other societal stressors including post-incarceration experience and

military experience, with the qualitative research providing more insight into the incarceration experience. Regarding the role of religion/spirituality, the qualitative research was able to extend beyond the limited scope of the quantitative research and provide nuance and context for examining the dimensions of religion/spirituality that illuminate how integral it is to Afrocentric culture. The qualitative research findings were in alignment with the hypothesis in the quantitative research in that it showed how religion/spirituality can serve as a resource for helping to prevent a Black person from developing suicidal behavior. It also provided greater insight into how this can happen through intergenerational transmission of faith and other aspects of Afrocentric culture highlighted in the qualitative research. Both quantitative and qualitative research underscores the urgency of addressing the racist environment which interferes with many Black people's ability to cultivate a connection to society and feel a sense of belonging. As long as these factors persist, this group will always remain at risk for suicide.

CHAPTER XI - Implications & Recommendations for Social Work & the Lay Community

Social Workers' Role in Addressing Black Suicide & U.S. Racist Society

Implications for Social Work Practice & Research

On June 26, 2020, the Grand Challenges for Social Work (GCSW), initiated by the American Academy of Social Work & Social Welfare, announced that it was adding the goal of eliminating racism to its list of 12 Grand Challenges for Social Work, making it the 13th Grand Challenge (Grand Challenges for Social Work, 2021). This challenge, which is promoting the development of anti-racist social work, is aimed at eradicating racism and addressing the effects in the daily lives of people as well as on all levels of society (Grand Challenges for Social Work, 2021). This new grand challenge is a clear call directing all social workers to prioritize addressing interpersonal and structural racism in every aspect of social work to advance the vision of eradicating racism from society and transforming this nation. Social work must develop effective interventions for addressing the effects of racism on individuals and society as a whole, along with interventions for stopping its spread.

Training in the Ubuntu Relational Framework for the Study of Black Suicide

The Ubuntu Relational Framework for the Study of Black Suicide which emerged from this study is an anti-racist framework in alignment with the aim of the GCSW call for a wholistic approach to addressing racism. It encapsulates the full scope of the work of addressing suicidal behavior among Black people within the racist ecological context Black people, and all people, are situated within. This framework reflects the understanding of suicide as a symptom of one's lack of faith, disconnection from God's

Spirit, family, community, ancestors, and society which can lead to a death consciousness, a state of unawareness and isolation that makes one vulnerable to the impact of racism and other toxic societal stressors that can create barriers to full integration into society. It amplifies the need for a collective community survival consciousness that prioritizes the needs of the whole society, which includes eradicating racism and other systems of oppression, with an understanding that the individual is a part of the whole and cannot flourish independently. It also highlights the factors that contribute to one's ability to cultivate Divine consciousness through faith and connection to God's Spirit, family, community, and ancestors, enabling one to overcome barriers to integration into society, and protecting against suicidal behavior by assessing oneself and one's circumstances through this elevated consciousness and not through hopeless and despair. This work is decisive for the inner structural spiritual transformation required for humans to live as their complete true selves and resist the consumption of negative, fear-based thoughts that can lead to despair and make one vulnerable to the desire to call forth one's own death. This framework gets to the heart of social work. The National Association of Social Workers Code of Ethics (2017) sets forth as a core social work value the work of affirming the dignity and worth of all people which calls for social workers to be "cognizant of their dual responsibility to clients and to the broader society" and to "enhance clients' capacity and opportunity to change and to address their own needs" (The National Association of Social Workers Code of Ethics, 2017). The Ubuntu framework helps social workers to adhere to this dual responsibility to support their clients' own transformation and to transform the broader society.

Training social workers in this Afrocentric framework would expand social workers' knowledge of an African-centered social work approach appropriate for responding to this multidimensional problem that requires a creative, culturally-rich approach that is not rooted in the dominant Western methods developed by and for White people. According to Bent-Goodley, Fairfax, & Carlton-LaNey (2017), "African-centered social work practice, education, and research have important roles to play in solving contemporary and historical problems" (p. 4). The training incorporates instruction on the following eight areas listed here and explained below: (1) Ubuntu and African-centered social work approach; (2) history of racism, (3) how to become anti-racist and anti-oppressive social workers, (4) history of Black/African-American culture and tradition and religion/spirituality as protective factors; (5) skills-based training on how to talk to clients about racism and other societal stressors and assessing them as potential risk factors for suicidal behavior, and about Black/African-American culture and tradition and religion/spirituality as protective factors; (6) critical race theory and intersectionality; (7) reflexivity and self-examination of racial bias and internalized racism; (8) death consciousness construct and Divine consciousness construct and the conceptual system capable of generating Divine consciousness, incorporating spiritual ecomaps and affirmative therapy.

Ubuntu & African-centered social work

The training would begin with education on the principle of Ubuntu and African-centered social work approach. This framework will help social work educators understand the philosophy and theology of Ubuntu, the African philosophy asserting that individual humans cannot flourish without being connected to God, other humans, and

the environment. Through global and local examples, the instruction will highlight it as foundational to the work of transforming this society from one that prioritizes individualism to a more collective way of being as an important value to be taught to social workers. Social work educators must help social workers to see that they cannot talk about treating individuals outside of the context of the whole community and society. Macro and clinical social work need to be joined. Are clinical social workers talking to macro social workers about the rise in suicide among Black people (and all people) and what this says about the condition of the U.S. society? Are macro social workers talking to clinical social workers about racism, mass incarceration, and other systems of oppression? Are they all collaborating on the work of eradicating racism and other systems of oppression to heal society and the people in it? This would enhance social workers' understanding of the interconnectedness of all people and systems, and deepen the practice of social work.

History of racism

The challenging racial ecological context in which Black people are embedded is a social context that can lead to despair, hopelessness, and ultimately suicide (Burr, et al., 1999). The training would include comprehensive education on the history of racism in the U.S. and the formation of the U.S. racial ecology, exploring the social, legal, and psychological impact on Black people and the social forces that create barriers to some Black people fully flourishing and integrating into society.

How to become anti-racist and anti-oppressive social workers

The training would equip social workers for the life-long work of becoming anti-racist, anti-oppressive social workers. This work starts with becoming anti-racist and

anti-oppressive humans, through deepening knowledge of the connection of history and contemporary societal challenges to be better equipped for discerning strategies and interventions for dismantling racism and systems of oppression. They will be equipped with the skills to connect this work with the work supporting the personal transformation of individuals.

History of Black/African-American culture and tradition and religion/spirituality

The training will include an introduction to the history of Black/African-American culture and traditions including the role of religion/spirituality, family, community, and ancestors in enabling them to resist succumbing to racial and other forms of oppression.

Skills-based training on talking to clients about racism, and culture, religion/spirituality and making assessments

Training will include skills-based instruction on how to talk to clients about racism, racial discrimination, prior incarceration, prior military involvement and other stress factors and assessing them as potential risk factors for suicidal behavior. This dissertation project provides a robust contextual analysis that draws acute attention to the debilitating effect of racism on the social environment in the U.S. and Black people. It underscores the need for questions regarding racism to be included in the assessment tools and frameworks social workers use to evaluate their clients, as well as the need for the assessments to be more comprehensive and embedded in historical, social, and political contexts. Carter (2007) contends, “It is rare for mental health professionals to assess clients for exposure to race-related experiences... In spite of the fact that researchers know people are harmed by racism and that people of Color experience these

events as stressful, there still is inadequate information for mental health professionals to use when assessing how someone is affected by racism” (Carter et al., 2007, p. 82-83). Social workers can use the resources such as the race-related stress index and internalized racism and oppression scale to assess the impact of racism and integrate those findings with the information from the suicide risk assessment. Researchers are calling for the development of instruments that measure historical impact on suicide risks and resilience (Marion & Range, 2003).

An important step in assessing the risk of suicide in this population is determining the individual’s awareness of cultural protective factors highlighted in this study and their access to them (e.g., spiritual coping, family/kin bonds, etc. (Utsey et al., 2007). This training will further include skills-based instruction on how to talk to clients about Black/African-American culture and tradition and religion/spirituality as protective factors. It will instruct social workers on how to incorporate these components into their assessments as well as how to provide psychoeducation to clients regarding these cultural elements as a resource for creating a healthy mental and social environment. In addition to racism, understanding cultural factors, including religion/spirituality, will inform risk assessments and help clinicians to craft more targeted questions and interventions. It will help them to know what signs to look for as they discern suicide risk such as lack of access to the cultural protective factors including spiritual/religion resources, family and community support, and a lack of appreciation for the resistance work of their ancestors, which could all provide protective buffers against suicide (Utsey, Hook, & Stanard, 2007). Social workers could use tools such as family genograms to help clients review their family and ancestral history and learn about the experiences of family members and

ancestors who demonstrated strength and resistance to societal stressors. Awareness of their family and ancestral history is a resource that could provide strength and encouragement. It could also serve as a vehicle for them to talk to family members about whether or not there is a history of suicide in their family.

Religion/spirituality is an area that social workers are lacking in training and this gap is particularly prominent in assessing the religious and spiritual orientation of African Americans, a population for whom this resource is most pertinent (Hodge & Williams, 2002). Hodge & Williams (2002) assert that research shows that religion/spirituality is an important resource for African Americans that can be operationalized in clinical settings to help them overcome challenges. Training would include equipping social workers with the skills for effectively talking to their clients about religion/spirituality and asking questions that help them discern whether their client has a religious/spiritual worldview, and if so, how to harness religious/spiritual strengths. Questions would also be designed to help them gauge the client's openness to exploring religion/spirituality as a resource if they do not have that worldview. They would be trained in employing spiritual ecomaps (Hodge, 2000), a mapping process designed to help people explore their "existential relationships to various spiritual dimensions in their ecological environment" highlighting the core relational strengths located within the family systems, and spiritual systems, which includes a transpersonal relationship with God and spiritual beings such as angels (Hodge & Williams, 2002). This mapping process, which can be used for different faiths, would illuminate their spiritual strengths, existing resources, and relationships and help to assure them that they are accompanied and not grappling with challenges alone (Hodge & Williams, 2002). Instruction would also include a focus on

the importance of social workers, particularly those who are nonreligious, affirming the Afrocentric spiritual worldview of their Black clients who possess this orientation and to communicate openness, appreciation, and acceptance (Hodge & Williams, 2002). They will be trained on how to distinguish their work as social workers who focus on helping clients incorporate their spiritual strengths to help them address their challenges, from the aim of spiritual directors or clergy whose goal is to help individuals develop their intimate relationship with God (Hodge & Williams, 2002).

Training would also include strategies for developing relationships with community faith-based partners and advocating for funding from local and national governments for programs that cultivate community and family cohesiveness (Utsey et al., 2007). They can also develop partnerships with faith-based organizations to provide access for clients who want to explore religion/spirituality as a resource as well as hold psychoeducation programs at faith-based sites to promote suicide awareness (Utsey et al., 2007; Marion & Range, 2003). These efforts can work to decrease stigma around mental health and suicide and increase awareness in the Black community. More Black people must understand that suicide is not behavior reserved only for White people.

Critical race theory and intersectionality

Social workers will be trained in critical race theory which will guide the instruction to underscore the importance of applying an intersectional lens appreciating the impact of clients who possess multiple identities, such as Black people who are formerly incarcerated and veterans. The training will be embedded within the racial ecological framework so that social workers will understand the impact of these risk factors being experienced within a racist environment.

Reflexivity and self-examination of racial bias and internalized racism

This training will incorporate the importance of social workers engaging in the critical work of ongoing self-reflection, including identifying and healing from their own racial biases, internalized racism and white supremacy, and their fears about Black people. As explained previously, the practice of reflexivity is imperative for social work practice (Jensen-Hart & Williams, 2010) and research (Probst, 2015). Empathy and reflection are essential elements for transformation. Social worker researchers and educators must address their fears around exploring the active role of racism in the social environment, as well as their own internalized racial biases. According to Loya (2012), “Ethically, White social workers must actively combat racism and oppression and must strive to practice in culturally competent ways” (p. 30).

Social workers cannot be co-facilitators of the process of transformation within individuals, institutions, and societies without being willing to engage in their own personal transformative work.

Suicide emerges as an option for a person who is disconnected from themselves and society. It is also an outgrowth of a society that is not fully connected and cohesive itself (Durkheim 1897/2012) The work of reconnection begins with each of us. Social workers therefore must commit to their own personal reconnection work through self-reflection and examination and have the courage to be vulnerable to be able to contribute to the creation of an environment where people are actively engaged in reconnecting with themselves and each other. This is spiritual work rooted in the African-centered worldview that affirms our relationships with ourselves, with each other, with the environment, and with God (Morrison & Hopkins, 2019).

Death consciousness construct and Divine consciousness construct and conceptual system capable of generating Divine consciousness, incorporating spiritual ecomaps and affirmative therapy

As asserted previously, suicide is a psychosociological threat that manifests into a decision to end one's suffering (Poussaint & Alexander, 2000). It is defined in the Western world as a conscious act of lethal self-harm by an individual trapped in a "multidimensional malaise" who perceives death as the only way out of acute pain (Shneidman, 1985, p. 203). The aforementioned training components provide the foundation for the training in the death consciousness and Divine consciousness constructs, and the conceptual system capable of generating Divine consciousness (outlined in my autoethnography in chapter six), incorporating spiritual ecomaps and affirmative therapy. This training operationalizes spiritual resistance against the tempting malaise that can lure one into perceiving death as an attractive response to one's acute pain. Death consciousness refers to identification with the mortal self and lack of awareness of one's own divinity connected to God's Spirit, which makes one vulnerable to the malaise that can emerge from societal forces such as racism that cause Black people to have a negative perception of themselves, cause isolation, and prevent them from feeling fully integrated into society. Divine consciousness is the state of awareness of the possession of God's Spirit and of one's own divinity. It is an awareness of God's full presence within and around oneself, bringing one's whole being into harmony (mind, body, and spirit) with God and the environment, through one's spirit's connection to God's Spirit (Ruiz & Nelson, 1997/2009; Leloup, 2002). As explained previously, when one is in a state of death consciousness, one is susceptible to developing "psychological

constriction”, the cognitive state that is common in people who choose suicide (Shneidman, 1985, p. 138). This state causes one’s consciousness to appraise their challenging circumstances in a limited way (Shneidman, 1985). As also noted earlier, Outlaw (1993) contends that it can be hypothesized that racism can cause Black Americans to automatically assess primary appraisals as stressful encounters as harmful which can lead to symptoms of withdrawal and depression.

The training will include instruction on the meaning of these constructs within an Afrocentric spiritual cultural context, and my autoethnography will be utilized to provide context and instruction on the components of the conceptual system capable of generating Divine consciousness following Maturana & Varela’s (1992) scientific method (see Figures 4a & 4b in Appendix 1). It outlines spiritual practices and cultural values such as prayer and affirmation of God’s promises, that cultivate faith (including intergenerational faith), connection to God’s Spirit, and a sense of the African value of interdependence which reinforces one’s connection to family, community, and ancestors. These are practices and values that cultivate a path to Divine consciousness. Divine consciousness represents a commitment to a new way of being in the world. It is an expression of Afrocentricity, which, Asante (1989) contends, “governs every moment of any life” and changes the way you see everything in the world (Asante, 1989, p. 7). Helping people in distress identify and utilize their spiritual strengths and cultural resources can help Black people shift racism-induced negative self-perception and view their challenges as manageable (Hodge & Williams, 2002). Social workers would be trained in how to help clients who are open to these resources learn how to activate them. They would be trained in how to ask questions that help clients explore their religious and spiritual strengths and

practices that cover a range of topics including God, rituals, faith, community, and transpersonal encounters (Hodge & Williams, 2002). As explained earlier, spiritual ecomapping, which can entail the use of arrows as well as symbols, pictures, and words to depict experiences where clients have perceived God intervening in their difficult circumstances, can be utilized (Hodge & Williams, 2002). It is a tool that can help clients assess these resources within the broader context of their family and spiritual systems and interpret their function and role in promoting their spiritual and emotional well-being (Hodge & Williams, 2002). Hodge & Williams (2002) explain the value of spiritual ecomaps for African-American clients battling challenges. They assert, “The concrete depiction of what are often numerous accounts of divine activity, in addition to other systems of spiritual ecomap, serves as a powerful visual reminder that consumers do not face their problems alone” (Hodge & Williams, 2002, p. 590). With a strong visual spiritual life map as a foundation, the social worker can then instruct the client on death and Divine consciousness and the conceptual system capable of generating Divine consciousness, explaining how spiritual practices can insulate them from effects of racism and other intrusive challenges (Hodge & Williams, 2002). Hodge & Williams (2002) explain, “Workers can address problems by encouraging consumers to enter into a nurturing, holding environment with God...through increased prayer, meditation, and other devotional activities that focus on expressions of God’s love, admiration, etc.” (p. 589). The spiritual ecomap and the conceptual system capable of generating Divine consciousness operationalize spiritual resistance. These tools can help Black people develop and sustain a state of Divine consciousness that affirms that they have spiritual and earthly support which can help them avoid psychological constriction and enable

them to engage in “cognitive reframing” (Hodge & Williams, 2002). This reframing is the psychological work consistently required for Black people to stay mentally healthy in a racial ecology. It is the work of appropriately appraising and processing negative death-affirming messages, challenges, and societal stressors through a healthy mind rooted in one’s true self that is in harmony with God’s Spirit and one’s own divinity.

Social workers would also be trained in how to incorporate a form of affirmative therapy in their efforts to support their clients in cultivating their spiritual and cultural strengths. Affirmative therapy is a psychotherapeutic approach grounded in empathy and unconditional support for clients which is used to validate the humanity of sexual and gender minorities (Hinrichs & Donaldson, 2017). It is rooted in the attitude and way of being of the clinician who communicates in multiple ways that they will provide a safe, affirming care environment, such as through hanging a rainbow flag in the waiting room (Hinrichs & Donaldson, 2017). In addition, clinicians affirm their clients and coach them in affirming themselves through positive affirmations as protection against societal messaging that denounces their humanity (Hinrichs & Donaldson, 2017). Social workers can adapt this therapeutic approach for their Black clients. Through all the ways outlined above, they can cultivate a demeanor and disposition that communicates they are sensitive to the history and culture of Black people including their protracted struggle against racism and they appreciate the role of religion/spirituality in their ability to survive and thrive throughout the centuries in this country. For example, A Black Lives Matter sign posted in their office would signal a certain level of awareness, affirmation, and safety for Black people in the way that a rainbow flag signals awareness, affirmation, and safety to the LGBTQ community. They can coach their clients to make affirmations

that declare their pride in their Black and/or African-American identity, and that affirm their divinity. Black people have historically utilized affirmations as part of their human rights resistance work to affirm their humanity and self-worth. During the 1960s Black freedom movement, Black men who were sanitation workers in Memphis went on strike to protest poor working conditions and pay and held signs that read: I AM A Man, making reference to the Declaration of Independence that declares all men are created equal (New-York Historical Society Museum & Library, 2018). Black power freedom fighters urged Black people during this time to affirm their humanity through slogans such as “Black is Beautiful” manifested through a variety of expressions including natural hairstyles, West African-inspired clothing, and music (i.e. James Brown’s “Say it Loud-I’m Black and I’m Proud) (White, Bay, & Martin, 2013). These declarations extend back to slavery. Former enslaved woman, Sojourner Truth who became an itinerant preacher and an abolitionist, is famously known for asserting: “Ain’t I A Woman?” at a Women’s Rights Convention in Akron, Ohio in 1851 when White women did not want her to speak and contaminate their cause with the cause of abolition and freedom for Black people (Painter, 1996, p. 167). These affirmations countered the dominant culture’s messaging of Black people as criminals, less than human, unworthy, etc. that get internalized and translated into fear, insecurity, low self-worth, etc., and can cause Black people to disconnect from themselves and society. Affirmations that declare one’s worth would be important for Black people who are struggling with racial oppression or need help affirming their worth which they may feel doubts about after incarceration or military service and coping with struggles related to residuals from those experiences and integrating back into society. Affirmations that reinforce one’s identity as a child of God

or one made in God's image, or as an expression of God's Love, such as "I am love", or for Christians, "I am Christ Consciousness." These declarations that affirm one's divinity provide powerful psychological assurance of one's true identity and help to keep one's consciousness and mental terrain rooted in this truth. This intervention is flexible and can be adjusted according to different faith orientations. Social workers will be trained with the capacity to ask questions that help them to discern their clients' needs and tailor the approach to meet their needs. This training is critical. The field of social work has recognized the important role of religion/spirituality in the human experience (Oxhandler, Parrish, Torres, & Achenbaum, 2015). Oxhandler et al., (2015) contend there is a strong need for social workers to be trained in addressing religion/spirituality with their clients and incorporating this important component into their psychosocial assessments and interventions.

Implications for Future Research

Researchers must also be trained in the Ubuntu Relational Framework for the Study of Black Suicide to enhance their understanding of the complexities of Black Suicide and the role of religion/spirituality as a protective factor. Suicide research on Black people is still at an early stage of development (Joe, 2006). As a result, the field has been slow to provide appropriate interventions for Black people, and more research is required regarding the risks and protective factors to achieve greater diagnostic clarity (Joe, 2006). More research is needed in areas such as the connection between suicide and homicide (Poussaint & Alexander, 2000). As noted previously, suicide researchers have highlighted a connection between suicide and homicide and have indicated it is important to acknowledge and understand the connection between suicide and homicide among

Black people in the U.S. (Poussaint & Alexander, 2000). Poussaint & Alexander (2000) contend that an exploration of this connection between both acts of violence must be integrated into community strategies for preventing suicide as well as homicide. The impact of the racial social environment and all of its dimensions and how it influences suicidal behavior in Black people must be further explored (Kaslow, Sherry, Bethea, Wyckoff, Compton, Grall et al., 2005). In addition, research focusing on the socioeconomic factors that contributed to the spike in suicide rates among Black adolescents between 1980-1995 is needed (Utsey, Hook, & Stanard, 2007).

Researchers must understand the importance of context and cultural experiences of Black people and integrate this into research (Utsey, Hook, & Stanard, 2007; Gibbs, 1997; Morrison & Hopkins, 2019; Borum, 2014) It is necessary to have research that centers Black population as the paucity of research on suicide that includes Black or African American population includes small numbers (Joe, Scott, & Banks, 2018) As Borum (2014) asserts, “In these comparisons, assumptions, values, and methodologies used for interpreting and explaining White, middle-class participants’ behavior are then applied to African American participants without much attention to differences in culture, worldview, histories, and sociocultural realities” (Borum, 2014, p. 657).

Scholars (Utsey, Hook, & Stanard, 2007) have already called for more research that explores the cultural orientation and worldview of Black people to gain more insight into the protective components of the cultural elements that reduce suicide risk and suggest that this may also shed light on the fluctuating rates. More research to examine the specific cultural mechanisms that provide a buffer is necessary (Utsey, Hook, & Stanard, 2007). In addition, more research is needed on older Black people, and on Black

women, areas which have been limited due to their lower rates (Utsey, Hook, & Stanard, 2007). Finally, more research is needed on the period leading up to suicide attempts, particularly between the planning stage and the attempt (Joe, Baser, Breeden & Neighbors, 2006). This dissertation centers race and sociohistorical and cultural context as important components of the analysis of suicide illustrates the illegitimacy of a color-blind approach to research and practice and highlights racism and oppression as societal defects as opposed to “remote pathologies in an otherwise healthy society” (Borum, 2014, p. 662).

Under-researched Subgroup: Formerly Incarcerated and Veterans

The findings of this dissertation draw attention to the suicidal behavior of two, under-researched subgroups within the Black population – formerly incarcerated persons and veterans. Formerly incarcerated Black people, a particularly vulnerable population, require specialized clinical attention which honors the impact of their incarceration. More research is needed in this area. Focusing on incarceration identifies a clear intervention point for social workers to address racism on the micro-level and the macro level. This study also highlights the mental health needs of Black veterans, another vulnerable population requiring specialized clinical attention which honors the impact of their military service. The research will support advocacy for policies needed which will support funding for mental health resources for these populations.

Need for Focus on Youth

Data from Youth Risk Behaviors Survey show that in 2017, 7.4 percent of youth in grades 9-12 reported making at least one suicide attempt within the previous 12 months (American Foundation for Suicide Prevention, 2020). Within that same group,

female students reported attempting suicide at a rate nearly twice as often as male students (9.3% vs. 5.1%), and Black students reported the highest rate of attempts (9.8%) (American Foundation for Suicide Prevention, 2020). The data revealed that nearly 2.4 percent of all the students who reported attempting suicide needed medical treatment, and Black students reported the highest rates of treatment (3.4%) (American Foundation for Suicide Prevention, 2020).

COVID-19 & Suicide

COVID-19, a new disease caused by a novel coronavirus (CDC, 2019), exacerbates the race-based stress and chronic stress that Black people experience (Williams, 2020). Black people are dying from COVID-19 at alarmingly high rates in the U.S. (Ray, 2020). In addition, Black people make up a significant part of the “essential” workforce in positions including bus drivers, food service workers, stockers, janitors, and cashiers, which increases their exposure to the virus (Ray, 2020). This is a symptom of the institutional racism that perpetuates the racial economic inequality in the U.S. (Jones, 1997).

Another area the virus is exacerbating is grief. According to Williams (2020), “Tragically, COVID-19 is increasing the stress of bereavement in black communities...Black adults are twice as likely to lose a child by age 30 and a spouse by 60. The pandemic has multiplied these losses and the traumatic effects on families and communities while denying black Americans the opportunity to grieve their losses together” (Williams, 2020). Racism also compounds Black grief. According to Rosenblatt & Wallace (2005) when an African American perceives racism to be a contributing factor to the death, feelings of anger and rage can be added to the grief and it

may trigger memories of other death of people close to them or that they heard about that were also associated with racism and discrimination. They assert, “It can add feelings of hopelessness, vengefulness, inadequacy, and desperation that can come up at any time an African American faces, remembers, or thinks about discrimination or racism” (Rosenblatt & Wallace, 2005, p.8).

This virus is an important contemporary element of the social context and an area for future research. The psychological implications of social distancing on people who have struggled for centuries to close the distance between them and the wider society; more blacks being arrested for violating social distancing rules. Research on the state of Ohio by ProPublica shows racial disparities in the enforcement of the stay-at-home orders that have been issued to help stop the virus from spreading (Kaplan & Hardy (2020). Kaplan & Hardy (2020) assert that “Crowds of mostly white protesters have defied Ohio’s stay-at-home order without arrest, while in several of the state’s biggest jurisdictions, police departments have primarily arrested black people for violating the order” (Kaplan & Hardy, 2020). This virus which permeates the atmosphere and contaminates the air is functioning like racism which pollutes the ecology Black people are living in and compromises their health. It enhances the risk of arrest, discrimination, and death, which increases the hopelessness, despair, grief, anxiety, vulnerability, and fear already raging within the U.S. racial ecology.

All of these factors increase the psychological risk of suicide for this population. Early research is supporting this concern. A recent study (Bray, Daneshvari, Radhakrishnan, Cubbage, Eagle, & Southhall et al., 2020) by researchers at Johns Hopkins exploring racial differences in suicide mortality trends in Maryland during the

early period of the COVID pandemic shows that the number of suicide deaths among Black people doubled during the period between March 5, 2020, and May 7, 2020, compared to the numbers during the period of 2017-2019. The study shows that the number of suicide deaths by White people in Maryland during that period at the start of the pandemic decreased by almost half (Bray, Daneshvari, Radhakrishnan, Cubbage, Eagle, & Southhall et al., 2020).

Community

The role of community is another key area for future research. A strong sense of community and collaboration has been a consistent theme among Black Americans throughout their experience in this country, although the shape and degree of cohesion have shifted over time due to a variety of factors, such as school desegregation and urban renewal leading to desegregation and resegregation and, which Hill (1999) asserts, “forever diminishing the sense of community we once had” (Hill, 1999, p. 130). (Hill, 1999). Many Black Americans who grew up during the period before the Civil Rights movement believe the community cohesion was stronger during that time as they were growing up (Hill, 1999). Despite this shift and challenges in the communities, Hill (1999) notes that there continues to be evidence of community engagement and self-help with communities organizing to stop crime, close drug houses, protect children and young people, and promote environmental aesthetics. Black people in America have demonstrated an ethic of care for each other within a social environment that has been consistently hostile, and their struggle in many ways has bound them together. Black communities have been organizing movements for racial justice consistently since slavery, which include the Civil Rights Movement and the contemporary Black Lives

Matter movement, have revealed their commitment to this ethic of interdependence through their fight for liberation –a fight that extends beyond care for each other and includes the survival of the greater society. They have fought for their liberation knowing that their liberation is connected to the liberation of others, even their oppressors.

For the Lay Community

The Black Church, other faith communities, and community centers

This dissertation is curated for adaptation into a book that will create awareness about Black suicide and will be accessible to multiple professionals and institutions across disciplines that support the health and well-being of Black people. This includes social work institutions, community health clinics, ministers and faith-based organizations, community organizers, activists, and other lay people. Researchers concerned about the translation and dissemination (T&D) of research into the field deem this approach to be a requirement. According to Brownson, Kreuter, Arrington, & True (2006), “For T&D, we must share discoveries through channels most likely to reach potential adopters and end users” (Brownson, Kreuter, Arrington, & True, 2006, p. 121). The primary user this work ultimately must reach is Black people and people who support their mental health and well-being.

Social workers must provide training on the Ubuntu Relational Framework for the Study of Black Suicide in churches and other faith communities to help spread awareness about suicide and the vital role of religion/spirituality in helping to prevent suicide. The findings from the quantitative study reveal that religion/spirituality was not a buffer against suicide attempts for the participants in that study. The literature shows that the role of the Black Church as a strong cohesive source within the Black community has

shifted. This must serve as a call to the Black Church to appreciate the impact of the shift in demographics and how to cultivate the level of cohesion that was historically a part of the Black church since slavery in a diverse context. Additionally, given what the research shows regarding the rise of suicide among young Black people and the decline of their church attendance, the Church must develop more effective strategies for addressing the spiritual needs of young people which will encourage them to utilize the resources that their elders utilize and their ancestors also utilized to protect them from the harsh impact of a racist society and other challenges. Social workers must provide the same training in community centers and any other gathering places for people who support the emotional health and well-being of Black people.

Black People

The Ubuntu Relational Framework for the Study of Black Suicide is a shield of protection against the alarming call towards premature death in the Black community. It is a framework that reminds Black people of elements of the African/Black/African American ethos that have helped Black people develop and sustain a capacity for spiritual resistance against suicide and other deadly toxic forces in the U.S. racial ecology since the time of the arrival of the first enslaved Africans. The Divine consciousness that affirms connection to and dependence on God, family and community, and to the ancestors produces a collective survival consciousness that keeps one's healing and liberation tied to the healing and liberation of others.

This project opened with the stated aim of preventing Black people from calling forth their own death. It is ending with a call for Black people to stop calling forth the death of their individual selves and their collective selves. This project explored the need

for suicide conceptually to be framed differently for Black people. Scholars have highlighted the closeness between homicide and suicide (Henin, 1969; Poussaint & Alexander, 2000). As Borum's (2014) study illuminated, when applying the African philosophy—a person is a person through other persons – it reveals that when a Black person kills another Black person, they are killing an extension of themselves (Borum, 2014). As Noble (1991) explains, this African notion of “extended self” and the “survival of the tribe” is fundamental to the psychology of African/Black people. These are expressions of Ubuntu. These are cultural understandings that must be illuminated and reinforced within the Black community so that Black people can engage in a holistic discussion about the forces that are compelling them to die at their own hands at alarming rates. Framing this work through Ubuntu highlights these critical philosophical and theological underpinnings. Ubuntu theology, which emphasizes the vertical dimensions of Ubuntu, acknowledges that despite their connection to each other, individual humans cannot fully flourish unless they also realize that they are extensions of God (Ntamushobora, 2012).

Black people's appreciation for the value of collective liberation and responsibility that has been expressed throughout the generations of their presence in the U.S. has extended beyond care for the humanity of Black people. A most compelling example is the fact that Black people have participated in every war the U.S. has been involved in, even while they were enslaved, including the wars preceding the founding of the nation, enduring racial violence during their time in service and as they reintegrated back home (Johnson & Johnson, 2013). This is a powerful expression of their belief in collective liberation and responsibility and of the understanding that a person is a person

through other persons, even if the other person does not recognize their humanity. The history of the survival of Black people in America is replete with examples of their spiritual resistance through their individual and collective practices and can be used as a resource to support their mental health and well-being. These values are at the heart of the Black American worldview (Utsey, Bolden, Lanier, & Williams, 2007; Grills, 2002). Black people can utilize components of this framework to help pass on these life-affirming values and resources that can guard them against suicidal and other self-destructive behaviors.

CHAPTER XII - Conclusion

The present study sought to examine the influence of personal stress and societal stressors including racial discrimination, post-incarceration status, and veteran status, on suicide attempts among Black people in the U.S., and whether religion/spirituality influenced the relationships between attempted suicide and racial discrimination, post-incarceration status, veteran status, and personal stress. It further explored whether religion/spirituality as a protective factor is passed down intergenerationally, and if so, whether there are intergenerational patterns and/or differences in the utilization of religion/spirituality as a source of protection against developing suicidal behavior. Despite its limitations, the present study offers an important contribution to enhancing the understanding of the complexities of suicidal behavior among Black people in the U.S. and the role of religion/spirituality as a protective factor. Guided by a cluster of theories, with Critical Race Theory and the Afrocentric Worldview as the overarching theoretical and philosophical approaches, the findings and analysis confirmed that personal stress and societal stressors, specifically racial discrimination, post-incarceration status, veteran status, imbedded within a racist society are associated with suicidal behavior among Black people in the U.S. Guided by Durkheim's Social Integration Theory, the findings enhance the understanding of the impact of racism on this country's ability to create the "collective force" and cohesion Durkheim contends is required to "restrain suicide" within a society (Durkheim, 1897/2012, p. 209).

The findings from the quantitative study reveal that religion/spirituality was not a buffer against suicide attempts for the participants in that study. Although the

multiplicative interaction effect did not support the buffering effect of religion in the deterring, reducing, or preventing of suicide attempts in this current data set, the possibility of an additive interaction effect should be explored in future research. In an additive or biological interaction, the effects of two variables are combined to estimate their interaction. Epidemiologists have emphasized that additive interaction carries great public health importance (VanderWeele, 2009; Rothman, 2012).

Through the Afrocentric world view, the findings of the present study enhanced the understanding of the complexities of the role of religion/spirituality as an important protective component of Black culture. Assessed together, the findings from the quantitative and the qualitative research provided the foundation for the broader work revealed through this study encapsulated in the Ubuntu Relational Framework for the Study of Black Suicide which guides the understanding of the risks and protective factors of Black suicide through the constructs of death consciousness and Divine consciousness. This framework highlights the need to equally prioritize the concern of what animates Black people's desire to live, which was illuminated through the qualitative research, along with the question of what factors make them at risk for cultivating a desire to die. The Ubuntu framework helps social workers to adhere to their dual responsibility to support their clients' transformation and the transformation of the broader society, which must include a commitment to their own healing and transformation. It is a framework that reinforces a commitment to collective liberation which helps guide social work to its highest good.

Through the Afrocentric worldview, the present study aimed to respond to the urgency of Black suicide with reverence and in a manner that honored the seriousness of

this investigation as sacred work. Again as Parham (2009) explains, in ancient African psychology, the work of nurturing one's mental health is equated with expanding one's human consciousness through attending to one's spirit. This spiritual force field of protection, reinforced by the network of family, community, and ancestors that the Spirit of God runs through, is what this study aimed to examine and elucidate to equip social work practitioners and others with the understanding and tools necessary for not only appropriately responding to suicidal behavior in Black people, but also supporting their efforts to develop a healthy holistic mental and social environment within an oppressive racist environment. This study provides a practical methodology that operationalizes spiritual resistance and provides recommendations for equipping social workers with the capacity to employ the Ubuntu Relational Framework.

This dissertation contributes to the growing body of research on suicide among Black people in the United States. The findings support the call for more culturally specific diagnostic models to address suicide among Black people, an act that has roots in generational historical sufferings stemming from slavery and centuries of systemic racial oppression in the U.S. (Poussaint & Alexander, 2000). Further research can lead to more targeted clinical interventions that address the internal feelings of rejection, low self-worth, and disconnection from society among some Black people which can lead come to call forth their own death. Research regarding Black suicide helps to change the dominant narrative regarding Black people by highlighting their vulnerabilities and amplifying the psychological and emotional impact of societal pressures such as racism, post-incarceration status, and veteran status, on their mental health and well-being. This contributes to the ongoing work of humanizing Black people in the societal

consciousness which is still necessary centuries after slavery. The interviews with the three Black men, which provided a balanced, non-voyeuristic view into their interior lives, helps to further this critical work. Darrell's case study provided a compelling integration of the themes from both studies as it highlights the death consciousness state that makes one susceptible to the impact of racism and other pressing societal stressors that can lead to non-traditional but lethal "suicidal" behavior, and the role of Afrocentric culture, religion, and spirituality in shifting one from death consciousness to Divine consciousness. Additionally, drawing attention to the mental health implications of incarceration and its influence on suicide among Black people would also contribute to the active efforts within the public health community to reframe incarceration as a public health crisis (Wildeman & Wang, 2017).

This work also contributes to the growing research focus on a strengths-based approach to the exploration of suicide. Shifting the focus from a deficit model to a strengths-based approach also helps to broaden the scope to include a prioritization of the work of eradicating racism and the other systems of oppression embedded within the social environment that Black people, and all people, live within. The Ubuntu Relational Framework for the Study of Black Suicide reminds the social work profession that when examining the complex phenomenon of Black suicide, the work of healing the external societal conditions, as well as the internal psychological and emotional conditions that contribute to suicidal behavior is critical. All of this work must occur within a comprehensive framework that explores the multiple dimensions of the Black experience in the U.S. However, as the devastating recent occurrences of racial violence in our society have demonstrated even more clearly, the social work profession must prioritize

the work of eradicating racism. Until the racist societal U.S. environment is healed, Black people will be forced to continue to struggle to resist the urge to call forth their own death.

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APPENDICES

Table 1
Descriptive statistics, frequency & percentages for all variables (N=7,766)

	Frequency(%)	Mean(sd)
Dependent variable		
Suicide attempt	345(4%)	
Personal & societal stress factors		
Personal stress	3,483(45%)	
Racial discrimination contexts:		
In health care:		
No racial discrimination	5,533(79%)	
Obtaining health care	218(3%)	
Receiving treatment	500(7%)	
Both (obtaining & treatment)	710(10%)	
In public & other situations:		
No racial discrimination	3,600(53%)	
Discrimination in public	1,119(16%)	
Discrimination in other situations	418(6%)	
Both (in public & in other situations)	1,687(25%)	
Experiencing racist names & threats:		
No racial discrimination	4,829(76%)	
Being called a racist name	921(15%)	
Being made fun of, picked on or threatened	136(2%)	
Both (called racist name and threatened)	446(7%)	
Post incarceration status:		
Never been to jail or prison at all	6,386(83%)	
Been to jail, prison, or juvenile detention before age 18	186(2%)	
Been to jail, prison, or correctional facility since age 18	895(12%)	
Been to both before and after age 18	238(3%)	
Veteran status		
Served on active duty in the U.S. Armed Forces	605(8%)	

Table 1 (Continued)
Descriptive statistics, frequency & percentages for all variables (N=7,766)

	Frequency(%)	Mean(sd)
Religion/spirituality protective factors		
Importance of religious or spiritual beliefs:		
Very important	6,109(79%)	
Somewhat important	1,301(17%)	
Not very important	344(4%)	
Frequency of attendance at religious services:		
Once a year	68(1%)	
Few times a year	790(16%)	
1-3 times a month	1,568(31%)	
Once a week	1,587(31%)	
Twice a week	1,075(21%)	
Sociodemographic factors		
Age		43(16.30)
Male	3,153(41%)	
Female	4,613(59%)	
US born	7,189(93%)	
Born outside of US	576(7%)	
Less than high school	1,321(17%)	
Graduated high school	2,553(33%)	
Some college	3,342(43%)	
Beyond college	550(7.08%)	
Income 0-\$19,999	3,100(40%)	
Income \$20,000-\$34,999	1,865(24%)	
Income \$35,000-\$59,000	1,489(19%)	
Income \$60,000-\$200,000+	1,312(17%)	

Table 2
Association between racial discrimination in health care and suicide attempt adjusted for personal stress

	Model 1 OR[95%CI]	Model 2 OR[95%CI]	Model 5 OR[95%CI]
Personal & societal stress factors			
Personal stress		5.0*[3.40,7.31]	5.13*[3.50,7.54]
Racial discrimination contexts:			
In health care:			
No racial discrimination			
Obtaining health care	1.61[.81,3.20]	1.47[.70,3.09]	1.50[.72,3.13]
Receiving treatment	2.0*[1.36,2.96]	1.62**[1.09,2.43]	1.62**[1.10,2.42]
Both (obtaining & treatment)	2.1*[1.34,3.23]	1.81***[1.16,2.84]	1.90***[1.20,2.92]
Sociodemographic factors			
Age			.98*[.98,.99]
Male			
Female			1.42**[1.10,1.90]
Income \$20,000 to \$34,999			.71****[.51,.99]

Note: Model 5 was controlled for age, gender, US born status, education, and income. Findings from Model 3, 4 & 6 are reported in Table 7. *p<.001, **p<.02, ***p<.01, ****p<.05

Table 3

Association between racial discrimination in public and other situations and suicide attempt adjusted for personal stress

	Model 1 OR[95%CI]	Model 2 OR[95%CI]	Model 5 OR[95%CI]
Personal & societal stress factors			
Personal stress		4.76**[3.21,7.06]	4.85**[3.30,7.20]
Racial discrimination contexts:			
In public & other situations:			
No racial discrimination			
Discrimination in public	2.05*[1.24,3.40]	1.58[.93,2.64]	1.63[.96,2.80]
Discrimination in other situations	2.25*[1.30,3.91]	1.80***[1.03,3.13]	1.88*****[1.10,3.34]
Both (in public & in other situations)	2.25**[1.50,3.44]	1.66****[1.08,2.56]	1.84*[1.15,2.95]
Sociodemographic factors			
Male			
Female			1.61**[1.19,2.18]
Income \$20,000- \$34,999			.65*[.457,.914]

Note: Model 5 was controlled for age, gender, US born status, education, and income. Findings from Model 3, 4 & 6 are reported in Table 8. *p<.01, **p<.001, ***p<.0001, ****p<.00001, *****p<.000001

Table 4
Association between racist names & threats and suicide attempt adjusted for personal stress

	Model 1 OR[95%CI]	Model 2 OR[95%CI]	Model 5 OR[95%CI]
Personal & societal stress factors			
Personal stress		4.43*[2.77,7.11]	4.53*[2.85,7.19]
Experiencing racist names & threats:			
No racial discrimination			
Being called a racist name	2.42*[1.56,3.75]	1.86**[1.15,3.02]	1.89**[1.21,2.96]
Being made fun of, picked on or threatened	1.97[.93,4.17]	1.70[.79,3.66]	1.87[.84,4.14]
Both (called racist name and threatened)	2.41*[1.50,3.88]	1.90**[1.21,3.01]	2.07**[1.29,3.30]
Sociodemographic factors			
Age			.98**[.98,.10]
Female			1.90*[1.42,2.53]
Income \$20,000-\$34,999			.64***[.45,.92]

Note: Model 5 was controlled for age, gender, US born status, education, and income. Findings from Model 3, 4 & 6 are reported in Table 9. *p<.001, **p<.01 ***p<.02

Table 5

Association between post incarceration status and suicide attempt adjusted for personal stress & interaction terms

	Model 1 OR[95%CI]	Model 2 OR[95%CI]	Model 5 OR[95%CI]	Model 6 OR[95%CI]
Personal & societal stress factors				
Personal stress		4.64**[3.16,80]	4.71**[3.22,6.90]	
Post incarceration status:				
Never been to jail or prison at all				
Been to jail, prison, or juvenile detention before age 18	2.18*[1.30,3.66]	1.52[.90,2.56]	1.41[.81,2.46]	
Been to jail, prison, or correctional facility since age 18	2.84**[1.94,4.20]	2.21*[1.42,3.44]	2.53**[1.59,4.03]	
Been to both before and after age 18	5.03**[3.11,8.13]	3.4**[2.04,5.74]	3.81**[2.09,6.95]	
Jail before 18 x personal stress				.47[.08,2.89]
Jail since 18 x personal stress				.35****[.11,1.11]
Both x personal stress				.31****[.08,1.12]
Sociodemographic factors				
Age			.99*[.98,.10]	.98*[.98,.10]
Female			1.88**[1.37,2.58]	1.88**[1.38,2.56]
Income \$20,000-\$34,999			.68****[.47,.96]	.68****[.48,.97]

Note: Models 5 & 6 was controlled for age, gender, US born status, education, and income. Findings from Model 3, 4 are reported in Table 10.

*p<.01, **p<.001, ***p<.03, ****p<.08, *****p<.07

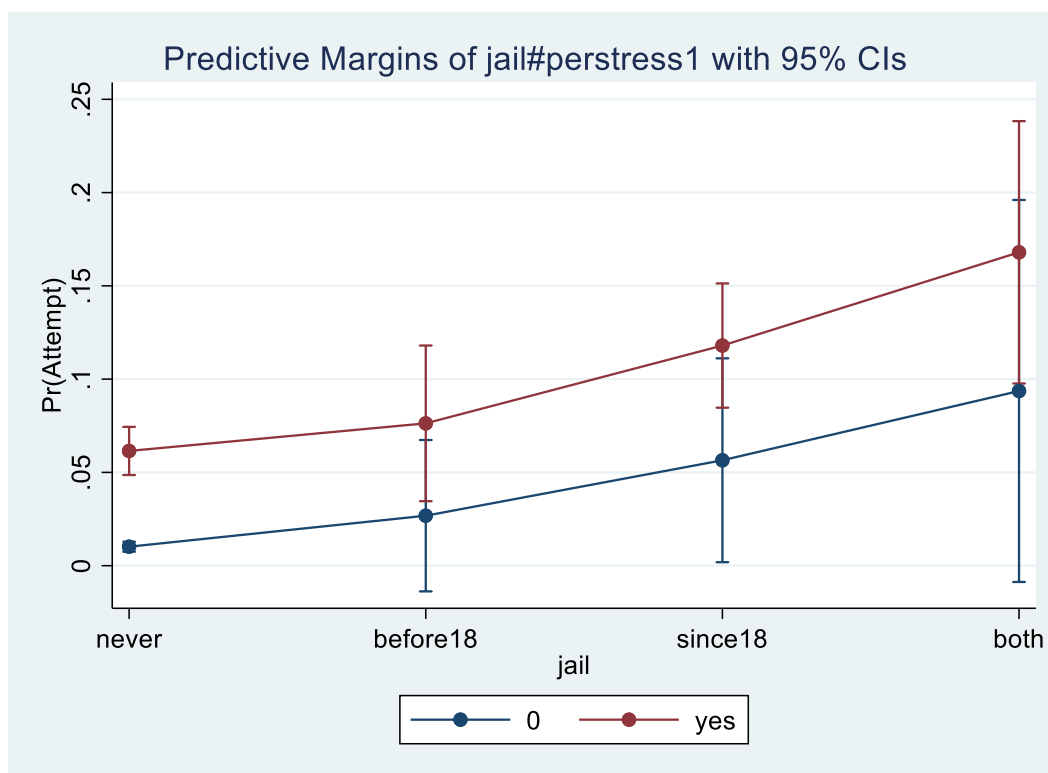
Figure 1 Predictive Margins of Jail and Personal Stress

Table 6 Association between veteran status and suicide attempt adjusted for personal stress

	Model 1 OR[95%CI]	Model 2 OR[95%CI]	Model 5 OR[95%CI]
Personal & societal stress factors			
Personal stress		5.20**[3.65,7.41]	5.31**[3.74,7.56]
Veteran status:		1.43[.81,2.5]	
Served on active duty in the U.S. Armed Forces, Reserves or National Guard		1.80*[1.01,3.19]	2.48***[1.34,4.59]
Sociodemographic factors			
Age			.98**[.97,.99]
Female			1.75**[1.34,2.28]
Graduated high school			.62*[.39,1.00]
Some college			
Beyond college			
Income between \$20,000-\$34,999			.69****[.50,.96]
Income between \$35,000-\$59,999			.62****[.41,.95]

Note: Model 5 was controlled for age, gender, US born status, education, and income. Findings from Model 3, 4 & 6 are reported in Table 11. *p<.05., **p<.001., ***p<.01., ****p<.03

Table 7

Association between racial discrimination in health care and suicide attempt adjusted for personal stress and religion/spirituality & interaction terms

	Model 3 OR[95%CI]	Model 4 OR[95%CI]	Model 6 OR[95%CI]
Personal & societal stress factors			
Personal stress		4.8*[2.8,8.1]	5.0*[3.1,8.1]
Racial discrimination contexts:			
In health care:			
No racial discrimination			
Obtaining health care	1.4[.54,3.64]	1.3[.46,3.5]	3.1[.86,10.9]
Receiving treatment	1.7[1.11,2.62]	1.4[.87,2.2]	1.1[.48,2.5]
Both (obtaining & treatment)	2.2[1.4,3.5]	2.0[1.2,3.1]	1.3[.50,3.4]
Religion/spirituality protective factors			
Importance of religious or spiritual beliefs:			
Very important			
Somewhat important	1.7[.75,3.8]	1.6[.72,3.5]	
Not very important	.98[.21,4.5]	1.0[.24,4.3]	
Frequency of attendance at religious services:			
Once a year			
Few times a year	.65[.17,2.6]	.59[.14,2.6]	
1-3 times a month	1.06[.28,4.1]	.99[.24,4.15]	
Once a week	1.2[.29,4.7]	1.2[.27,5.2]	
Twice a week	1.6[.44,5.5]	1.6[.39,6.4]	
Interaction terms			
Obtaining health care x personal stress			.36[.08,1.7]
Receiving treatment x personal stress			1.6[.57, 4.2]
Both x personal stress			1.5[.57,4.0]

Note: Models 4 and 6 were controlled for age, gender, US born status, education, and income. *p<.001

Table 8
Association between racial discrimination in public and other situations and suicide attempt adjusted for personal stress and religion/spirituality & interaction terms

	Model 3 OR[95%CI]	Model 4 OR[95%CI]	Model 6 OR[95%CI]
Personal & societal stress factors			
Personal stress		4.0*[2.4,6.6]	5.3*[2.5,11.0]
Racial discrimination contexts:			
In public & other situations:			
No racial discrimination			
Discrimination in public	2.2[1.1,4.3]	1.7[.83,3.6]	2.3[.90,6.0]
Discrimination in other situations	3.0[1.5,6.0]	2.7[1.3,5.5]	1.7[.45,6.5]
Both (in public & in other situations)	2.6[1.6,4.2]	2.3[1.3,3.7]	1.8[.69,4.5]
Religion/spirituality protective factors			
Importance of religious or spiritual beliefs:			
Very important			
Somewhat important	1.4[.53,3.6]	1.4[.56,3.5]	
Not very important	.91[.19,4.4]	1.2[.26,5.3]	
Frequency of attendance at religious services:			
Once a year			
Few times a year	.10[20,5.0]	1.0[.20,5.2]	
1-3 times a month	1.5[.30,7.1]	1.4[.30,7.1]	
Once a week	1.7[.34,8.3]	1.8[.35,9.2]	
Twice a week	2.2[.46,10.6]	2.3[.46,11.9]	
Interaction terms			
Discrimination in public x personal stress			.64[.26,1.6]
Discrimination in other situations x personal stress			1.1[.24,5.0]
Both x personal stress			1.0[.37,2.9]

Note: Models 4 and 6 were controlled for age, gender, US born status, education, and income. *p<.001

Table 9
Association between racist names & threats and suicide attempt adjusted for personal stress and religion/spirituality & interaction terms

	Model 3 OR[95%CI]	Model 4 OR[95%CI]	Model 6 OR[95%CI]
Personal & societal stress factors			
Personal stress		3.8*[2.1,7.1]	4.4*[3.1,6.2]
Racial discrimination contexts:			
Experiencing racist names & threats:			
No racial discrimination			
Being called a racist name	2.9[1.6,5.0]	2.2[1.2,4.0]	2.2[.49,9.9]
Being made fun of, picked on or threatened	2.3[1.0,5.3]	2.2[.89,5.3]	1.6[.33,7.6]
Both (called racist name and threatened)	2.6[1.44,7]	2.3[1.3,4.2]	.90[.26,3.1]
Religion/spirituality protective factors			
Importance of religious or spiritual beliefs:			
Very important			
Somewhat important	1.4[.50,4.0]	1.3[.47,3.8]	
Not very important	1.3[.27,6.7]	1.5[.36,6.7]	
Frequency of attendance at religious services:			
Once a year			
Few times a year	.39[.10,1.5]	.40[.10,1.6]	
1-3 times a month	.74[.20,2.8]	.69[.18,2.7]	
Once a week	.79[.20,3.1]	.80[.19,3.4]	
Twice a week	.98[.28,3.4]	.98[.26,3.8]	
Interaction terms			
Called racist name x personal stress			.84[.18,4.0]
Being made fun of, threatened x personal stress			1.2[.25,6.2]
Both x personal stress			2.5[.77,8.8]

Note: Models 4 and 6 were controlled for age, gender, US born status, education, and income. *p<.001

Table 10
Association between post-incarceration status and suicide attempt adjusted for personal stress and religion/spirituality

	Model 3	Model 4
Personal & societal stress factors	OR[95%CI]	OR[95%CI]
Personal stress		4.0*[2.4,6.6]
Post incarceration status:		
Never been to jail or prison at all		
Been to jail, prison, or juvenile detention before age 18	2.7[1.2,6.3]	1.6[.67,3.9]
Been to jail, prison, or correctional facility since age 18	3.3[2.0,5.4]	3.1[1.7,5.4]
Been to both before and after age 18	5.5[2.9,10.7]	5.0[2.2,11.0]
Religion/spirituality protective factors		
Importance of religious or spiritual beliefs:		
Very important		
Somewhat important	1.4[.69,2.9]	1.4[.70,3.0]
Not very important	.85[.20,3.6]	.88[.22,3.5]
Frequency of attendance at religious services		
Once a year		
Few times a year	.72[.18,3.0]	.61[.14,2.6]
1-3 times a month	1.2[.30,4.6]	.97[.24,4.0]
Once a week	1.4[.34,5.7]	1.3[.29,5.4]
Twice a week	1.7[.45,6.3]	1.5[.38,5.8]

Note: Models 4 was controlled for age, gender, US born status, education, and income. *p<.001

Table 11
Association between veteran status and suicide attempt adjusted for personal stress and religion/spirituality & interaction terms

	Model 3 OR[95%CI]	Model 4 OR[95%CI]	Model 6 OR[95%CI]
Personal & societal stress factors			
Personal stress		4.6*[2.9,7.4]	5.3*[3.6,7.7]
Veteran status			
Served on active duty in the U.S. Armed Forces, Reserves or National Guard	1.7[.89,3.3]		
Interaction terms			
Veteran status x personal stress			1.04[.30,3.6]
Religion/spirituality protective factors			
Importance of religious or spiritual beliefs:			
Very important			
Somewhat important	1.5[.70,3.3]		1.5[.70,3.1]
Not very important	.83[.18,3.8]		.86[.20,3.8]
Frequency of attendance at religious services			
Once a year			
Few times a year	.71[.20,2.6]	.70[.18,2.6]	
1-3 times a month	1.1[.32,4.1]	1.1[.28,4.0]	
Once a week	1.3[.34,4.6]	1.3[.34,5.2]	
Twice a week	1.6[.47,5.2]	1.6[.44,5.8]	

Note: Models 4 and 6 were controlled for age, gender, US born status, education, and income.. *p<.001

Figure 2a. Prevalence of Suicide from Slavery to 2018





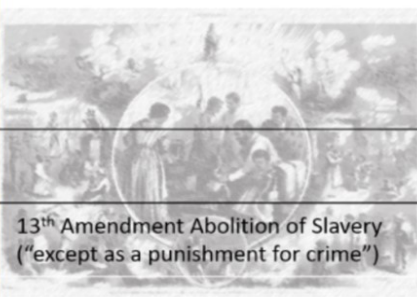
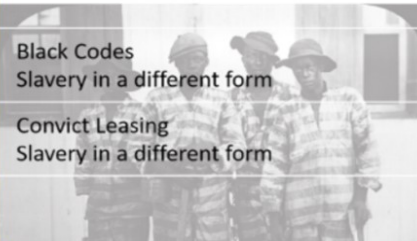
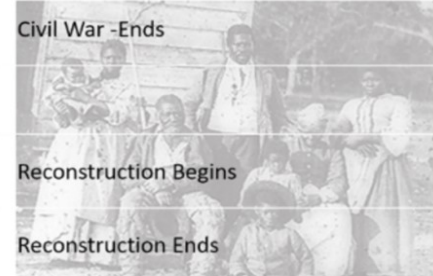
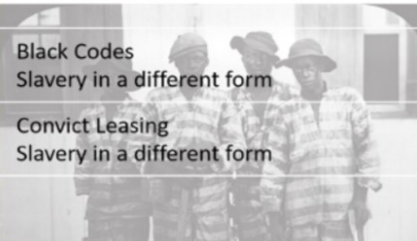

Period	Year	Prevalence of Suicide		Slavery to Mass Incarceration Barriers to Social Integration
Middle Passage: Transport to British North America Colonies	1619 ¹	"Visible & Significant"		Africans arrive in British North America Colonies –Slavery begins
Codification of Slavery	1630 ²	"Visible & Significant"		
A RUNAWAY IN JAIL. Formation of United States of American of the Parish of St. Landry, on the 22nd of November instant, a negro- man calling himself Henry, and say- ing he belongs to Mr. William Ja- cob, residing in the Parish of St. Mary. <i>This man is black stout built speaks French</i>	1776 ³	"Visible & Significant"		
	1850 ⁴	Men	Woman	
		Enslaved		
		1.0	0.44	
		Freed		
		1.94	0.44	
Start of Civil War	1861 ⁵	"Visible & Significant"		
Civil War -Ends	1865			13 th Amendment Abolition of Slavery ("except as a punishment for crime")
	1865			Black Codes Slavery in a different form
	1866			
	1877			Convict Leasing Slavery in a different form
Reconstruction Ends	1877			
Great Northern Migration of African Americans from the South to the North	1879			

Figure 2b. Prevalence of Suicide from Slavery to 2018

Period	Year	Prevalence of Suicide		Slavery to Mass Incarceration Barriers to Social Integration
 Jim Crow Laws	1881 - 1896			
		Men	Woman	
 Civil Rights Act is signed	1933 ⁶	6.5	2.1	 Civil Rights Movement Protestors labeled criminals
	1964			
	1950s-1960s	Men	Woman	
	1979-1997 ⁷	10.9	1.9	
	1980			 Election of Ronald Reagan War on Drugs Violent Crime Control Act and Enforcement Act of 1994 2.4 million Black Adults un Correctional Control (more than the number enslaved in 1850)
	1994	Men	Woman	
	1999-2009 ⁸	9.19	1.72	
	2007			
 Election of President Barack Obama	2008	Men	Woman	
	2009-2018 ⁹	10.0	3.0	

1 Synder, 2015 (p.6)

2 Synder, 2015 (p.6)

3 Synder, 2015 (p.6)

4 Synder, 2015 (p.6)

5 Synder, 2015 (p.6)

6 Lester, 1998

7 Joe & Kaplan (2001)

8 CDC, 2020

9 SPRC, 2020

Figure 3 Maturana & Verela's Criterion of Validation

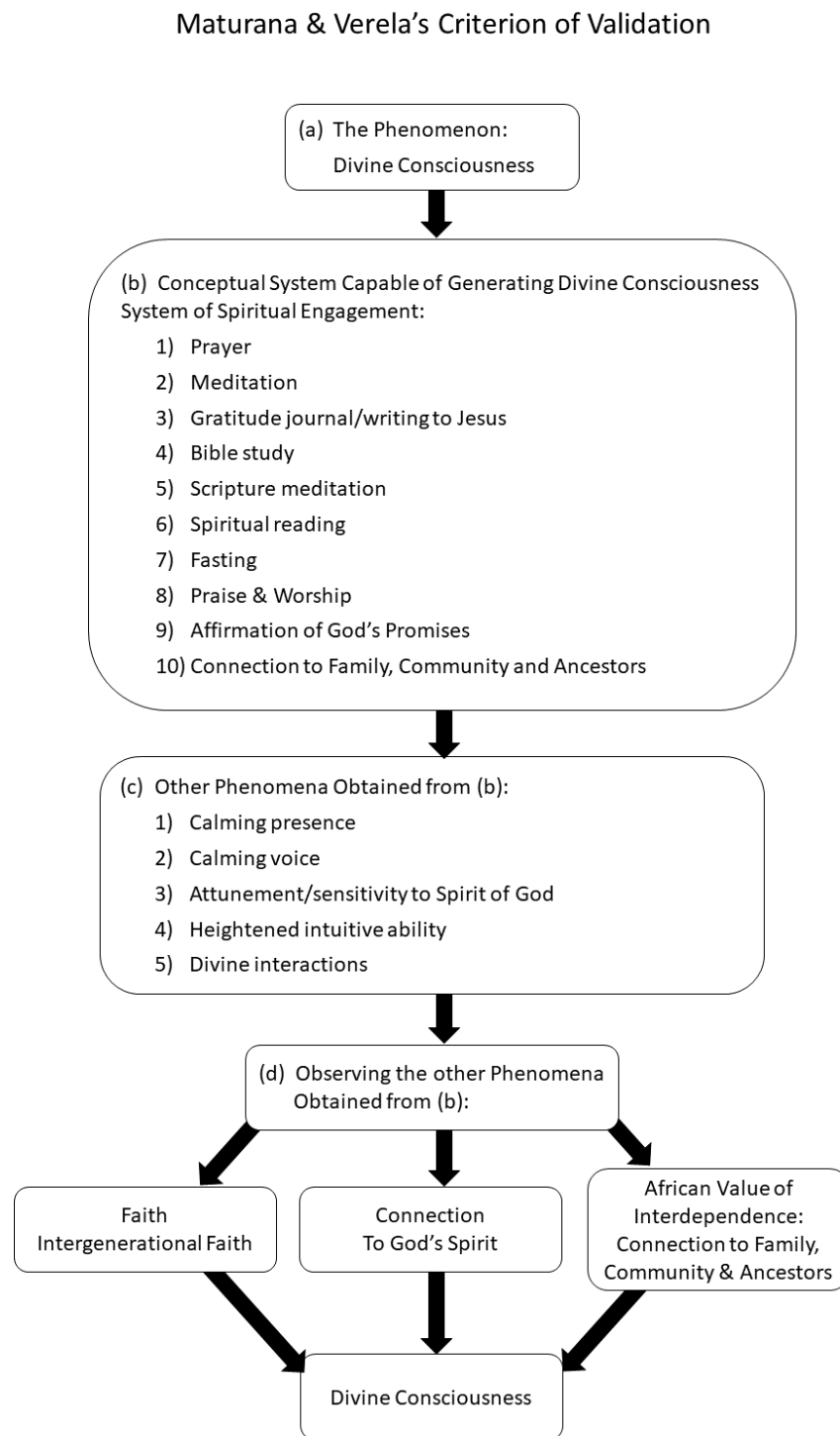


Figure 4a. Ubuntu Relational Framework for the Study of Black Suicide

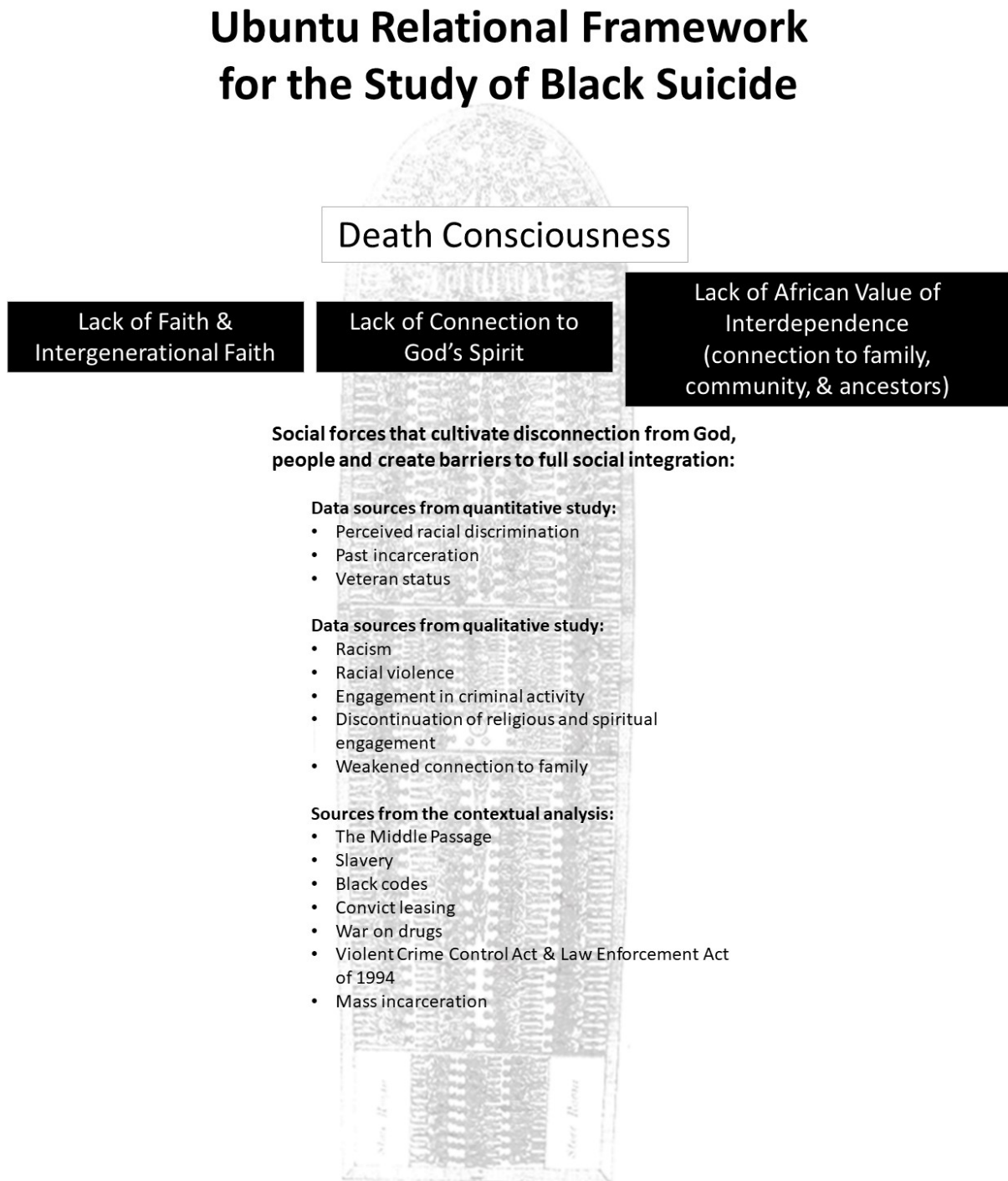


Figure 4b. Ubuntu Relational Framework for the Study of Black Suicide

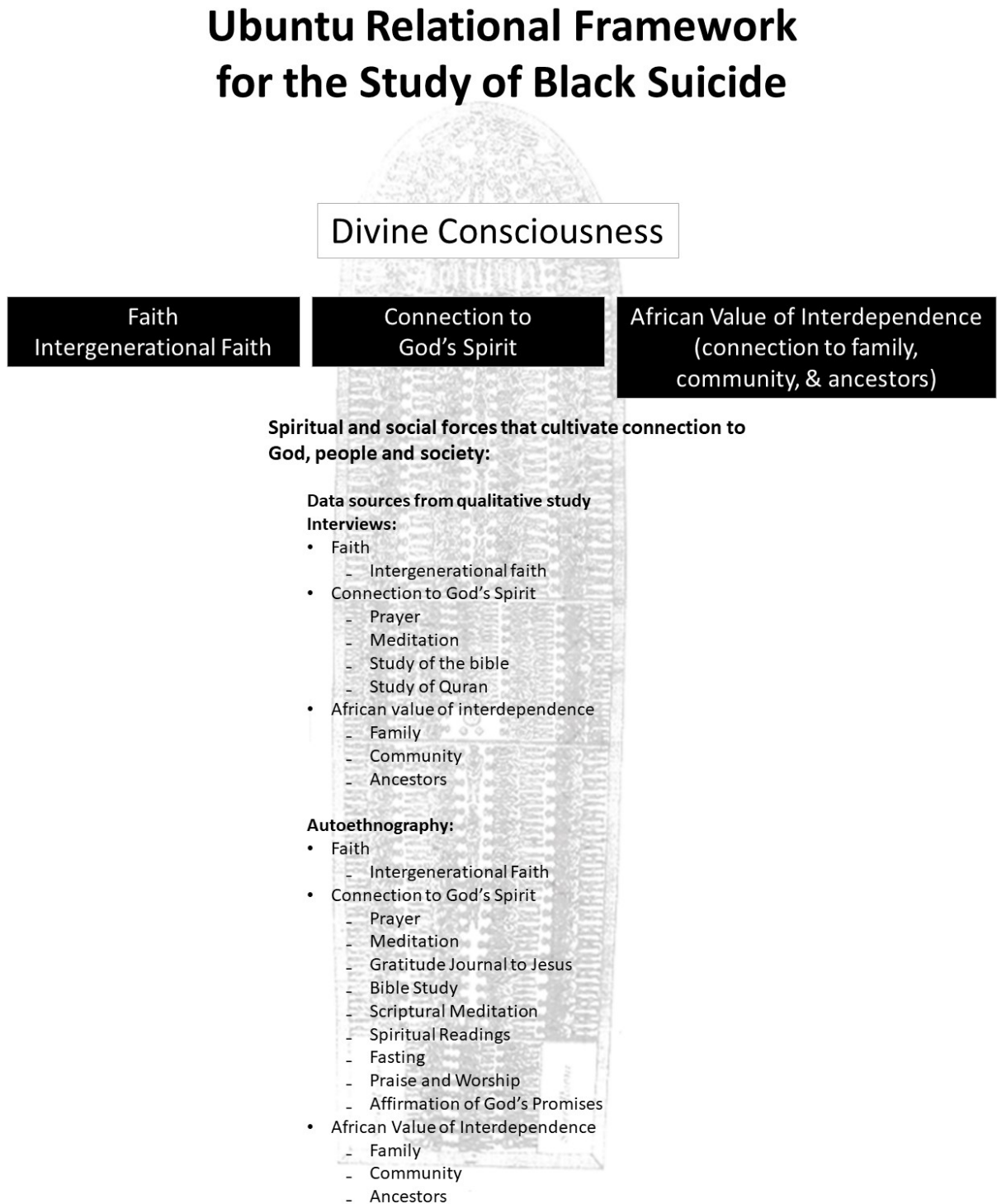


Figure 4c.**Ubuntu Relational Framework for the Study of Black Suicide**

The Ubuntu Relational Framework for the Study of Black Suicide includes the following key components:

- (1) the commitment to the understanding of the historical, cultural, and spiritual context of Black people in the U.S. which includes the history of the impact of slavery and racism (including the intergenerational transmission of the psychological impact of slavery and racism); the African roots of Black culture (including the value of interdependence-connection to family, community, and ancestors-and the intergenerational transmission of values); and the intergenerational transmission of religion/spirituality;
- (2) the commitment to the social work person-in-environment (PIE) principle and to addressing the racism and oppression embedded within the U.S. social environment that influences suicidal behavior;
- (3) the commitment to reflective practice to eradicate and heal from one's own internalized racism and oppression as a spiritual/relational practice of reconnecting to one's self, community, family, ancestors, and society, and engagement in work in society to eradicate racism and oppression and to cultivate healing from its effects; and
- (4) the commitment to understanding the African philosophy of ubuntu.

Figure 4d.

**Suicide & Spiritual Resistance among Black People in the U.S.: From Death
Consciousness to Divine Consciousness**

Overarching Frames through Which the Study was Conducted

- Afrocentric Worldview
- Critical Race Theory
- Strengths-based Approach
- Psychospiritual Approach

Theories that Inform the Data Analysis

- Critical Race Theory
- Social Integration Theory
- Interpersonal-Psychological Theory of Suicide
- Stress Coping Theory
- Grounded Theory

Risk Factors of Black Suicide

Psychological distress:

- Hopelessness
- Depression
- Trauma
- Anxiety disorders
- Psychotic symptoms

Sociocultural factors:

- Racism/racial discrimination
- Racial inequality
- Cultural assimilation
- U.S. individualism
- Incarceration
- Unaddressed effects of military service
- Low ethnic identity
- Low education levels
- Low levels of religion/spirituality (i.e. lack of church attendance)
- Substance abuse
- Barriers to access to consistent therapeutic support
- Access to lethal methods including guns
- Social isolation
- Dysfunctional family & interpersonal relationships

- Lack of family cohesion
- Maladaptive coping mechanisms
- History of suicide attempts
- Financial challenges (e.g. unemployment; income inequality)

Utsey et al., 2007; Kaslow et al., 2005; Borum, 2014; Poussaint & Alexander, 2000; Joe et al., 2006; U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs, n.d.

Mitigating Components of Black Suicide (Protective Factors)

Afrocentric cultural protective factors (values):

- Religion & Spirituality
- The Black Church (affiliation & attendance)
- Strong faith in God (belief that suicide is immoral)
- African value of interdependence (e.g. connectedness - strong, cohesive family & community supports/community orientation & connection to God & ancestors)
- Rejection of U.S. Individualism
- Appreciation for Black history and the struggle of enslaved ancestors and others

Gibbs, 1997; Morrison & Hopkins, 2019; Borum, 2014; Kaslow, Sherry, Bethea, Wyckoff, Compton, Grall, et al., 2005; Utsey, Hook, & Standard, 2007; Utsey, Bolden, Lanier, & Williams, 2007; Marion & Range, 2005; Spates & Slatton, 2017

Appendix II Consent forms and Interview Questions



Boston College Consent Form
Boston College School of Social Work
Informed Consent to be in study: Suicide & Spiritual Resistance Among Black
People in the U.S.
Researcher: Melissa W. Bartholomew, PhD candidate
Study Sponsor: N/A
Adult Consent Form

Invitation to be Part of a Research Study

You are invited to participate in a research study. You were selected to be in the study:

- Because you are a Black American and you are at least 18 years of age.
- Because you might have an interest in sharing your thoughts and feelings about your experiences with societal stressors such as racial discrimination, and veteran status, or post incarceration status, if either pertains to you, on your mental health, including any suicidal behavior, and, the role of spirituality.

Important Information about the Research Study

Things you should know:

The purpose of the study is to examine the influence of societal stressors such as racial discrimination, veteran status, post incarceration status on suicidal behavior among Black people in the U.S. and the role of religion/spirituality as a buffer against suicidal behavior. If you choose to participate, you will be asked to:

Participate in an interview process that may require two sessions, approximately 1 hour each.

The interview will take place in a setting that is comfortable and convenient to you. You may be interviewed in person at your home. You may also be interviewed via Zoom video meeting.

It is possible that there may be a need for follow-up sessions, approximately 1 hour each.

The interview sessions will be audio recorded, and may also be video recorded. Any interview that is conducted via Zoom video meeting will be video recorded.

This will take approximately 1-month time period total to conduct approximately two, 1 hour interview sessions. In other words, if there is an additional interview session required after the first session, it will be scheduled as soon as possible, but no longer than within 1 month's time.

Because you will be asked questions about the impact of societal stressors such as racial discrimination on your mental health including whether or not you have had thoughts of suicide, the sensitive nature of the questions could cause some discomfort. These feelings would likely be within the normal discomforts associated with these types of questions. It is also possible to experience the normal discomforts associated with taking time out of your schedule to participant in an interview. There may also be unknown risks.

Taking part in this research project is voluntary. You do not have to participate and you can stop at any time.

Please take time to read this entire form and ask questions before deciding whether to take part in this research project.

What is the study about and why are we doing it?

The purpose of the study is to examine the influence of societal stressors such as racial discrimination, veteran status, post incarceration status on suicidal behavior among Black people in the U.S. and the role of religion/spirituality as a buffer against suicidal behavior. The study will include two parts. One part will analyze these themes and an additional theme, using information from a survey that was previously conducted. The second part is this part that you are being asked to participate in. It involves interviews with up to 6 Black adults over age 18 in the U.S.

What will happen if you take part in this study?

If you agree to take part in this study, you will be asked to:

Participate in an interview process that may require two sessions, approximately 1 hour each. You will be asked questions during the interview.

The interview will take place in a setting that is comfortable and convenient to you. You may be interviewed in person at your home. You may also be interviewed via Zoom video meeting.

It is possible that there may be a need for a follow-up session, approximately 1 hour each. If necessary, it will be scheduled as soon as possible.

The interview sessions will be audio recorded, and may also be video recorded. Any interview that is conducted via Zoom video meeting will be video recorded. Some of the questions will be of a sensitive nature and will ask you to discuss any suicidal behavior. For example, you will be asked whether as a result of certain stressful experiences related to your experiences as a Black person in the U.S. if there has ever been a time when you felt like you wanted to end your life?

The information collected will not be linked to any other data (e.g. research data, Census data or protected health information).

How could you benefit from this study?

You might benefit from being in this study because you may consider contributing to a study that could help lead to better mental health outcomes for Black people to be a benefit.

What risks might result from being in this study?

There are some risks you might experience from being in this study. Because you will be asked questions about the impact of societal stressors such as racial discrimination on your mental health including whether or not you have had thoughts of suicide, the sensitive nature of the questions could cause some discomfort. These feelings would likely be within the normal discomforts associated with these types of questions. It is also possible to experience the normal discomforts associated with taking time out of your schedule to participate in an interview. There may also be unknown risks.

The interviewer will work hard to make you feel as comfortable as possible for the interview to minimize the potential discomforts and risks.

If at any point during the interview or afterwards you need to talk to someone about how you're feeling or if you suffer from PTSD or need any form of emotional or psychological support, please consider the following options:

Contact your medical or mental health provider for support.

For support for veterans with PTSD, call U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs, 1-800-273-8255, xt. 1.

For any concerns about suicidal thoughts, call the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline 1-800-273-8255

If there is an emergency and you need help immediately, call 911.

There may also be risks related to information, such as a breach of confidentiality. Precautions will be taken to help ensure that your information will be protected during the data collection process and while it is stored. Please see below for more details.

How will we protect your information?

The records of this study will be kept private. During the interview process, there will be no one else present other than yourself and the interviewer, unless you request to have another person present. During the session, although the interview will be recorded (either audio or video), the interviewer (the principal investigator) may also take notes on a laptop or in a notebook. Following the session, the interviewer will make sure the notes are kept secure and will place any handwritten notes in a secure container in her home office. The notes will not contain any identifying information such as your name, SS# or date of birth. The electronic data will be stored on the interviewer's school's departmental server. All electronic information will be coded and secured using a password-protected file.

We will assign to each participant a unique, coded identifier that will be used in place of actual identifiers. We will separately maintain a record that links each participant's coded identifier to his or her actual name, but this separate record will not include research data.

In any sort of report we may publish, we will not include any information that will make it possible to identify you, without your permission. Research records will be kept in a locked file. The results of this study may be published or presented at a scientific meeting. The researchers will ask for separate written permission to include your name or pictures or recordings or any other information that could identify you.

Your interview(s) will be audio or video tape recorded. The only individuals who will be allowed access to them are the principal investigator, Melissa Bartholomew, her faculty advisor, Dr. Thanh Tran, and her faculty consultant, Dr. Eli Tucker-Raymond. The recordings will only be used for educational purposes for Bartholomew's dissertation project. After the completion and approval of the Bartholomew's dissertation in 2020, the recordings will be erased by deletion; any handwritten notes will be shredded; and any electronic notes will be deleted.

Mainly just the researchers will have access to information; however, please note that a few other key people may also have access. These might include government agencies. Also, the Institutional Review Board at Boston College and internal Boston College auditors may review the research records. Otherwise, the researchers will not release to others any information that identifies you unless you give your permission, or unless we are legally required to do so.

What will happen to the information we collect about you after the study is over?

We will not keep your research data to use for future research or other purpose, without your written permission. Your name and other information that can directly identify you will be kept secure and stored separately from the research data collected as part of the project.

We may share your research data with other investigators without asking for your consent again, but it will not contain information that could directly identify you. We will not share your research data with other investigators.

How will we compensate you for being part of the study?

You will not receive any compensation for your participation in this study.

What are the costs to you to be part of the study?

There is no cost to you to be in this research study.

Your Participation in this Study is Voluntary

It is totally up to you to decide to be in this research study. Participating in this study is voluntary. Even if you decide to be part of the study now, you may change your mind and stop at any time. You do not have to answer any questions you do not want to answer. If you decide to withdraw before this study is completed, the data collected via video or audio recording will be immediately deleted; any typed notes will be immediately deleted; and any handwritten notes will be shredded as soon as the interviewer leaves the session and gets to the shredder in her home office.

If during the interview(s) the interviewer determines that the session should stop for any reason, such as your emotional reaction to the questions, the interviewer will stop the session. The principal investigator (the interviewer) has the right to end your participation in the study at any time without your consent. For example, if your behavior is inappropriate, your participation could be terminated.

If you choose not to be in this study, it will not affect your current or future relations with Boston College.

If you tell us something that makes us believe that you or others have been or may be physically harmed, we may report that information to the appropriate agencies.

Getting Dismissed from the Study

The researcher may dismiss you from the study at any time for the following reasons: (1) it is in your best interests (e.g. side effects or distress have resulted) or (2) you have failed to comply with the study rules.

Contact Information for the Study Team and Questions about the Research

If you have questions about this research, you may contact:

Melissa Bartholomew, PhD candidate at Boston College School of Social Work, who is the lead researcher (principal investigator and interviewer) in charge of this study. Her number is (206) 351-8862.

You may also contact Dr. Thanh Tran, Boston College School of Social Work, who is the faculty advisor of the lead researcher. His number is (617) 552-2539.

Contact Information for Questions about Your Rights as a Research Participant

If you have questions about your rights as a research participant, or wish to obtain information, ask questions, or discuss any concerns about this study with someone other than the researcher(s), please contact the following:

Boston College
Office for Research Protections
Phone: (617) 552-4778
Email: irb@bc.edu

Your Consent

By signing this document, you are agreeing to be in this study. Make sure you understand what the study is about before you sign. I will give you a copy of this document for your records. I will keep a copy with the study records. If you have any questions about the study after you sign this document, you can contact the study team using the information provided above.

I understand what the study is about and my questions so far have been answered. I agree to take part in this study.

Printed Subject Name

Signature

Date

Consent to be Audio/video Recorded

I agree to be audio/video recorded.

YES _____ **NO** _____

Signature

Date

Consent to Use Data for Future Research

I agree that my information may be shared with other researchers for future research studies that may be similar to this study or may be completely different. The information shared with other researchers will not include any information that can directly identify me.

YES _____ **NO** _____

Signature

Date

Consent to be Contacted for Participation in Future Research

I give the researchers permission to keep my contact information and to contact me for future research projects.

YES _____ **NO** _____

Signature

Date



Boston College Consent Form
Boston College School of Social Work
Supplemental Informed Consent to be in study: Suicide & Spiritual Resistance
Among Black People in the U.S.
Researcher: Melissa W. Bartholomew, PhD candidate
Study Sponsor: N/A
Supplemental Adult Consent Form

This supplemental adult consent form is provided in addition to the informed adult consent form signed _____

Permission to Reveal Identifying Information

Consent to reveal my identity:

I agree to allow the researchers of this study to reveal my name, pictures, recordings and other identifying information as a part of this study, including in any publication or presentation of the findings, except for my Social Security Number and full date of birth.

Permission to Keep Records and Data

Consent to keep all records:

I agree to allow the lead researcher of this study, Melissa Bartholomew, to keep the recordings, handwritten notes, and electronic notes after the completion of her dissertation.

Yes _____

No _____

Name: _____

Signature: _____

Date: _____



**Boston College School of Social Work
Melissa W. Bartholomew, PhD candidate**

Interview Questions for Qualitative Study (Revised):

Suicide & Spiritual Resistance Among Black People in the U.S.

Overview of Research Study & Principal Investigator

This qualitative study will explore the association of various critical stressors including racial discrimination, post incarceration status, and veteran status and suicidal behavior among Black Americans. It will also explore the role of religion/spirituality in the ability of Black Americans to cope and resist the desire to end their lives, and whether or not there are any differences across generations. The principal investigator is Melissa W. Bartholomew, a PhD candidate in the School of Social Work.

If you have a question at any point during this interview you may request to stop and ask your clarifying question(s). If you want to stop the interview all together for any reason, you may request to end the session at anytime. Thank you.

Part I: Background / Life Overview

1. Do you mind sharing the date of your birth?⁴
2. Where were you born?⁵
3. Where were your parents born?
4. How many generations has your family been in the U.S.?
5. Do you have any siblings? If so, how many?⁶
6. Who are your parents?
7. What are/were their occupations?⁷
8. How would you characterize your social class growing up? Now?⁸
9. How would you describe your racial identity?⁹
10. How would you describe your religious identity?¹⁰
11. How would you describe your gender?
12. How would you describe your sexual orientation?

⁴ Fowler, J. (1981). *Stages of faith: The psychology of human development and the quest for meaning*. San Francisco, CA: Harper & Row, Publishers.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

13. Can you identify and share a little about what you would consider to be the major “turning points” or events that have had significant impact on the direction your life has taken?¹¹
14. Are there key people or experiences that you consider to be influential in your life?

Part II: Religion/Spirituality

1. Do you believe in God? If so, can you describe your understanding of God?
2. If you do not believe in God, can you explain why not?
3. Religion can be defined as a tradition or practices based on revelations, scriptures, laws, and ethical teachings.¹²
4. Would you describe yourself as a person who ascribes to a particular religion?
5. If so, what religion?
6. Faith and religion can be seen as connected to each other. Faith can also be defined as something separate from religion. It can be described as something that helps people make meaning of the various occurrences and relationships in their life. Faith can also be described as one’s relationship with transcendence or a power greater than themselves.¹³
7. If you would describe yourself as a person of faith, what does faith mean to you? How has it impacted your life?

Spirituality can be defined as a way of tapping into one’s inner resources to find strength and to connect to oneself, to others, and to God.¹⁴ One can also be described as spiritual and not believe in God.

8. Would you describe yourself as religious¹⁵ or spiritual, or both? Or neither? Please explain why or why not.
9. Have you had any significant religious or spiritual experiences in your life?¹⁶ If so, please explain.
10. What is your earliest memory of a religious or spiritual experience?
11. Is there someone in your life who has influenced your faith or spirituality? If so, who and in what way?
12. Is your family religious or spiritual? If so, can you describe what that looks like in your family? Family of origin and current family?
13. If your family is not religious or spiritual, can you explain why not?
14. Can you explain the role of religion or spirituality in your family?

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Fowler, J. (1981). *Stages of faith: The psychology of human development and the quest for meaning*. San Francisco, CA: Harper & Row, Publishers

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Newlin, K., Knafl, K., & Melkus, G. D. E. (2002). African-American spirituality: A concept analysis. *Advances in Nursing Science*, 25(2), 57-70.

¹⁵ Fowler (1981).

¹⁶ Ibid.

15. Do you attend religious/worship services – now, or at any point in your life?¹⁷ If so, please describe how you feel about the services and the role they play(ed) in your spiritual development.
16. Do you engage in spiritual practices, such as prayer?
17. If you pray, how would you describe your prayer life? Has it changed over time?
18. If you pray, what do you believe is happening when you pray?¹⁸
19. Would you say your religion and/or spirituality has evolved over the course of your life?
20. If so, can you describe how?
21. Has your faith or spirituality helped you to cope with the impact of being Black in the U.S. and experiencing racial discrimination and other societal stressors over the course of your life?
22. If so, can you describe how? If not, can you explain why not?
23. If you have experienced times in your life when you have thought about ending your life or even taken steps toward the act, did your religion or spirituality help you to manage those feelings?¹⁹ If so, how?
24. Is there anything else you think I need to know about the role of religion/spirituality in your life? If so, please share.

Part III: Impact of Blackness

Black or Blackness is understood as a social construct with no fixed definition.²⁰

1. Do you identify as a Black woman/man?
2. Can you describe what being Black is?²¹
3. Can you describe the first time you became aware that you were Black?
4. How old were you?
5. Can you describe how being Black impacts your interactions with White people? What about other people of color?²²
6. Can you describe what you think White people think about you as a Black person when they meet you? What about other people of color?²³

¹⁷Taylor, R. J., Chatters, L. M., & Joe, S. (2011). Religious involvement and suicidal behavior among African Americans and Black Caribbeans. *The Journal of nervous and mental disease*, 199(7), 478.

¹⁸ Fowler (1981).

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Harris, C. A., & Khanna, N. (2010). Black is, Black ain't: Biracials, middle-class Blacks, and the social construction of blackness. *Sociological Spectrum*, 30(6), 639-670.

²¹ Woodson, A. N. (2017). 'Being black is like being a soldier in Iraq': metaphorical expressions of blackness in an urban community. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 30(2), 161-174.

²² Sue, D. W., Nadal, K. L., Capodilupo, C. M., Lin, A. I., Torino, G. C., & Rivera, D. P. (2008). Racial microaggressions against Black Americans: Implications for counseling. *Journal of Counseling & Development*, 86(3), 330-338.

²³ Ibid.

7. Can you describe any assumptions you think White people have of you as a Black person or of Black people in general? Can you describe any assumptions you think other people of color have of you or Black people in general?²⁴
8. How old were you?
9. Can you describe how you have felt about being Black in the U.S.?
10. Can you describe generally how you have felt about being Black in the U.S. throughout your life? Has this changed from childhood to adolescence to adulthood?
11. Has your skin color had an impact on your self-esteem and how you feel about yourself?²⁵ If so, please explain. If not, please explain why it has not.
12. Have you ever had any negative experiences associated with being Black and having black skin, in the U.S.?²⁶ If so, can you describe 1 or 2 experiences?
13. If you have, how did the experiences make you feel about your place in society? What, if anything, did you do in response?
14. Have any of these experiences impacted your mental health or emotional well-being?²⁷ If so, how? If not, why not?
15. As a result of these experiences, has there ever been a time when you felt like you wanted to end your life?
16. If so, when?
17. Can you describe the feeling?
18. Did you ever take any steps to act upon those feelings? If so, what were the steps?
19. What stopped you from following through on the act?
20. Is there anything else you think I need to know about the impact of Blackness on your life? If so, please share.

Part IV: Racial Discrimination

1. Discrimination is defined by some as being “ignored or excluded” based on your race.²⁸ Have there been incidences in your life when you have been ignored or excluded because you are Black? If so, please describe 1 or 2 incidents.
2. Can you describe how the discrimination experience(s) made you feel?
3. What if anything did you do in response?
4. Have any of these experiences impacted your mental health or emotional well-being? If so, how? If not, why not?
5. Have any of these experiences impacted your self-esteem or the way you felt about yourself? If so, how? If not, why not?

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Harvey, A. R. (1995). The issue of skin color in psychotherapy with African Americans. *Families in Society*, 76(1), 3-10.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ R. Williams, D., & Williams-Morris, R. (2000). Racism and mental health: The African American experience. *Ethnicity & health*, 5(3-4), 243-268.

²⁸ Carr, P. L., Palepu, A., Szalacha, L., Caswell, C., & Inui, T. (2007). ‘Flying below the radar’: a qualitative study of minority experience and management of discrimination in academic medicine. *Medical education*, 41(6), 601-609.

6. How did these experiences make you feel about your place in society?
7. As a result of these experiences, has there ever been a time when you felt like you wanted to end your life?
8. If so, when?
9. Can you describe the feeling?
10. Did you ever take any steps to act upon those feelings? If so, please explain what stopped you from following through with the act?
11. Is there anything else you think I need to know about the impact of racial discrimination on your life? If so, please share.

Part V: Veteran status (questions for veterans only)

1. How did you join the military – volunteer or by draft?
2. Which branch of the military did you serve in?
3. For how long?
4. What positions did you hold?
5. Please describe your experience. Did you move around a lot and experience a lot of transitions?²⁹ If so, please explain.
6. Were you involved in a war? If so, which one? How long were you there? What positions did you hold during the war?³⁰
7. Would you mind describing any particular experience or experiences from the war that stand out in your memory?
8. Did you experience pain (emotional and/or physical) during the war? If so, can you please describe the pain? If you did not experience pain, can you explain why not? When you returned from war? If so, can you please describe the pain?³¹ If you did not experience pain, can you explain why not?
9. Do you have a high tolerance for pain?³² If so, can you please describe how much pain you can tolerate? If you do not have a high tolerance for pain, can you explain why not?
10. Were you able to manage your pain during the war? During your service in the military? If so, please explain how? If not, please explain why not.
11. Do you experience pain now? If so, can you please describe what you experience? Are you able to manage the pain? If so, can you please explain how? If not, please explain why not.

²⁹ Lusk, J., Brenner, L. A., Betthausen, L. M., Terrio, H., Scher, A. I., Schwab, K., & Poczwardowski, A. (2015). A qualitative study of potential suicide risk factors among Operation Iraqi Freedom/Operation Enduring Freedom soldiers returning to the continental United States (CONUS). *Journal of clinical psychology, 71*(9), 843-855.; Joiner, T. (2005). *Why people die by suicide*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

³⁰ Brenner, L., Gutierrez, P., Cornette, M., Betthausen, L., Bahraini, N., & Staves, P. (2008). A qualitative study of potential suicide risk factors in returning combat veterans. *Journal of Mental Health Counseling, 30*(3), 211-225.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid.

12. Did you find that being Black negatively impacted your experience in the military? If so, how? If not, why not?
13. Please describe your experience returning home from the war.
14. When you returned home from the war, did you ever feel like you were a burden on your family? If so, can you please describe what that was like? If not, can you describe why not? Friends? If so, can you please describe what that was like? If not, can you describe why not? On society?³³ If so, can you please describe what that was like? If not, can you describe why not?
15. When you returned home from the war, did you have any trouble reconnecting with you family? If so, can you please describe what that was like? If not, can you describe why not? Friends? If so, can you please describe what that was like? If not, can you describe why not? Society?³⁴ If so, can you please describe what that was like? If not, can you describe why not?
16. How and when did you leave the military? What was your reentry back into civilian life like?
17. After you left the military, did you have any trouble reconnecting with your family? If so, can you please describe what that was like? If not, can you describe why not? Friends? If so, can you please describe what that was like? If not, can you describe why not? Society?³⁵ If so, can you please describe what that was like? If not, can you describe why not?
18. Did you ever feel like you were a burden on your family? If so, can you please describe what that was like? If not, please explain. Friends? If so, can you please describe what that was like? If not, please explain. On society?³⁶ If so, can you please describe what that was like? If not, please explain.
19. Have you experienced discrimination as a result of your veteran status? If so, please explain. If not, please explain why not. If so, do you think that being Black enhanced the discrimination? If so, please explain. If not, please explain why not.
20. Have you ever felt stigmatized as a result of your veteran status? If so, please explain. If not, please explain why not.
21. Did you experience pain (emotional and/or physical) when you reentered civilian life? If so, please explain. If not, please explain why not.
22. Have you ever received mental health treatment-while in the military and/or after discharge? If so, please explain. If not, please explain why not.
23. Has there ever been a time when you felt like you wanted to end your life?
24. If so, do you think it was a result of your experiences in the military? If so, can you please explain? If not, can you please explain why not?
25. If there has been a time when you wanted to end your life, do you think that other experiences in your life had had an impact on that desire as well? If so, can you please explain why? If not, can you please explain why not?
26. If so, can you describe the feeling?
27. Did you ever take any steps to act upon those feelings? What stopped you from following through with the act?

³³ Lusk.

³⁴ Lusk.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid.

28. Did your religion or spirituality help you to manage those feelings? If so, how?
29. Has your religion or spirituality helped you to cope while you were in the military and in war? If so, please explain. If not, please explain why not.
30. Did your religion or spirituality help you to cope during your reintegration back into society and presently? If so, please explain how. If not, please explain why not.
31. Is there anything else you think I need to know about the impact of the military on your life? If so, please share.

Part VI: Post Incarceration Experience (questions for formerly incarcerated persons only)

1. How old were you when you went to prison?
2. How long were you incarcerated?
3. Can you explain what led to your incarceration?
4. Would you mind describing any particular experience or experiences that stand out in your memory?
5. Did you experience many transitions during your period of incarceration? If so, can you please describe them? Were you in more than one prison? If so, how many?
6. Do you think being Black impacted your experience in prison?³⁷ If yes, please explain. If not, please explain why not.
7. Did you experience pain (emotional and/or physical) during your incarceration? If so, please explain. If not, please explain why not.
8. Do you have a high tolerance for pain? If so, can you please describe how much pain you can tolerate? If you do not have a high tolerance for pain, please explain why not.
9. If you experienced pain during your period of incarceration, were you able to manage it?
10. Do you experience pain now? If so, are you able to manage it? If you do not experience pain now, can you please explain why not?
11. When did you return home from prison? What was your reentry back into civilian life like? Please describe.
12. Did you have any trouble reconnecting with your family? If so, please explain. If not, please explain why not. Friends? If so, please explain. If not, please explain why not. Society?³⁸ If so, please explain. If not, please explain why not.
13. Did you ever feel like you were a burden on your family when you returned home? Friends? If so, please explain. If not, please explain why not. On society? If so, please explain. If not, please explain why not.

³⁷ Cooke, C. L. (2004). Joblessness and homelessness as precursors of health problems in formerly incarcerated African American men. *Journal of Nursing Scholarship*, 36(2), 155-160.

³⁸ Simlot, R., McFarland, K., & Lester, D. (2013). Testing Joiner's theory of suicide in jail inmates: An exploratory study. *Psychological reports*, 112(1), 100-105.

14. Have you experienced discrimination as a result of your formerly incarcerated status? If so, do you think that being Black enhanced the discrimination? If so, please describe what that felt like. If not, please explain why not.
15. Have you ever felt stigmatized as a result of your formerly incarcerated status?³⁹ If so, please describe what that felt like.
16. Did you experience pain (emotional and/or physical) when you reentered civilian life? If yes, please explain. If not, please explain why not.
17. Have you ever received mental health treatment-while incarcerated and/or after you returned home? If yes, please explain. If not, please explain why not.
18. Has there ever been a time in your life when you felt like you wanted to end your life? If so, do you think it was a result of your incarceration experience? If yes, can you please explain? If not, can you please explain why not?
19. If there has been a time in your life when you felt like you wanted to end your life, do you think that other experiences in your life have had an impact on that desire as well? If so, please explain. If not, please explain why not.
20. If so, when?
21. Can you describe the feeling?
22. Did you ever take any steps to act upon those feelings?
23. What stopped you from following through on the act?
24. Did your religion or spirituality help you to manage those feelings? If so, please explain how? If not, please explain why not.
25. Did your religion or spirituality help you to cope while you were incarcerated? If so, please explain how. If not, please explain why not.
26. Did your faith/spirituality help you to cope during your reintegration back into society and presently? If so, please explain how. If not, please explain why not.
27. Is there anything else you think I need to know about the impact of incarceration on your life? If so, please share.

Concluding question

Is there anything else you would like to share about anything we have talked about today or anything related to it?

³⁹ LeBel, T. P. (2012). If one doesn't get you another one will: Formerly incarcerated persons' perceptions of discrimination. *The Prison Journal*, 92(1), 63-87.

