Western Kentucky University
TopSCHOLAR®

Counseling & Student Affairs Faculty Publications | Counseling and Student Affairs

1-1-2003

# African American Women at Midlife: The Relationship Between Spirituality and Life Satisfaction

Saundra Starks
*Western Kentucky University*, saundra.starks@wku.edu

Aaron W. Hughey
*Western Kentucky University*, Aaron.Hughey@wku.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.wku.edu/csa_fac_pub

Part of the Race and Ethnicity Commons, and the Sociology of Culture Commons

Recommended Repository Citation
Starks, Saundra and Hughey, Aaron W.. (2003). African American Women at Midlife: The Relationship Between Spirituality and Life Satisfaction. *Affilia*, *18* (2), 133-147.
**Original Publication URL:** DOI: 10.1177/0886109903018002004
**Available at:** http://digitalcommons.wku.edu/csa_fac_pub/20

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by TopSCHOLAR®. It has been accepted for inclusion in Counseling & Student Affairs Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of TopSCHOLAR®. For more information, please contact connie.foster@wku.edu.

# African American Women at Midlife: The Relationship Between Spirituality and Life Satisfaction

by

**Saundra H. Starks, EdD**
Assistant Professor
Department of Social Work
Academic Complex 201-C
Western Kentucky University
Bowling Green, KY 42101

&

**Aaron W. Hughey, EdD**
Professor
Department of Counseling and Student Affairs
TPH 417-D
Western Kentucky University
Bowling Green, KY 42101

**African American Women at Midlife:**
**The Relationship Between Spirituality and Life Satisfaction**

Abstract

In order to examine the potential relationship between life satisfaction, spirituality and other demographic variables, 147 African American women from Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Michigan and Missouri were asked to complete the Adult Life Satisfaction Scale (ALSS) and the Black Women's Spirituality/Religiosity Measure (BWSRM). In-depth interviews were also conducted with six African American women. Data obtained were subjected to correlated groups t test, Pearson r's and regression analysis; content analysis was used to analyze the interview data. Although no significant difference was found among the ratings of life satisfaction and spirituality with respect to age or education level, the African American women did report higher levels of religiosity than spirituality which correlated significantly with life satisfaction. Analysis of a subscale of the BWSRM found that the women reported significantly higher levels of spirituality than religiosity. A moderate correlation was found between age and religiosity while spirituality was found to be a critical variable in contributing to life satisfaction in African American women at midlife, regardless of age, income or education.

**African American Women at Midlife:**
**The Relationship Between Spirituality and Life Satisfaction**

African American women share a history steeped in both oppression and spirituality. Subordination obviously has a deleterious effect on the potential of individuals to contribute to the well being of society (Akbar, 1991; West 1993). Currently, more African American women are being sent to prison than ever before and the percentage of African American women with AIDS/HIV is at an all time high (US Census Bureau, 1998). Life transitions also become more difficult and often it is only through the evolution of their spirituality that African American women achieve greater life satisfaction (Devi, 1994; Warfield-Coppack, 1995). Unfortunately, many religious belief systems and practices contribute to, rather than distract from, the stress experienced by African American women.

The genesis of self help in the African American community was the "Black church," which, for sake of clarity, is used to denote a community of churches with a membership that is predominately African American. Within this institution existed a dichotomous process and blend of African-centered focus and mainstream Euro-American doctrine and philosophy (Asante, 1990; Frazier, 1974; Karenga, 1988). Religion has been manifest as a political force, a protective factor and an educational and transformational vehicle (Collins, 1990; hooks, 1990; Karenga, 1988). And even though the majority of African Americans in the United States are protestant with a Judeo-Christian base, there are growing numbers of African American who affiliate or identify with Islam, ancient African religions as well as various nontraditional and unorthodox sects (Karenga, 1993).

Several developmental theorists (Fodor, 1990; Jones, 1998; Ruffin, 1989) have alluded to the fact that African American women at midlife seem to confront challenges in a more constructive manner than either their younger or older counterparts. They also seem to possess skills and coping mechanisms that permit them to deal more effectively with life stressors. Spirituality, which in part entails reflecting on the meaning of one's life honestly and candidly, appears to play a key role in helping African American women at midlife to successfully negotiate this transition (Rupp, 1996). Rupp's conceptualization of the process includes going deeper into self introspection, shedding the old wounds often carried since childhood, and transforming, through hope and healing, into a more enriched and enlivened existence.

Many researchers make a clear distinction between religion and spirituality (Giovanni, 1994); bell hooks, 1993; Taylor, 1993; Vanzant, 1992; and Wade-Gayles, 1995). Religion is characteristically defined as a formally organized doctrine of beliefs, whereas spirituality is viewed as being more concerned with inner connectedness, meaning and purpose in life. Spirituality has been described as a universal concept that unites all beings to the creative force (Vanzant, 1992). Siegel (1992) acknowledges that religion can be a source of support and a vital part of the healing force, he argues that religion can also be a destructive force. Often religion is preached more than it is practiced.

## Purpose of the Study

The primary purpose of the current study was to investigate the relationship between spirituality and life satisfaction among African American women at midlife. As the population increases and more African American women live well beyond the menopausal years, there is an even greater need to examine issues beyond the biological aspects of aging and what is assumed via a European American or mainstream model. Midlife seems to constitute a key developmental stage for African American women and was therefore selected for examination in the study. These women are coping with a host of bio-psycho-social processes, and superimposed on these for African American women are the over arching factors of racism and politically sanctioned oppression (Larke, 1996; Westbrooks, 1995; hooks, 1992; Weed, 1992; Collins, 1990; Fodor, 1990; Mitchell & Helson, 1990; Giddings, 1984).

Specifically, four research questions formed the basis for the current study:

(1) Do African American women report differences in their levels of spirituality and their levels of religiosity?

(2) As the aging process occurs do African American women become more spiritually connected?

(3) Is there a relationship between the use of spiritual practices, age, socioeconomic status and life satisfaction for African American women?

(4) What factors predict the level of life satisfaction in African American women at mid-life?

## Methodology

A convenience sample was considered appropriate in that it allows for access to a population that best suits the purposes of the study (Gall, Borg & Gall 1996). A total of 160 African American women were initially approached for the study; these women were members of student and faculty women's groups at universities, organized groups of women in the general community (clubs, Sunday school classes) and unorganized groups of women in the community (beauty salons) in Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Michigan, and Missouri. A pilot study involving five African American women was conducted prior to data collection to enable the researcher to identify problems with the survey, assess the comfort level of the participants with the questions and determine if the questions communicated what was intended. Content validity of the qualitative measures was evaluated by having three subject matter experts review the questions in terms of their relevance to the content domain.

Instruments. All participants were administered two instruments, the Adult Life Satisfaction Scale (ALSS), a 56-item self-report Likert-scale used to assess life satisfaction of adults including the elderly (Sandhu, Petrosko & Portes, 1995), and the Black Women's

Spirituality/Religiosity Measure (BWSRM), a 52-item, self-administered measure that assesses both religious and spiritual practices and beliefs of African American women (Mattis, 1995). An information form was also used to gather data on age, education, income and other demographic background variables.

There are eleven subscales on the ALSS that range in reliability from .68 for leisure to .96 for both the spiritual and the marriage/sex subscales (Sandhu & Aspy, 1995). Reliability of the ALSS was also estimated using Cronbach's Coefficient Alpha for the scales. The Coefficient Alpha was determined to be .95. Reliability estimates for the BWSRM range from .71 for spirituality to .86 for religiosity (Mattis, 1994). Cronbach's Alpha was used to evaluate the internal consistency of each scale; the Coefficient Alpha is estimated to be .74 for religiosity and .75 for spirituality. Finally, Alpha levels for the study sample were also calculated for the population sample and reliability was estimated using Cronbach's Coefficient Alpha for the scales. Coefficient Alpha for the ALSS is .95; for the BWSRM the Coefficient Alpha is .74 for religiosity and .75 for spirituality. It is generally accepted that an Alpha of .7 or above establishes adequate population reliability for research purposes (Hinkle, Wiersma & Jurs, 1995).It should be noted that although reliability is based on a sample of 147, sample sizes varied among the scales due to missing data.

In order to examine spirituality in a more indepth manner, a subset of items was selected from the BWSRM and used within the context of the current study. Support for the unidimensionally of this scale was based on three methods commonly used in scale development: (1) principle components analysis, (2) item internal consistency analysis and (3) the pattern of correlations with other variables on a scale previously tested to measure the same variable (spirituality). An exploratory analysis was used to assess the underlying dimensionality of the twelve items. The principle components analysis revealed two components with Eigen values equal to or greater than 1.0 (6.06 and 1.03). The first component accounted for 50 percent of the total variance, while the second accounted for only 8.6 percent of the variance in the correlation matrix, suggesting a single dominant component. Given that the new scale correlated more with spirituality than the BWSRM adds support to the belief that this new scale is measuring spirituality.

Further support for the unidimensionally was provided by an inspection of the Scree Plot (Gorsuch, 1983). Use of the BWSRM subscale was also supported by estimation of internal consistency (Gall, Borg & Gall, 1996). The measure of internal consistency was used to estimate the Coefficient Alpha. The calculated alpha was estimated at .90. The third source of support was based on the correlations. After obtaining the mean score across the 12 items of the BWSRM subscale for the 147 women, the correlation between the BWSRM subscale and measures of spirituality and religiosity from the BWSRM was calculated. Correlation of the subscale with the complete BWSRM was .65 for spirituality and .18 for religiosity. Although both statistically significant, there is obviously a large difference in the magnitude of the correlations. This difference lends support to the uniqueness of the scale.

Interviews. The qualitative component of the study consisted of in-depth interviews with

six African American women ranging in age from 40 to 65. This purposeful sampling allowed for two to be chosen from the 40 year old group, two to be chosen from the 50 year old group and two to be chosen from the 60 year old group. Additionally, two of the women interviewed were selected from a university environment (one was faculty and one was staff), two were selected from a religious environment (Sunday school classes), and two were selected from a community environment (beauty salons). According to Gay (1996), ethnographic methods allow for purposeful sampling with the goal being to select subjects likely to provide in-depth understanding and insight. All six participants had completed both the ALSS and the BWSRM prior to the interview, as well as a consent form. Open-ended questions were used to guide the interview process and also allowed for emergent data. Incomplete answers were followed up with non-directive probing procedures by asking questions such as "Anything else?," "Tell me more," or "How do you mean that?" Interview sessions were audio-taped with participant permission. This narrative component enabled the researcher to better understand the subjective experience of the participants. Perspectives from their own voices enhanced the study and allowed for emergent data.

Quantitative Analysis. Data were analyzed initially using measures of central tendency and variability. Frequencies were calculated in order to identify outliers and other data inconsistencies; outliers were defined as scores that have z values greater or equal to 2. Inconsistencies that occurred in the data were examined by using the demographic information and checking for logical inconsistencies. For example, women who are 40, retired and with an annual income greater than one hundred thousand dollars. Cross tabs and frequencies were used to identify other potential data problems.

Life satisfaction was determined by the total score on the ALSS. The variables of age, spirituality, religiosity were considered the predictor variables. These variables were assessed by using the scores on the BWSRM and demographic information. For question 1, a correlated groups $t$-test/ repeated measures $t$-test was used to compare the level of religiosity to the level of spirituality (Hinkle, Wiersma & Jurs, 1995). The mean level of religiosity and the mean level of spirituality as determined by the BWSRM was compared. For question 2, Pearson Product-Moment Correlation Coefficients ($r$'s) were computed between age and the spirituality scores as measured by the BWSRM. The Pearson $r$ was then tested for statistical significance using the $t$ test. For question 3, the relationship between the use of spiritual practices were assessed using a regression formula regressed on the following predictor variables: spirituality, religiosity and selected demographic variables (age, income, education) (Tabachnick and Fidell, 1989). The significance of the multiple $r$'s was assessed using the $F$ ratio. The .05 level of statistical significance was employed for the study.

Qualitative Analysis. Analysis for question 4, the qualitative portion of the study, consisted of first coding the responses from the women's narratives. This content provided insight into the specific ways that spirituality works in relationship to life satisfaction for African American women. Techniques of inductive analysis were used as best practice when interpreting data in the naturalistic sense (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The unitizing, categorizing and constant comparative method was also used (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). Similarities and differences across

groupings of variables were described and analyzed; common threads were then defined from within the data.

The coding categories for the content analysis were Religiosity, Spirituality, Holistic, and Other. Religiosity referred to those responses that used references to God, Jesus, or organized worship. Spirituality was referenced as responses that related to a higher power, a higher purpose, inner direction or inner connectedness. Holistic included references to mind, body and spirit collectively or to meta physical processes. Other was used for responses that did not seem to fit in the previous categories. The raters were African American women who functioned independently and represented the fields of counseling psychology, social work and theology; they were selected due to their perceived expertise on African American women and spirituality. Interrater reliability on categories was established by training sessions that precipitated an 80 percent agreement among the raters.

Anecdotal and field notes were kept and used to triangulate the data. Several researchers in ethnic studies (Banks and Banks, 1995; Jenkins, 1995; Jones, 1998; Rogler, 1989) have found that a combination of approaches work best. The methodological quality of a study can be limited by bias and insensitivity to culture and history, particularly when the research subjects are from a minority population such as African American women.

## Results and Discussion

Of the 160 African American women initially identified for the study, 147 agreed to participate, representing a participation rate of 91.9 percent. Of the 147 survey packets returned, 127 (86%) were complete and considered acceptable . The mean age of the women was 48.21 (SD = 8.58). Participants were from the following six states: Kentucky (n = 59); Michigan (n = 35); Florida (n = 13); Alabama (n = 11); Missouri (n = 6); Georgia (n =5). Of the women providing information on residency, 51 (57%) classified themselves as living in the suburbs, 32 (36%) classified their residence as urban, and 6 (6.7%) of the women classified themselves as living in rural areas. With regard to marital status, 69 (54.3%) of the participants reported being married, 32 (25.2%) reported being separated or divorced, 4 (3.1%) reported being widowed, 21 (16.5%) single and 1(.8%) woman identified herself as other. Most (102; 88.9%) of the women in the study reported their religious affiliation as Protestant or other (including Baptist, Methodist, Presbyterian, etc.) (102 or 88.9%); Catholic was reported by 5 (6.5%), and 9 (7.9%) women reported being atheist or agnostic.

Occupational categories for the participants ranged from professional or executive to retired and unemployed. Fifty-six (43.3%) women identified themselves as professional or executives. Nineteen (15.6%) of the sample reported themselves as being in business or management; 12 (15.6%) identified as other occupations; 8 (6.6%) listed clerical or sales; 8 (6.6%) reported self employment and 3 (2.5%) were retired. Educational levels ranged from doctoral degrees to less than a high school education. The largest group of women reported having some college or a college degree (n =63 or 49.6%); the next largest group reported having

a professional degree such as MBA or M.Ed. (n=37, 29.7%). Twenty-one (16.6%) women reported less than college and the smallest group included those with doctoral degrees (n=6, 4.7%). With respect to income, the largest group of participants (54; 43.2%) reported annual incomes between $40,000 and $69,000. The second largest group was women who reported incomes of $21,000 to $39,000 (n=31, 24.8%). Twelve (9.6%) women reported making over $70,000 a year. Twenty-eight (22.4%) women reported incomes of less than $20,000.
The data were examined statistically to test four hypotheses that were generated by the four research questions. The first three questions were addressed quantitatively, while the fourth was addressed qualitatively.

Quantitative Analysis. Question 1: Do African American women report differences in their levels of spirituality and their levels of religiosity? Based on the work of previous researchers, including Townes (1997) and Vanzant (1992), it was hypothesized that African American women would report a significantly higher level of spirituality than religiosity. Table 1 contains the mean and standard deviation for religiosity and spirituality on the Black Women's Spirituality/Religiosity Measure (BWSRM).

Table 1
Means and Standard Deviations of the Black Women's Spirituality/Religiosity Measure (BWRSM) Scale (N = 126)

| | Mean | SD |
|---|---|---|
| Spirituality | 2.96 | .69 |
| Religiosity | 3.83 | .76 |

Religiosity has a higher mean score indicating that African American women reported a greater level of religiosity than spirituality on the BWSRM. A paired t test revealed that the difference in mean levels of spirituality was statistically significant ($t$ =11.84, $df$=.125, $p$<.01). In order to evaluate the strength of this difference, the eta-squared was used. The eta-squared was .53 indicating that 53 percent of the total variance is accounted for after removing the effects of individual differences (Hinkle, et.al, 1994). In order to further explore this issue a number of supplemental analyses were conducted using the subscale of the BWSRM described previously. A paired t test was used to compare religiosity and spiritual connectedness. A significant difference between the two was found in the expected direction with spirituality greater than religiosity. The eta-squared was .32, indicating the strength of the association between the variables is moderate, (Hinkle, et.al. 1994). As anticipated in the initial hypothesis, African American women at midlife reported a difference in their levels of spirituality and religiosity; spirituality being higher than religiosity. It was postulated that if spirituality were defined in broader terms it might have been somewhat higher.

Question # 2: As the aging process occurs do African American women become more

spiritually connected? It was hypothesized that African American women tend to become more spiritual as they get older; therefore a positive correlation between age and spirituality could be anticipated. However, the observed correlation between age and spirituality, as measured by the BWSRM, was relatively low (r=.12) and not statistically significant at the .05 level. This implies that age is not linked to reported levels of spirituality. Additional analysis revealed that the correlation between age and religiosity was statistically significant at the .05 level, yet still relatively weak (r=.18). Although the magnitude of the effect is small (Hinkle, et.al., 1994), older women tended to report higher levels of religiosity.

These results support previous research that suggests that older African American women are more religious as are generally older women from most ethnic groups (Taylor, 1993). At the same time, the findings contradict Foley (1997), who found that neither religiosity or spirituality increased as women got older.

Question # 3: Is there a relationship between the use of spiritual practices, age, socioeconomic variables (age, income, etc.) and life satisfaction for African American women? It was assumed that the relationship between the background variables and life satisfaction tends to be mediated by the level of spirituality. In order to analyze this question, a hierarchical regression analysis was conducted. Table 2 reveals the correlations among the various variables included in the hierarchial regression analysis.

Table 2
Correlations among Selected Demographic Variables

| | Life Satisfaction | Spirituality | Age | Education | Income |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Life satisfaction | 1.00 | | | | |
| Spirituality | .28** | 1.00 | | | |
| Age | .12 | .12 | 1.00 | | |
| Education | .03 | .04 | .07 | 1.00 | |
| Income | -.03 | .00 | .10 | .56** | 1.00 |

*p <.05 **p<.01

The variables were entered in the hierarchial regression analysis in following order: life satisfaction; spirituality; age; education; and income. The results of this analysis are found in Table 3.

Table 3
Results of Hierarchial Regression Analysis of the Background Variables with Life Satisfaction using The BWSRM

| Predictor Variables | Life Satisfaction | Life Satisfaction |
|---|---|---|
| | R | $R^2$ |
| Spirituality | .28** | .08 |
| Background (age, education, income) | .13 | .02 |
| Spirituality & Background | .31* | .10 |

* Multiple correlation significant at p <.01 ** Multiple correlation significant at p < .05

The background variables of age, education, and income were not significantly related to life satisfaction. However, spirituality was significantly related to life satisfaction. When the background variables were entered after spirituality there was no significant increment in the multiple correlation coefficient. The implication is that spirituality is a critical variable in predicting the life satisfaction of African American women. Because the demographic variables did not add to the predictor of life satisfaction over spirituality, no support was found for spirituality as an intervening variable.

A second hierarchical regression analysis was conducted using the BWSRM subscale. The results of the hierarchial regression analysis using the BWSRM subscale are found in Table 4.

Table 4
Results of Hierarchical Regression Analysis of the Background Variables with Life Satisfaction using the BWSRM subscale

| Predictor Variables | Life Satisfaction R | Life Satisfaction $R^2$ |
|---|---|---|
| Spirituality | .45** | .20 |
| Background (age, education, income) | .13 | .02 |
| Spirituality & Background | .46** | .21 |

* Multiple correlation significant at p <.01 ** Multiple correlation significant at p < .05

A similar pattern emerged, although the squared multiple correlation coefficient was more than twice the magnitude in the previous analysis (.08 versus .20). This analysis further supports the finding that spirituality is a direct predictor of life satisfaction. African American women who report higher levels of spirituality also report higher levels of life satisfaction. Age, education and income were not found to be significantly related to life satisfaction, which contradicts Byars and Dhooper (1989), who found that education was significantly related to life satisfaction. As noted by Greene (1994), income and education, factors that are usually seen as enhancing one's probability of success in life, may not be perceived similarly by individuals from different racial backgrounds.

Qualitative Analysis. Question 4: What factors predict the level of life satisfaction in African American women at mid-life? This was addressed by examining the data obtained through structured interviews with six African American women ages 41, 47, 50, 50, 61, and 65. Occupationally, the group consisted of a cosmetologist, a sociologist, a speech and language pathologist, an elementary school teacher, a secretary and a retired individual with a clerical background. Two had completed high school, two had associate degrees, and two had doctorates. Diversity was clearly evidenced in that the women represented different income levels, education and religious/non-religious affiliations. The beauty shops frequented by African American women by far allowed for the most diversity and a greater cross section of African American women. Whether the shop was in suburban upper income Farmington Hills, Michigan, urban Atlanta, inner city Louisville, or more rural Bowling Green, Kentucky, the age, income, and education ranges of the women were significantly varied.

Each interview lasted between 30 and 60 minutes. All six interviewees seemed interested in the study. The interview questions were designed to invoke genuine unedited responses from

the interviewees. The interview settings were in the personal space of the interviewee, with all being done at the home of the person except for one that was conducted in her office. This arrangement seemed to give the interviewees a sense of comfort, and being able to relax in a safe setting seemed conducive to a productive flow of their thoughts and feelings around the issues of life satisfaction and spirituality. The women seemed eager to share, to compare, to continue to explore and were yet in other ways affected by the study as evidenced by their expressions both verbal and nonverbal. There was no noticeable hesitation in their responses regarding the balance in their lives and the harmony and sense of solace and personal power they derived from their spiritual and religious beliefs. Some women manifested these emotions and feelings through participation in formally organized religious institutions while others did not. As Mattis (1994) observed, much of the experiences among these women is often communicated "meta-linguistically - as smiles, gestures, codes, with the ever-hopeful - do you-know-what-I mean?" "Yes, lord this is so true".

Data for the qualitative analysis were obtained from two open-ended questions on the BWSRM, which all participants were asked to complete, and the interview transcripts of the six interviewed participants. Responses were analyzed for content and categorized with the assistance of three raters with expertise in the areas of African American women's studies, life satisfaction and spirituality. Question construction for the interviews was informed by the literature on African American women and spirituality and in consultation with the women who participated in the pilot study. The analysis of the data derived through the interviews followed a four step procedure. First, the content of all the transcripts of the interviews were read and the audio tapes were listened to in order to assign codes for themes that emerged from the data. Second, three raters were engaged in reading the responses to the open ended questions and categorizing the responses based on the assigned codes. Third, category revisions were made by the researcher following the initial work of the raters. Fourth, the category system that emerged was used to recode all 127 responses to the BWSRM open ended questions.

The content analysis of the interview data revealed consistent themes of family, friends and spirituality. Strong sentiments and pride in being African American women were also pervasive among the responses. Issues of Black history, empowerment, women's struggles, and relationships were also manifest. Further, the content analysis revealed a trend among African American women at midlife to question traditional religious practices and transcend the oppression of racism and sexism through their own spiritual journey of awareness and wholeness. As noted by Maslow and Jung (Edwards, 1998) and Jones (1989), women at midlife are connecting to self and others by using relevant processes to define themselves and make sense of their experiences. This inherently spiritual process leads to a more acute emphasis on quality of life issues while enabling African American women to discover and appreciate the love, power and beauty of spirit within themselves.

The evidence of the incorporation of the seven spiritual principles of Kwanzaa into the daily thinking and behavior of these women was amazingly apparent in their narratives. They readily discussed faith, purpose, unity, cooperative economics, self-determination, creativity, collective work and responsibility and seemed to be aware of a strong relevance for these

principles at work through their own lives. They reported acquiring strength and resilience from the socialization process of their families and their ancestors. This socialization process often involved religious or spiritual teaching. Their narratives gave testimony to spiritual mentoring as the women wrote and discussed their stories. Without prompting, many of the women made reference to their mothers and grandmothers as passing along the lessons of survival and success. Most grew up in an era that forced them to be aware of what faced them in a world that was potentially dangerous and oppressive. With this knowledge, balanced with their deepening and evolving spirituality, many attributed their satisfaction with life to this history, nurturing and mentoring by older African American women.

Negative influences that impacted the lives of the women were reported as deaths, losses, health failure of self, close friends or family members. The struggles of single parenthood were suggested by several as a leading cause of dissatisfaction with life for African American women in general. They saw this problem as contributing to the inability of these women to economically provide care for their families as well as relating to the strain of having the sole responsibility for children.

Overall, life satisfaction was ranked high by the majority of the women in the study. True to the history of the African American culture, even in times of extreme adversity, there are vehicles that allow for adaptation and degrees of satisfaction with the significant values of life. They seemed to understand the concept of journey's of grief, loss and healing as an essential component of life. Consistent with the findings of Graves (1994), they were able to tell the stories of the injustices in their lives and to then be able to balance the scale with their blessings for better acceptance and understanding.

Limitations. There are at least three limitations worth noting with respect to the current study. First, the convenience sample of African American women between the ages of 40 and 65 could limit the generalizability of the results obtained. An inherent weakness in any study employing a convenience sample is that the participants are, by design, not selected randomly. Obviously, this can adversely affect the reliability of the data obtained as well as any subsequent statistical analyses that are based on those data. For example, the demographic descriptors suggest that the sample is heavily populated by African American women who have incomes and educational credentials that are commonly associated with the middle to upper-middle socioeconomic classes. A second limitation is somewhat related and involves the six African American women who participated in the qualitative portion of the study. Although ethnographic methods allow for the approach employed used in the study (Gay, 1996), the impact of this sampling strategy on external validity is difficult to ascertain. Therefore, the results of this effort will need to be cross validated in future studies. The third limitation involves having a specific cohort of women (African American women ages 40 to 65) born between 1938 and 1958. This time frame limits the generalizability of experience. For the most part, these women were born and lived in an era of shared experiences that no other cohort of African American women will experience in the same way. For example, the participants in the study grew up in the era of civil rights, women's rights, demonstrations, integration, and Jim Crow. By its nature, this shared heritage could become a limiting factor when attempting to extrapolate the

implications of the study to younger African American women as they reach midlife.

## Conclusion and Implications

Myers (1980) asserted that a crucial role of religiosity and spirituality is to provide experience and substance that are meaningful and necessary to aid in the resolution of adversity. Unfortunately the systems that should nurture, heal, and support African American women are the very ones that often oppress them; i.e., religious and therapeutic institutions. Too often, African American women are repressed, constrained and confused by traditional religion. At the same time, African American women will no doubt continue to participate in organized religious institutions. Participation in organized religion is heavily ingrained in the cultural experience and expectations of many African American women. Even those who admitted to no affiliation with a particular denomination or church seemed to be searching for a group expression to complement their individual spiritual practices. As such, there may be a window of opportunity, given the current spiritual climate of African American women , for churches to revisit their original mission and consider alternative paradigms to minister to, and serve the needs of, this population.

The relatively unexplored area of African American women at midlife with respect to spirituality and life satisfaction suggests some interesting new directions for future research projects. It is important that more be known about the particular nature of these women and the potential for enhancing their life satisfaction and their contributions to society. As Devri (1994) and Jones (1998) have argued, psycho-spiritual theories and approaches could benefit from strong empirical research. Replication of this study with a larger sample and increasing the percentage of lower socioeconomic groups of African American women could contribute significantly to building theory and approaches combining psycho-spiritual education derived from the legacies of resilient African American women at midlife. Focus groups might be established to expand and strengthen the qualitative findings.

It is recommended that future research in the area of African American women, spirituality and life satisfaction be conducted using culturally competent research paradigms. There is an inherent danger in research which merely compares African Americans with Americans of European descent (Banks, 1995; Padilla and Lindholm, 1995; Rogler, 1989). As demonstrated within the scope of the current study, there is an inherent value in augmenting quantitative methodologies with qualitative techniques. This triangulation of measures yields data that more accurately reflect the subjective experience of the participants (Padilla & Lindholm and Banks, 1995; Gilligan, 1982). For example, the qualitative techniques of the present study could be expanded to include larger samples as well as second and third interviews, thus expanding the data collection and allowing for the development of rapport and increased clarity.

There is an assumption by some researchers that all women are essentially the same with respect to their needs, coping patterns, utilization of resources and levels of resiliency. Traditionally, women have been presented as deficient and described without the benefit of their own voices (Gilligan, 1982). A major threat to African American women's ability to pass on the

traditions of resilience and survival rests in dispelling the myths and misconceptions that lack sensitivity to the issues of diversity and the value of ethnic history. It appears that spirituality is indeed a powerful and positive force in the lives of African American women and that at midlife a deepening of inner connectedness and transformation occurs. Spirituality is directly related to life satisfaction and increases and deepens as African American women age.

## References

Akbar, N. (1991). The evolution of human psychology for African Americans. In R. L. Jones (Ed.). *Black psychology,* (3rd ed., pp.99-123). Berkley, CA: Cobb & Henry.

Asante, M. K. (1990). *Kemet, afrocentricity and knowledge.* Trenton, NJ: African World Press, Inc.

Banks, J. A. & Banks, C.A. (Eds.). (1995). *Handbook of research on multicultural education.* New York: Simon & Schuster.

Byars, L. F., & Dhooper, S.S. (1989). Stress and the life satisfaction of Black social workers. *Affilia, 4,* (1), 70-78.

Collins, P. H. (1990). *Black feminist thought: Knowledge, consciousness and the politics of empowerment.* New York: Routledge.

Devi, S. (1994). *The psycho-spiritual journey of African-American women: A guide to nurturing and healing the soul.* Unpublished doctoral dissertation, The Union Institute, Cinncinnati, OH.

Edwards, K. L. (1998). A cogno-spiritual model of psychotherapy. In R. L. Jones (Ed.) *African American mental health: Theory, research & intervention (*pp.497-501*).* Hampton, VA: Cobb & Henry Publishers.

Fodor, I. (1990). On turning 50: No longer young/not yet old: Shifting to a new paradigm. *The Behavior Therapist,13,* 39-44.

Foley, L. S. (1997). Exploring the experience of spirituality in older women. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Nebraska - Lincoln, Lincoln, NE.

Frazier, E. F. (1974). *The Negro church in America*. New York: Schocken Books.

Gall, M. D., Borg, W. R., & Gall, J. P. (1996). *Educational research: An introduction* (6th ed.). White Plains, New York: Longman Publishers.

Gay, L. R. (1996). *Educational research: Competencies for analysis and application* (5th ed). Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall.

Giddings, P. (1988). *In search of sisterhood: Delta Sigma Theta and the challenge of the Black sorority movement.* New York: Quill Publishers.

Gilligan, C. (1982). *In a different voice: Psychological theory and women's development.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Giovanni, N. (1994). *Racism 101.* New York: William Morrow & Company, Inc.

Glasser, B. G., & Strauss, A. L. (1967). *The discovery of grounded theory: Strategies for qualitative research.* Chicago: Aldine/Atherton.

Gorsuch, R.L.(1983). *Factor analysis* (2nd ed.). New Jersey: Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Graves, S. (1994). *Expressions of healing: Embracing the process of grief.* North Hollywood, CA: Newcastle Publishing.

Hine, D. C. & Thompson, K. (1998). *A shining thread of hope: The history of Black women in America.* New York: Broadway Books.

Hinkle, D. E., Wiersma, W., & Jurs, S. G. (1994). *Applied statistics for the behavioral scienc,*(3rd ed.). Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin Co.

hooks, b. (1993). *Sisters of the yam: Black women and self-recovery*. Boston, MA: South End Press.

hooks, b. (1990). *Yearning: Race, gender and cultural politics*. Boston, MA: South End Press.

Jenkins, A. J. (1995). *Psychology and African Americans: A humanistic approach.* Needham Heights, MA: Allyn & Bacon.

Jones, R. L. (Ed.). (1989). *Black adult development and aging.* Berkley, CA: Cobb & Henry Publishers.

Jones, R. (Ed.). (1998). *African-American mental health: Theory, research & intervention.* Hampton VA: Cobb & Henry Publications

Karenga, M. (1988). *The African American holiday of Kwanzaa: A celebration of family, community and culture.* Los Angeles, CA: The University of Sankore Press.

Karenga, M. (1993). *Introduction to Black studies* (2nd ed.). Los Angeles, CA: The University of Sankore Press.

Larke, P. J. (1996). Dealing with the "isms": Racism, classism and sexism. In N. Carter & M. Parker (Eds.) *Woman to woman: Perspectives of fifteen African American christian women (pp. 243-259)* Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House.

Lincoln, Y. S.& E. G. Guba (1985). *Naturalistic inquiry.* Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.

Mattis, J. (1995). Black woman's spirituality/religiosity measure (BWSRM). In *Workings of the spirit: Spirituality, meaning construction and coping in the lives of Black women.* Unpublished doctoral dissertation, The University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, Michigan.

Mitchell, V., & Helson, R. (1990). Womens' prime of life: Is it the 50s? *Psychology of Women Quarterly, 14,* 454-470.

Myers, L. W. (1980). *Black women: Do they cope better?* Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.

Rogler, L. H. (1989). The meaning of culturally sensitive research in mental health. *American Journal of Psychiatry, 146* (3), 296-303.

Ruffin, J. *(1989).* Stages of adult development in Black, professional women. In R.L. Jones (Ed.), *Black adult development and aging* (pp.31-61). Berkley CA: Cobb & Henry Publishers.

Rupp, J. (1996). *Dear heart come home: The path of midlife spirituality*. New York: Crossroad Publishers.

Sandhu, D. S. & Aspy, C. B. (1995). *Counseling for prejudice prevention and reduction.* Alexandria, VA: American Counseling Association.

Sandhu, D. S., Pestrosko, J. M., & Portes, P. (1995) . Adult life satisfaction scale (ALSS). In D. S. Sandhu, & G. B. Aspy (Eds.), *Counseling for prejudice prevention and reduction, (pp.261-264).* Alexandria, VA: American Counseling Association.

Siegal, B. (1992). *Love, medicine and miracles.* New York: Harper & Row.

Tabachnick, B. G., & Fidell, L. C. (1989). *Using multivariate statistics.* New York: HarperCollins Publishers.

Taylor, S. (1993). *Living in the spirit.* New York: Amistad Press.

Townes, E. M. (Ed.). (1997). *Embracing the spirit: Womanist perspectives on hope, salvation and transformation.* Mary Knoll, NY: Orbis Books.

U. S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census. (1998). *Projections of the population of the United States, by age, sex, and race:* 1983 to2080, Series P-25, No.952, pp.38,105-6.

Washington, D.C: Author.

Vanzant, I. (1992). *Tapping the power within: A path to self-empowerment for Black women.* New York: Harlem River Press.

Wade-Gayles, B. (Ed.). (1995). *My soul is a witness: African American women's spirituality.* Boston, MA: Beacon Press.

Warfield-Coppack, N. (1994). *Images of African sisterhood: Initiation and rites of passages to womenhood*. Washington, DC: Baobab Associates, Inc.

Weed, S. (1992). *Menopausal years the wise woman way: Alternative approaches for women 30-90.* Woodstock, NY: Ash Tree Publishing.

West, C. (1993). *Race matters.* New York: Vintage Books.

Westbrooks, K. (1995). *Functional low-income families: Activating strengths*. New York: Vantage press.