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Review Article

The Correlation between Spirituality and Academic Success amongst African American Women.

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Abstract

Spirituality is a subjective term that differs between individuals. There is existing literature comparing the experiences of African American men and broader groups at historically black colleges and universities (HBCU) and predominately white institutions (PWI) as it relates to spirituality. However, there is little or lacking research that focuses on the experience of African American women. This literature review will document the effectiveness spirituality has on the academic success of African American Women. More research must be done to address the correlation between African American female's student success and spirituality.

Keywords: academic success; spirituality; religious attitude scale; student success scale; faith development theory; historically black colleges and universities ; predominately white institutions ; north carolina central university

Spirituality and Academic Success

The proposed literature review will examine the impact spirituality has on African American, has on institutions of higher learning as it relates to academic success in the United States. According to York, Gibson, and Rankin (2015), academic success as inclusive of academic achievement, attainment of learning objectives, acquisition of desired skills and competencies, satisfaction, persistence, and post- college performance. The academic and personal challenges that African American, post-secondary education students encounter and the catalysts that spur them on will also be studied regardless to the stage of faith development that each individual self identifies to determine if spirituality impacts academic success and personal/relational outcomes.

Spirituality is associated with an individual's search to understand the general meaning of life and the source of life that includes a relationship with a higher power which influences one's daily decisions and relationships with others (Duffy, 2010). Does spirituality contribute to academic success for female African American students in higher education settings while improving their personal/relational outcomes? The challenges female African American students in higher education settings range from individual knowledge of self, realities of race, coping strategies, recognition of the Divine, personal faith development, transition from childhood to adulthood, and social/communal supports (Patton & McClure, 2009).

African Americans in higher education settings are impacted by challenges including feelings of being loneliness, isolation, and less than their white counterparts while pursuing the bachelorette degree (Kim & Hargrove, 2013). According to Patton and McClure (2009) African American women report feeling alone and isolated because they are likely one of the few people of color in their classroom. African American

students reported being less involved in classroom discussions for fear that they would be misunderstood by their white counterparts. Additionally, the same students reported feeling pressure to perform well (Kim and Hargrove, 2013). The African American women felt as though their actions or inactions would be considered by their white peers as how all African Americans comport themselves (Patton and McClure, 2009). Likewise, African American men reported having adjustment issues pertaining to socializing with white colleagues outside of the classroom and balancing the rigorous academic demands with their personal lives (Riggins, McNeal, & Herndon, 2008). The above stated findings regarding African American college students and their experiences in higher education settings justifies the need for further research.

The proposed literature review will address the impact spirituality has on African American students' academic success in higher education settings. Additionally, the research will seek to address the impact spirituality has on reducing stress-related feelings for African Americans in pursuit of higher education.

Literature Review

The literature review will be presented in three sections regarding how spirituality provides or improves: a. coping strategies b. academic success c. personal/relational outcomes for African American post-secondary education students. In studying spirituality's impact on African American students' academic success in higher education, it is important to gain insight on how spirituality is viewed by said population. Researchers report that spirituality is a difficult concept to measure due to individual interpretation (Patton & McClure, 2009; Duffy, 2010). The more concise definition of spirituality comes from Patton and McClure, which identifies spirituality as an individual's interpretation, belief, and practice in concert with interpersonal relationships with others and the Divine or

higher being.   The core of one's spirituality includes personal relationships, communal relationships, and a relationship with the Divine or higher being. This commingled relationship helps one to identify his/her life's purpose (2009). Commingled relationships that African American students in higher education settings experience with the Divine or higher being and others serves as a way in which these students cope with academic and personal challenges.

Coping Strategies

Coping strategies used by African Americans in institutions of higher learning and beyond are identified as prayer, meditation, and inspirational readings used to gain strength, maintain a sense of inner peace and reflect on stressful situations (Patton & McClure, 2009).   Prayer for African American students fosters a locus of control which tell the student that s/he is capable of overcoming adversity (Riggins, McNeal, & Herndon, 2008)**.** As African American students matriculate in post-secondary education settings many struggle with balancing academics and personal and financial responsibilities (Riggins et al., 2008). The challenges that ensue due to the balancing act exacerbates students' stress level. According to Weddle-West, Hagan, and Norwood (2013), African American males attending Predominantly White Institutions, (PWIs) reported using prayer to reduce stress which allows students function and matriculate in a more calm and focused manner verses fear and anxiety. Prayer, which is identified as a coping strategy is foundational in spiritual development.

Additionally, it is reported that African American males who attend PWIs spiritual development was present is at a higher rate than those who attended Historically Black Colleges and Universities, (HBCUs) (Weddle-West et al., 2013).   This deepened spiritual development is attributed to African American males feeling inadequate in relation to their performance in the classroom in comparison to their white counterparts (Weddle-West et al., 2013). African American males also report that spirituality helps them to better understand themselves. In this case spirituality acts as an anchor that supports African American men when stressors arise. As much as spirituality acts as an anchor for African American men, there are instances where African American men have difficulty reconciling their personal beliefs and their professional goals. It is reported that African American men experience a type of internal struggle between the two concepts (Lewis, 2016). It is possible that African American men pursuing higher education can be spiritually grounded, thereby, having a strong sense of the Divine and a relationship with the Divine and others, while struggling with who he is as it relates to his professional aspirations. African American men struggle with great inner conflict, spiritually they know who the Divine says that they are, however, the difficulties encountered in higher education settings is so great that uncertainty exists.

Academic Success

According to York, Gibson, and Rankin (2015), academic success is inclusive of academic achievement, attainment of learning objectives, acquisition of desired skills and competencies, satisfaction, persistence, and post- college performance. Although, African American males experience a great deal of stress relating to their matriculation at both HBCUs and PWIs they are successful in completing their degrees despite the plethora of obstacles they face. Kim & Hargrove (2013), report that African American males attribute their academic success to family members support and encouragement and their ability to channel their spirituality and inner strength.

Weddle-West, Hagan & Norwood (2013) reports that African American students who attend HBCUs have a greater sense of support due to the academic and social environments. Students have the opportunity to witness and engage with African American faculty, staff, and community

of African American leaders regularly who are accomplished in their fields and whose primary objective is the academic success of the African American student (Weddle-West et al, 2013).   As a result, students who attend HBCUs are less likely than those who attend PWIs to gravitate towards the Divine for support as they journey through their academic careers (Weddle-West et al., 2013).

Research can be found specifically on African American males and their matriculation at both HBCUs and PWI and their spiritual practices, spiritual development, and how spirituality impacts academic success for them. The African American females' experience regarding academic success during their matriculation at institutions of higher learning whether HBCUs or PWIs and spirituality are grouped with their male counterparts. There is a lack of literature that specifically discusses the African American female and her experiences as it relates to academic success during undergraduate studies and spirituality which is why this study is so important.

There is a positive correlation between spirituality and knowing one's purpose in the lives of college students.

Although, African-American men according to Lewis (2016) still wrestle with reconciling their personal and professional beliefs, Reimann, Fialkowski, & Stewart-Sicking (2015), reported that students who have developed their spiritual lives and spiritual practices are reportedly healthy, and have a strong sense of meaning and purpose in life. This spiritual health and sense of purpose for students leads to academic success. In contrast religious service attendance for African American students did not yield a positive effect on academic success according to Mooney (2010). It is interesting to note that Bachelor of Social Work (BSW) students reported feeling convicted about his/her own spirituality as it relates to supporting their clients. Students pursuing the (BSW) struggled with understanding how to integrate his/her personal faith without violating the client's right regarding self-determination (Harris, Yancey, Myers, Deimler, & Walden, 2017). This concept perplexing because the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards as of 2008 expects Social Workers to work ethically and effectively with religion and spirituality as relevant to clients and their communities and to refrain from negative discrimination based on religious or nonreligious beliefs.

Personal/Relational Outcomes

To understand the faith development of an individual their personal and relational outcomes is a sure indicator. The contents of the Faith Development Theory (FDT) as identified by James Fowler incorporates the faith community that ultimately helps to shape the behaviors and decisions of an individual (Fowler, 2001).   Personal and relational outcomes are direct results of the faith community that Fowler referred to. African American males attending HBCUs reported that due to their affiliation and interaction with a local faith community they were less likely to fall prey to temptations present on college campuses (Riggins, McNeal, & Herndon, 2008). African-American male students who are connected to a faith community reported receiving encouragement when they face challenges during matriculation, and also reported that as a result of the community's investment in them and their academic life they were motivated to complete their degrees as not to let down those who have supported them (Riggins, et al., 2008). Some African American males use spirituality to avoid "punishment" from God and seek to focus on eternal life to assist in avoiding temptation to engage in sinful acts (Riggins, et al., 2008). African American males experienced quite the opposite when attending PWIs as it relates to how spirituality was infused in their matriculation. African American males, because of their on-campus mentorship relationships and community relationships, did not have on campus organizations that included elements of spirituality.

African American males attending PWIs found a sense of community through mentorship opportunities from mature African American men serving in leadership capacities in various organizations and clubs on campus. Again, there is no specific mention of African American females and their experiences or lack thereof as it relates to campus community, and mentorship opportunities. These students according to Weddle-West, Hagan, and Norwood (2013) are more engaged in the culture than those African American men who are not connected to mentorship opportunities through clubs and organizations, thereby, making them more likely to graduate from PWI's. It is also interesting to note that African American males attending PWIs join student organizations that stress the importance of spirituality as a means to achieve academic success (Weddle-West, Hagan, & Norwood, 2013). Increasing physical space that allows students opportunities to express and explore spirituality is key as it relates to personal and relational outcomes. This can occur through the use of meditation rooms, public posting boards that provides information regarding spiritual development activities on campus. These forums give students the opportunity to engage in meaningful and provocative conversations with one another on matters pertaining to spirituality and one's calling (Filer, Agati, Chance, Donahue, Eickhoff, & Foubert, 2009). As it relates to one having a spiritual calling to an organized religion there is a connection with overall satisfaction regarding personal and relational outcomes. Students were reported to be more likely to embrace spirituality and the purpose of calling when they know who they are personally regarding their spirituality (Duffy & Sedlacek, 2010). Perhaps, African American students' spirituality would be included in their campus life if resources on HBCU campuses provided designated spaces as they do on PWI campuses.

Although, African-American students are less likely to have spirituality infused in their on-campus lives, those connected to a faith community, such as a church or a student organization that provides spiritual mentorship, off-campus are less likely to engage in negative coping strategies that result in what is known as hyper-sexuality (Giordano & Cecil, 2014). Students who understand their purpose and connection to the Divine through interpersonal relationships with likeminded people are not riddled with existential anxiety, including social anxiety that results in engaging in compulsive and addictive sexual relationship patterns (Giordano & Cecil, 2014). It appears that spirituality fosters healthy personal relationships for African American students attending both HBCUs and PWIs.

While spirituality and academic success seem to have a positive correlation among African American students at both HBCUs and PWIs, there is subset of African American post-secondary education students that do not share the same affinity for spiritual/religious communities. According to Means (2017), this subset of African American students is the Lesbian, Gay, Bi-sexual, Transgender, Queer and Ally (LGBTQA) community. African American LGBTQA students experience homophobia, racism, and classism, thereby being spiritually marginalized in spiritual communities as they attempt to develop and deepen their spirituality. These students are faced with the daunting task of explaining how they identify as LGBTQA and spiritual/religious (Means, 2017). Explaining spirituality as a LGBTQA student is reported as being traumatic. Additionally, this population often has difficulty being transparent with faculty and staff on campuses for fear of being misunderstood, judged regarding their sexuality and spirituality trauma associated with explaining spirituality as a LGBTQA student (McGuire, Cisneros, & McGuire, 2017). For this cause campus organizations and centers where the LGBTQA subset have a "safe-space" are becoming more relevant to campus life (Patton, Simons, 2008). While there are some obstacles faced by this specific community, they too can benefit from supportive and accepting spiritual environments.

Theoretical Framework

Faith Development Theory (FDT) was developed by James Fowler and addresses the psychological factors that develop an individual's understanding of what faith means to him/her. FDT identifies the psychological aspect of an individual as it relates to his/her faith through seven stages. This is an indication that an individual does not have to ascribe to any particular religion or even consider him/herself to be religious. The seven psychological factors occur in stages consisting of: logic, role-taking, formal moral judgment, social awareness, locus of authority, understanding of the world; greater society and symbolic functioning (Fowler, 1991).

FDT is the selected theoretical framework used to unearth the experiences of African American women in post-secondary education as it relates to spirituality and academic success. FDT was identified because of its unique triadic structure relating to faith and faith development. According to Fowler, Faith Development Theory looks at faith and faith development through the lenses of the individual, family/friends, and those systems of power that have influence on the individual (2001). A unique feature of FDT is self-awareness. Self-awareness is relational and continues to mature over time in an individual's life. There are three components of self-awareness: individual choice, connections with family/friends, and influential societal systems. An individual must engage in continuous self-examination, communal relationships, and personal engagement with the Divine; those components were identified as being catalysts for influencing positive experiences (Fowler, 2001). Thus, the development of the individual in terms of his/her faith does not occur in silo.

The configuration of Faith Development Theory is two-fold; structure operations and contents. Structure operations consist of the constant inner personal dialogue, communal relationships and Divine/higher power relationship. The contents of faith include elements such as personal narratives, practices, faith community, interpretation of life experiences that configures one's responses to life conditions and experiences which ultimately influences and alters one's thought process and behaviors (Fowler, 2001). Faith narratives are one's personal account involving the self, personal relationships and the Divine.

Faith Development Theories (FDT) origins are steeped in Eric Erickson's psychosocial theory. Erickson's psychosocial framework consists of eight stages. Stage 1. Trust vs. Mistrust which develops an individual's ability or concept of hope occurs from birth to 1 year and 6 months. Stage 2. Autonomy vs. Shame is developed from 1 year and 6 months through three years; at this stage the individuals will is developed. Stage 3. Initiative vs. Guilt occurs from ages 3 to 5 years and the sense of purpose is discovered by the individual. Stage 4. . Industry vs. Inferiority occurs from ages 5 to 12, the individual develops his/her personal identity. Stage 5. Identity vs. Role Confusion; ages 12-18 and the development of fidelity. Stage 6 Intimacy vs. Isolation; ages 18-40 where the development of love occurs. Stage 7. Generativity vs. Stagnation; ages 40 - 65, basic development of care Stage 8. Ego Integrity vs. Despair; ages 65 and older is where one develops w**i**sdom (Mulley, 1975). The inclusion of Erickson's psychosocial framework in FDT focuses on the biological development, ego development, and social-cultural support of an individual as it relates to the life cycle and individual development. FDT, as identified by Fowler, identifies the significance of "timing and focus of the psychosocial crisis of each stage and transition are part of faith development foundation" (Fowler, 2001). Erickson's examination of multicultural and multinational experiences included African-Americans and other minorities that are impacted by pseudo speciation.

According to Patton and McClure, Faith Development Theory, is significant when addressing academic success because of its inclusion of the life experiences of college students as they navigate the stages of faith development and lifespan development (2009). The transition from childhood to adulthood requires one to personally identify and understand

the intricacies of life; differentiating that which is true from that which is untrue through the process of awareness of self. As it relates to African American women and their academic success, spirituality serves as a source of coping and emotional/mental stability as it relates to the everyday stressors that minorities face in a socially and politically oppressive system (Patton et al., 2009). While, there is existing literature that focuses on analyzing the broader African American population, and more specifically African American males, the research should also seek to identify the differences and similarities between African American men and women as it relates to the impact of spirituality on academic success.

Implications for Social Work Practice

Social workers need to know how to use cultural competence to affectively assist African American females on college campuses. This will assist with retention rates as well as contributing to the diversity of the field of studies of African American female students. The implications for Social Work practice on the micro level will be to provide one on one support to African American female post-secondary education students attending HBCUs. On the mezzo level social workers should seek to organize and facilitate support groups for female African American post-secondary education students attending HBCUs that bring awareness to the impact spirituality has on the academic success. Macro Social Workers must advocate and bring awareness to the challenges African American females face in post-secondary education settings, challenge the current policies that create educational disparities for female African American post-secondary education students, create platforms innovative ways to better support African American females pursuing post-secondary education.

The research on African American males as it relates to their spirituality and academic success is vast. As a result, additional research must be completed to ensure that the experiences of African American females in pursuit of higher education is also included in literature.

The importance of African American females and their experiences must be included in literature to ensure their needs are addressed through on campus resources and services to assist with their success academically.

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