COPING SELF-EFFICACY AMONG RELIGIOUSLY INVOLVED BLACK WOMEN:
AN EXPLORATORY STUDY

A Dissertation Presented to
the Faculty of Simmons University School of Social Work
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree
Doctor of Philosophy
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Black women regularly face stressors which are complex, oppressive, and involve the interlocking effects of race, gender, and social class. Chronic exposure to these stressors poses a significant threat to the psychological and physical well-being of Black women, and may have the cumulative effect of weakening their confidence and coping self-efficacy over time. Coping self-efficacy, an individual’s beliefs in their ability to overcome stress, is recognized as an important cognitive appraisal with critical implications for determining coping behaviors and outcomes. The purpose of this inductive, qualitative study was to explore how religious involvement, and the Black church tradition, helps Black women to develop and sustain coping self-efficacy in the face of oppressive stressors.

Focus group interviews with 32 religiously-involved Black women ages 24-75 were conducted to explore the relationship between stress, coping self-efficacy, and religious involvement. The participants were drawn from eight historically Black churches within a large, metropolitan area in the Northeast region. Using an exploratory design with grounded theory data analysis methods, this dissertation study yielded the following major themes: 1) I Have To Build; 2) The Bottom Line; 3) God Is Connected To Our Struggle; 4) It’s In My Genes; 5) I Can’t Do This Alone; 6) His Track Record; 7) Knowing Sunday’s Going To Come; and 8) Help Me Journey Through. Combined these themes provide a culture-specific, mid-range theory of coping self-efficacy for Black women.
This study offers clinical social workers a useful framework for understanding the unique stress experience of Black women; the impact of self-efficacy in Black women’s coping; and the necessity of clinicians to develop the skills and competence for spiritually-integrative treatment when working with religiously-involved Black women.
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“I am because we are and since we are, therefore I am.”
African Proverb

To all of the beautifully strong Black women I’ve known in my life, I dedicate this work to you! Like the women whose stories are represented within these chapters, my life has been enriched by a circle of incredible women who encourage my faith and surround me with love. From each of you, I have drawn incredible strength, encouragement and inspiration.

To my mom, my first teacher: I have long admired your grace, and quiet (but formidable) strength. Through your continuous love and sacrifices for our family, you have inspired me to hope for and believe in the possibility of my dreams - always reminding me that all things are possible with God. Today, I share this blessing of a dream fulfilled with you. This is for us.

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Though this research is dedicated to the women in my life, I want to express special appreciation for my dad, Rev Robert Johnson. Thank you for the lessons of faith I learned from you as a young girl, and that today continue to reside in the deepest parts of my heart. I remember the curiosity I had as a child, following you to church, and asking endless questions about God and religion. It’s been a curiosity that has led me to this research, and my desire to explore and explain what I know to be true - about faith, resilience, and the
power of God’s presence and His love.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT i

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS iii

TABLE OF CONTENTS v

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION 1
  Problem Statement 1
  Purpose and Goals of the Study 2

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW 4
  Stress Experience of Black Women 5
    Impact of Racism on Physical Health 6
    Impact of Racism on Psychological Health 7
    Religion and Spirituality as a Buffer 10
  Religion and Spirituality in the Lives of Black Women 12
  Role of the Black Church 13
  Religious Involvement as a Coping Resource 15
  Neurological Impact of Religious Coping 17
    Efficacy of Spiritually-Based Meditation and Mindfulness 18
    Importance of Neurological Findings for Social Work 20
  Theoretical Perspectives 22
    Stress and Coping Theory 23
      Significance of Stress and Coping Theory for Black Women 25
    Social Cognitive Theory 26
      Significance of Self-Efficacy for Black Women 27
      Prior Research on Self-Efficacy and Religion 28
      Self-Efficacy Development and the Black Church 29
    Religious Coping Theory 31
      Significance of Religious Coping Theory for Black Women 33
    Critical Race Theory 34
      Significance of CRT for Black Women 35
    Black Feminist Thought 35
      Significance of BFT for Black Women 36
  Summary 36

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY 37
  Study Design and Rationale 37
  Research Questions 39
  Definition of Terms 39
  Sampling Plan and Inclusion Criteria 41
  Recruitment Strategy 42
    Meeting with Pastors 43
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter Four: Findings</th>
<th>63</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I Have To Build</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Bottom Line</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>God Is Connected To Our Struggle</td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It’s In My Genes</td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I Can’t Do This Alone</td>
<td>85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>His Track Record</td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knowing Sunday’s Going To Come</td>
<td>92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Help Me Journey Through</td>
<td>99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summary</td>
<td>111</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter Five: Discussion</th>
<th>113</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Racism as a Dominant Stress Experience: Connecting Findings to Research</td>
<td>115</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A Self-Efficacy Model for Black Women: Connecting Findings to Research</td>
<td>118</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bandura’s Model of Self-Efficacy</td>
<td>119</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Verbal Persuasion</td>
<td>119</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enactive Mastery Experience</td>
<td>120</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vicarious Experience</td>
<td>121</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical/Affective States</td>
<td>121</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Facilitative Spiritual Perspectives</td>
<td>122</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spiritual Connection to God</td>
<td>124</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Connection with Other Black Women</td>
<td>127</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religion and Spirituality as a Tool for Resistance and Subversion</td>
<td>129</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individual Response</td>
<td>131</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Systemic Response</td>
<td>131</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Choosing Not to Respond</td>
<td>132</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summary: Developing a Theory from the Research</td>
<td>133</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Practice Implications</td>
<td>133</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Policy Implications</td>
<td>135</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Study Benefits &amp; Limitations</td>
<td>136</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Stress is hemmed into their dresses, pressed into their hair, mixed into their perfume and painted on their fingers. Stress from deferred dreams, the dreams not voiced; stress from the broken promises, the blatant lies; stress from always being at the bottom, from never being thought beautiful, from always being taken for granted, taken advantage of; stress from being a Black woman in a White world.

Adisa, 1990
Rocking in the Sun Light

We’re constantly living in stress. How could we not have Jesus in our life? How could we not get up in the morning and pray every day? We’re taking care of ourselves, we’re taking care of the people on the job, we’re taking care of the family, the extended family - this is who we are!

Research Participant
Introduction

Problem Statement

The stress experience of Black women in the United States is layered and complex. While Black women face everyday challenges common to women of all backgrounds (e.g., personal, family, career-related), they must do so while also navigating the added and intersectional stressors of race, class and gender oppression (Collins, 2009; Hamilton-Mason, Everett, & Hall, 2009; Kwate & Goodman, 2015). Racism, both subtle and overt, is a regular occurrence for many Black women. These experiences can have a deleterious impact on the emotional, psychological and physical well-being of Black women (Anderson, 2013; Clark, Anderson, Clark, & Williams, 1999; Kreiger, et al., 2010; Szymanski & Lewis, 2016).

Research shows chronic experiences of racism is associated with general psychological distress, including depression and anxiety, and increased health risks such as hypertension, diabetes and obesity (Hill & Hoggard, 2018; Krieger, Kosheleva, Waterman, Chen, & Koenen, 2011; Woods-Giscombe & Lobel, 2008).

The cumulative impact of this stress experience poses a significant threat to Black women’s self-perceptions, including self-efficacy. Coping self-efficacy, an individual’s beliefs in their ability to overcome stress in spite of the difficulty faced (Bandura, 1997), is recognized as an important cognitive appraisal with critical implications for determining coping behaviors and outcomes. Chronic, pervasive racism can erode one’s feelings of coping self-efficacy and the related elements of personal control, mastery and confidence (Grote, Bledsoe, Larkin, Lemay, & Brown, 2007; Thomas & Gonzalez-Prendes, 2009). This creates a cyclical problem as individual’s become more challenged in their ability to cope.

Given racism’s persistent threat to the self-efficacy of Black women, and the
centrality of self-efficacy to the coping process, it is important to explore resources, supports, and processes which help build and sustain coping self-efficacy among this group. My assumption for this dissertation study was that religious involvement, an important coping resource for many Black women, may be instrumental in the development of coping self-efficacy among this group. For the purpose of this study, religious involvement is operationally defined as private devotion to God (i.e., spirituality), and public participation in church (i.e., religion) (Ellison, 1993). Throughout this manuscript, the term religious involvement is used interchangeably with the words “religion and spirituality” in order to be consistent with previous studies that have examined how Black women understand and use these terms (Mattis, 2000).

Religion, spirituality, and the Black church tradition have long been identified as key elements in the lives of many Black Americans (Dillard & Smith, 2005; Harvey, 2011; Taylor & Chatters, 2010). According to data from the U.S. Religious Landscape Survey, 88% of Black Americans report they are absolutely certain God exist; 76% report praying at least daily; and 53% report attending religious services at least once a week, while another 36% report attendance at least once or twice a month (Pew Forum, 2014, 2009). Historically, the Black church has held important significance as an expression of the spirituality and culture of the Black community (Lincoln & Mamiya, 1990), as well as a crucial coping resource in the face of stress and adversity (Harvey, 2011; Taylor & Chatters, 2010). Black women consistently report that religious involvement helps them to cope with stress, with many naming it as a primary and preferred coping resource (Bacchus & Holley, 2004; Hamilton-Mason, et al., 2012; Harris-Robinson, 2006; Mattis, 2002).

**Purpose and Goals of the Study**
The purpose of this study was to explore the role of religious involvement in helping Black women to develop and sustain coping self-efficacy, and to explore the impact of self-efficacy in helping Black women to thrive in spite of racism-related stressors. The conceptual framework for this study includes stress and coping theory (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1997), religious coping theory (Pargament, 1997), critical race perspective (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012), and the Black feminist perspective (Collins, 2009). Together these frameworks help us better understand the complexities of Black women’s stress experiences, and the intricacies of their coping narratives.

Focus group interviews were conducted with 32 religiously-involved Black women who attend historically Black churches in a large, metropolitan area in the Northeast region. The following research questions were explored: 1) how does religious involvement help Black women cope with stress; 2) how does the Black church experience help Black women develop and sustain coping self-efficacy; and 3) how does self-efficacy improve the coping experiences of Black women.

This study’s exploration of the relationship between coping self-efficacy and religious involvement among Black women fills an important gap in existing literature. While earlier research explores the phenomenological link between religious and spiritual beliefs and cognitive appraisals, no study to my knowledge has placed self-efficacy at the center of inquiry for understanding Black women’s coping.

Findings from this study offer the following insights into the stress and coping experiences of Black women: 1) racism and racial bias are dominant stressors for Black women; 2) religion and spirituality offer important beliefs, perspectives, and strategies that positively impact Black women’s ability to cope; 3) religion and spirituality act as a buffer
against the negative impact of racism and oppression on Black women’s self-efficacy and feelings of self-worth; and 4) the Black church provides a sacred community for Black women in which they feel affirmed, validated, and supported.

This study has important implications for clinical social work in that it offers clinicians a framework from which to apply a culturally-relevant and spiritually-integrative treatment approach in working with Black women. As more Black women seek professional counseling, often with Pastors and church leaders increasingly recommending therapy, it is important for clinicians to be knowledgeable of the importance and salience of religious involvement in their clients’ lives, and to be skillful in integrating spirituality-sensitive practices in their work with Black women. This study’s exploration of the relationship between self-efficacy development and religious involvement among Black women makes an important advancement in religious coping research. Findings from this study can lead to: 1) an increased understanding of the religious coping experiences of Black women; 2) development of new and improved interventions aimed specifically at strengthening self-efficacy among Black women; and 3) improved collaborations between mental health providers and the Black church community.

**Literature Review**

In this literature review, I present findings from existing research which has explored the psychological and physical impact of everyday racism; the role of religion, spirituality and the Black church tradition in the coping experiences of Black women; and the impact of mindful religious coping on neurological functioning, and its implications for spiritually-integrative social work practice. Additionally, I explore the following five theories which provide the conceptual framework for this study: stress and coping theory, social cognitive
theory, religious coping theory, Black feminist theory, and critical race theory. In discussing the literature presented, I also explore critical gaps in existing research, and identify ways in which this dissertation study seeks to contribute to knowledge in those areas.

**Stress Experience of Black Women**

The stress experience of many Black women is complex, multi-layered and oppressive. While Black women face everyday stressors similar to those experienced by women of all backgrounds, they must do so while also navigating the interlocking effects of race, gender, and social class (Collins, 2009; Hamilton-Mason, Hall, & Everett, 2009; Kwate & Goodman, 2015). Black women face the “double jeopardy” of racism and sexism - being both Black and female (Holder, Jackson, & Ponterotto, 2015; St. Jean & Feagin, 1998; Thomas, Speight, & Witherspoon, 2008).

Regular experiences of racism and racial bias is an unfortunate reality for many Black women. Oppression is experienced on multiple levels including individual (e.g., bias, microaggressions, individual racism); institutional (e.g., structural inequality, institutional racism); and cultural as Black women are bombarded with negative, societal messages about their identity and worth (Collins, 2009; Shorter-Gooden, 2004).

Researchers who have studied coping in response to racism find that these stressors are often more challenging to manage than generalized stress (Plummer & Slane, 1996). For Black women, racism presents an added challenge to an often already complex and burdensome stress experience. The cumulative impact of racism-related stressors can be damaging to one’s sense of agency, personal control and coping self-efficacy – making it difficult for Black women to mobilize the inner resources needed to effectively cope.
Chronic exposure to racism can have a deleterious effect on the emotional, psychological and physical well-being of Black women (Anderson, 2013; Kreiger, et al., 2010; Szymanski & Lewis, 2016; Cooper, Thayer, & Waldstein, 2013; Woods-Giscombe & Lobel, 2008). The biopsychosocial model of racism (Clark, Anderson, Clark, & Williams, 1999) suggests racism in its varying forms (e.g., racial bias, microaggressions, and discrimination) impacts every aspect of one’s existence and experience, making it a significant threat to the overall functioning and well-being of people of color.

In the subsequent sections, I review the literature on the physical and psychological impact of racism-related stressors for Black women. I then discuss the role of religion and spirituality for this group and its function as a critical coping resource in response to oppressive stressors.

**Impact of Racism on Physical Health.** There is a well-established link between chronic stress and physical illness (Kreiger, et al., 2010; Mitchell, 2015). Substantial literature documents the disproportional impact of stress-related health issues, such as hypertension, diabetes and obesity on Black Americans (Brondolo, Love, Pencille, Schoenthaler, & Ogedegbe, 2011; Krieger, et al., 2011). According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2017), African Americans continue to have among the highest rates of hypertension in the United States, and lower rates overall of hypertension control. Moreover, epidemiological research shows Black women experience greater morbidity from stress-related illnesses than their White counterparts (Mitchell, 2015; VanderWeele, et al., 2017). Data from the National Center for Health Statistics indicates life expectancy for Black females at birth is 78.3 years compared to 81.3 years for White females.
(Arias, Xu, & Kochanek, 2019). Comparably, life expectancy for Black males at birth is 72.0 years compared to 76.4 years for White males.

While some of the health disparities experienced by Blacks can be attributed to systemic inequalities such as limited access to quality health care and physician bias, individual experiences of racism have been shown to have a direct, negative impact on one’s physical health and overall well-being. Prior research which has specifically examined the impact of chronic racism on physical health has established its association with poorer health outcomes among Black women, including high blood pressure and hypertension (Brondolo, Love, Pencille, Schoenthaler, & Ogedegbe, 2011; Mitchell, 2015); adverse cardiovascular health (Cooper, Thayer, & Waldstein, 2014; Jolly, Vittinghoff, Chattopadhyay, & Bibbins-Domingo, 2010; Roger, Go, & Lloyd-Jones, 2011); and compromised reproductive health outcomes, including low birth rate and infant mortality (Sealy-Jefferson, Slaughter-Acey, Caldwell, Kwarteng, & Misra, 2016).

Researchers have also explored the “weathering effect” of racism and its impact on the overall health, vitality, and quality of life for Black women (Geronimus, Hicken, Keene, & Bound, 2006; Simons et al., 2016). According to the “weathering hypothesis”, Black women face increased risk for accelerated aging, and premature illnesses as a result of chronic exposure to interpersonal and institutional racism, and socioeconomic deprivation. Schmeer & Tarrence (2018) found for Black Americans stress-related weathering may begin as early as childhood.

**Impact of Racism on Psychological Health.** Chronic stress exposure poses a significant threat to an individual’s psychological and emotional well-being. For many people, stress produces intense emotions such as sadness, anger, and anxiety. When stressors
remain unresolved and/or become chronic, psychological problems may develop. Depression, for example, is the leading cause of mental illness in women, and it is often triggered or exacerbated by stress (Kwate & Goodman, 2015; Woods-Giscombe & Lobel, 2008). For Black women, the risk of depression can be elevated because of persistent exposure to systemic racism and oppression (Hill & Hoggard, 2018; Szymanski & Lewis, 2016).

The psychological impact of oppressive stressors such as racism is especially injurious, and damaging to one’s sense of self. Research shows chronic exposure to racism is associated with general psychological distress (Hill & Hoggard, 2018; Kwate & Goodman, 2015; Szymanski & Lewis, 2016); intrusive thoughts (Chou, Asnaani & Hofmann, 2012; Gaylord-Harden & Cunningham, 2009; Hill & Hoggard, 2018; Miranda, Polanco-Roman, Totypes, & Valderrama, 2013); lowered confidence and feelings of worthlessness and helplessness (Hill & Hoggard, 2018; Thomas & Gonzalez-Prendes, 2009); sleep difficulty (Hicken, Lee, Ailshire, Burgard, & Williams, 2013); and depression (Adkins, Wang & Elder, 2009; Chou, Asnaani & Hofmann, 2012; Gaylord-Harden & Cunningham, 2009; Hedden, 2015; Miranda, Polanco-Roman, Totypes, & Valderrama, 2013; Szymanski & Lewis, 2016; Woods-Giscombe & Lobel, 2008).

Among the psychological risk factors associated with racism, depression is shown to be especially prevalent. Previous research indicates racism-related stress has consistently been linked to depressive symptoms in Blacks even after accounting for confounding variables such as general stress, SES, and other demographic factors (Banks, Singleton, & Kohn-Wood, 2008; Chou, Asnaani, & Hofmann, 2012; Gaylord-Harden & Cunningham, 2009; Miranda, Polanco-Roman, Totypes, & Valderrama, 2013; Schulz, et al 2006). These
findings are further supported by longitudinal studies which demonstrate the experience of racism preceded the depressive symptoms in study participants, and therefore reinforces the finding that racism is a risk factor for depression (Holt, Roth, Huang, Park, & Clark, 2017). Researchers have also explored racism-related vigilance (e.g., hypersensitivity, anticipation of racist encounters) and indicate its association with depressive symptomatology (Himmelstein, Young, Sanchez, & Jackson, 2015; LaVeist et al, 2014; Williams & Mohammed, 2009).

Persistent encounters of racism have also been linked to feelings of powerlessness; a decreased sense of personal control and agency; lowered confidence and decreased feelings of self-efficacy (Grote, Bledsoe, Larkin, Lemay, & Brown, 2007; Hill & Hoggard, 2018; Thomas & Gonzalez-Prendes, 2009). Among Black women, Thomas and Gonzalez-Prendes (2009) found the external reality of racism and inequity (e.g., lack of access to valued resources such as income, education, and employment status), leads to an internal experience of powerlessness over the causes or solutions to one’s problems, and thereby contributes to lowered self-confidence and coping self-efficacy. According to Thomas and Gonzalez-Prendes, “the feeling of powerlessness creates barriers that limit, or even deny, individuals’ capacity to implement solutions to problems - while simultaneously increasing an internal sense of helplessness, low self-efficacy, and physical and emotional distress (2009, p. 93).”

As prior research indicates, the psychological impact of persistent racism is pervasive and can have a debilitating effect on one’s overall well-being. Due to this, it is critical to understand how religion and spirituality mitigates the consequences of chronic exposure to racism. In the next section, I will review research which suggests religious involvement provides a buffer against the harmful, psychological and physical effects of racism.
**Religion & Spirituality as a Buffer.** For many Black women, religion and spirituality is an essential element in their everyday coping experiences, including when dealing with racism-related stressors. Black women consistently report spiritual practices such as prayer, scripture reading and participation in faith communities serve as meaningful and central coping resources (Bacchus & Holley, 2004; Boyd-Franklin, 2010; Hamilton-Mason, et al., 2012; Harris-Robinson, 2006; Lewis-Coles, & Constantine, 2006; Mattis, 2002). Prayer, for example, has been heavily researched and found to be effective in helping Black Americans to cope with a range of socioemotional and relational stressors, including racism, (Greer & Abel, 2017; Holder, Jackson, & Ponterotto, 2015; Holt, Roth, Huang, Park, & Clark, 2017; Lewis-Coles, & Constantine, 2006; Rowles & Duan, 2012) as well as varying health conditions and illnesses (Cooper, Thayer, Waldstein, 2014; VanderWeele et al., 2017).

Existing research indicates religion and spirituality provides a buffer against the negative psychological and physical impact of racism-related stressors (Forrest-Bank & Cuellar, 2018; Morton, Lee & Martin, 2017). The link between religious involvement and psychological and emotional well-being among Blacks is well supported in previous studies (Greenfield, Vaillant, & Marks, 2009; Oats & Goode, 2012) including those which examine the depression risk associated with chronic exposure to racism (Hill & Hoggard, 2018).

Racism can negatively impact one’s view of self as the discrimination and mistreatment is based on one’s ethnic and racial identity, leaving some to experience self-doubt, inadequacy, and a devaluing of their overall worth (Grote, Bledsoe, Larkin, Lemay, & Brown, 2007; Thomas & Gonzalez-Prendes, 2009; Tourse, Hamilton-Mason & Wewiorski, 2018). Religious involvement can have a positive impact on mental health by helping to enhance an individual’s self-appraisals which are often directly threatened by racism.
Cognitive appraisals are central to the coping process as they help to shape the emotional and behavioral response to stress. Appraisals represent the beliefs individuals hold about the meaning of the stressor, the threat it poses, and their ability to manage it. Black women consistently report religious involvement, specifically prayer and a personal connection to God, helps to strengthen their perceptions of themselves, and the beliefs they hold regarding their ability to cope with stress (Forrest-Bank & Cuellar, 2018; Rowles & Duan, 2012).

In addition to its positive impact on the psychological risks associated with racism, existing research also suggests religion and spirituality acts as a buffer against the harmful consequences of racism-related stress on physical health (Cooper, Thayer, & Waldstein, 2014; Holt, Roth, Huang, Park, & Clark, 2017; Labbe & Fobes, 2010). Specifically, prayer has been linked to lower blood pressure, enhanced heart rate variability, and lower cardiovascular disease (Cooper, Thayer, & Waldstein, 2014; Holt, Clark, Debnam, & Roth, 2014; VanderWeele, et al., 2017).

In one study, Cooper, Thayer, & Waldstein (2014) studied the impact of prayer on the cardiovascular health of African American women coping with racism. The study found 49% of African American women reported using prayer as a coping strategy for both racism-related experiences, as well as more general stress. Among those with higher levels of spirituality and religiosity, researchers found favorable levels of cardiovascular reactivity at rest and during racism recall, including decreased diastolic blood pressure (DBP) and increased heart rate variability (HRV).

The combined empirical research on the psychological and physical impact of prayer supports this study’s assumption that religious involvement remains a powerful coping strategy for Black Americans as they encounter racism-related stress. In the next section, I
provide a closer examination of the role of religion, spirituality, and the Black church in the lives of Black women, and discuss its collective impact as a coping resource.

**Religion and Spirituality in the Lives of Black Women**

Throughout history, religion and spirituality has played a vital role in the lives of many Black Americans (Harvey, 2011). According to data from the U.S. Religious Landscape Survey, 88% of Black Americans report they are absolutely certain God exist; 76% report praying at least daily; and 53% report attending religious services at least once a week (Pew Forum, 2014; Pew Forum, 2009). As this data indicates, Black Americans are a highly religious group with many relying on religion and spirituality as an essential element of their everyday lives.

Religion, as defined by Canda and Furman (2010), represents an institutionalized pattern of values, beliefs, symbols, behaviors, and experiences that are oriented toward spiritual concerns, shared by a community, and transmitted over time in traditions. Spirituality refers to an individual’s belief in the sacred and transcendent nature of life and the manifestation of these beliefs in a sense of connectedness with others (e.g., God, ancestral spirits, nature) and a quest for goodness (Mattis, 2002).

While religion and spirituality are distinct experiences, there is an important phenomenological link between these constructs. As many theorists have noted, religion can evoke spiritual experiences; and similarly, spirituality can encompass religious as well as non-religious expressions (Canda & Furman, 2010). Existing literature on Black women’s conceptualizations of religion and spirituality indicate that many of them identify with a view of spirituality that is interconnected with religious involvement (Bacchus & Holley, 2004; Harris-Robinson, 2006; Mattis, 2000). Religious involvement can be defined as private
devotion to God (i.e., spirituality), and public participation in church (i.e., religion) (Ellison, 1993). Researchers have found for many Black women, religiosity (i.e. church attendance, Bible study and prayer) is identified as a means of spiritual expression and experience (Bacchus & Holley, 2004; Harris-Robinson, 2006; Mattis, 2000; Musgrave, Allen, & Allen, 2002). Consistent with previous studies, religious involvement is used interchangeably with the terms religion and spirituality throughout this dissertation study (Mattis, 2000).

Additionally, the discussion is focused on Christianity and the Black church tradition as a reported 78% of Black Americans identify as Protestant and 3 in 4 Black Protestants indicate their affiliation with a historically Black church as reported by the U.S. Religious Landscape Survey (Pew Forum, 2014). Moreover, Black women are placed at the center of this dissertation study as a reported 66-87% of Black church congregants are women. Additionally, while pastoral leadership in Black churches is still male dominated, an increasing number of Black women are enrolling in seminary training programs, and becoming leaders of their church congregations (Ngunjiri, Gramby-Sobukwe, & Williams-Gegner, 2012).

**Role of the Black Church**

Historically, the Black church has held prominence as a central element in the lives of many Black Americans, providing individual spiritual needs, and broader social and community supports (Harvey, 2011). According to data from the U.S. Religious Landscape Survey, 53% of Blacks report weekly attendance at a traditional Black church and another 36% report attendance at least once or twice a month (Pew Forum, 2014). The term Black church refers to U.S. Protestant churches with predominately Black congregations and culturally distinct patterns of worship, theological and social teachings, and community
engagement (Lincoln & Mamiya, 1990).

The Black church holds significance as a religious institution founded by Black for Blacks. At the time of its inception, it was the only social institution of any kind that was built, financed and controlled entirely by Blacks (Harvey, 2011). Many in the Black community continue to identify the Black church, with its historical and cultural significance, as an essential part of their lives, and a meaningful coping resource (Boyd-Franklin, 2010; Taylor & Chatters, 2010). The Black church provides both a theological and sociocultural perspective from which to address the complex stressors many Black women face, including racism and oppression (Harvey, 2011; Taylor & Chatters, 2010).

Historically, the Black church has advanced a form of liberation theology which acknowledges the injustices Black Americans have endured, and seeks to address it through social activism and empowerment (Eugene, 1995; Johnson, 2015). Black liberation theology was developed in the 1960s during the height of the Civil Rights era by Black theologians and social activists who believed the church and Christianity should assume a critical role in challenging racism, and easing the suffering of the oppressed (Cone, 1995; Pinn, 2007). Black ministers had grown increasingly frustrated with White church leaders for their silence on the everyday experience of racism, and for their failure to join them in the fight for social justice. These ministers believed authentic Christianity required deep concern for the well-being of all people, and an active engagement toward addressing societal ills.

Leaders of the Black liberation theology movement spanned across all Black church denominations and included notable ministers such as Adam Clayton Powell, L.K. Williams, Reverdy C. Ransom, and James Walker Hood (Barnes, 2006; Harvey, 2011). Black liberation theology was intellectualized by the scholarship of James Cone and became
recognized as a critical framework with his publication of *A Black Theology of Liberation* in 1970. This work was followed in the same year by the formation of the Society for the Study of Black Religion from which other religious scholars continued to advance and legitimize Black religious thought (Pinn, 2007).

Predominately Black Churches today incorporate tenets of Black liberation theology through their religious and spiritual teachings; political and community activism; and the provision of vital social programming such as tangible aid, financial literacy training, youth development activities, health initiatives, counseling, and marriage enrichment programs (Boyd-Franklin, 2010; Lewis & Truelar, 2008; Taylor & Chatters, 2010). Comparing the social activism of the Black church to other congregations, Oates and Goode (2012) argue “the Black church’s strong record of involvement in civic and political activities substantially eclipses that of White congregations (p.42).”

The responsiveness of the Black church to emerging community needs continues to be a defining characteristic of many ministries and church leaders. The Church’s involvement in addressing critical social issues makes it a meaningful coping resource for religiously-involved individuals. In the next section, I discuss how religious and spiritual beliefs and practices emerge as a helpful coping strategy for many Black women.

**Religious Involvement as a Coping Resource**

In addition to its spiritual function, Black women have consistently reported that religious involvement is essential in helping them to cope with stress. Previous research has examined the role of religious and spiritual beliefs in meaning-making and coping appraisals for Black women (Bacchus & Holley, 2004; Harrison-Robinson, 2006; Mattis, 2002).
In a study of the religious coping experiences of Black women, Mattis (2002) found religion and spirituality plays a critical role in shaping the ways in which Black women construct meaning in times of adversity. According to the study, Black women often use religious and spiritual beliefs to help them interpret life events and stressful situations in ways that facilitate positive coping. In response to adverse or difficult life circumstances, Mattis found religion and spirituality allows Black women to do the following: use transcendent and spiritual sources of knowledge to gain insight; interrogate and accept the reality of their circumstances; identify, confront and transcend limitations; engage in spiritual surrender; identify and grapple with existential questions and life lessons; recognize their purpose and destiny; and achieve growth.

In a related study, Bacchus & Holley (2004) explored how professional Black women use religion and spirituality to cope with work-related stress. The study found that spirituality aids Black women in their coping by providing a framework from which to appraise stressful events – helping the women to consider meaning and purpose, and to decipher if a stressor is positive and leads to growth, or if it is negative and potentially damaging. Study participants also reported using prayer, meditation, and inspirational readings to gain personal strength, inner peace, and guidance in the management of work-related stress, including microaggressions and racism.

In another study, Harris-Robinson (2006) found prayer and belief in God to be a primary and preferred coping resource among Black women dealing with high-level stress and adversity. Respondents reported using problem-focused and emotion-focused coping (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), as well as a third form of coping which Harris-Robinson recognizes as spiritual-focused coping. The study found spirituality offers Black women an
accessible way of dealing with chronic stressors such as racism, where they might otherwise feel little or no agency and control to affect change in their situations. Spirituality offers the women a sense of peace and calm, as well as strength and courage in responding to stress and adversity.

Collectively, the literature demonstrates the reliance on religion and spirituality by Black women in response to stress. The effectiveness of this coping strategy is not limited to subjective beliefs. There exists documented evidence in neurobiology of the impact of these coping strategies which I discuss in the next section.

**Neurological Impact of Religious Coping**

Beginning with the work of William James in the 1900s, researchers have long been interested in the relationship between religious and spiritual experiences and neurological functioning. In recent years and with the popularity of mindfulness and meditative practices, there has been a resurgence of interest in the study of spiritually-contemplative practices and mindful religious coping. There is particular interest in the impact of these practices on brain functioning, and its implications for spiritually-integrative social work practice. The neuroscience of religion, also known as neurotheology, maintains that global belief systems have a measurable impact on the brain, and that there is a neurological basis for religious, spiritual, and mystical experiences (Dixon & Wilcox, 2016; Horgan, 2003).

Meditation refers to the focusing of one’s mind, thought and activity for the purpose of achieving clarity of thoughts, emotional calm, and a sense of stability. Meditation is rooted in religious traditions and beliefs, and is widely used in Buddhism, Hinduism, and Jewish and Christian faiths. Within religious and spiritual contexts, meditation is often used
as a path for self-realization, enlightenment, and/or to achieve closeness to God/Higher Power.

Mindfulness, a form of meditation which involves the psychological process of focusing one’s attention on present experiences, has grown in popularity and has many secular uses including in clinical treatment (e.g., mindfulness-based stress reduction, Gestalt therapy). Mindfulness can be helpful in resolving psychological distress, and reducing stress and worry as individuals practice being present in the moment, and avoid ruminating over the past or worriedly anticipating the future.

**Efficacy of Spiritually-Based Meditation and Mindfulness.** Spiritually-based meditation and mindfulness involves practices such as contemplative prayer and worship, and focused reflection on God – elements which many Black women regularly practice through individual devotion and the collective worship experience in the Black church. Prior research indicates spiritually-based meditation has a positive impact on physical, psychological, and neurological health (Davis & Hayes, 2011; Plante, 2011; Vaillant, 2013). Physical health benefits include: reduced blood pressure, decreased cardiovascular reactivity, and improvement in one’s overall health (Walsh & Shapiro, 2006; Yi, 2017). Psychological benefits include: improved emotional regulation and stress tolerance; decreased anxiety and depression; enhanced self-perceptions; and an increased sense of overall well-being (Plante, 2011; Yi, 2017).

Research on the neurological impact of spiritually-based meditation indicates that practices such as contemplative prayer positively impacts brain functioning by influencing individuals’ cognitive appraisals of stressful events, and enhancing their self-perceptions. Spiritually-based meditation has been linked to improved perspective taking and coping self-
efficacy (Dixon & Wilcox, 2016; Horgan, 2003). Coping self-efficacy, which refers to an individual’s beliefs in their ability to overcome stress in spite of the inherent difficulty, is thought to be a major determinant of coping behaviors and outcomes (Holt, Roth, Clark, & Debnam, 2014; Oates & Goode, 2012).

Bandura (1997), a major theorist on self-efficacy, considered the association between self-efficacy and neurology, writing “efficacy beliefs like all other beliefs do not exist apart from neural systems; a host of microsensory, perceptual, and information-processing activities gives rise to a judgement of personal efficacy (p. 4).”

In a seminal study on the neurological impact of spiritual and religious practice, Beauegard & Pacquette (2006) studied brain activity in Carmelite nuns during moments of contemplative prayer and religious study, and compared it to their brain activity during rest and baseline periods. Using blood and oxygen level imaging, researchers were able to measure activity levels in the brain during moments of religious and spiritual focus and found positive changes in the regions of the brain responsible for conceptual thinking (temporal lobes); self-awareness (parietal lobes); emotion control and meaning-making (limbic systems); and reasoning, personality, and executive functioning (frontal lobes). For example, researchers found decreased activation in the parietal lobes during meditation and prayer, which may help facilitate transcendent experiences and the ability to move beyond an awareness of self to a deeper sense of God during moments of intense prayer. The study also found activation in the limbic system as participants read and studied religious text, suggesting the act of mediating on sacred text may help to produce positive emotions in some individuals.
In a related study, researchers Newberg and Waldman (2006) examined the brain scans of study participants and found a positive correlation between an active spiritual life (e.g., regular periods of prayer, devotion to God) and optimal changes in brain functioning. Using brain scans and survey data of the participants’ religious and spiritual practices, researchers were able to establish a link between intense prayer and meditation, and substantive changes in the structure and function of the brain. The study found engaging in as little as 12 minutes of daily meditative practice correlates with increased brain activity in the hippocampus and frontal areas of the brain which can result in increased positive emotions and enhanced reasoning. As the researchers discovered, improvements in brain functioning were indicated for participants whose meditation was focused on positive thoughts of a loving God. Researchers found severe beliefs and the experience of God as punishing or punitive had a negative influence on brain function.

Findings from these studies help to validate the significance of religion and spirituality in people’s lives, and the important role it plays in enhancing cognitive functioning, as well as psychological and physical well-being. These empirical findings can also help inform the work of social work practitioners seeking to integrate clients’ religious and spiritual identities into clinical treatment, as discussed in the next section.

**Importance of Neurological Findings for Social Work.** Research on the neurological benefit of religious coping has significant implications for social work practice as it reinforces the importance of spiritually-integrative treatment. While acknowledgment and respect for the religious and spiritual identities of clients is an expressed value within NASW Code of Ethics, some clinicians continue to struggle with its full integration in clinical practice. Neurotheology research establishes legitimacy for religion and spiritually
as an effective coping resource. Findings on the neurological impact of positive religious coping may lead more clinicians to accept the significance and utility of spiritually-integrative treatment as a meaningful tool for improving clinical outcomes among religiously-involved clients. Incorporating the religious and spiritual identities of clients into clinical treatment offers the following benefits: 1) ensures social workers are taking a more holistic approach to clients’ care; 2) helps to foster positive religious coping skills; 3) helps to identify and disrupt negative religious coping patterns; 4) helps to improve overall client outcomes.

Historically, social work as a helping profession has its roots within European religious tradition as reflected in the religiously-laden undertones of the profession’s values, and its early emphasis on charity work for the poor (Canda & Furman, 2010). In an effort to professionalize the field, social work moved away from its religious roots beginning in the 1920s. Over the last thirty years, there has been a resurgent effort within social work to recognize the salience of religion and spirituality in people’s lives, and the importance of clinicians being able to skillfully engage with these elements in clinical practice (Canda & Furman, 2010; McInnis-Dittrich, 2014; Xu, 2016).

This dissertation study seeks to contribute to the body of clinical research from which social workers can deepen their understanding of religious coping among Black women, and develop practice knowledge and skills in effective clinical treatment with this population. In this section, I have provided a foundation for understanding the racialized stress experience of Black women and its impact on their physical, psychological and neurological well-being. In the next section, I situate the stress and coping experiences of Black women within key theoretical frameworks.
Theoretical Perspectives

The conceptual framework for this study is developed from the following theoretical perspectives: stress and coping theory, social cognitive theory, religious coping theory, critical race theory, and Black feminist perspective (Figure 1). In this section, I will outline the core tenets of each theory and discuss its implications for this study. The strengths and limitations of these traditional theoretical models and their applicability to the experience of Black women will also be discussed.
Stress and Coping Theory. Stress and coping research spans across many decades with the earliest approaches for understanding stress emerging from biology and psychoanalytic ego psychology (Anderson, 1991). These traditional models of stress focused on stimulus-response and antecedent-consequence relationships wherein the emphasis is placed on a linear, unidirectional sequence from stressor to consequence. A major shift in the conceptualization of stress and coping began to occur with the seminal work of Richard Lazarus (1984) in which he explored a more transactional, process-oriented model for understanding stress. Lazarus advanced the argument that the trajectory from stress to consequence is mediated by cognitive and behavioral processes which become determinants for the adaptational outcomes that are reached.

This dissertation study applies Lazarus & Folkman’s transactional model of stress and coping theory (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). This model describes a process comprising of three components: stress, appraisal and coping.

Stress is defined as a particular relationship between the person and the environment that is appraised by the individual as taxing and endangering to his or her well-being. There are four types of stressors: acute stressors; stressor sequences; chronic intermittent stressors; and chronic persistent stressors. Acute stressors are time-limited events such as a job interview or minor surgery. Stressor sequences are series of events which occur over an extended period of time resulting from an initiating event such as job loss, divorce or bereavement. Chronic intermittent stressors are ongoing events which occur at different times (e.g., once a day, once a month) such as relationship problems or work conflict. Chronic persistent stressors are events which may or may not be initiated by a discrete event and which persist consistently for a long time (e.g., racism or poverty).
The second component of stress theory deals with *appraisals*. Appraisals represent the cognitive process by which individuals attribute meaning to stressors based on the threat it poses and their ability to respond. Appraisals are central to the coping process. The appraised meaning of a stressful event helps to shape the individual’s emotional and behavioral response.

Appraisals are categorized as either primary or secondary. Primary appraisals represent an evaluation of the threat or challenge presented by a stressor. Primary appraisals can include judgments that an encounter is irrelevant (no impact on well-being); benign-positive (preserves or enhances well-being or promises to do so); or stressful. Stressful appraisals can take three forms: harm/loss, threat, and challenge. *Harm/loss* refers to damage the person has already sustained; *threat* refers to anticipated harms or losses; and *challenge* refers to events that hold the possibility for mastery or gain. Secondary appraisals are judgments regarding what can be done in response to the stressor. Secondary appraisal is a complex evaluative process in which the individual considers the coping options available; the likelihood that a given coping option will accomplish the intended result; and the likelihood that the individual can apply the coping strategy effectively. Primary and secondary appraisals together determine which events the individual will identify as stressful and the ways in which he or she will respond to stress.

The third component of stress theory deals with *coping*. Lazarus and Folkman (1984) describe coping as constantly changing cognitive and behavioral efforts to manage specific external and/or internal demands that are appraised as taxing or exceeding the resources of the individual. Coping includes efforts to manage stressful demands regardless of outcome. Lazarus and Folkman emphasize coping should not be equated with mastery over the
environment as certain sources of stress cannot be mastered. Effective coping under these conditions is the individual’s ability to tolerate, minimize, accept or ignore the stressor.

There are two types of coping styles: emotion-focused and problem-focused (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Emotion-focused coping is more likely to occur when there has been an appraisal that nothing can be done to modify harmful, threatening, or challenging environmental conditions. Emotion-focused coping includes strategies such as selective attention, minimization, avoidance and distancing. Problem-focused coping occurs when a stressor is appraised as being amenable to change. Problem-focused coping involves defining the problem, identifying alternative solutions, and implementing a course of action.

**Significance of Stress and Coping Theory for Black Women.** Stress theory is a useful framework from which to consider the stress and coping experiences of Black women. Stress theory places emphasis on coping as a process, and highlights the important role of appraisals and meaning-making in determining coping outcomes. For Black women, there is a strong parallel between the appraisal component of stress theory, and the everyday meaning-making that occurs within their religious and spiritual identities. An important function of religion and spirituality for many Black women is that it offers a set of beliefs that helps them to interpret the events in their lives, and make meaning of those events in ways that fit within their religious schemas. The religious meaning-making that occurs within healthy, secure attachments to God (Pargament, 1997, 2013), often helps to facilitate positive emotions (e.g., acceptance, forgiveness, hopefulness) which can help individuals successfully manage stressful events. This dissertation study applies the framework of stress theory to explore the coping experiences of Black women, and the significance of cognitive appraisals and global beliefs in their coping process. This study is especially interested in
understanding Black women’s religious meaning-making as it may provide a pathway to self-efficacy, a concept that emerges from Bandura’s social cognitive theory which I discuss in the next section.

**Social Cognitive Theory.** Developed by Bandura (1986, 1997), social cognitive theory deals with the interaction between individuals and their social environment. Social cognitive theory describes the reciprocal process by which the beliefs, behavior and support of people within an individual’s social environment have influence on the individual. Self-efficacy, a central construct of social cognitive theory, refers to one’s beliefs in their ability to achieve certain outcomes in spite of the difficulty faced. Bandura recognizes self-efficacy as the single most important personal factor in behavioral change. Bandura (1997) writes of self-efficacy “after people become convinced they have what it takes to succeed, they persevere in the face of adversity and quickly rebound from setbacks (p.80).” According to Bandura, self-efficacy beliefs influence the courses of action people choose to pursue; how much effort they put forth in given endeavors; how long they will preserve in the face of obstacles and failures; their resilience to adversity; whether their thought patterns are self-hindering or self-aiding, how much stress and depression they experience in coping with taxing environmental demands; and the level of accomplishments they realize.

Self-efficacy beliefs are developed through 4 key areas: enactive mastery experience; vicarious experience; verbal persuasion; and physiological and affective states. *Enactive mastery experience* refers to the role previous successes play in helping to promote or sustain an individual’s belief in his/her capabilities. *Vicarious experience* refers to an individual’s appraisal of his/her capabilities in relation to the attainments of others. *Verbal persuasion* refers to the encouragement received from others and the role it plays in strengthening one’s
own beliefs in his/her ability to achieve desired outcomes. *Physiological and affective states* refer to judgments regarding one’s capabilities based in part on his/her somatic response to a particular situation.

**Significance of Self Efficacy for Black Women.** Coping self-efficacy has particular relevance for Black women given the chronic and oppressive nature of the stressors they experience. Black women often face stressors and oppressions that are systemic, and difficult to change. These experiences may at times leave Black women feeling disempowered which can negatively impact their efficacy beliefs and coping outcomes (Grote, Bledsoe, Larkin, Lemay, & Brown, 2007). Research indicates chronic exposure to stressful events can erode one’s feelings of personal control, mastery and confidence (Grote, Bledsoe, Larkin, Lemay, & Brown, 2007; Thomas & Gonzalez-Prendes, 2009).

For Black women who regularly experience stressors which are complex, oppressive and threatening to one’s sense of self, it is important to explore elements which help them to develop and sustain coping self-efficacy in spite of these challenges. This is a critical area of research that has to-date been grossly understudied. Self-efficacy offers a critical framework for understanding the ways in which religious involvement and the Black church experience may help Black women to cope with stress.

Given the central role of the Black church in the lives of Black women, and the emphasis of Black church theology on empowerment and liberation from oppression (Harvey, 2011; Paris, 1985; Taylor & Chatters, 2010), I was particularly interested to explore the ways in which the church functions to develop and sustain coping self-efficacy among its members. This dissertation study seeks to fill an important gap in existing literature by: 1) exploring the role of religion, spirituality, and the Black church experience in fostering
coping self-efficacy among Black women, and 2) examining the impact of self-efficacy in helping Black women to thrive in spite of racism-related stressors.

To my knowledge, no study has placed self-efficacy at the center of inquiry for understanding Black women’s coping as this study does. Previous studies (Howseepian & Merrluzzi, 2009; Perez & Smith, 2015) which have explored the association between self-efficacy and religiosity have focused primarily on White study samples, and as such have not considered the context of complex, racism-related stressors. I summarize two earlier related studies in the next section.

**Prior Research on Self-Efficacy and Religion.** Perez & Smith (2015) studied religious coping among White, female cancer patients and found that three measures of well-being (physical, functional, and social) were positively associated with intrinsic religiousness (i.e., internalization of faith as the primary motive in life; reliance on religion to guide day to day decisions), and mediated by coping self-efficacy. The study found patients high in intrinsic religiousness had a higher sense of self-efficacy for coping with cancer. Self-efficacy for coping with cancer has been associated with positive health outcomes such as less fatigue, decreased depressive symptoms, and higher quality of life among cancer patients (Albrecht, et al., 2013; Merluzzi, Nairn, Hegde, & Martinez Sanchez, 2001; Philip, Merluzzi, Zhang, Heitzmann, 2013).

In another study involving White, middle-class, cancer patients, Howseepian & Merrluzzi (2009) found a significant association between religious involvement, social support and self-efficacy. This research suggests involvement in a faith community may provide greater social support, or the perception of social support, which may increase patients’ confidence that they can manage cancer-related difficulties. Howseepian &
Merruzzi (2009) found that the perception of social support was also present for patients who do not attend church regularly, but have strong religious beliefs and feel connected to God or a Higher Power, and therefore perceive themselves to be part of a larger, global community of believers.

Although these prior studies have established an important link between religiosity and self-efficacy among Whites, there have been no studies to my knowledge which has looked specifically at the unique stressors faced by Black women or men, and the role of the Black church in fostering self-efficacy among this group. Despite Blacks being consistently identified as a highly religious group, research in this area has been grossly overlooked. This dissertation study seeks to fill a critical need for new research exploring the association between religious involvement and coping self-efficacy among Black women. In the next section, I apply Bandura’s model for self-efficacy development to existing literature on the Black church experience.

**Self-Efficacy Development and the Black Church.** Given the threat racism-related stressors pose to the self-efficacy of Black women, it is important to explore resources, supports and processes which may help promote and sustain coping self-efficacy among this group. This dissertation study explores the Black church as a viable pathway for self-efficacy development among Black women.

Bandura’s self-efficacy model identifies four essential elements through which self-efficacy is developed. Drawing from existing literature on the Black church experience, I have identified important parallels between Bandura’s model and Black women’s spiritual development as experienced within the Black church. First, *enactive mastery experience* is reflected through a principle, therapeutic function of the Black church which is to encourage
and uplift the spirit of Black people by helping them to: 1) recognize the presence of God in their struggle; 2) reflect on their past experiences in overcoming difficulty with the help of God; and 3) reinforce a belief in their ability to cope with life’s challenges (Eugene, 1995). The Black church has long responded to the struggle of Black Americans in this country beginning with the atrocity of chattel slavery. The early Black church was developed during this time as a place for slaves to gather on plantations for spiritual guidance and support as existing religious institutions were closed to them (Harvey, 2011; Paris, 1985). Historically Black churches continue to be sources of strength in the Black community and provide an opportunity for spiritual renewal and empowerment (Boyd-Franklin, 2010; Lewis & Truelar, 2008).

Second, *vicarious experience* is likened to the social support experience within the Black church. The Black church is often recognized as a therapeutic community for Black women as it provides an opportunity for the women to find connection, support and validation (Boyd-Franklin, 2010; Eugene, 1995; McRae, Thompson, & Cooper, 1999). The support among women in Black churches is such that the triumphs and victories for one church member holds meaning and significance for other women in the church. Ellison (1993) writes of the Black church experience “the particular quality of fellowship generated within these religious groups may build feelings of self-esteem and personal empowerment” (p.1029).

Third, *verbal persuasion* is parallel to a central function and mission of the Black church which is to encourage the churchgoer through empowering and uplifting sermons. As one theologian writes, “preaching needs to be encouraging such that the self-esteem of Black people is enhanced by understanding the message of Scripture (Harris, 1995, p.92).” An
additional reinforcement of verbal persuasion in the Black church is the call and response
tradition in which the congregation joins in unison to recite an affirmation at the direction of
a church leader (Eugene, 1995). Bandura (1997) writes “people who are persuaded verbally
that they possess the capabilities to master given tasks are likely to mobilize greater effort
and sustain it (p.101).”

Fourth, physiological and affective states are related to the charismatic nature of the
Black church experience in which overt expressions such as shouting, dancing and “letting
the spirit take over” are commonplace (Eugene, 1995; Hamilton, Sandelowski, Moore,
Agarwal, & Koenig, 2012). These zealous expressions often act as an outlet for pent-up
anguish for which Black women may have limited opportunities outside of the church
environment to express. The physiological and emotional expressions that are experienced
within the church setting can help to revive and renew efficacy beliefs among Black women.

Given the many, potential ways religious involvement and the Black church
experience may contribute to self-efficacy development and positive coping overall, it is
important to understand Pargament’s model of religious coping, which I discuss in the next
section.

the religious coping framework considers the ways in which religion and spirituality help
individuals cope with stress. Religious coping is defined as the use of religious beliefs or
behaviors (e.g., prayer, seeking strength from God) to prevent or alleviate the negative,
emotional consequences of stressful life circumstances, and to facilitate problem solving
functions: discovering meaning following difficult life events; establishing a sense of control
through belief in God’s divine control; experiencing comfort in spite of the precariousness of
the world we live in; achieving intimacy and closeness with God and others; and adjusting to
life changes and transformation.

The religious coping framework includes three styles of coping used by individuals
with a religious and/or spiritual orientation. These coping styles are self-directing, deferring
and collaborative. **Self-Directing** refers to a religious coping style in which the individual,
not God, is responsible for solving problems. The individual takes on an active problem-
solving stance. Persons who ascribe to the self-directing coping style believe that God has
given them the freedom and resources needed to direct their own lives. **Deferring** refers to a
religious coping style in which individuals appear to defer the responsibility of problem-
solving to God. Rather than actively solving problems themselves, persons who ascribe to
the deferring coping style wait for solutions to emerge through the active efforts of God.
Here God, not the individual, is viewed as the source for solutions. **Collaborative** refers to a
religious coping style in which responsibility for the problem-solving process is held jointly
by the individual and God. In this coping style, neither the individual nor God is seen as a
passive participant. Here both participants are viewed as active contributors working
together to solve problems.

Religious coping theory distinguishes between positive and negative religious coping.
**Positive religious coping** reflects a secure relationship with God and a belief that life events
hold meaning. Patterns of positive religious coping might include elements such as
redefining the stressor as potentially beneficial and looking to religion for help in letting go
of feelings such as anger, hurt and fear. According to Pargament, collaborative and self-
directing coping styles are examples of positive religious coping. **Negative religious coping**
reflects a less secure relationship with God and a tenuous and ominous view of the world. Pargament identifies the deferring coping style as an example of negative religious coping. Patterns of negative religious coping might include elements such as redefining the stressor as a punishment from God or expressing feelings of confusion and dissatisfaction with God.

Significance of Religious Coping Theory for Black Women. Religious coping theory is an especially relevant framework for Black women given the salient role religion and spirituality plays in their everyday lives. This dissertation study applies religious coping theory in order to explore how the religious beliefs and practices of many Black women intersect with the coping process, resulting in the many psychological benefits generally associated with religious coping. Religious coping has been shown to help foster positive self-perceptions, reduce stress, increase adjustment to life changes, and enhance overall well-being (Pargament, 2011).

While religious coping theory may be a useful framework for understanding the coping experience of Black women, it is important to recognize its limitations as a theoretical model which was developed for and validated on a predominately White study sample. Religious coping theory, for example, differentiates between positive and negative religious coping styles. Generally, self-directive and collaborative coping styles are considered to be indicative of a high-functioning individual. Whereas, a religious coping response in which the individual defers the coping action to God is often assumed to be a sign of weakness, and therefore considered a negative coping response. This polarization may be incompatible with the lived experience of Black women in certain situations. A more culturally-sensitive interpretation of religious coping might suggest that a Black woman who is faced with a systemic and oppressive stressor demonstrates strength by 1.) recognizing when a stressor is
beyond her ability to change and 2.) asking for help from a Higher Power whom she believes can affect change in her circumstances.

In order to avoid these mischaracterizations when applying religious coping theory to the unique stress experiences of Black women, it is helpful to conjoin this model with Critical Race Theory and Black Feminist Perspective for added context. These two frameworks are discussed in the next sections.

**Critical Race Theory.** Critical race theory (CRT) is a theoretical perspective which originated in the 1980s from the works of legal scholars of color who were concerned about racial subjugation in society and its impact on the justice system, specifically the perpetuation of racial oppression through the law (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). CRT later expanded beyond the field of law, and is now applied to a wide range of disciplines in order to expose racism in its many forms. CRT is a useful framework for understanding the pervasiveness of racism in every area of society, and its impact on the everyday experiences of communities of color.

There are three core tenets of CRT. First, race is a social construction with no significant biological basis. The categorization of people by race allows racial hierarchies to be formed and systems of racism to be created, as privileges, status and access to resources is given to some groups and not others. Second, racism is ordinary, pervasive, and a permanent reality of everyday living. Racism is embedded in our social structures and perpetuated in our systems and institutions. There is little incentive to change racism as it benefits the White majority group. Third, oppression is not limited to racism. Persons of color hold multiple and intersecting identities (e.g., race, sex, class, nationality, sexual orientation), and therefore are likely to experience layered oppressions based on these marginalized identities.
Addressing and challenging racism requires a multi-dimensional approach which acknowledges intersectionality.

**Significance of Critical Race Theory for Black Women.** CRT is aligned with the social justice aims of social work in that it seeks to expose racism, and elevate the voices of the oppressed. Daftary (2018) writes “CRT is a strong and necessary framework for social work research, reinforcing ethical constructs and values that set the field of social work apart from other helping professions (p.14).”

CRT underscores the significance of this study’s exploration of the pervasiveness of racism for Black women, its impact on their overall well-being, and the women’s own narratives of how religious involvement makes a meaningful difference in their ability to cope with the range of micro and macro aggressions that are constant in their lives. Black Feminist Perspective further contextualizes the racialized, stress and coping experiences of Black women, and it is discussed in the next section.

**Black Feminist Thought.** Black feminist thought (BFT) is a theoretical perspective which examines the intersections of race, class and gender in Black women’s lives, and the oppressions that have permeated Black female existence (Collins, 2009). In acknowledging these oppressive experiences, Black feminist thought promotes activism, resistance, and empowerment for and among Black women. BFT prioritizes the lived experience of Black women as a valued epistemology and way of knowing. The framework is intentional about sharing Black women’s narratives as told by Black women, thereby rejecting narratives of Black women that have too often been constructed and told by others, and as a result are often erroneous and stereotypical (Howard-Hamilton, 2003).
Black feminist thought consists of three key premises: 1) Black women’s lived experiences and ways of knowing are a valid source of knowledge and should be trusted; 2) Black women have a shared, collective understanding based on the unique experiences of Black identity, yet the experiences of individual Black women may differ based on the intersection of other diverse identities (e.g., class, religion, age, and sexual orientation); 3) increased awareness of oppression and injustice should lead to active engagement in social movements, and individual efforts to resist, challenge and change systems of injustice.

**Significance of Black Feminist Thought for Black Women.** Similar to CRT, Black Feminist Theory offers a useful framework for understanding and contextualizing the racialized stress and coping experience for Black women. A core theme of BFT is to empower persons of color to define themselves and reject the definitions imposed on them by others. Relatedly, the research purpose and methodological aim of this study seeks to center the voice of Black women in narrating their own coping stories. Even as this group is identified as a highly religious group, literature on how religion and spirituality impact the coping experiences of Black women is often drawn from theoretical frameworks and measurement scales developed by and for Whites (Hill & Pargament, 2003). This study aims to create new knowledge based on Black women’s epistemology and ways of knowing. Milner (2017) writes, “knowledge can and should be generated through the narratives and counter-narratives that emerge from and with people of color (p. 391).”

**Summary**

In this chapter, I have explored existing literature on racism-related stressors and its impact on the physical and psychological well-being of Black women. Next, I reviewed relevant research on the role of religion, spirituality and the Black church in Black women’s
I then explored the empirical findings that underscore the importance of religion and spirituality in the neurobiology of coping. Finally, I have identified the conceptual framework for this study which provides the basis for exploration of self-efficacy as a meaningful element in Black women’s coping, and for which religious involvement and the Black church may be a pathway for its development. I also identified two critical theoretical frameworks which expand our understanding of the role of race in coping: critical race theory and Black feminist perspective. In the next chapter, I discuss the methodological approach for this dissertation study.

**Methodology**

The purpose of this study was to explore how religious involvement, and the Black church tradition, helps Black women to develop and sustain coping self-efficacy in the face of racism-related stressors. Black women regularly face stressors which are complex, oppressive, and threatening to their overall well-being, and sense of coping self-efficacy. Despite the significance of self-efficacy to the coping process, and the complex threats against it for Black women, there appear to be no empirical studies to my knowledge which have placed self-efficacy at the center of inquiry for Black women’s coping. In this chapter, I discuss the research design and methodology of this study, and its alignment with the overall research goal of understanding coping self-efficacy among religiously-involved Black women.

**Study Design & Rationale**

This study used an inductive, qualitative design to explore coping self-efficacy among Black female churchgoers in a large, metropolitan area in the Northeast region. The exploratory design, and grounded theory data analysis methods, were intentionally chosen for
this study in order to allow new theory to emerge from the data. The rationale being that exploratory, qualitative research is well suited for studies such as this one in which there has been limited or no prior research, and little is known about the phenomenon being studied (Maxwell, 2005). Grounded theory research allows the participant voice to be centered, and the participant narrative to be the data point from which new knowledge and theory is developed (Creswell, 2007).

Focus group interviews were selected as the primary mode of data collection for this study. The focus group model offered several important benefits to the study participants, myself as the researcher, and to the overall goals of the study.

First, the use of focus groups allowed me to make a connection with study participants and establish trust in ways that would not have been possible with quantitative research (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). Given the history of exploitation toward the Black community in medical and social science research (Washington, 2008), and the history of pathologizing religious experience in the fields of psychology and mental health (Hathaway, 2011), it was important to me that I establish trust with this study population of religiously-involved Black women.

Second, using a focus group model allowed me to have close engagement with the study participants as the data was being collected. This proved especially helpful in ensuring clear understanding of the research questions; giving participants the opportunity to ask clarifying questions; and giving me as the researcher the opportunity to follow up with important prompts.

Third, the focus group model allowed study participants to engage with each other in meaningful ways. Through the focus group discussions, the women in this study were able
to discuss their thoughts, feelings and experiences in a setting with other Black women who hold shared identities and similar experiences. Some of the participants reported that the focus group discussions offered them an experience that mirrored a church experience, and the feelings of connection, validation, and support that the women regularly derive from being in fellowship with other Black women in the church.

In addition to the focus group interviews, I also collected supplemental data from each participant using a Brief Participant Questionnaire and a Stress and Coping Questionnaire. These tools are discussed later in the chapter in the section on Data Collection.

**Research Questions**

This research study specifically explored the following research questions:

1) How does religious involvement help Black women to cope with stress?

2) How does the Black church experience help Black women to develop and sustain coping self-efficacy?

3) How does self-efficacy impact the coping experiences of Black women?

**Definition of Terms**

Working definitions for the major concepts explored in this study are described below:

- *Stress*: defined as a particular relationship between the person and the environment that is appraised by the person as taxing and endangering to his or her well-being (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).

- *Coping*: refers to the constantly changing cognitive and behavioral efforts to manage specific external and/or internal demands that are appraised as taxing or exceeding the resources of the person (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).
• **Coping self-efficacy:** defined as an individual’s beliefs regarding his or her ability to manage stress (Bandura, 1997).

• **Religious coping:** the use of religious beliefs or behaviors (e.g., prayer, seeking strength from God) to facilitate problem solving and prevent or alleviate the negative emotional consequences of stressful life circumstances (Pargament, 1997, 2007, 2011).

• **Religious involvement:** the use of private religious devotion (e.g., prayer, meditation, scripture reading) and public religious participation (i.e., church attendance) (Ellison, 1993).

• **Religion:** An institutionalized pattern of values, beliefs, symbols, behaviors, and experiences that are oriented toward spiritual concerns, shared by a community, and transmitted over time in traditions (Canda & Furman, 2010).

• **Spirituality:** refers to an individual’s belief in the sacred and transcendent nature of life and the manifestation of these beliefs in a sense of connectedness with others (e.g., humans, spirits, and God) and a quest for goodness (Mattis, 2002).

• **Black church:** refers to U.S. Protestant churches with predominately Black congregations and culturally distinct patterns of worship, theological and social teachings, and community engagement (Lincoln & Mamiya, 1990).

• **Racism-related stressors:** refers to transactions between individuals or groups and their environment that are the result of perceived racism and that are believed to tax existing personal resources and threaten well-being (Harrell, 2000).
- **Black women:** persons who identify as being of African or Afro-diasporic descent. While *Black women* is sometimes presented as lowercase, for the purpose of this study and its social justice aims, the term *Black* is capitalized.

**Sampling Plan & Inclusion Criteria**

This study employed a purposeful sampling plan (Creswell, 2007) that focused on recruiting Black, female churchgoers who regularly attend a predominately Black, Protestant church within a large, metropolitan area in the Northeast region. Study participants were recruited from area Baptist, Methodist, Pentecostal and non-denominational churches. The designation of these particular denominations was consistent with those identified by Lincoln and Mamiya (1990) and Harvey (2011) as representing the Black church tradition.

The targeted sampling size for this study was 24-32 study participants, which is consistent with the recommended size for focus group research (6-8 participants per group) (Krueger, 2000; Marshall & Rossman, 2006). The initial plan for this study included four focus groups. During the recruitment phase, a fifth focus group was added to accommodate the overwhelming response to the study.

Inclusion criteria for participation in the study included self-report of the following: 1) must be a Black female age 18 or older; 2) must be English speaking; 3) must regularly attend worship service at a predominately Black church (i.e., at least 1-2 times a month); and 4) must regularly engage in some form of personal religious devotion outside of church (e.g., prayer, worship, scripture reading). Persons who did not attend a predominately Black church or those who attend a predominately Black church fewer than once a month were excluded from the study.
The specificity of the sampling plan was an intentional effort to draw prospective study participants who would be most knowledgeable of the Black church experience and the religious coping phenomenon being studied. This purposeful sampling strategy is commonly employed in qualitative research, particularly grounded theory designs (Creswell, 2007). Participants in qualitative research should also be available and willing to participate, and be able to speak with clarity and depth about their experiences. These are all measures I explored in my pre-screening of prospective participants, and which I discuss later in this chapter.

**Recruitment Strategy**

To assist in my recruitment efforts, I consulted with gatekeepers within the local Black church community. Gatekeepers, as defined by Marshall and Rossman (1999), are persons in authority at a given research site who can permit or deny access to potential study participants. Maxwell (2005) posits that the use of gatekeepers in qualitative research is an important first step in gaining access to hard-to-reach populations and/or populations that may have some distrust of outsiders. This is especially relevant in Black communities where there has been a history of exploitation of this population in research (Washington, 2008).

Within the Black church community, pastors and church leaders are often the gatekeepers who are able to extend or limit access to outsiders looking to engage church members in research. I consulted with three local pastors and ministers who are known to me personally and professionally, and who have direct connections and access to my study population. This group of gatekeepers were helpful to me in important ways.

First, I sought their assistance in identifying four local Black churches that would be appropriate for use in my study. In addition to stratifying my sample to include participants
from each of the four targeted Black church denominations (i.e., Baptist, Methodist, Pentecostal, and Non-denominational), I also sought to diversify my sample by including churches with varying characteristics (e.g., congregation size; socioeconomic status of church members; educational level of the pastor; and churches with female leadership). By including a group of nonhomogeneous Black churches in my study, I was able to draw from a more diverse sample of Black women and therefore strengthen the credibility of my research findings. The gatekeepers I consulted with held intimate knowledge about the local Black church community and helped me to identify the most diverse sample of churches. Moreover, as a Black Christian woman myself, I worked with my gatekeeper cohort to help me identify churches that I did not have any personal involvement with; therefore, allowing me to avoid dual relationships and minimize the threat of bias.

In addition to helping me to identify churches that would be well-suited for my study, my gatekeeper cohort helped me to establish contact with the leaders of the four identified churches. The gatekeepers either formally introduced me to the identified church leaders, or spoke with church leaders on my behalf to share information about my study and to inform the church leaders that I would soon be contacting them to discuss the study further.

Meetings with Pastors. After receiving assistance from the gatekeeper cohort in establishing initial contact, I followed up with each Pastor by sending a letter detailing the purpose and benefits of my study, and requesting a meeting with the church leader to discuss their church’s potential involvement in the study (Appendix D).

All of the Pastors expressed interest in the study and agreed to meet either by phone or in person. During the meetings, I took the opportunity to explain the study; discuss my interest and motivation in studying the topic; and to invite their church’s involvement in the
study. I asked the Pastors for permission to actively recruit eligible study participants from within their churches, and to conduct the focus group sessions in a private meeting space inside the church. I asked each church leader to identify a preferred method by which I could conduct recruitment efforts within the church. The following options were presented to the church leaders: distribution of study flyers to church members; a verbal church announcement about the study; printed study announcement made through the church bulletin; or an email posting to congregants using the church’s listserv. One Pastor asked me to submit a recruitment video to be played along with other video announcements at the church.

In each meeting, I found the Pastors to be welcoming and supportive. For example, in one church meeting, the female, Co-Pastor (i.e., spouse of the Senior Pastor) asked if she could pray for me. I welcomed the prayer, and she proceeded to ask me if I had a particular need in my life for which she should pray. I asked her to pray that I would be successful in completing my dissertation research and that my study would be a blessing to others. The Co-Pastor held my hand as she prayed, and in her prayer, she made mention of our slave ancestors and remarked that my research and accomplishments would be like a dream fulfilled for them. I found the experience to be meaningful and profound, and the Pastor’s gesture to be one of genuine care and concern. I believe this experience provided me a glimpse of the kind of deep caring Pastors have for their congregations and visitors.

**Field Visits to Churches.** After meeting with the Pastors and securing their agreement to participate in the study, I planned a field visit to each of the four churches during a Sunday worship service. The church visits, which were conducted before study recruitment began, were important for two key reasons.
First, the visits provided me with a sense of the church atmosphere and spiritual teachings. The visits offered me an indication of what the congregants might regularly experience as church members. Observations made during the field visits gave me a framework for contextualizing and understanding some of what the study participants would later share in the focus group sessions, such as the exuberant and cathartic nature of praise and worship; the opportunities for connection and fellowship with fellow church members; and the inspirational and socially-conscious sermon content.

Second, the church visits provided me with an opportunity to introduce myself and the research study to potential participants. During all but one of the church visits, the Pastor introduced me to the congregation and endorsed my research study - encouraging eligible church members to sign up as participants. At one church, the Pastor invited me to the pulpit to speak directly before the congregation and explain the purpose and goals of my study. At two other churches, the Pastors invited me to stand in the congregation as they introduced me and the research opportunity. This approval by church leadership was important in helping prospective study participants to establish trust with me from the beginning. The Pastors were gracious in their remarks about me and the importance of my research. One Pastor made a reference to my study again later in the service during his sermon as he spoke about the importance of seeking mental health care in addition to drawing on spiritual supports to cope with life’s problems.

**Pre-screening & Addition of Fifth Focus Group.** Prospective study participants were instructed to contact me and I conducted a pre-screening by phone to determine their eligibility for the study (Appendix C). During the pre-screening, I discovered that some of the women who reached out to me were from churches other than the four designated
churches identified by the gatekeepers, and for whom I had established agreement with the church Pastors. I learned from these women that they had heard of the study through an email list maintained by one of the four pre-selected church ministries. The email list extended beyond that individual church ministry to the broader Black church community in the region. I explained to interested persons that the study was limited to members from the four pre-selected churches. However, as the number of calls increased from persons outside of the designated four churches, I talked with my dissertation committee about the possibility of adding a fifth focus group that would be of mixed design and made up of women from Black churches outside of the four original church sites. I explored with my dissertation chair the potential value of a fifth focus group. Those benefits included: increased sample size; broader church representation; and the opportunity to address what I experienced as an ethical challenge of turning away potential participants who wanted to share their religious coping narratives, and otherwise met the inclusion criteria. My chair agreed, and a fifth focus group session was added. I was able to reach out again to previous callers and invite their participation in this mixed focus group. The mixed focus group included religiously-involved Black women who represented four different Black church congregations, bringing the total number of churches represented in this study to eight.

All eligible study participants were emailed a follow-up letter formally inviting their participation in the study (Appendix E). The letter included a statement of the study purpose and details pertaining to the date and location of their focus group session. A letter of informed consent (Appendix F) was also sent to eligible participants with instructions for them to review it and bring a signed copy with them to the focus group session. Informed consents were also on hand at the start of each session.
Study Participants

A total of thirty-two women participated in the study. Three more women agreed to participate in the study, but did not show up for their scheduled focus group session. The mean age for study participants was 45, with the women ranging in ages from 24-75. Only 23% of the study participants were married; 55% identified as single and 16% were divorced. Regarding education levels, 20% of the study participants completed some college or earned an associate’s degree, 35% earned a bachelor’s degree, and 8% earned a graduate degree. The annual household income for study participants was as follows: 42% reported earning up to 60K; 26% reported earning 60-100K; and 13% reported earning over 100K (Table 1).

The women reported experiencing a range of stressful events in the past year, including but not limited to racism, financial challenges, health-related issues and family or relational stressors (Figure 2; Table 2). The women, representing four different Christian denominations, identified as highly religious and spiritual with 77% indicating they attend church weekly; and 87% indicating they regularly engage in some form of religious devotion outside of church (e.g., prayer, scripture reading, praise and worship) (Table 4). Study participants largely reported feeling confident in their ability to cope with stress, and identified religious involvement as a significant factor in their feelings of confidence (Table 3).
Table 1: Study Participants (N=32)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age (mean, range)</td>
<td>45 (24-75)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marital Status</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Married/Partnered</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Single</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Divorced</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Widowed</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High School/GED</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some College</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Associates</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bachelors</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Master’s/Graduate Degree</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Missing/Unknown</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Type of Job</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manager/Administrator</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Educator</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Journalist</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health Care Professional</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Service Provider</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Administrative Support Person</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Civil Service Worker</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IT Professional</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unemployed</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Retired</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Annual Household Income</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>$0-20K</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$20-40K</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$40-60K</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$60-80K</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$80-100K</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Over $100K</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Missing/Unknown</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Figure 2: Participants’ Stress Experiences

Participants’ Stress Experiences
(Participants’ report of biggest stressors faced in the past 3 months)

- Social Stressors: 25%
- Financial Stressors: 20%
- Health-related Stressors: 22%
- Family/Relational Stressors: 33%
Table 2: Participants’ Stress Experiences

(Participants’ report of biggest stressors faced in the past 3 months)

FINANCIAL STRESSORS
Car trouble
Housing issues
Financial problems
    Debt
    Tax issues
Unemployment

FAMILY/RELATIONAL STRESSORS
Death of family member/close friend
Relationship issues/marriage problems
Conflicts with friends
Family problems
Family changes
    Empty nester/transition to college
    Relocation/distance from family
    Caring for aging parent
Parenting issues/concerns

HEALTH-RELATED STRESSORS
Health issues
    Disability
    Weight gain
    Surgery
    Chronic illness
Issues with healthcare
Health issues for family member
    Caring for sick child
Addiction problems
Addiction problems in family
Mental health problems for family member
    Suicide risk

SOCIAL STRESSORS
Educational problems/school-related stress
Work-related stressors
    Extensive travel
    Project demands/volume of work
    Career changes/job search
    Starting new business
Feelings of underachievement
Legal issues
Racism
Table 3: Coping Attitudes and Beliefs

(1-5 = not at all-extremely)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>Mean</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Belief that stressors can be changed or fixed</td>
<td>4.50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feelings of personal control over stressors</td>
<td>3.27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feeling confident in one’s ability to cope</td>
<td>4.23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Importance of religious involvement in one’s feelings of confidence</td>
<td>4.68</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 4: Religiosity and Religious Coping Patterns

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Denominational Affiliation</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Baptist</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African Methodist Episcopal (AME)</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pentecostal</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-Denominational</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other (United Methodist)</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Grew up in the church (attending church since childhood)</strong></td>
<td>87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Joined church as an adult</strong></td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Frequency of church attendance during a typical month</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 or more times a month</td>
<td>77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 times a month</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Twice a month</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Frequency of personal religious devotion outside of church (e.g., prayer, scripture reading, praise and worship, fasting, Christian broadcasts)</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All the time</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frequently</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Occasionally</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Helpfulness of religious involvement in one’s efforts to cope with stress</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Likert scale, 1-5 = not at all-extremely)</td>
<td>Mean 4.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Data Collection: Interviews and Instruments

Two-hour focus group sessions were held at each of the four identified churches, and the fifth focus group was held on a local college campus. All study participants received a $30 cash stipend in appreciation for their participation in the focus group interviews.

A semi-structured Interview Guide (Appendix L) was used for each focus group discussion. The Interview Guide was developed based on the goals of the study, and existing research literature on stress and coping, and religiosity among Black women. Questions and follow-up probes were open-ended and a relaxed interview format was followed. The Interview Guide was intended to provide the necessary structure to address key research questions, while also offering flexibility for the conversation to evolve in directions that felt important to the study participants. Semi-structured interview guides are commonly used in qualitative research to maximize the opportunity for authentic and reflective participant voice (Padgett, 2008). Following the first focus group session, slight modifications were made to the interview guide to improve clarity of two of the research questions based on feedback received from this initial group.

In addition to the focus group interviews, each study participant was asked to complete two brief questionnaires designed specifically for this study. These questionnaires included: 1) a Brief Participant Questionnaire (Appendix H) which was used to gather information on the demographics of study participants; and 2) a Stress and Coping Questionnaire (Appendix I) which explored the types of stress events experienced by study participants, as well as the religious coping strategies used by this group. The questionnaires were administered as participants arrived for the focus group sessions and before the interviews began. Similar to the Interview Guide, the questionnaires were developed based
on the key research objectives. The questionnaires were intended to offer supplemental data that would help to contextualize the interview data.

**Data Analysis Strategies**

The primary data collection for this study were the focus group interviews. This study used grounded theory methods (Corbin & Strauss, 2014) to analyze the focus group data. Each of the five focus group sessions were audio-taped. Audio files were then sent to a professional transcriber who transcribed all interviews verbatim.

Prior to beginning data analysis, I listened to the full audio file of each focus group interview. Next, I read each individual transcript. I then re-read each transcript while simultaneously listening to the corresponding audio file. This involved process of listening and reading allowed me to stay close to the data and immerse myself in the content (Maxwell, 2005). It also allowed me to review the transcripts for accuracy and make necessary corrections. Corrected transcripts were then uploaded to the research software program QSR International NVIVO 9 for data management and analysis.

Grounded theory methods involve multiple rounds of analysis known as open, axial and selective coding (Corbin & Strauss, 2014). The first step in my analysis was open coding and it involved reading each transcript line by line, and identifying and assigning labels to describe the themes of each line or sections of lines. The next step in my analysis was axial coding. Axial coding involved classifying and grouping together related themes, while focusing in on what emerged as the core phenomenon. The last stage of analysis was selective coding and this involved an integrative process of identifying relationships between emerging themes, thus leading to the development of a mid-range theory that would help explain the core phenomena.
In exploring thematic relationships within and between categories, I constantly held the key research questions in mind. At each point of analysis, I asked myself how does this category and sub-category help me to understand the core phenomenon of coping self-efficacy among this group of religiously-involved Black women. Throughout the coding schema, I sought to validate the emerging thematic relationships by searching for confirming and disconfirming examples within the data. This thorough, analytical process of coding was employed until saturation, which Creswell (2007) describes as the point at which “analysis produces no new codes or categories, and when all of the data has been accounted for in the core categories of the grounded theory paradigm (p. 290).”

The grounded theory data analysis yielded the following major themes: 1) I Have To Build; 2) The Bottom Line; 3) God Is Connected To Our Struggle; 4) It’s In My Genes; 5) I Can’t Do This Alone; 6) His Track Record; 7) Knowing Sunday’s Going To Come; and 8) Help Me Journey Through (see Table 5). These themes provide a culture-specific, mid-range theory of coping self-efficacy for Black women.

In addition to the focus group interviews, the Brief Participant Questionnaire and the Stress and Coping Questionnaire provided important supplemental data which helped to confirm and contextualize what the participants shared in the focus groups interviews. The Questionnaires included questions about the participants’ demographics; patterns of religiosity and religious coping; and general coping beliefs and perspectives. A simple data analysis was used to calculate the aggregate mean of these variables (Tables 2-4).

**Credibility, Trustworthiness, and Rigor**

Establishing trustworthiness is a critical factor in qualitative studies. Trustworthiness refers to the credibility and validity of research findings and its accuracy in representing the
experience of study participants (Creswell, 2007; Padgett, 2008). The biggest threats to validity in qualitative research are bias and reactivity (Maxwell, 2005; Corbin & Strauss, 2014). Bias refers to the selection of data that fits the researcher’s existing theory or preconceptions, and reactivity refers to the influence of the researcher on the setting or individuals studied. Both are compromising to the integrity and validity of the research findings. There are several steps I took to minimize the validity threats and strengthen the trustworthiness of my research. These included memo writing, member checking, and the use of rich participant quotes in the reporting of data.

**Memo Writing.** Memo writing, a recommended strategy in qualitative research, is a process in which the researcher writes down ideas and reflections about the evolving theory throughout various stages of the research. Corbin & Strauss (2014) identifies memo-writing as a vehicle for shaping emerging analysis and as a reflective tool for maintaining self-awareness about researcher bias and assumptions.

I found memo writing to be helpful throughout the various stages of my research, including after field visits to churches, after each focus group session, and throughout the coding process. During field visits, I wrote research memos to document my observations of the church atmosphere and experience. I noted elements such as praise and worship; the sharing of testimonies; fellowship and connection among church members; and sermon content. During the coding phases, I wrote research memos to reflect on and track my coding decisions, including observations I was making about the data, and questions I’d like to consider for future research.

Memo writing was also used during the preliminary stages of this study as I conceptualized the research topic, and my connection to the phenomenon being studied. I
used memo writing to pay attention to my own identity as the researcher and the risk for researcher bias and reactivity. Researcher subjectivity is recognized as a significant threat to the trustworthiness of qualitative data (Maxwell, 2005). Memoing throughout the research process can be helpful in minimizing this risk. My own personal background is that of a religiously-involved Black woman who was raised by a Christian minister and grew up in the church. As an adult woman, I am a member of a local church and I have some church leadership experience. These personal factors are an important element of my identity as a researcher, and gave me insider status with the study population. There were advantages and risks to having a shared identity with the study participants, as well as a personal familiarity with Black church experience.

Benefits included being able to quickly build trust with study participants, and helping them to establish a sense of comfort and openness with me and each other. This led to the participants’ open sharing and vulnerability in discussing their own spiritual challenges, as well as critiques of the church, in some cases. I believe the trust I was able to quickly establish with the participants allowed them to feel safe in sharing their challenges and vulnerabilities. The participants understood that I have respect for spirituality, religion and the church, and the meaningful role it plays in people’s lives. The participants trusted that I would not be judgmental of them or their churches based on what they shared.

Additionally, being a member of the community being studied gave me the advantage of understanding key elements of church and faith experience at the start of this research project. For example, as an insider, I understood certain expressions and colloquialisms the women used to describe aspects of Black religious experience. Johnson-Bailey (1999) argues that for Black women interviewing Black women, the identity of the
researcher can positively impact data analysis and interpretation, as well as participants willingness to share, as there are “fewer margins to mitigate, which allows the interview to be more intimate (p.669).”

In addition to the benefits of my insider status, there were certain disadvantages including increased risks for researcher subjectivity and bias. It was important for me to find an appropriate balance between establishing comfort and trust with the participants, and maintaining boundaries and objectivity as a researcher. I sought to minimize the risk of researcher bias and reactivity by not deviating from the role of interviewer during the focus groups, and by paraphrasing and summarizing participant statements during the focus group interviews as much as possible. The techniques of paraphrasing and summarizing during data collection were used as a form of member checking to make sure I had participant agreement about what I believed the participants to be saying, instead of relying on my own interpretations which could be subject to bias. Memo writing helped me to maintain a sense of self-awareness throughout the research process, including during data collection and analysis.

**Member Checking.** Member checking is a process which occurs post data analysis and it involves the researcher taking specific descriptions or themes back to study participants to determine whether the participants feel the findings or interpretations are accurate (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The strategies for member checking in this study included: paraphrasing with study participants during the interviews; and member checking with the cohort of gatekeepers. During individual meetings with members of the gatekeeper cohort, I presented the major themes of the study and relevant quotes to determine if the identified themes appeared to be consistent with their experiences. I was able to establish
agreement with the findings by the gatekeepers. Member checking was also established with my dissertation chair who I worked closely with throughout the coding process, and who reviewed the major themes that emerged. My dissertation chair identifies as a religiously-involved, Black woman with a professional background in stress and coping research with this population. My chair read the list of major themes and the related quotes and offered agreement in most cases, with the exception of one instance when she provided a slightly different interpretation of a participant’s comment.

Maxwell (2005) identifies member checking to be the “single most important way of ruling out the possibility of misinterpreting the meaning of what participants say and do and the perspective they have on what is going on, as well as being an important way of identifying your own biases and misunderstandings of what you observed (p.111).”

**Participant Quotes.** Another effort to establish trustworthiness in this study involved the intentional use of participant quotes that were rich and thick in description, and that provided the reader with a vivid account of the participants’ thoughts, feelings and experiences. Participant quotes are the primary vehicle for data presentation in qualitative research, and through these quotes the researcher has the opportunity to engage with issues of credibility and trustworthiness of the study findings (Maxwell, 2005).

In an effort to provide data that was most accurate to the participants’ experience, and to enhance the credibility of study findings, I made the decision to present data content as it emerged from the participants. Throughout the coding process, I used the participants own words and language to develop categories and themes. The major themes of the study were labeled using the actual words and phrases of the participants (Table 5). This is known in
qualitative research as in-vivo labeling (Marshall & Rossman, 2006) and it is a strategy used to capture participants’ actual words and language, thus ensuring accuracy and credibility.

**Establishing Rigor.** Another critical factor in qualitative research is establishing rigor. Rigor refers to the use of multiple forms of data collection and multiple levels of data analysis in order to enhance the veracity of the research study and improve its credibility. Maxwell (2005) argues that rigor “reduces the risk of chance associations and of systemic biases due to a specific method, and allows a better assessment of the generality of the explanations that one develops (p.112).”

By triangulating my sources of data collection, I was able to address issues of rigor in my study. Triangulation is a validity-testing strategy which involves collecting information from a diverse range of individuals using a variety of methods (Maxwell, 2005; Padgett, 2008). This study used a combination of focus group interviews, questionnaires, and field visits to triangulate the findings and establish rigor.

Focus group interviews were the primary mode of data collection for this study. Brief participant questionnaires were used to provide important supplemental data which was helpful in confirming and contextualizing the focus group findings. Field visits were conducted before formal data collection began, and proved useful in my being able to confirm what the participants would later describe about their church experiences in the focus group interviews. Collectively, the focus group interviews, participant questionnaires, and field visits, provided a rigorous, triangulated model of data collection for this study.

**Ethical Considerations**

This dissertation study was reviewed and approved by the Simmons College Institutional Review Board to ensure it met the standards for ethical research and protection.
of human subjects. Ethical considerations related to this research include its associated risks and benefits.

**Study Risks.** At the start of the study, participants were informed they may experience some risks associated with this study. These risks as explained to them were minimal and included a breach of confidentiality and possible emotional distress. First, participants could face a breach of confidentiality as a result of third-party access to the research data (i.e., professional transcribers) and/or study participants divulging personal information about focus group discussions with others outside of the group. Second, participants may experience some emotional distress as they think about and discuss stressful situations. Additionally, some participants may be uncomfortable sharing their thoughts in a group setting, particularly if their views are unpopular and/or critical of the church or church leadership. Some participants may worry that their comments may be related back to church leadership and/or spread around the congregation.

**Protection against Risks.** There were several steps I took throughout the study to minimize risks. First, all study participants were required to sign a confidentiality agreement stating that they would not share personal information discussed in the focus group sessions with persons outside of the group (Appendix G). The study participants welcomed the confidentiality agreement. Some participants remarked that within the women’s ministry meetings and gatherings at their churches, there is a shared commitment to creating safe spaces for honest and supportive conversations with each other.

Several additional precautions were taken to minimize the risk of breached confidentiality. These included obtaining a confidentiality agreement from the professional transcriber, and securing all confidential, study-related materials (e.g., signed consents,
contact information, surveys) in a locked file cabinet in my home. Additionally, study findings were reported in aggregate with no recognizable links to the identity of individual participants or churches.

The risk for emotional distress related to this study was expected to be minimal given the study’s focus on identifying ways religious involvement has helped study participants to cope with stress. However, as a clinician with more than 15 years of experience, I was paying attention for any signs of emotional distress among study participants and was prepared to provide support and assistance as needed. At the end of the focus group sessions, I provided all study participants with a referral listing of local mental health professionals (including Christian counselors) in the event a study participant was interested in counseling supports after the session (Appendix J).

**Study Benefits**

Study participants were believed to have benefited from their involvement with this study in two important ways. First, the opportunity to discuss their thoughts, feelings, and experiences with other Black, Christian women in a supportive environment was identified as a positive experience for the study participants. Many of the participants reported that they felt good about the opportunity this study gave them to share their personal stories of triumph and victory over stress. The participants also reported that they felt inspired and encouraged by the stories and testimonies shared by others in the focus groups. A few of the participants remarked that the focus group dynamic had parallels to women’s discussion events in the church, and was itself an example of the ways in which religious involvement, particularly fellowship with others, helps them to develop and sustain self-efficacy.
Second, the study participants enjoyed knowing that their participation in this research study would contribute to new knowledge and increased understanding of the religious coping experiences of Black women, and the strengths they derive from God and the church. A few of the women thanked me for engaging in this research, and for highlighting the mental health and spiritual needs of their communities.

Methodology Conclusion

Based on this methodology, critical data was collected on the religious coping experiences of Black women. In the next chapter, I present the “voice” of the study participants in the presentation of findings.

Findings

Focus group interviews with 32 religiously-involved Black women aged 24-75 were conducted to explore religious coping among this group. The participants were drawn from eight historically Black churches within a large, metropolitan area in the Northeast region. This study sought to answer the following key questions: 1) how does religious involvement help Black women to cope with stress; 2) how does the Black church experience help Black women to develop and sustain coping self-efficacy; and 3) how does self-efficacy improve the coping experiences of Black women. Religious involvement is operationally defined in this study as the use of private religious devotion (e.g., prayer, meditation, scripture reading) and public religious participation (i.e., church attendance) (Ellison, 1993). Throughout this paper, religious involvement is used interchangeably with religion and spirituality, in order to be consistent with previous studies that have examined how Black women understand these concepts (Mattis, 2002). Coping self-efficacy is defined in this study as an individual’s beliefs regarding his or her ability to manage stress (Bandura, 1997).
Through this study, I was particularly interested in exploring how Black women develop and maintain positive, self-efficacious beliefs in the face of stress experiences such as racism, sexism and classism which are complex, oppressive, and damaging to one’s sense of self. My guiding assumption for this study was that religious involvement, which is understood to be an important element in the lives of many Black Americans (Boyd-Franklin, 2010), offers to Black women a useful framework for countering the damaging effects of racism and oppression, and builds within them the emotional, psychological, and spiritual resources needed to effectively cope with oppressive stressors. To explore my assumption, a grounded theory methodology (Corbin & Strauss, 2014) was used; and open, axial and selective coding procedures yielded the following themes: 1) I Have To Build; 2) The Bottom Line; 3) God Is Connected To Our Struggle; 4) It’s In My Genes; 5) I Can’t Do This Alone; 6) His Track Record; 7) Knowing Sunday’s Going To Come; and 8) Help Me Journey Through. Together these themes provide a culture-specific theory of religious coping for Black women.

My analysis of the coping experiences of religiously-involved Black women focused on Black women’s use of cognitive coping strategies such as meaning-making, religious reframing, and the relational-cultural supports available to Black women through their ancestors and their connection to God. It continued with an examination of Black women’s dependence on God, particularly in the face of stressors that are beyond their ability to control. Further exploration included how dependence on God aids the women in the development of their own confidence and coping self-efficacy. Analysis of self-efficacy development, generated specific elements of the Black church experience and its role in building and sustaining coping self-efficacy among its female members. Finally, spiritual and
religion practices were examined more broadly for the role they play in Black women’s coping experiences and the development of coping self-efficacy. The intersecting identities of race, class, and gender, along with the stress experience of racism and oppression for this study’s participants, are embedded throughout each theme of the analysis.

**I Have To Build**

Across cultures, a natural human tendency in the face of stressful situations is to consider the purpose or meaning of the stressor, with many often asking questions like “why is this happening?” or “why me?”. Stress and coping literature would suggest this is connected to the process of meaning-making (Slattery & Park, 2015), and describes it as an important and normative element in coping. One’s efforts to understand the purpose of a stressful event, and construct meaning of the event as it fits within the person’s larger life schema, is a key cognitive-coping approach which helps to facilitate the individual’s ability to manage the stressor (Pargament, 1997, 2007, 2011).

The women in this study discussed the importance of identifying the purpose and meaning of the stressors in their lives, and using these understandings to help them cope. As one respondent explained, “there's a purpose behind some of the stressors that you face and I think that's how I view it…and to try and recognize that and use it.” For the women in this study, the purpose of stress in their lives was most often associated with the need to grow spiritually. One respondent offered the following explanation, “this is happening because I have to build.”

The women described being intentional in their efforts to identify the meaning and learning opportunity of the stressors they experience. They also describe this as its own growth process. One respondent reflects on her growth and maturity in this area:
I think when I was younger in my walk, I would feel like “God, why is this happening, why now, why this?” But now I've become more like how is this an opportunity for me to praise you, or what is it that you're trying to teach me? What is it that you're trying to show me? How can I glorify you? How can this be something I can turn around and make about you, and not me because it's never about us.

Another respondent describes a similar growth experience:

What I've learned to do over time and through the years is simply to ask God, what is it I should be learning from this? It's discernment, that's where I find myself many times is just saying Lord, what do you want me to learn? What am I supposed to learn? So for me, that's how I deal with most really serious stressors.

In analyzing the data, the respondents identified two key growth opportunities that emerge from stress. These include: (1) learning more about themselves and their strengths and capacities; and (2) learning more about God and His availability to them in times of stress. As one respondent explains, “adversity is where our growth comes from, it's how we stretch and grow, learn more about our humanity, depend more on God.” Another respondent described how stress and adversity provides her with an opportunity to grow; and as a spiritual person she recognizes an interconnection between learning more about herself and learning more about God:

Going through stress and adversity and trials and tribulations, the hope is for those things to strengthen you, to learn about yourself, but also to learn about others. But I think for me most importantly is learning about me. And in that learning is learning to trust Him.
One respondent likens the experience of learning more about God through stress to that of learning more about yourself and your partner through conflict:

If you go through an issue with your husband or your friend and you actually make it through, the relationship gets tighter. Like I'm glad we had that argument because now I understand you. But I feel like when I'm going through stress…in the midst I'm like “God, why? No, take me out, I'm not ready.” But afterwards I'm glad because now I hear You louder. When everyone else is saying “do this, [NAME REDACTED], do that”, I hear You louder because what just happened.

In many cases, the women in this study attribute the development of these new strengths and capacities to the stress experience itself, and how it facilitates their need to find new ways to cope. Respondents offered examples of stressful times in their lives that ultimately resulted in tremendous spiritual growth. One respondent described her mother’s illness and the ways in which it resulted in her own spiritual growth:

She had a stroke in 2002 and during that time God strengthened my faith. The year that she died in 2005, I started having – God led me to have Bible study with her six days a week and I had Bible study with my mom for over an hour, and she prayed, and I believe that was what brought me through that period. Because my strength in God, my faith in God began to grow. And God moved me – I've heard it said in church many times, from glory to glory, to a higher level. Until it started blowing my mind. You cannot read the Bible every day, study the word of God, and not be changed by it. And it changed me.
Another respondent described her conflict with a close friend and the spiritual coping strategies she developed as a result which have continued to have a positive and lasting impact on her:

I didn't know how things would turn out, but I really see that as a time where my faith was really developed, and the practices that I use to cope with stress, because of that situation I continued to like journal daily, I continue to read scriptures daily - write down “Lord, I hear you saying” daily because of that time that made me go there with such passion. Like just needing help, needing some kind of direction, that it became my everyday practice. So I would definitely say that's one example of how a stressful situation helped to develop my faith because it's what I do now. Stress or no stressing, it's not dependent on the season anymore.

Stress encounters like these challenged the women, and caused them to shift their thinking about their own coping capacities. The women appeared to emerge from these situations with more confidence and hopefulness. As one respondent described, “when you're able to look back, when you're outside of that dark tunnel, you're like wow, I went through all of that while dealing with this and this and this. That's affirming, just counting your growth.”

Another respondent described her experiences with stress as “tests.” Her belief is that with each stressor she experiences and overcomes, she becomes better prepared for the blessings God has in store for her - a view widely shared by other participants:

I've always known that everything will be okay, that this is only a test for the moment and will only make me stronger, and if I'm going through this right now, and this is that hard, then God must have something amazing in store for me, something that's greater that I'd be able to handle later on in life.
For the women in this study, identifying the lessons to be learned or the growth to be realized following a stressful event is a crucial part of their meaning-making process. It helps them to better understand the stressor and its spiritual implications, while also providing them with the strength and encouragement necessary to cope. The theme of “I have to build” reflects for the women this process of consciously considering the meaning of the stressors they encounter, and engaging in spiritual practices which help them to cope with the stressor at hand, while also creating a context for their faith to continue to develop and increase.

**The Bottom Line**

Within stress and coping literature, the process of reframing is recognized as a cognitive coping strategy in which the individual is able to consider the stressor from alternative viewpoints and perspectives (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Most often these viewpoints help to facilitate positive coping outcomes as the individual examines the stressor and their reactions to it in new ways. For the women in this study, these alternative viewpoints are drawn from and reinforced by their religious and spiritual beliefs. The women refer to these perspectives as the “bottom line.” Bottom-line perspectives provide a buffer against the negative, psychological impact of stress, while also fostering a greater sense of confidence and coping self-efficacy within the women. Three such perspectives were discussed by the women: normalization of stress, victory over stress, and gratitude in the midst of stress.

The women in this study view stress as a normal part of everyday life. The women believe their Christian faith is not a shield from the realities of life. One respondent describes it this way:

I think for me, just knowing and understanding that church and my faith doesn't
shield me from the life that people live, and that if you are living this life, at some point, especially if you're an adult, at some point you're going to go through stress. If you're caring for somebody, if you have a job, you're responsible for something – whatever the case may be. Just renting an apartment, owning a house, owning a car – whatever is going on, as an adult you're going to come across some stressors. And faith and church, and church folk and Pastor - that's not to shield you from that, it's not like this island that you go to and watch everybody else go through that.

This acceptance and normalization of stress helps the women to manage their emotional reactions to stress, and focus on overcoming the problem. As one respondent explained:

I also realize that regardless of whether I trust Him or not, I'm going to go through stress and issues because it's life. And as long as we're living and breathing, we're going to face things regardless. The difference is, as [NAME REDACTED] said, with God you're victorious at the end. Not just at the end, but in it too. There's victory in adversity too.

The theme of victory over adversity emerged as a prominent theme among the respondents. Here one respondent refers to it as the bottom line:

So the bottom line is every single situation that I'm confronted with I can handle because God would not allow me to deal with it if I couldn't handle it. So knowing that in the end I'm going to win regardless.

Another respondent described her cognitive approach or mindset when facing difficult situations. She describes focusing in on the steps she needs to take to get past the stressor:

So no matter how hard the situation is, it's going to end. And so I look at what I need to do to get to the end, and sometimes all I have to do is be there. Somethings I'm
just going to have to suffer. So with that I literally just affirm myself in God and just know that sometimes - like to me life, the bottom line is all we have to do is get to the end, keep putting one foot in front of the other, be responsible and do what we're supposed to do. Sometimes you have to lose to win and sometimes you do get to win and win.

Not only did the women report feeling more assured and confident themselves, but they also sought to pass this strength on to others. One respondent, who is a mother, described her efforts to provide encouragement to her college-age daughter. She says to her:

God has this situation, He has a plan for your life. God has not done these things for you, for you to fail and be destitute and in the street or whatever you're anxious about.

That's not God's plan for you. So let's proceed as if we know what God's plan is for us.

In addition to these self-efficacious beliefs, another dimension of the bottom line perspective, as reported by these women, is the recognition that things could be worse. This acknowledgement inspires within the women an attitude of gratefulness for where they are. As one respondent says, “I come now to just feel thankful for the things I have and the things I don't have. It could be a lot worse.” Another respondent elaborates on the idea that things could be worse. She reflects on the ways this understanding helps her to better cope with the stress:

So, for me I feel like the bottom line to any situation - I always ask myself what's the worst that could happen, right? For the most part, most people feel like death is the worst thing that can happen. If its sickness, maybe I'll die or maybe I'll lose my job which means I'll lose my house, etc. So, I always look at the bottom line and I feel
like, I mean, death has no victory over me, right? To live is Christ and to die is gain so I don't lose, so I'm not fearful in that way. I've always felt like if I lost my job and therefore lost everything else, there are shelters, there are soup kitchens, there are friends, there's the church, there's provision. So, I always see it in that way first.

Having a grateful attitude was emphasized as an important and mindful intention by the women in this study. They report that shifting their thinking and cognitions from the problem to being thankful, enhances their ability to cope. One respondent explained the importance she places on thanking God/Jesus. She says, “that's just a prayer, that's just a mantra that I have - thank you, Jesus. And I mean really just daily, bathing in my thoughts and thank you, Jesus for every little thing.” She goes on to discuss the importance of taking the time to recognize her blessings as a way to better manage the stressors she faces:

Our lives are so full of God's blessings and we just don't see it. So being very mindful, slowing down, taking a look at really what is manifest in our lives, helps [us] to get through those times when we lose our loved ones and situations are just beyond our control. And life does happen that way. But that is what gets me through.

Another respondent reflects on the perspective she gains from viewing situations with gratitude. She says, “it's all about how we look at the circumstances in our lives. Being prayerful, being grateful, expressing that gratitude, for me allows God to work through me to manifest in the most terrible situations so many positive things.”

The women in this study describe the in-vivo theme of “bottom line” as a form of reframing that helps them view the stressor, and their ability to respond to it, in ways that facilitate positive coping behaviors and outcomes, as well as support strong emotional and spiritual well-being. Reframing as a cognitive coping approach also helps them to deepen
their sense of coping self-efficacy, as the women are able to view the stressors and their coping capacities more generously.

**God Is Connected To Our Struggle**

Historically, religion and spirituality have played a critical role in the lives of Black women. In particular, the Black Church has functioned not only to provide important spiritual supports, but it has also provided a meaningful response to the struggle and oppression experienced by Blacks (Barnes, 2006; Boyd-Franklin, 2010; Cone, 1995; Shorter-Gooden, 2004). The women in this study discussed 1) their personal experiences of racism and oppression; 2) their beliefs that God is connected to their struggle and 3) their experience of the Black church as a coping resource in response to racialized stressors.

To begin, racism, bias and oppression were identified by the women in this study as dominant stress experiences in their lives. One respondent described it this way, “we have to be very candid about this - because being black, period, in this country, in the world, there's so many things - we're oppressed, depressed, and suppressed.” Another respondent expressed a similar sentiment about what she sees as the prevalence of racism towards Blacks:

> It seems like society to me is more racist now than ever before. Yes, people have a little bit more privileges, but if you really look at it, it's like – it's harder. People are more blatant with what they're doing, they're saying whatever they want to say, and certain groups – us, Blacks are just, we're lower and lower – we're holding up the totem pole, we're not even on the totem pole. That's the feeling.

The women in this study shared personal stories of their experience of racism and bias. For many of them, these experiences occurred in the workplace. One respondent described the
challenges she faces as a Black woman in middle management among majority White colleagues:

The biggest stressor I have right now is work, in my entire department I'm the only minority of any kind, black or otherwise. I'm also the youngest and so that creates a different level of issues when I have people reporting to me who are - they come in for the first time and look at me, and they're like, "I have to report to her?" And so having two new directors that are also of this whole mindset in terms of being at least somewhat racist, it's been a big stressor.

Another respondent, a receptionist at a hospital, offered the following example of mistreatment she experienced from a colleague and which she believed to be because of race, class, and gender dynamics:

I was on the phone last night, someone pointed in my face when I was on the phone, waving their finger in my face, and I was literally on the phone. I said "Hold on a minute - do you want my attention? Because you're sure going to get it. (laughter) What is it that you want?"

Expressing her disbelief about the mistreatment, the respondent went on to say:

I mean, point your finger in someone's face and wave it. Across the desk! He said, “can you tell me where to get a small blood pressure cuff?” I said, "You're a PCT, right?” He said, “yeah.” I said “alright go in the back room and get it.” I couldn't believe this young guy.

In addition to their own experiences of racism and bias, the women also noted their observation of Black men being mistreated in the workplace. The women expressed a feeling of solidarity with their male counterparts. One respondent shared the following
example:

I work at the hospital. There's racism there all the time. I see it mostly towards the men, the few black men there. It's stressful for the black men at the job. It's just a few doctors there that are [black], but these are the ones that deliver the mail and the couriers, they get disrespected a lot.

Some of the respondents discussed the negative impact of these repeated experiences of racism and bias on their sense of self. For some of the women, these experiences cause them to feel like they need to prove themselves. One respondent explained it this way:

We do on a day-to-day, face different things and I still feel like I have to prove myself - it may not be a conscious thing, it might even just be on a subconscious level, feeling like you probably think I'm these things before you even hear me open my mouth, just because I'm black - and I'm a woman.

Another respondent described a similar feeling:

Being a woman and being black is being a double minority so you're always constantly trying to prove to them, and I feel like for me it's been to not affirm the stereotypes about black women. Whether that be that we're all teenage moms, we have all these baby daddies, or we're lazy or loud or angry – whatever those stereotypes are, whether it was in my schooling or even at work, it's trying to prove to them that we're not all like whatever it is you might think we are. So that's a stress in and of itself especially at work.

One respondent discussed the pressure she feels to be portray a certain image around her White colleagues:
I saw this picture on Instagram, which is like a social media thing, it was like black people at work. It had a black bear, and he was unzipping like a white polar bear's shell off of him, because at work you have to put on this – "Good morning." I want to enunciate more, I want to make sure that I'm saying "ask" and not "axe" because that's not proper. So just little things like that, being mindful of them, and then when you're off work - you're like okay, I can let my hair down, I can be myself.

Despite these psychologically painful experiences of racism and bias, the women in this study believe that God is connected to their struggle, and that He gives them the strength, encouragement and confidence to overcome these struggles. One respondent described her experience of God’s presence during moments of difficulty:

God is connected to our struggle, He concerns himself with everything that we concern ourselves with. He is intimately acquainted with everything I go through, and is intimately concerned with everything I'm concerned with every day - nothing is too small, nothing is too minute, nothing is insignificant. If I'm concerned with it, God is concerned with it as well.

Similarly, another respondent described her experience of God’s closeness:

That for me is how tangible my faith is. It's not that God is this person up there, not touched. But you [God] tell me you're touched with the feeling of my infirmity and that you're with me, that you're intimately, right next to me, in it with me, you're not up looking down at me, you're right with me, right with me and I'm not alone. And that's so important for me to know that. That's tangible for me. It's not a thought. It's tangible.

According to the women in this study, knowing that God is connected to their struggle helps
them to maintain a strong sense of confidence and optimism in the face of racism and bias. One respondent expressed adamantly, “my faith gives me that assurance and confidence that at the end of the day, what's for me is for me and like you said, no one can keep me from that.” Another respondent reflected on the sense of self-efficacy that comes from knowing she is connected to God:

I think for me, there is a sense of self efficacy that comes because I have a connection to somebody who is more powerful and bigger than me and who has more than I could ever ask for and would give it to me, were it His will that I would have it.

The women in this study also report that knowing God is connected to their struggle helps them to resist racism and bias, and the limitations it imposes on them. In an expression of her defiance and resistance against racism, one respondent commented:

With God, He crosses everything. He can move mountains for me. So whatever I need, if I need to go to a courthouse, see I’m in the kingdom, I’m in the spirit now, man has no control over me anymore. You can't tell me “no, I can't have that job, no I can't have that business, no I can't have that treatment.” Because I serve the almighty God and I got Jesus, and that's enough! And any red tape anybody wants to pull - no more. There's no more red tape for me! I really was excited about that, I no longer have to deal with racism.

Another respondent echoed this belief, “for me, just knowing, knowing [pounds on the table] that if God has something for me, there is nothing racism can do to prevent me from being or having what it is He has for me.” The women in this study also report engaging in acts of resistance. Some of the respondents report that they use their professional skill sets and their chosen careers as a tool for challenging racism. One respondent, who works with juveniles
in the criminal justice system, described her work as a way to challenge systemic racism and give back to her community:

My job is to literally teach them about these systems of oppression, about racism and to help them to realize when they are in these situations. I feel like I'm put in a place where I'm blessed to be able to share that with youth, and I feel like that's how I give back to my community is by teaching the young people.

Another respondent who works in secondary education discusses the role of her faith in helping her to engage in critical race conversations with educators. She describes her work as challenging, yet meaningful:

People used to tell me in the district where I came from that I had the most difficult job in the district, to go in and sit down and talk to people about the racialized achievement gap and the fact that there is probably some racial bias going on here as to why your kids can't learn how to read. Those are tough conversations to have, but knowing that you're not doing it with malice and you're on purpose for what God wants you to do is what kept me able to do it and to have some really difficult conversations.

While many of the women report feeling a sense of responsibility to speak out against racism, some of the respondents shared that there are times when they choose not to practice active resistance. One respondent explained that her priority as a single parent is providing for her family, and she is careful not to jeopardize her employment by calling out racism in the workplace.

I'm a woman, a black woman, and we have adjusted to a lot of things because we know we have to. And every time I go through a little bit of racism I just go, “it
doesn't matter because I know who I'm working for - my black family.”

In addition to the personal choices the women make in dealing with racism and the supports they receive from God, the women in this study also identify the Black church environment as a critical resource in coping with racism. As one respondent explains, “I think just worshiping in a place that so integrally connects the struggle that we've had as a people with the gospel. It's before you, it's there. It's like it's not incidental, it's not coincidental.”

Respondents described how church involvement affirms and validates their identity as Black women, and provides helpful encouragement to them as they navigate the challenges of racism. One respondent explained it this way:

You know, coming to church and being affirmed in a community of color is really, really uplifting to go out into the world and see yourselves, maybe not where you would like to see yourself but knowing that you do have a community that you belong to of believers where you can see yourself and you feel accepted and you feel where you belong, and I think that's important.

Another respondent described how her current church community affirms her identity as a Black woman and the difference this makes for her:

I think being at this church gives a lot of credibility to how I feel about my identity as a black woman. I think that's important in a religious journey, for me. I've been to many churches, many denominations, and I know where I'm comfortable. I know what I need to feel affirmed as a Christian in my journey and so I think [CHURCH NAME REDACTED] does that for me. And I think for me that's important. And it does help to deal with the racism.

Similarly, another respondent emphasizes the significance of being in a church setting with
other Black women, and the strength this offers her in dealing with racism and sexism:

For me personally in my religious environment, my church environment, I need to see folks who look like me, I need to see women who wear their hair like me, things like that. And that keeps me fortified to then go out and be able to deal with the barriers of racism, sexism, and all the other isms that we have to deal with.

The women also discussed the supports they receive and the insights they gain from church teachings on racism and oppression. One respondent describes how her Pastor engages these challenging topics and how meaningful this is to her:

I think our Pastor is out there, he's engaged, he's dialoguing – he's bringing that to the congregation. He's not covering it up. And he talks about racism, he talks about the different strategies that we can do, how we can empower ourselves to chip away at eliminating some of this racism. I think it comes from him, he's very good at doing that – again, giving folks different suggestions at how to eliminate some of these isms. And most importantly, just calling it as it is. So that's one important factor that I see from [CHURCH NAME REDACTED].

Some of the women shared their experiences of being healed from racial injuries and pain as a result of the insights gained from their church involvement. One respondent described how her views of other racial groups has shifted because of her encounters with them in church:

This is the first time I've ever been to a black church where there is more than one non-black person who comes on a regular basis (laughter) and so just being able to interact with people who are voluntarily putting themselves in this place where they could go to a white church, an Asian church, or whatever type church, but instead they're choosing to come to [CHURCH NAME REDACTED]. It kind of gets you to
the mindset of they’re not all bad. The reality is no matter what I go thru at work, not everyone is like these people, not everyone is like the people that I work with that are continuously making these ignorant racist or sexist comments, not everyone is like that. Because I go to church with ten or however many people there are that are not black, that are in this space, that are worshiping, that believe in God and that are actually acting like it, and that are not - or I'm assuming not racist. And so it just makes it a little bit easier knowing that it's not everybody.

Another respondent shared her experiences of racism in high school, and the negative feelings towards Whites that she struggled with as a result. She talks about how a church conference helped her to let go of her own bias:

So in high school I had this real dislike for white people, and I went to YEC which is Youth Encountering Christ and we take our youth there every year. It was my first year going, my senior year of high school, and it's a predominantly white setting, there's only a handful of black people sprinkled in. And it was then that I really was confronted with the fact – like you know, God loves all of us, we're all His children. You know we sing Jesus loves yellow, black, that whole thing. Red and yellow, black and white. So I was like I can't say I love God and really have this dislike for people - I can't be mad at all white people because of my experience at school or because of the fact that my ancestors were raped…at this conference I was like I have to love everybody. I can't really have this bias or be mad at white people because of my experiences. So my faith came into play.

For the women in this study, religious involvement plays a pivotal role in their efforts to cope with racism and bias. The in-vivo theme of “God is connected to our struggle” represents the
relationship of God and the church community to the oppressive struggles of Black women. According to the women, this connection is manifest most through worship, fellowship, and sermons and church teachings that deal with the harsh realities of racism. Together, these elements of church experience offer the women new insights and perspectives, a sense of validation, and healing from racial wounds.

**It’s In My Genes**

Within Black culture, there is a strong connection to one’s ancestors, particularly for the models of strength, wisdom, and perseverance they provide in the face of difficult and trying times (Hamilton-Mason, Hall, Everett, 2009; Shorter-Gooden, 2004). The women in this study discussed the lessons of faith and perseverance that were modeled for them by their mothers, grandmothers, and aunties. Many of the women shared fond memories of the matriarchs in their lives and the powerful lessons gained from them, particularly as it relates to overcoming struggles. One respondent spoke of her mother and how emphatic her mother is about putting her problems in God’s hands:

I think of my mother. I asked my mother one day, "Ma, how do you cope with your stress?" And she said you know what? I put it in God's hands! Although she's facing a lot and is going through a lot, a lot of her adversity she puts in God's hands.

Other respondents reported a similar sentiment and recounted specific spiritual strategies they witnessed their mothers use to cope with stress, such as singing hymns and being prayerful. One participant reflected on her mother’s singing of hymns in the midst of her daily struggles as a single parent:

I remember thinking about my mother, who was a single mother struggling in the Islands to raise me and my brother, and going to do day work, going to iron for White
folks – in Jamaica by the way. They immigrated and they wanted someone to clean their floors and she would do that. Then she would come home, and I would be in charge of helping her cook food to sell to supplement our income. But every day I never forgot my mother as she was washing with her hands, was singing these hymns. Another respondent described her mother’s reliance on prayer as a way of coping:

I think about my mother who was a very, very prayerful woman. She just - you know how what the Bible say to always pray? She was just one of those – that was who she was, and I just didn't understand it. It's like, don't you have stuff to do? (laughter)

The respondent became emotional as she reflected on her mother’s strong faith and determination in spite of the challenging circumstances she faced:

I just couldn't understand how do you pray always when you have things to do?
When you're raising 8 children and you're in a marriage that's abusive and that you need to be out of, and when you can't take care of your own kids because you're scrubbing people's floors to support - how do you – ? But that was really her stance in life (tearful).

Another respondent reflected on what she observed in her aunties and grandmothers who stayed close to God through prayer, both in times of stress and when things were going well:

I think of my great-aunties and my grandmothers and how they tried to stay in that place with the Lord throughout the day. In times of stress they went to the Lord, but they tried to stay in his presence throughout the day. They felt his grace throughout the day so that whatever happened, they could deal with it.

Gratitude also emerged as an important spiritual tool for coping with stress. One participant reflected on the grateful attitude her grandmother showed despite her daily struggles:
I remember my grandmother did day work and she would come home and I can visualize her getting off the bus and walking down the street. Our house was the first house on the corner - just this tiredness on her. But, she would come in, and she always used to have this "thank you, Jesus." It's like at the end of the day when she would come home and sit on that sofa, it was like "thank you, Lord, for another day." So that spirit of gratitude is what gave her the energy, the motivation, the confidence to keep going.

The women in this study talked about the faith lessons they learned from their mothers and grandmothers and the profound influence it has had in the women's own lives and coping experiences. One participant reflects on how her mother's influence has shaped her faith development since childhood:

Faith has been always a part of my life, probably before I knew what it actually was. I think that's just something that as a child, being an only child, I observed my mother a lot. So I just saw her, how she handled things. So I kind of picked up on it without really knowing what it was.

For many of the respondents, it was the examples set by the matriarchs of their families who often struggled in their everyday lives, that has had the most direct impact on how the women now use faith to help them cope with stress. The in-vivo theme of “it’s in my genes” reflects the intergenerational sharing of faith tradition in the Black community. As one respondent explained, “yes, we're Christians by choice, but truly examples helped us get to this point and they're still working in us.” Another respondent described it this way, “so my mother passing that [spiritual influence] onto me, it's in my genes. So yes, love the Lord, but it's in my genes.”
The many stories of strength and survival derived from Black ancestors provide a meaningful source of hope and inspiration for Black women today as they navigate their own stressors and trials. When the women in this study say “it’s in my genes” they are acknowledging the strength they witnessed in their mothers and grandmothers and the powerful ways these lessons have been transmitted across generations. It also represents the cultural significance of supportive female relationships for Black women. Researchers who study mother-daughter relationships across cultures believe "each of us takes in at a cellular level how our mother feels about being female…and what she believes is possible in life" (Northrup, 2016). For Black women, as we have seen in this study, the mother-daughter bond can extend to other maternal figures in their lives such as grandmothers and aunties who often play a key role in child-rearing in Black families.

**I Can’t Do This Alone**

Black women frequently report the use of religion and spirituality in their management of everyday stress and racism (Everett, Hall & Hamilton-Mason, 2010). A common colloquialism in the Black faith community is the notion of “turning things over to God” in which the person acknowledges the stressor or problem to be beyond their ability to control and thus they depend on God for His divine intervention and resolution of the problem. The women in this study identified three elements related to their experience of depending on God. These include recognizing the need for God’s help; acknowledging the benefits of depending on God; and learning to overcome the challenges in depending on God.

To begin, the women in this study acknowledge when their own capacities for dealing with stress are limited, and they must depend on God. One participant, like many others who grew up in the church, described learning to depend on God from a young age. She says, “I
was brought up in the church and I was taught to let God – whatever you couldn't handle to give it to God. I've always done that all of my life.”

Some of the women are accepting of their limitations and show comfort in being able to turn to God for help. One respondent described the relief and comfort she feels in acknowledging *I can't do this alone*:

I think for me sometimes, depending on the stressor, the more serious issues in my life that cause a great deal of stress that are out of my control - sometimes I'm praying and crying and asking God to really just help me because I just can't do anything. And I think that's an okay place to be. I don't try to fix it, and then go to the Lord. I'm in it and I want Him in it because I'm like I can't do this alone.

Similarly, another participant detailed her experience of acknowledging her limitations and seeking God for help with those things that are outside of her coping capacity:

I can't do anything but take it to God. And I have to take it in pain and I have to take it in tears. I can't take it in strength because I don't have the strength, and it's a tremendous stressor for me, but that helps me to come through because it helps me to know that I don't have to be strong. I don't have to be able to solve everything and that yes, God I am human, I'm human. You know what I mean? You gave me a lot of good things and strengths and qualities, but at my basic elemental self, I'm very vulnerable, very human at this point in time.

The women have found that by acknowledging their own limitations and vulnerability, and looking to God for help with their problems, they are able to develop the personal strength needed to manage the stressors at hand. One participant described how allowing herself to be vulnerable before God contributed to her renewal:
Sometimes when the tears come in the middle of the night, it just depends on the stressor, but I think being okay to say "I'm not strong enough, God, to do this," and yes, I have a husband, I have a family, I have all these support systems - but for me, I don't have the strength so I have to come to you and I come in my weakness. I'm like "Lord, I can't do it - I just have to come to you because I can't do it." I got to lay it down. And in doing so that's where I find the strength.

Similarly, another participant explains, “I find that coming to God in my tears, in my sorrow, in my pain is where I am renewed.” In addition to gaining strength and being renewed, the women in this study also report experiencing peace and calmness when they turn to God for help. One respondent described the peace she feels in knowing she can depend on God:

In my faith I feel I can give it to God, and just rest in knowing He's in control and He's there with me, He's going through it with me. And that helps [me] to not feel all stressed and be angry about what may or may not have happened my way.

Another respondent shared her experience of finding peace and reassurance when she looked to God for help during a challenging time in her life:

My mother had cancer, my aunt had cancer, my father had cancer, my son's a hemophiliac. Over the weekend, it was Good Friday of that year, my son broke his hand, my mother was in the hospital, my aunt was diagnosed very poorly and my father was in the hospital. And when I finally had made the rounds and talked to the last doctor who wanted to talk to me about my mother, I couldn't, and I got in my car and I said "okay, God - they say you never give anybody any more to handle than they can, but I've got my limit." And instead of falling apart, I got the greatest sense of peace that, you know - you're right, you're in the middle of all of this, but it's going
to work.

For some women in the study, depending on God did not come as easily. These women described the challenges of depending on God and how they learned to overcome them. As one participant explains: “for me, I had to come to a place to where I could give up my control. I had to surrender my control to someone other than me, and that was a difficult process for me.” The following two participants offer further insight into what makes depending on God difficult for them and how they are learning to accept God’s help. One respondent explains:

I’ve been out of the church up until recently for a very long time, so my first instinct when I’m encountering a stress, I’m like I got this. And I really forget that I have God. I’m like oh no, I can do this. I literally take down paper. I’m like this happens if I do this, this – like I literally have like a blueprint of how to deal with the stress. Because I think I’m powerful for some reason by myself [sarcastically]. Then after I'm like okay, I still need some faith, because I could do all this and it still could be bad.

Another respondent explained her experience this way:

I think that's a little bit of my ego - like I got this. Like my family is a family of - you have an issue, you work it through. You do A, B, C, have ten different options, which one works? We’re real logical people, and from a child, on my father's side, it was always if you have a issue, go do these steps - boom, boom, boom. So I feel like even on top of all of that, I have to remember that okay, that's good, but I didn't get that knowledge from no place, that's also God. So either way, I'm going to have to go through God.
Another respondent shared the following story about the moment she learned to relinquish control and trust God:

I see God as my GPS. I was a year or so ago driving to New York, to interview with Morgan Stanley. And my GPS was taking me in a different direction than I was familiar with. And I started freaking out because it was five o'clock in the morning, it was dark – and I don't know this way, I don't know these highways, this is crazy. And I had driven an hour and I was going to turn around and go back. And the way I knew was going to take me five hours, where the GPS was going to take me four hours. And I literally had a conversation with the Lord about this dilemma. Because like "Lord, this GPS is taking me in this direction. I'm an IT executive, I'm used to being in control and having a strategic plan. But in this case – And the Lord said to me, “okay, you know what? If you go back an hour, it's going to take you an additional hour to get there, and you're going to be late for your interview at Morgan Stanley. So you have a decision to make so you either release your control and rely upon the GPS to get you there, which will get you there about 45 minutes early, or you risk being late for the interview, to go the way that you know.” And – I don't want to be late for this interview. So I had to relinquish my control and rely on the GPS. And I was there 45 minutes early and the Lord said to me when I arrived, He said, “now that is how I want you to trust Me. To trust Me even more. Because man programmed that GPS. You need to learn how to let go, you can't control everything, and that's where I come into play – I'm going to guide you through your stresses, dilemmas, challenges in life.” And that was a powerful changing, life changing moment.
Being able to depend on God in moments of difficulty has been an important strength and resource in the coping experiences of Black women. For the women in this study, the in-vivo theme of “I can’t do this alone” represents 1) an acknowledgement of human limits and fragility in coping with stress, and 2) an understanding of the need for God’s help and guidance. As we have seen with the women in this study, trusting God comes easily for some and for others it requires more of a journey to reach this point.

**His Track Record**

Reflecting on the past blessings of God provides religiously-involved individuals with a hopeful anticipation of things to come, even in the face of present difficulties. Self-efficacy theory (Bandura, 1997) refers to this reflective view of past triumphs and successes as enactive mastery experience, and identifies it as an important factor in helping one to feel more confident and capable in the face of a current stressor. The women in this study discuss the confidence that emerges when they reflect on the ways God has helped them to overcome stressors and trials in the past. As one respondent says, “I think for me that's a big confidence booster just knowing that God has already done for me before.” Another respondent echoed this sentiment with her own reflection: “You [God] have proven yourself a million times over to me and even in this moment you are doing now, so I can just be at peace and let go and believe that this is going to be okay.”

Some of the women referred to their personal history of God’s help to them as “His track record.” One respondent described how reflecting on God’s track record helps her to sustain her faith in trying situations:

I just look back at the track record. He was there – oh, and there too - oh, and right there. And that time I didn't think He was there but He was. And it makes me - when
you know a team is going to win, you look at what they did before, their stats. Oh, they might win this one. So that's what keeps me in faith. Like He's never failed me, never. And that's what keeps me in faith.

Another respondent reported that reflecting on God’s track record helps her to have confidence that she will get through any stressor that comes her way:

As Christians our confidence comes from what we know about God in the past, because he's got a good history right? The old folks say that God's credit is good with us and you think about the Old Testament, remember what God did for you back then, remember how God did this? So we can have confidence even now. But it's based on what we know of His record and His credit history with us. So I always think about that.

Many of the respondents reported that because of the trust and confidence they have in God, it ultimately helps them to feel more confident in themselves and their ability to overcome stress and difficulty with God’s help. One respondent, however, offered a slightly different view. She explains that her confidence is not in herself, but in God entirely:

That's the thing about the confidence - it's not confidence in the situation, it's not confidence in yourself. It's confidence that God has this, whatever it is. We think of that word and we live in a very sort of self-involved society. That it's not about me, the confidence has nothing to do with me and everything to do with the fact that I can trust God, that this situation – it may not even turn out the way I want it to turn out or that I envision, if I had my druthers it would turn out that way. But the confidence that whatever the outcome that God is in it, and that's what it's supposed to be, and that's where I'm supposed to be.
While a distinction is made between these two perspectives, the important similarity among all the respondents is the belief that their confidence, however defined, can be attributed to God. When encountering a stressful situation, the women in this study report they are able to draw encouragement and confidence for a hopeful outcome by reflecting on previous times in their lives when God has helped them to overcome. The in-vivo theme of “His track record” reflects the trust they’ve developed in God, and the basis this provides for deepening a sense of coping self-efficacy within the women.

**Knowing Sunday’s Going To Come**

Regular participation in Sunday services has long been a tradition within the Black community, and it is recognized by many Blacks as a critical coping resource (Boyd-Franklin, 2010). The women in this study reported church involvement plays a key role in helping them to cope with stress. Many of the respondents spoke of the positive impact of being in church. One respondent explained, “for me it provides a point to focus on so that when things are getting stressful, I can always return here and know that I'm going to make it through this.” Other women reported that church helps them to feel grounded despite the stressful events in their lives. One respondent shared, “right now I'm going through a lot, but I'm still able to give so much of myself and I still feel so fulfilled in what I'm doing. And I feel it's because I'm so grounded in church.” Another respondent reflected on how grounded she feels now that she regularly attends church, compared to periods in her life when she did not:

Before I returned to the church I think I believed that I had the ability to deal with or solve any kind of stress that was going on in my life, and I was very, very stressed.
When I returned to the church, I felt that I was grounded again, I found my faith again and I found my center again.

Another respondent shared the following story of the stressors she experienced during her absence from church and how upon her return, she recognized the importance of church in helping her to make good decisions and manage stress:

Years ago when my daughters were little, I was going with this guy and I had stopped going to church and everything. We had an argument and I went to go to the doctor for a regular appointment and when I got there, the lady looked at me after she took my blood pressure. And she said to me “your blood pressure is really high, I'm surprised you're still walking.” And I said oh! So the doctor said “come here, I want to talk to you.” He took me into a room and sat down across from me. And it was a Black man, a Black doctor. And he said, "Do you believe in God?" And I say, “yes I do.” Why is he asking me that? And he said, "You've never had high blood pressure before and something in your life is raising your blood pressure. I want you to do me a favor. I want you to go back to church. And then we're going to see if we need to put you on some medicine." So that was God sent! So I did go back to church. I went back to God so He could deliver me from that thing. And eventually that relationship was over and I stayed with God and I got stronger in God.

In addition to acknowledging the importance of church in their lives, the women also discussed how they look forward to church service each Sunday and explained how the mere anticipation of church is helpful to them. As one respondent explained, “I think knowing that Sunday’s going to come around again gives me something to look forward to, something to strive for.” Another respondent reflected similarly on how she looks forward to church and
the way it helps her to feel renewed and recharged:

Although I have a very busy life, Sunday is very important day for me and I look forward to church, I look forward to the worship, I look forward to the release. I look forward to getting refilled to go back out.

The women in this study also described the general atmosphere of the Black church and the ways in which the church environment contributes to a sense of coping self-efficacy and calm. One respondent shared how the church atmosphere helps her to feel confident in her ability to overcome stress:

I think the atmosphere is different. I don't think people understand. You come in with a body of believers focused on one purpose, there's a different atmosphere. An atmosphere of peace, an atmosphere where you can just forget all your troubles, you can relax and take a break. Sure, you may have to go back out there to that problem, but you feel like you can conquer it. You can do something about it, and I think that's important, and everybody's looking for that.

Another respondent shared that the church atmosphere offers her a sense of renewal when she is feeling stressed and burdened:

When we're congregated and our faith is united, it's so powerful. You can hear songs or you can just have a thought or what have you, tears can start streaming down your face. You're able to connect with other people, whether they testify or you just see them. Random things happen and for random reasons you have spiritual reactions. Like you just walk in the door at church, and you're like, who knew I was going to feel this way? Nothing happened at all that I know of, but I feel this way. And so it replenishes us. And it's so important.
Another respondent shared that the church atmosphere offers her peace in a world that can otherwise feel out of control:

> I have to say, the fellowship, the love, the peace - you just walk in, and it's like wow, love. Love on another level I never experienced. And peace, a lot of peace, a lot of calmness. When the world out there is crazy and out of control, I can come here and be okay, I'm cool. I'm straight. So it's nice. It's a nice peaceful place to be.

In addition to the general church atmosphere, the women in this study also discussed specific elements of the Black church experience and how it helps them to cope with stress. These elements include sermons, praise and worship, testimony, and fellowship with others.

**Sermons.** The women in this study reported Sunday sermons and church teachings are important to them, and that it plays a significant role in helping them to cope with stress. One respondent described the impact of church sermons this way:

> Any time I'm going through, even if I feel like I can't go on, it never feels that way when I do come to church - either something is said to me that was exactly what I needed at the time or the Word I feel is directly for me.

One respondent shared that her anticipation of the sermon begins days in advance of Sunday service:

> Counting down the days and just knowing that whatever the Pastor's topic is, if he's preaching something, someone else is preaching, what have you, I'm going to hear something that I can relate to or that's going to apply to my life. Whether it's an ah-ha moment or that's what I need to do – whatever. I know I'm going to get something out of doing that [going to church].
Another respondent described her intentionality in coming to church to hear an uplifting and encouraging message:

And to me, going to church, I need something to help me to deal with the stressors when I walk out that door. Oh, it's great when the spirit is high. Its rah rah and hallelujah, but I need something when I walk out that door, and my former Pastor used to say, "You can't carry me around in your car – you have to know the Word for yourself. And you need a Word to be able to carry you through whatever you're going through." And so when I come to church, that's what I'm looking for – I'm looking for something to help me when I leave those doors. I come looking – seeking a Word, and that Word I've learned can come from the pulpit, it can come from the choir. It comes in many directions. It can come with my conversation with [NAME REDACTED], it comes in many forms.

Praise & Worship. The women in this study discussed the positive impact of participating in praise and worship at church. When feeling overwhelmed with stress, the women report praise and worship provides a cathartic release, and helps them to feel confident and hopeful about their ability to overcome. One respondent describes the impact of praise and worship this way:

I like to dance and I like to jump around in church because this is victory for me when something's on my mind and I start shouting and I start screaming “oh glory hallelujah” - that's power for me, this is for my spirit.

Another respondent describes the freedom she feels in church to express her joys and her struggles through praise and worship:

If I've got to cry sometimes, I'll let it out. We're kind of a run around church – it's
whatever you feel. I feel really free to express that here… you're free to emote in whatever kind of way you need to.

**Testimony.** The women in this study discussed the power of the testimonies shared in church. They report that hearing the testimonies of fellow churchgoers offers them inspiration and encouragement as they face their own challenges. As one respondent explains, “hearing other people's testimonies, and knowing that they've been in the same place, it just makes it easier and it takes away the unnecessary stress.” A second respondent echoed this sentiment: “the testimony of other people that have had stressful situations, that's always been encouraging and inspired me.” Another respondent reflected on how her faith grows and develops as a result of the testimony of others:

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You watch people overcome, you watch people change from where you've seen them a year earlier to where they are now, that also is a factor of how our faith develops.

So it's not just only your faith walk, it's what you see in the lives of other people.
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**Fellowship.** The women in this study discussed the importance of church fellowship and the opportunity it provides to develop meaningful relationships with fellow church members. As one respondent experienced, “when I came to [CHURCH NAME REDACTED] I was able to find people who I could trust, who I could confide in, in addition to God.” The women report these connections make an important difference in their efforts to cope with stress by providing them with a support network of people who understand their struggles, validate their experiences, and encourage them to persevere.

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One respondent shared her experience of how valuable it has been to be a part of a community where she feels understood and supported, and where her confidence grows. She contrasts this experience with how she felt during the period in her life when she was not...```
actively involved in church:

Prior to me joining [CHURCH NAME REDACTED], part of me thought ‘oh, if I read scripture and if I watch some sermons online, I can do this [cope with stress] by myself, it's not that hard.’ (laughter) But over time I really did realize or better understand the value of being part of a community and being part of a church and having that support network and having people to kind of boost you up when you're feeling like – when I'm feeling like I can't do this or I'm a horrible person or whatever it may be. I think they're able to reflect things about myself that maybe I don't see or maybe I've forgotten, and sort of give me a little more confidence to face whatever the stress may be.

Other respondents underscored the importance of having people in the church that they can talk to during moments of personal challenge and difficulty. One respondent explained:

When you isolate yourself, it's much harder to go through whatever it is you're going through, so just being in the midst of other people to encourage you – because Pastor was saying when you're here, you get to know people, you get to know what their trials are and even what their gifts are and skills are. There are people right here that we can talk to that can encourage us who maybe can identify what we're going through, so I think that helps too, just being able to draw from other people around us in the congregation too.

The respondents also reflected on the opportunity to connect with other Black women in the church, with some of them referring to these relationships as a sisterhood. As one respondent says, “there's things you can't discuss with your children or your husband, you need a girlfriend. That's what this church has brought for me - the women, the sisters around this
table, the sisterhood.” Another respondent echoes this sentiment, and describes her experience of finding community with other Black women in the church:

I think being around likeminded people helps a lot. I've made a lot of good ones [friends] here since I've been at [CHURCH NAME REDACTED] and it's helped a lot. I think being around sisters that understand your struggles, that understand and are very nonjudgmental, just there to listen to you, to hug you, to show you love - just wonderful women.

As the women in this study have underscored, religious involvement and the Black church tradition is an important resource in the coping experiences of Black women. Historically, the Black church tradition has held dual-significance in the Black community. The Black church has functioned as a sacred space where religious and spiritual needs are met, and the identities and struggles of Black men and women are understood and validated (Lincoln & Mamiya, 1990). For the women in this study, the in-vivo theme of “knowing Sunday’s going to come” represents the importance Black women place on church involvement, and the impact of the church experience (i.e., sermons, praise and worship, testimony, and fellowship with like-minded others) as a coping resource.

**Help Me Journey Through**

Religion and spirituality offer individuals a myriad of beliefs, perspectives, and practices that can help inform their interpretation of stress events, and help individuals to determine the strategies they might use to cope (Pargament, 2001). In addition to the importance of church attendance as described in the previous section, the women in this study identified ways in which they use religious and spiritual practices (such as prayer,
scripture reading, and praise and worship), combined with traditional counseling and psychotherapy, to cope with stress.

To begin, the respondents talked candidly about the ways in which their faith impacts how they experience the coping process. Some of the respondents were transparent in acknowledging that sometimes their first response to stressful situations is panic and worry. One respondent describes the panic she sometimes feels in response to stress:

I'm going to be transparent. I'm going to say when I face issues. The first thing I do is I stress (laughter). I get anxious. My heart is palpitating, I'm talking fast, I'm crying. I'm calling my friend- [saying] this has happened.

Another respondent describes reacting to stress with self-pity, loathing, and questioning of God.

One of the first things I do when I'm stressing is I'm like oh my God, why me? I go to the sympathy place of "oh my God, my life is so terrible – please, somebody, take pity on me. Oh my God, it's so awful."

The women explained how after these initial reactions of panic, worry and doubt, they become intentional in using religion and spirituality to help them move forward in their coping. As one respondent explains, “from there, I think I begin to think about how God would have me move in that situation, really seeking God for guidance, and He begins to show me how else this can work out.” The women in this study also described their process of spiritual growth and maturity, and its parallels to the stress and coping process. They explained that as they become more spiritually mature, they are better able to respond to stressful situations with calm and confidence. One respondent reflected on her own growth and maturity in responding to stress:
We talk about how developmental the process is for us as Christians, in terms of learning how to access what our faith can do for us in our stress. For me, one of the things I learned over the last few years - and turning 50 it's actually become really clear to me now - that the things that would take me over the edge no longer do so at 50. Because it's not at all important. And I have less time between the time when I angst and begin to pray now. Where as there were times when I was younger, it would be months, maybe even years, right? Now depending on what it is, it could be a couple seconds or it could be a day. I'm not going to lie - I've had a day when I just need to do this, I need to cry. God, let me just cry and do this. So when my mother died I needed several days to do that. So I think for me, the way I access God has grown and evolved over the years.

In using religious and spiritual practices to cope with stress, the women in this study report that scripture reading, prayer, and praise and worship is most helpful to them.

**Scripture.** The women in this study report turning to scripture for encouragement, perspective, and guidance when dealing with stressful situations. One respondent, when faced with stress, describes the practice of searching scripture for a message that is personally relevant to her and her situation:

The Scripture is very important to have a favorite scripture for yourself. What I’ve had to do because so many things were happening, I just had to run to the Bible and find a scripture that applied to what's been going on in my life, especially with my coworkers and my family. My favorite one is cast your cares on Him for he cares for you. It just really enlightens my soul.

The women in this study believe scripture offers answers to the problems they face. One
respondent explains:

Just following the Word and believing that it has power to change your life problems, to help solve problems in your life and that there are answers in the Bible, so that's changed me to be a problem solver and helped me with a lot of my stress.

Some of the respondents identified specific scriptures that they like to reflect on in times of stress. These scriptures promote positive coping beliefs and strategies which prove to be impactful for the women. As one respondent explains, “I'm reminded of Philippians, right? Be anxious for nothing, but bring everything to God in prayer and supplication.” Another respondent reflects on a scripture that helps her cope: “I literally go to 1 John 6:33 where it says don't be afraid, don't be concerned. This is what's happening, this is what's supposed to happen. Life is supposed to have these challenges, but fear not I have overcome the world.”

Another respondent identified a scripture that is helpful to her in coping with stress, and explained that she wears a bracelet embossed with this scripture as a constant reminder of her ability to overcome stress with the help of God/Christ:

The other thing, for the last 20 years I've worn a bracelet, it's Philippians 4:13 and it's like I can hold onto it, literally. So there's times when I'm just like if I can just hold onto this, even if I can't stop and pray because I'm in the middle of work or whatever, I feel at least holding onto that means there's a connection and that connection has gotten me through a lot.

**Prayer.** The women in this study report prayer is a key resource in helping them to cope with stress. The respondents were unanimous in saying that prayer is the spiritual practice they use most often, and the one they find to be the most effective in helping them to cope. One respondent describes prayer as her biggest form of coping:
I think personally when I'm going through something - and this last year has been something. So when I'm going through a lot, I just stay still, I pray. My biggest form of coping is prayer, for me, so I'm like I'm going through some stuff, I'm going to take a day and I'm just going to pray.

Similarly, another respondent refers to prayer as her first line of defense in dealing with stressors big and small:

I go right in my prayer closet - not a physical prayer closet, but just go somewhere and say I need to come out of this situation right now, regroup, pray, and that's my first line of defense is prayer. I just pray. I pray about my coworkers, I pray about my family situation. I pray about every single thing. I pray about the littlest things. Okay, God, can I find a parking spot today at work? Can you help me out? And you know what - God has answered me so many times, I can't tell you.

Stress and coping theory (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984) suggests two types of coping, emotion-focused and problem-focused coping. Emotion-focused coping has to do with an individual’s management of their emotions in response to stress. Problem-focused coping refers to the courses of action an individual takes to address a stressor. The women in this study discussed the ways that prayer helps them with emotion-focused and problem-focused coping.

**Emotion-focused coping.** One respondent discusses the emotions she experiences in response to stress and how prayer helps her to effectively manage these emotions. She says, “when something happens I do cry, I get emotional, but I always have to go back - go to prayer so I won't get so emotional that I can't concentrate on what I need to do.” Some respondents shared stories and examples of how prayer helps them to cope with difficult
emotions. One respondent shared an example of how prayer helped her to manage her emotions in response to a personal stressor that emerged while she was in class and unable to deal with the stressor at that moment:

Well, they lost my application for the Section 30 and so when they told me, when I found out about it - yes, I was very upset because I’m saying how am I going to live? Emotion set in, but it wasn't a long time. I had to leave my classroom, go to a private spot, and pray so that I can calm down and go back into the classroom and focus on what I needed to focus on.

Another respondent shared her experience of intense grief following the passing of her mother and described how prayer helped her to get through the emotional pain:

My mother passed away two years ago. Actually, October, the 19th will be two years. I was at a place of suicidal thoughts, literally to leave this earth. And the meaning of faith took a new meaning for me, and I learned in that to sit still. I needed to confront those feelings. So I went through – when I couldn't pray, my tears were prayers. I had to get the emotions out, in order to then allow God to show me His healing and His comfort.

Other respondents reflected on the lessons they’ve learned about the importance of dealing with painful emotions and seeking God’s help in the healing process. One respondent discussed her growth in this area:

One of the things I never back away from, I confront the feelings, I'm not afraid to confront anger, bitterness, pain. I'm not afraid to confront it because I find as a woman, I've done an excellent job of hiding my pain and it pops open like a file cabinet when it's triggered. So I am learning to confront it. So whatever I need to do
to confront it, then allow the Lord to do the healing that He needs to do.

Another respondent reflected on how her faith and church involvement has helped her to find balance between expressing normal feelings such as sadness or anger, while also being careful not to get stuck in those emotions. She explains:

For me, my faith and church involvement now helps me to acknowledge my feelings. It's not to say oh, [NAME REDACTED], you can't be mad, you can't be sad. I'm going to be mad, I'm going to take a minute and be upset about whatever I'm upset about, but I don't stay there.

Similarly, another respondent reflected on her experiences in learning to let go of negative emotions. She describes this process for herself as ‘upshifting’:

It's like I might tap into my emotional feeling and my natural thoughts before upshifting, I call it. I say it's a growth process. When I'm going through something, a lot of times I might get sad or I might get angry first, but I'm learning to not dwell there, you know shift the gear.

In addition to prayer helping the women to manage their emotions, they also report that through prayer God helps them to identify steps to address or remedy the problem at hand.

**Problem-focused coping.** The women in this study discussed ways in which prayer helped to inform their decision-making and problem-solving in response to stress. One respondent described a period in her life when she was dealing with significant family issues. During this period, she began to take time to pray each day before returning home from work. She believes as a result of her prayers, she was able to identify new ideas and strategies to help her address the problems in her family:

When I would drive home, instead of driving home and getting in my driveway and
knowing somebody would be on the porch waiting for me to come in the house, I
learned to stop two blocks from home - take five minutes to pray, get centered, and
then drive home and be ready to get out of the car.

The respondent goes on to explain:

So all of a sudden, little things were coming in that were saying here's a way to cope,
here's this to cope. And I swore it was because of stopping at that moment to pray -
when I could have just pulled my hair out and said, “I can't do this.” (laughs)

The women in this study also discussed encountering crisis situations in which they had to
respond immediately and without time to pray. One participant explained it this way:

There's some stress where I had to respond immediately so I didn't have a chance to
step back to get focused, or thoughtful or prayerful around it. And so for those
things, it would be sort of like "okay, Lord we’re launching into this, I hope you've
got my back.”

The women believe that by being in relationship with God, there’s an understanding that He
is always looking out for them and working on their behalf, including in moments of urgency
when they might not be able to pray. Another respondent reflected on her experiences in
navigating crisis situations. She describes her thought process and the trust she feels that
God will guide her in those situations:

“God, here it is, this is happening, and You know what the outcome will be and You
know how I can get [thru it], and so just help me as I go through this process, help me
to be still, to hear from you as I take action, before I take action and sort of guide my
steps.”

Praise & Worship. The women discussed the powerful impact of expressing praise to God
when dealing with stressful situations, and explained how this spiritual practice helps them to cope. One respondent describes the peace and joy she feels during moments of praise and worship:

I love praise and worship, I just think praise and worship just removes so much stress and just puts me at ease and allows me to focus on God and His goodness and how He's there for me, and just helps me focus on Him and forget about a lot of my emotional stress and problems and stuff like that. It calms me down. I can put on the gospel and jump around in my kitchen until I get happy.

Similarly, another respondent described how singing praise and worship songs help her to manage stress:

If I'm getting stressed out, I'll start singing a song. Or if I'm in a situation - it happens almost every other day. I'm an organizer so I'm around a lot of people, and things will come up in conversation and I'll just starting singing some Christian song just so that I don't have to think or hear or allow it to get in my spirit.

**Counseling.** The women in this study acknowledge the importance of counseling and mental health supports in addition to using religious and spiritual coping strategies. Some respondents discussed the stigma of counseling in the Black community, as well as the strong Black woman persona which prevents some in their community from seeking out counseling supports. One respondent stressed the importance of being able to recognize when faith is not enough and counseling is needed. She says:

I just had a thought on counseling – knowing when you do need counseling, especially as black women. We try to be so strong and keep it all together. “I'm not crazy, what are you talking about?” But it's important to know that you can reach out
for counseling when it gets to that point where okay, even being in church and having faith and all this, I need to take it a step further and see if there's somebody that can help me get through what I'm going through…I think that's really important.

Another respondent shared her experience of using a combination of counseling and prayer to help her get through a difficult time in her life:

After my mom passed, I was diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder. She passed in September and it wasn't until January of this year that God delivered me from post-traumatic stress disorder. My medical doctor was going to put me on psychotropic medication and God spoke to me. I do believe in medication, please don't get me wrong. I believe in medication, but God spoke to me and said “I want you to pray and praise your way through this.” And that's what I did. And God brought me through it. But the only reason my medical doctor didn't put me on medication is because I committed to going to counseling, the same external counselor, and I did. I did. And the combination of the two is why I still have my mind. Okay? Because at one point I thought I was going to lose my mind. So I find that the coupling of praying and crying out to God, and going to counseling was helpful; helped to bring me through.

The women in this study also discussed what they described as a facade among some in the church community. They believe this facade hinders some Christians from seeking counseling, as it perpetuates the notion that emotional distress is a sign of weakness in one’s faith. One respondent describes the pressure her mother felt to live up to this facade:

I find that we have this façade in the church that we're supposed to be strong because of who we know. But that's why God has counselors as well! Because I recall when
my brother died from AIDS and my mom was going around saying "He's in a better place, at least I know where he is, he's in a better place." But then later she shared with me how she nearly lost her mind. But the people in the church were talking about "Oh, Sister [NAME REDACTED]", she's very strong – see how she handled that?" When she nearly lost her mind! Losing her child. But she felt the need to have this facade because it was expected.

Another respondent endorsed this concern about facades in the church:

Sometimes I feel we walk around on eggshells because internally we go through different things or struggling with things, but we have to look good on the outside because we don't want people to see we're broken. We don't want people to judge us. We don't want the church to know. It's a lot of that.

The respondent goes on to talk about the need to disrupt those harmful views:

So there's a lot of change that needs to happen because we're not perfect, and we never will be. But that lie needs to stop being disseminated to us that we need to be perfect all the time.

One respondent discussed what she sees as the role of the Pastor and other church leaders in cultivating more understanding of mental health concerns, and acceptance of counseling and psychotherapy:

Many times the church does not address issues of mental health. It tends to get swept under the rug because we're just told not to focus on our issue, to focus on God. Some of us are better at that than others. But when you're dealing with a divorce, a mother dying from cancer, a number of things, it's very hard when your Pastor says don't focus on these things, focus on God.
This respondent chose to pursue counseling for herself despite those messages, and eventually switched to a church that was more supportive and informed regarding mental health needs:

I had to go out to [NAME REDACTED], to a secular place to get group and one-on-one counseling for grief. Then when I [switched churches] and stepped in to [CHURCH NAME REDACTED], I also got it from the pulpit, and Pastor [and First Lady] provided one-on-one conversations at 12 midnight or 1 a.m. So this is important.

All of the women in this study described their current churches and Pastors as being supportive and encouraging of mental health counseling in response to stress. One respondent says, “that's one of the things that I really like about this church and our leader is that he promotes [counseling] and education in many facets.” Another respondent spoke similarly about her church: “Pastor talks about that – if you know that you need additional help, then don't be afraid to ask and get it.”

For the women in this study, the in-vivo theme of “help me journey through” represents the use of religious and spiritual beliefs and practices to cope with stress. Religious coping has historically been a fundamental resource for many Black women (Boyd-Franklin, 1989). Some theorists endorse it as an important and useful coping strategy which allows the individual to enact their most sacred beliefs in order to interpret and make-meaning of stressful events, in ways that can facilitate positive coping behaviors and outcomes (Pargament, 1988). The women in this study report the spiritual practices of prayer, scripture reading, praise and worship, and church involvement are most helpful to them in appraising stressful situations, and managing their emotional and behavioral
responses. These women, and their church communities, also endorse counseling and mental health supports as important and necessary resources in effective stress management.

Summary

In this chapter, I outlined the themes generated in response to this study’s exploration of coping self-efficacy among religiously-involved Black women. These themes included: 1) I Have To Build; 2) The Bottom Line; 3) God Is Connected To Our Struggle; 4) It’s In My Genes; 5) I Can’t Do This Alone; 6) His Track Record; 7) Knowing Sunday’s Going To Come; and 8) Help Me Journey Through. The experiences and accounts of the women who participated in this study offer valuable insights into the relationship between race and racism-related stressors, religious involvement, and coping self-efficacy. In the next chapter, I will discuss important implications of these findings for clinical social work, and identify ways in which the field must engage with Black women and their religious and spiritual identities going forward.
Table 5: Study Findings by Major Themes and Sub-Themes

**Theme 1: I HAVE TO BUILD**
- Purpose and meaning of the stressor
- Stressors as opportunities for growth
  - Personal growth: learning more about self
  - Spiritual growth: learning more about God
- Stressors build confidence
- Stressors make you stronger
- Stressors as spiritual tests
- Finding the lesson in the stressor

**Theme 2: THE BOTTOM LINE**
- Normalization of stress
- Victory over stress
- Gratitude in the midst of stress

**Theme 3: GOD IS CONNECTED TO OUR STRUGGLE**
- Experiences with racism
- Needing to prove self
- God is in it with me
- Confidence in the face of racism
- Spiritual acts of resistance
- Black church as a coping response to racialized stressors
  - Being affirmed in church
  - Sermons addressing racism
- Pastor’s engagement with social issues
- Racial healing through church experience

**Theme 4: IT’S IN MY GENES**
- Spiritual lessons from matriarchs
- The strength of our mothers

**Theme 5: I CAN’T DO THIS ALONE**
- Recognizing the need for God’s help
- Acknowledging one’s personal limitations
- Turning things over to God
- Learning to depend on God
- Benefits of depending on God – finding peace

**Theme 6: HIS TRACK RECORD**
- Reflecting on past triumphs
- Confidence in God

**Theme 7: KNOWING SUNDAY’S GOING TO COME**
- Before and after becoming involved with church
- Looking forward to church service
- Church atmosphere and experience
  - Sermons
  - Praise and worship
  - Testimony
  - Fellowship with others

**Theme 8: HELP ME JOURNEY THROUGH**
- First response to stress – panic and worry
- Emotion-focused coping
- Spiritual-focused coping
- Spiritual coping strategies
  - Prayer
  - Scripture reading
  - Praise and worship
  - Counseling and therapy
Discussion

“I think the atmosphere is different. I don't think people understand. You come in with a body of believers focused on one purpose, there's a different atmosphere. An atmosphere of peace, an atmosphere where you can just forget all your troubles, you can relax and take a break. Sure, you may have to go back out there to that problem, but you feel like you can conquer it. You can do something about it, and I think that's important, and everybody's looking for that.”

The purpose of this study was to explore the relationship between stress, coping self-efficacy, and religious involvement among Black women. Focus group interviews were conducted with 32 Black female churchgoers representing eight, historically Black churches in a large, metropolitan area in the Northeast region. Various interconnections exist between the rich findings of this study, and prior empirical research and existing conceptual literature. Establishing a midlevel theory about the religious and spiritual coping experiences of Black women was inextricably connected to the intersection of gender, racism and self-efficacy, and required an exploration of how the women shared their experiences, and a correlation of the study findings to current literature. The following research questions were explored: 1) how does religious involvement help Black women to cope with stress; 2) how does the Black church experience help Black women to develop and sustain coping self-efficacy; and 3) how does self-efficacy impact the coping experiences of Black women.

Black women regularly face stressors which are complex, oppressive, and involve the interlocking effects of race, gender and social class (Collins, 2009; Hamilton-Mason, Everett, & Hall, 2009; Kwate & Goodman, 2015). Chronic exposure to these stressors poses a
significant threat to the psychological and physical well-being of Black women (Hill & Hoggard, 2018; Kreiger et al., 2011; Kwate & Goodman, 2015), and may have the cumulative effect of weakening their confidence and self-efficacy over time (Grote, Bledsoe, Larkin, Lemay, & Brown, 2007; Thomas & Gonzalez-Prendes, 2009). Given that religion and spirituality are consistently identified by Black women as a central coping resource (Boyd-Franklin, 2010; Mattis, 2002; Taylor & Chatters, 2010), I was interested to explore how religious involvement helps Black women to develop and sustain coping self-efficacy. Self-efficacy, belief in one’s ability to successfully manage stressful situations, is a critical factor in determining coping processes and outcomes (Bandura, 1997). Yet, despite its significance, few studies have examined it. For Black women who regularly face racism-related stressors (e.g., microaggressions, racial bias, individual and institutional racism) it is important to understand how religious involvement, a central element in their lives, helps Black women to believe in themselves and their coping abilities in spite of the challenges they face. For the purpose of this study, religious involvement is operationally defined as private devotion to God (i.e., spirituality), and public participation in church (i.e., religion). Throughout this paper, religious involvement is used interchangeably with religion and spirituality, in order to be consistent with previous studies that have examined how Black women understand these concepts (Mattis, 2002).

Using an exploratory design with grounded theory data analysis methods (Corbin & Strauss, 2014), this study identified the following major themes: 1) I Have To Build; 2) The Bottom Line; 3) God Is Connected To Our Struggle; 4) It’s In My Genes; 5) I Can’t Do This Alone; 6) His Track Record; 7) Knowing Sunday’s Going To Come; and 8) Help Me Journey Through. Combined these themes provide the following understandings to this study’s key
research questions: 1) racism and racial bias are dominant stressors for Black women; 2) religion and spirituality offer important beliefs, perspectives, and strategies that positively impact Black women’s ability to cope; 3) religion and spirituality act as a buffer against the negative impact of racism and oppression on Black women’s self-efficacy and feelings of self-worth; and 4) the Black church provides a sacred community for Black women in which they feel affirmed, validated, and supported. All of these findings are contextualized within the literature review of this study, and build on earlier theoretical works.

Using the paradigm of stress, appraisals and coping as a guiding framework (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), I consider the significance of racism as a dominant stress experience for Black women and identify ways in which religious involvement helps the women in this study to develop and sustain coping self-efficacy in spite of these challenges. Second, I discuss this study’s findings about how self-efficacy positively impacts the coping experience of Black women. This study builds upon Bandura’s (1997) model of self-efficacy development and offers a culture-specific, midrange theory (Corbin & Strauss, 2014) of coping self-efficacy for Black women.

**Racism as a Dominant Stress Experience: Connecting Findings to Research**

This study began with an exploration of the everyday stress experience of Black women and the ways in which religious involvement helps them to cope. Among the women in this study, racism quickly emerged as a dominate stress experience. The women described frequent experiences of racism, racial bias, and microaggressions. As one participant remarked, “we have to be very candid about this - because being black, period, in this country, in the world, there's so many things - we're oppressed, depressed, and suppressed.” Although the women’s accounts of oppression centered around racism, they were also
intensely aware of their identities as women and how the intersecting identities of race, gender, and social class converge in the racialized stressors they experience.

While these experiences occurred in many different facets of the women’s lives, many of them discussed their experience of racism and bias in the workplace. The participants in the study consisted largely of working-class women with varying types of careers and education levels. Women in support roles, including technical and clerical positions, described frequently being ignored, talked down to, and undervalued in the workplace. Sometimes these encounters were enacted by persons in positions of power, and other times by colleagues in a lateral position, or by the consumers or patrons served by the women. Similarly, for the women in the study who held positions of leadership, they described experiences of being doubted, underestimated, and undermined in their roles. They described frequently encountering people who were in awe or disbelief of their accomplishments and credentials, seemingly implying that it is unfathomable for a Black woman to have the capacities to excel in certain professions. These negative assumptions and perceptions of Black women were reflected in the behaviors towards them, with some of their direct reports and other colleagues creating conflict and open resistance to their leadership. One of the study participants, a Black woman in a leadership position in higher education, said of her staff, “they come in for the first time and look at me, and they're like, "I have to report to her?"”

These findings are consistent with previous studies which indicate Black women regularly face racism-related stressors in the workplace, including being regularly denied promotions and tenure, and being overlooked for leadership opportunities (Bacchus & Holley, 2004; Holder, Jackson, Ponterotto, 2015; Shorter-Gooden, 2004; Thomas, Speight, &
Witherspoon, 2008). Holder, Jackson & Ponterotto (2015) conducted a study of Black women in corporate leadership positions and found they regularly face microaggressions at work, and these experiences negatively impact their overall well-being, as well as their positionality in the workplace.

The women in this study reported that the constant and repeated encounters of racism and racial bias sometimes leave them feeling like they need to prove themselves. For example, the women discussed feeling the need to outperform their White counterparts, avoid mistakes at all costs, and be vigilant about disproving negative stereotypes about Black women.

As a result of this tension, some of the women described the practice of assuming a dual identity – being their authentic selves around other Blacks, and presenting a more constrained self around Whites. Dubois (1903) referred to this phenomenon as “double consciousness”, which he described as the experience of Blacks alternating between their authentic selves and an alternative self in order to seem more acceptable to Whites, and to better integrate into spaces that otherwise devalue Black identity. Although this can be as a self-protective strategy for some Black women, previous research suggests the practice of double consciousness, and the inequities and biases that contribute to it, can have a detrimental impact on Black women’s sense of self (Szymanski & Lewis, 2016).

Research consistently indicates that chronic exposure to racism can have a deleterious impact on the psychological and physical wellbeing of Black women (Anderson, 2013; Clark, Anderson, Clark, & Williams, 1999; Kreiger, et al., 2010; Szymanski & Lewis, 2016). Studies have shown that racism-related stressors contribute to increased anxiety and depression (Holder, Jackson, Ponterrotto, & 2015; Kwate & Goodman, 2015), and lowered
self-esteem and efficacy (Grote, Bledsoe, Larkin, Lemay, Brown, 2007; Szymanski & Lewis, 2016; Thomas & Gonzalez-Prendes, 2009). Health data also shows a link between racism and racial bias and health problems faced by Black women such as cardiovascular disease, high blood pressure, and hypertension (Cooper, Thayer & Waldstein, 2014; Kreiger, et al., 2011; Mitchell, 2015).

Although the women in this study described feeling burdened and weighed down by racism-related stressors at times, they also reported feeling self-assured of their identity and worth as Black women, and confident in their ability to overcome stress and adversity with the help of God. A significant finding of this study is that religious involvement acts as a buffer against the damaging psychological effects of racism and oppression for this group of Black women by helping them to build and sustain coping self-efficacy. In the next section, I discuss Bandura’s model of self-efficacy development (1997) and its application to religiously involved Black women. I also discuss this study’s findings of four additional elements of self-efficacy development, and present a self-efficacy model for Black women (Figure 4).

A Self-Efficacy Model for Black Women: Connecting Findings to Research

This study identified key intersections between Bandura’s self-efficacy model, religious coping, and the Black church experience for this sample of Black women. As no theory of self-efficacy for Black women can be complete without contextualizing the racialized stress experience of this group, findings from this study include the following additional dimensions of self-efficacy for Black women: facilitative spiritual perspectives; spiritual connection to God; social connection with other Black women; and religion and spirituality as a tool for resistance and subversion. Although there has been conceptual
exploration of the importance of informal and formal religious involvement, there are relatively few empirical contributions to this phenomenon.

**Bandura’s Model of Self-Efficacy.** Self-efficacy refers to an individual’s belief in their ability to successfully manage stressful situations (Bandura, 1997). According to Bandura, self-efficacy beliefs directly influence a person’s emotional and behavioral response to stress; and ultimately plays a significant role in determining the individual’s ability to effectively cope with stressful events. Self-efficacy beliefs are developed through an individual’s positive and supportive interactions with their social environment. Bandura identifies four paths for self-efficacy development. These include verbal persuasion, enactive mastery experience, vicarious experience, and physical/affective states. This study examined the Black church, with its empowering messages and opportunities for positive social interactions, as a critical social environment through which Black women can develop and sustain self-efficacy in spite of the chronic and oppressive stressors they face which have the effect of weakening self-efficacy over time (Grote, Bledsoe, Larkin, Lemay, & Brown, 2007; Thomas & Gonzalez-Prendes, 2009). Important parallels between self-efficacy development and the Black church experience are discussed.

**Verbal Persuasion.** Verbal persuasion refers to the encouragement received from others which helps to strengthen an individual’s belief in their own ability to achieve desired outcomes. Bandura writes “people who are persuaded verbally that they possess the capabilities to master given tasks are likely to mobilize greater effort and sustain it” (1997, p.101). Verbal persuasion is parallel to a central function and mission of the Black church which is to encourage the churchgoer through empowering and uplifting sermons. As one theologian writes, “preaching needs to be encouraging such that the self-esteem of Black
people is enhanced by understanding the message of Scripture” (Harris, 1995, p.92).

Beliefs about God’s connection to oppressed people are central to Black liberation theology (Cone, 1995) which has historically been preached in traditional Black churches like the ones attended by the women in this study. The women indicate they frequently hear church sermons and teachings which directly address the injustices Black Americans face, while also including affirming messages about the dignity, value, and worth of Black women in spite of these challenges. These messages offer Black women an intentional, counter narrative to the negative messages they might internalize from the racialized stressors they encounter. Black liberation theology acknowledges the injustices Black Americans have endured, and positions God as being joined with them in the fight for freedom from oppression (Barnes, 2006; Cone, 1995).

**Enactive Mastery Experience.** Enactive mastery experience refers to the encouragement individuals gain from reflecting on their past successes in dealing with stress. Enactive mastery experience is reflected through the principle functions of the Black church to encourage and uplift the spirit of Blacks by helping them to recognize the presence of God in their struggles; reflect on their past experiences of overcoming difficulty with the help of God; and reinforce a belief in their ability to cope with life’s challenges (Eugene, 1995; Oates & Goode, 2012).

The women in this study regularly reflect on God’s blessings to them and their families, and are encouraged by the reminders of God’s help to them in dealing with previous stressors. An example of this is seen in the following quote as the study participant reflects on God’s care for her in the past, and the ways in which it fosters coping self-efficacy for her now: “You’ve proven yourself a million times over to me and even in this moment you are
doing now [sic], so I can just be at peace and let go and believe that this is going to be okay.”

In addition to these reflections offering an important reminder of God’s provision in the face of struggle, they also remind the women of their own ability to overcome any obstacle with God’s help. For the women in this study, the reflections on their past triumphs over stress, and God’s consistent aid to them in doing so, helps the women to feel confident and hopeful about being able to overcome new stressors.

**Vicarious Experience.** Vicarious experience refers to individuals feeling more hopeful about their ability to cope based on the experience of others around them who have successfully coped with similar stressors. Vicarious experience is likened to the social support experience within the Black church. The support among Black women in the church is such that they celebrate the triumphs and victories of each other as if it were their own; and similarly, they show concern for the burdens of each other and provide support through difficult times. Ellison (1993) writes of the Black church experience “the particular quality of fellowship generated within these religious groups may build feelings of self-esteem and personal empowerment” (p.1029).

The women in this study report that the affinity and connection they share with other Blacks in the church helps them to feel inspired and hopeful about their own strengths when they witness the success and triumph of fellow church members, and the ways God has worked on their behalf.

**Physical/Affective States.** Physiological and affective states refer to individuals’ beliefs in their ability to cope being strengthened by the generation of positive feelings and/or mood in response to the stressor. Physiological and affective states are related to the
charismatic nature of the Black church experience in which cathartic expressions such as shouting, dancing and “letting the spirit take over” are commonplace (Eugene, 1995; Hamilton, Sandelowski, Moore, Agarwal, & Koenig, 2012). These zealous expressions often act as an outlet for pent-up anguish which Blacks may sometimes carry as a result of the stressors they experience, and the feelings of powerlessness to effect change. The physiological and emotional expressions that are experienced within the church setting can help to encourage efficacy beliefs among Black women. The women’s physical and affective experiences provide them with a sense of knowing that fuels their beliefs in their ability to overcome their struggles.

In addition to the four areas discussed above, this study identified additional elements of self-efficacy for Black women: facilitative spiritual perspectives; spiritual connection to God; social connection with other Black women; and religion and spirituality as a tool for resistance and subversion.

**Facilitative Spiritual Perspectives.** This study found that the spiritual and religious beliefs of Black women help them to make meaning of stressful events in such a way that facilitates increased belief in their capacities to cope, and achieve enhanced personal and spiritual growth in the process. Like most religious doctrines, Christian theology provides perspectives on many aspects of the human condition such as stress, suffering and oppression, as well as elements such as strength, resilience and the capacity of the human spirit to overcome challenges. From the Bible and church teachings, Black women are able to draw useful perspectives that help them to make sense of the stressors they encounter.

For the women in this study, their religious and spiritual beliefs offered them perspectives which help to facilitate coping self-efficacy. Some of the appraisal beliefs
expressed by the women in this study included meanings associated with the normalization of stress; the belief that there is spiritual purpose to the stressors experienced; and the belief that adversity creates opportunities for growth.

First, the women acknowledge stress to be a normal part of life, and they recognize that having faith in God does not mean they are immune to stress or problems. Instead, the women feel that stressful events often serve an important purpose in their lives. The women believe stressful situations create opportunities for spiritual growth wherein they learn more about themselves and more about trusting God.

The women find that it is through stress and adversity that they are able to gain new insights and perspectives, develop increased capacities and strengths, change unhealthy patterns, and deepen spiritual characteristics such as patience, love, tolerance, and forgiveness. The women believe stressful situations and the personal strengths that emerge from them, make them better prepared for blessings God has in store for them in the future, with some of the women referring to these moments as spiritual tests.

Reflecting on these spiritual perspectives, the women discuss being intentional in their response to stress as they look for the learning opportunity it offers. The women explain that although they do experience feelings of anger, sadness, and other upset emotion in response to stress, their spiritual beliefs enable them to move on towards more adaptive thoughts that facilitate effective coping. The women explain that early in their faith walks, they often responded to stressful situations with angst and unrest. As the women have grown more spiritually mature, they have developed a spiritual understanding of stress which enables them to respond with greater optimism and resolve.
This study’s findings are consistent with previous research which identified
spirituality as a critical factor in the meaning-making and appraisals for African-Americans
(Hamilton-Mason, et al., 2012; Mattis, 2002). In an earlier study on the religious coping
experiences of African-American women, Mattis (2002) posits “spirituality is a way of
negotiating and making meaning about the issues, struggles, and forms of oppression that
they face in their everyday lives.” This study further adds to existing literature by identifying
spiritual growth as an important and desired outcome which the women consider and
anticipate when interpreting the stressful events in their lives.

**Spiritual Connection to God.** The women identified their faith in God and their
certainty of His love and positive regard for them as being a central factor in helping them to
feel affirmed and confident in the face of racialized stressors. The women reported that they
are encouraged by the belief that God is connected to their struggle; concerned about the
injustices they experience, and committed to seeing them through it. As one study
participant explained, “God is connected to our struggle, He concerns himself with
everything that we concern ourselves with. He is intimately acquainted with everything I go
through, and is intimately concerned with everything I'm concerned with every day.”

In addition to the beliefs the women embrace from religious doctrine concerning
God’s connection to their struggle, there is the more personal, lived experience of God’s
connection that is deeply meaningful to the women and impactful in their coping
experiences. Through their personal devotions, the women have cultivated a closeness and
intimacy with God that helps them to *feel* loved and valued. This connection to God, and the
sense of belonging it engenders, helps the women to feel more affirmed in their identities as
Black women and more confident in their abilities to cope with racism-related stressors.
The personal relationship the women have with God extends outside of their church participation. The women report their relationship with God is connected to their sense of spirituality, and they describe it as a central and defining element of their everyday experience. This spiritual connection to God positively impacts the women’s coping and their feelings of self-efficacy. The women see God as omnipotent and in control of all things, and because of their closeness with God, they believe they too have power to overcome any adversity with His help.

Religious beliefs about God’s presence and help during moments of struggle are an important part of Black women’s coping repertoire. It offers the women useful cognitive-coping perspectives such as hope, optimism and self-efficacy, and empowers them as they take action to address racism and other stressful situations with the assurance that God is present with them in these endeavors.

This study’s findings on the positive impact of personal, spiritual connection to God as a resource for Black women coping with racism-related stressors is consistent with existing literature. As Hamilton-Mason et al (2012) wrote, “they [African Americans] had to be spiritual beings and in touch with their spiritual selves to survive hate, racism, and sexism (p.482).” The findings of this study further add to existing literature by validating the women’s lived experience of a spiritual connection to God, and thus acknowledges and affirms Black women’s epistemology and emotive ways of knowing (Collins, 2009).

The spiritual connection the women have with God also impacts their feelings of power/powerlessness, and locus of control. Both of these elements are significant in relationship to Black women’s self-efficacy. Holder, Jackson & Ponterotto (2015) report that feeling empowered is critical for Black women in sustaining a sense of worth and efficacy in
the face of discrimination and bias experienced in the workplace. When an individual assesses that he or she has some measure of controllability or can affect change in a situation, the person feels more efficacious and is more likely to persist in coping efforts despite challenges (Bandura, 1997; Oates & Goode, 2012; Thomas & Gonzalez-Prendes, 2009).

Although Black women face chronic and oppressive stressors to which they may feel powerless to change, the women in this study report that by acknowledging their vulnerabilities and limitations, and “turning things over to God,” they actually feel more hopeful and confident that they will overcome the stressor. The women believe that dependence on God, which requires trust, helps them to have self-efficacy. The women explain that trusting God can take different forms. Sometimes, it means trusting that God has already equipped them with everything they need to overcome the stressor(s). Other times when the stressor exceeds the women’s ability to cope, trusting God means believing He will work on their behalf and give them victory over the problems in their lives. Even in situations where the outcome does not appear favorable to them, such as in moments of great loss or gross injustice, the women believe in the spiritual principle that something good can come from unfortunate situations – perhaps in the form of spiritual growth or the deepening of spiritual virtues.

The women in this study demonstrated self-awareness and comfort in discussing their vulnerabilities and struggles, and times when they must depend on God. The women in this study reject the strong Black woman persona (Abrams, Hill, & Maxwell, 2019) which portrays Black women as having an unreasonable expectation of strength. They refer to this image as a facade, and believe it is an expectation that is placed upon them by other Blacks, as well as those outside of the community. The women believe this facade is detrimental to
their well-being, and runs counter to the spiritual principal of depending on God. Because Black women have been socialized to be strong, resilient, and self-sufficient, some of the women in the study described experiencing greater challenges in relinquishing perceived control and depending fully on God. For these women it required learning to let go, and a role reversal. Traditionally, Black women have assumed many roles in caring for themselves, their families and communities, and they often feel pressure to maintain the strong Black woman persona across all of these roles. Unlike other relationships in their lives, the women don’t have to be a caretaker for God. Instead, God is there to take care of and provide for them. The women in this study believe that through the experience of depending on God, they become more resilient and strong because of the rest and renewal they receive from God. These perspectives are consistent with Biblical references about God providing strength to the weary and oppressed.

Through their spiritual connections to God and dependence on Him, the women are able to develop increased confidence and efficacy. The women acknowledge that their confidence in themselves and belief in positive coping outcomes comes from God.

Social Connection with Other Black Women. The women in this study report their participation in faith communities helps them to feel affirmed and validated in their identities as Black women through their fellowship and affinity with other Black women in the church. It is through the shared connection with each other that the women find encouragement and support, as well as a sense of comfort in knowing they are not alone in their struggles.

Referring to each other as sisters in Christ, Black women regularly draw strength and inspiration from each other. The church provides Black women an important opportunity to connect with one another in meaningful ways, and to share in each other’s trials and
triumphs. Black women in the church also benefit from important intergenerational sharing that happens in these communities. Women of different ages are able to connect and engage with each on a regular basis in church, and often in highly personable ways older generations sharing stories of wisdom and experience, and younger generations sharing new ideas and insights.

The impact and power of social support and kinship connections can be traced back to Afrocentric, collectivist principles where identity and experience is validated, and one’s sense of self is shaped and rooted in connection to each other and ancestors (Mbiti, 1990). The women in this study report that social support and kinship connections helps them to manage racism-related stressors. They described feeling affirmed by being with other women who look like them and understand their experience. This is consistent with the position Collins (2010) advances in Black feminist perspective regarding a collective understanding among Black women. In connection to racism, other theorists suggest social support circles within the Black community provide an opportunity to validate experiences and check perceptions regarding perceived racism (Boyd Franklin, 2010; Shorter-Gooden, 2004). Holder, Jackson, & Ponterotto (2015) refers to these moments as sanity checks and describes it as seeking out other African American women to validate the existence of microagressions and to check perceptions of racist incidents.

The findings of this study are consistent with existing literature which identifies social support as an important coping resource for Black women (Boyd-Franklin, 2010; Byrant-Davis, Ullman, Tsong, & Gobin, 2011; Holder, Jackson, & Ponterotto, 2015). Social support acts as a protective factor against the damaging effects of racism by providing the women with high identity centrality (Szymanski & Lewis, 2016), a sense of cultural
awareness and pride (Norman & Tang, 2016; Lewis-Coles & Constantine, 2006), and buffering against an internalization of the negative messages associated with racism (Shorter-Gooden, 2004). Throughout history, the support networks within Black churches have been central to the survival of Black women (Boyd-Franklin, 2010; Taylor & Chatters, 2010).

**Religion and Spirituality as a Tool for Resistance and Subversion.** Black women are empowered through their use of religion and spirituality as a form of resistance and subversion against oppression. The women in this study described the ways in which their faith helps them to reject and subvert racism. One participant, a Black woman in her 60’s who came of age during the Civil Rights era, spoke adamantly about her views on racism as a Black Christian woman: “For me, just knowing, knowing [pounds on the table] that if God has something for me, there is nothing racism can do to prevent me from being or having what it is He has for me.”

Evident in these expressions is the defiant strength, determination, and self-efficacy of Black women. As the women spoke of their encounters with racism, they discussed the actions they’ve taken to speak out against it, and to seek justice for themselves and others. Whether dealing with racial bias and discrimination on a micro level or systemic racism on a macro level, the women report feeling a personal and spiritual responsibility to actively engage in efforts to challenge injustice and fight for change. The women report feeling encouraged and emboldened by their faith to take a stand against racism and oppression. The women identify biblical scripture, church teachings, and the examples of their church leaders as being factors which compel them to action. Throughout the Bible, and as reinforced in church teachings, there are many references to God’s role in redeeming and rescuing the oppressed, and God’s expectations of His followers in challenging oppression.
The vocalization of the oppressed experience of Blacks and the psychological, physical and spiritual suffering it causes is a defining characteristic of the traditional Black church, and the Black liberation theology that is preached within these spaces. For many Black women, this element of the Black church experience provides a sense of meaning and hopefulness, as well as useful guidance in determining one’s response to oppression. Throughout the history of the Black faith tradition in the U.S., spiritual and religious principles have offered a useful framework from which resistance movements and subversive acts against racism and oppression have been formed (Ani, 2004; Barnes, 2006; Boyd-Franklin, 2010; Taylor & Chatters, 2010).

There has been a long history within traditional Black churches of being active in the struggle for freedom and equality for Black Americans (Harvey, 2011; Paris, 1985; Taylor & Chatters, 2010). Since slavery and throughout the history of Black Americans struggle in the U.S., the Black church has played a pivotal role in shifting the political climate and prompting societal change.

Additionally, the women in the study also identified their Pastors’ engagement with issues of racism and injustice as being an encouragement and inspiration to them in their own efforts to challenge and subvert racism. The women described their Pastors as being deeply committed to issues of social justice and noted that they regularly addressed issues of racism and oppression in their sermons and teachings. The women further reported that their Pastors not only talked about issues of injustice, but they were also actively engaged in community and national efforts to address these critical issues and encouraged the same of church members. Some of the actions taken by the Pastors include appeals to political leaders; mobilizing and participating in grassroots activism; and meeting the personal aid needs of
persons in the community impacted by systemic injustices.

For the women in this study, they described two ways of subverting racism – both on an individual and systemic level. They also identified times when they purposely choose not to combat racism as a means of self-preservation for themselves and their families. The women indicated their faith guides them in each circumstance.

**Individual Response.** The women reported frequently speaking out against racism and injustice, and feeling a spiritual conviction to do so. While challenging racism can be daunting at times, the women indicated they feel a sense of confidence and boldness in knowing that God is on their side and that He too disapproves of the injustices they experience. The sense of knowing regarding this connection gives the women the courage and confidence to persist in their efforts. We have seen this repeated throughout history as Black women have been known to draw formidable strength from their faith and its relationship to the struggle.

**Systemic Response.** In response to systemic or structural racism, some of the women report having professional jobs that allow them to address critical societal issues and injustices in an impactful way. The women see their professional work as a calling and believe that God has put them in these positions to have influence in helping to create meaningful change in the world. Some of the professions held by the women that allow them to have this kind of impact include those in government, education, and business sectors.

The women report feeling a sense of connectedness between their professional work, their spiritual lives, and their lived experiences as Black women having endured their own personal challenges with racism and oppression. The women see the professional positions they hold and the ways in which they are able to influence societal change through these
positions as a divine calling and a sacred responsibility with which God has entrusted them. While the women acknowledge this work can be challenging and feel burdensome at times, they find encouragement in knowing God is with them and that their work has impact. This is consistent with research which suggests individuals are more likely to persevere through difficulties when they see their work as a calling which connects them to a deeper and transcendent purpose (Duckworth, 2018).

**Choosing Not to Respond.** While the women in the study regularly speak out against racism and racial bias, they report there are times in which they determine a direct challenge to racism would be too risky for them or their families. In particular, the women talked about the need to find balance between responding to racialized stressors in the workplace and maintaining their jobs. The women believe it is necessary to be strategic and sensible in response to racial bias and racism. In situations where direct rebuke to racism is deemed too risky, some women choose to make more practical decisions for the sake of their jobs and being able to provide for their families. In these moments, the women take comfort in prayer and turning the situation over to God.

This study’s findings on resistance as a meaningful tool for coping with racism is consistent with previous literature. According to Hamilton-Mason et al (2012), “Black women historically have used the fundamental principles of spirituality as the basis for resistance, challenges to dehumanizing systemic and structural discrimination, and racism (p 496).” Resistance, which is defined as the process of confronting the perpetrators of a discriminatory behavior (Shorter-Gooden, 2004), is believed to avert potentially negative effects of racism (Everett, Hall, & Hamilton-Mason, 2010).

Resistance as a tool for coping with racism has been shown to help African American
women do the following: manage anger; counteract self-devaluation; place blame with the perpetrator rather than self; motivate perpetrators to change their behaviors; motivate others to act; and feel a sense of personal empowerment (Szymanski & Lewis, 2016). Additionally, there are reported health benefits to resistance strategies. Krieger & Sidney (1996) found that African American women who report “doing something about it” in response to discrimination, have lower blood pressure levels and hypertension than those who did “nothing”. Other studies report African American women who confront racism and sexism are more likely to feel efficacious and less likely to ruminate on the negative experience, than women who did not confront perpetrators of racism (Hyers, 2007).

**Summary: Developing a Theory from the Research**

The contextualization of these findings within existing research has led to the development of a midlevel theory about the religious and spiritual experiences of Black women. From these findings, and through the voices of the women in this study, we witness that religious involvement acts as a buffer against the negative, psychological effect of chronic and persistent racism, by helping Black women to develop and sustain coping self-efficacy. Self-efficacy positively impacts Black women’s coping experiences by helping them to feel confident in their abilities to address, and ultimately overcome, racist and oppressive stressors with the help of God.

**Practice Implications**

The racialized stress experience of Black women should have particular relevance to social work given that the field is distinguished as a profession in its commitment to social justice, and its understanding of cultural competence to extend beyond race and ethnicity to include other areas of difference such as religion and spirituality (NASW, 2017).
However, the relationship between social work and communities of color has not always been positive. Historically, the Black community has relied more on spiritual supports when dealing with emotional and psychological problems, in part because of the stigma within the Black community regarding mental health treatment. As counseling and mental health care has become more widely accepted in the Black community, including the Black church, it is important for social workers to engage compassionately and skillfully with religiously and spiritually involved Black clients in order to build trust with this community. Social workers should consider the contextual and societal factors that contribute to the stress experience of Black women, as well as the cultural and spiritual resources that are important to them.

Below are a set of recommendations for clinicians working with Black clients:

1. Clinicians should inquire about the spiritual and religious identities of their clients, and explore with them if spiritually-integrative treatment approaches are desired. For Black women, especially, spirituality and religion might inform the way they view a stressor, and the coping strategies they employ.

2. Clinicians should receive training on how to skillfully integrate spirituality into treatment, and to be knowledgeable of the differences between positive and negative patterns of religious coping as clients may sometimes use religion and spirituality in ways that might exacerbate their suffering and require intervention. Clinicians should always consider patterns of religious coping from a cultural perspective.

3. Clinicians must be aware of their own spiritual and religious biases, in order to avoid judgement or pathologizing of clients’ perspectives and practices.
4. Clinicians should look for opportunities to engage and partner with local Black churches and church leaders. This kind of engagement can help educate churches on mental health and therapy; and facilitate two-way referrals. Church leaders may feel more comfortable referring their church members to a clinician they know, and likewise clinicians might be able to refer interested clients to churches for the benefit of social supports, and spiritual nurturance if desired by the client. The women in this study discussed the challenge they sometimes experience in “finding the right church”, and they might be open to a clinician’s help in this regard.

5. Clinicians should consider the usefulness of group therapy models for Black women when possible and clinically appropriate. This model is similar to circles of social support that Black women are familiar with in their families, communities, and churches. Group therapy when skillfully applied with Black women can provide a safe space for them to express themselves and gain support from other Black women with shared understandings and experiences.

6. Clinicians should be knowledgeable of critical race frameworks so that they are able to help clients recognize when individual or institutional racism, bias, or microaggressions might be a contributing factor in the client’s distress. This can be helpful to a client who does not have this contextualized understanding and may instead internalize an oppressive situation and place blame on themselves.

**Policy Implications**

An important area of policy advocacy within the profession is for more extensive training in graduate programs of social work on spiritually-integrative treatment with religiously diverse populations. Currently, most graduate training programs offer these
courses as electives, and not as required curriculum which means many clinicians entering the profession may be ill-equipped to work with clients of diverse religious and spiritual backgrounds. In some cases, this may result in the spiritual and religious needs of clients being ignored or even pathologized, and the potential strength of these phenomenon as meaningful coping resources is unrecognized.

Additionally, the profession has an opportunity to advocate for changes among organizations and institutions (e.g., government agencies, schools) who design policies limiting their clinical staff from engaging in discussions with clients about their religious and spiritual identities for the purpose of identifying it as a potential coping resource. With education and advocacy efforts, administrators and clinicians within these settings might be persuaded to view religious and spiritual diversity as an area of culturally-sensitive practice and therefore an area that should be addressed in treatment.

**Study Benefits & Limitations**

An important benefit of this study is that the qualitative design allowed for the women to share rich, personal narratives of their experiences with racism-related stressors, as well as a detailed and transparent account of the ways in which religion, spirituality, and the Black church experience helps them to develop and sustain coping self-efficacy. The focus group format was itself beneficial as it in many ways mimicked the group fellowship dynamic that is characteristic of Black churches, and the sense of support Black female churchgoers often provide to each other. As sensitive content emerged in the focus group discussion, the women provided meaningful support to one another, including crying and rejoicing together, sharing resources and connections, and engaging in collective, corporate prayer at the close of each session. As a researcher it was moving to witness the care and
connection among the women, and then to review it again in transcribing, coding and analysis.

While this study provided important benefits, one limitation of the study is that the findings are not generalizable to a larger population of Black women. My efforts to mitigate this limitation included stratifying the study sample to include participants from different Black church denominations, and to include of varying ages, and education and SES levels. This study may serve as a useful framework from which to engage in future studies with a larger sample size, and to develop a measurement scale for Black women’s self-efficacy that would make it possible to conduct studies with larger populations of Black women.

**Future Study**

While this qualitative study centered the voice of Black women and provided useful data, the results cannot be generalized to the larger population of Black women. Future study leading to the development and validation of a religious coping scale for Black women would be helpful in widening the scope of this study. Currently, there exists no validated religious coping scale aimed specifically at understanding the religious coping experiences of Black women. The multi-faceted role and function of the Black church tradition is not fully captured by existing religious coping instruments (e.g., RCOPE, WORCS) as these tools were developed using primarily White, middle-class and male-dominated samples (Ellison, 1993; Hill & Pargament, 2003; Pargament, 2000; Pargament et al., 2011; Xu, 2016) and as such, the scales are limited in their applicability to Black women. Despite their wide-spread utilization, these instruments do not adequately reflect the complex interface between the unique stressors faced by Black women and the ways in which religious involvement, and the Black church tradition, helps these women to cope. According to Hill and Pargament (2003),
“there is a particular need for religion and spirituality measures that are theoretically and functionally linked to specific populations facing specific stressors” (p.70).

Additionally, the focus of this study was on the religious coping experiences of Black Christian women. Data from the U.S. Religious Landscape Survey shows Black Americans identify predominantly as Protestant (Pew Forum, 2014). However, religious diversity within the Black community is an important exploration, and future studies should examine how other faith traditions, such as Islam and Catholicism which has growing numbers of Black members, might also help contribute to self-efficacy development in the face of racism-related stressors.

Summary

The findings of this study highlight the importance of religious involvement in helping Black women to cope with racism-related stress, and sustain strong, coping self-efficacy in the process. Black women have long been identified as a highly religious group, and they consistently report their faith in God as being key in helping them to remain resilient through their struggle for equality and justice. This study’s findings are key in helping us to better understand the ways religious involvement helps to affirm Black women and encourage within them a positive self-image in spite of the racialized stressors they encounter. Given the current sociopolitical climate and the prevalence and audaciousness of racial insult and injury, it is important that clinicians and therapists develop the skills and competence for spirituality-integrative treatment models when working with religiously involved Black women.
FIGURE 3: ILLUSTRATION OF FINDINGS

- Self-Efficacy
- Racism-Related Stressors threaten SE for Black Women
- Religious Involvement helps Black women to develop SE
- SE helps Black women to cope with stress
FIGURE 4: SELF-EFFICACY MODEL FOR BLACK WOMEN

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Facilitative Spiritual Perspectives</th>
<th>Spiritual Connection to God</th>
<th>Social Connection to Other Black Women</th>
<th>Spirituality as a Tool for Resistance</th>
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Conclusion

As this dissertation study has demonstrated, the stressors faced by Black women are often multilayered, systemic, and not easily changed. The complexity of this stress experience may leave Black women feeling disempowered and hopeless at times - making it hard for them to mobilize the inner strength and resources needed to cope. Yet, since slavery and the Jim Crow era, Black women have consistently demonstrated the capacity to cope with life’s stressors and injustices - caring for themselves, their families, and their communities.

Black Americans, throughout history, have endured immense hardship and oppression and have proven resilient through those difficulties by relying on religion and spirituality (Boyd-Franklin, 2010; Taylor & Chatters, 2010). This dissertation study sought to explore the role of religious involvement in helping Black women to cope with racism and bias, and feel affirmed and validated in their identities in spite of these challenges. Through this study, I was particularly interested in exploring how Black women develop and sustain positive, and self-efficacious beliefs in the face of stress experiences such as racism, sexism and classism which are complex, oppressive, and damaging to one’s sense of self. Using grounded theory data analysis methods, study findings have yielded a mid-range theory for coping self-efficacy among Black women.

This study concluded that religious involvement offers to Black women a useful framework for countering the damaging effects of racism and oppression, and builds within them the emotional, psychological, and spiritual resources needed to effectively cope with oppressive stressors. For clinical social work and its commitment to providing culturally relevant practice, this study’s findings offer useful insights on the unique coping needs of
Black women and the ways in which the profession can best respond to these needs. It is important for clinical social workers to recognize the salience of religious involvement for Black women and the opportunity it holds for affirming and validating Black identity, and encouraging self-efficacy among this group. Clinical social workers may apply the findings from this study to: 1) develop new and improved interventions aimed specifically at strengthening self-efficacy among Black women; and 2) improve collaborations between mental health clinicians and the Black church community.
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RE: Your application dated 2/27/2014 regarding study number 13-081: Coping Self-efficacy Among Religiously Involved Black Women

Dear Ms. Warrington:

I have reviewed your request for expedited approval of the new study listed above. Your study is eligible for expedited review under the DHHS (OHRP) designation 45 CFR 46.110 (7).

This is to confirm that I have approved your application. The protocol is approved through your protocol dated 02/27/2014. The consent form 2/27/2014 has been approved. You must obtain signed written consent from all subjects. Please send Valerie Beaudrault, Human Protections Administrator, an electronic copy of the informed consent document in Microsoft Word format so that she can stamp it with the approval date.

You are granted permission to conduct your study as described in your application effective immediately. The study is subject to continuing review on or before 3/18/2015, unless closed before that date.

Please note that any changes to the study as approved must be promptly reported and approved. Some changes may be approved by expedited review; others require full board review. Contact Valerie E. Beaudrault (617-521-2415; fax 617-521-3083; email: valerie.beaudrault@simmons.edu) if you have any questions or require further information.

Sincerely,

Amitabh Dashottar
IRB Member and Primary Reviewer
Appendix B

✓ Are you a Black female churchgoer?
✓ Do your religious beliefs and practices play a role in your ability to cope with stress?

HOW DOES YOUR PARTICIPATION IN CHURCH HELP YOU TO DEAL WITH STRESSFUL SITUATIONS?

We want to hear about your experience!

Join us for a focus group discussion with other Black female churchgoers!

A study entitled “Coping Self-efficacy Among Religiously Involved Black Women” is being conducted to explore the ways in which religious involvement helps Black women to think about and cope with stress. This study is being conducted by a doctoral candidate at Simmons College School of Social Work in fulfillment of degree requirements. Your participation in this study will help researchers to better understand the role of religious involvement and the Black church tradition in the coping experiences of Black women.

To participate in this study, you must meet the following eligibility requirements:

- Be a Black female, age 18 or older
- Be English-speaking
- Regularly attend a predominately Black church (preferably at least 1-2 times per month)
- Be willing to participate in a 2-hour focus group meeting with other Black women.

Focus group sessions will be held between May 2014 – August 2014. Eligible study participants will receive a cash stipend for their participation. Light refreshments will be served.

For more information, please contact Robin Johnson Warrington at 617-319-0769 or by email at robin.warrington@simmons.edu. Limited spots available. Please call now.
Appendix C

Pre-screening questions

1. Are you a Black female at least 18 years or older?

2. Are you English speaking? (i.e., do you read and speak English comfortably)

3. Do you attend church?

4. If yes, which church do you attend?

5. Would you describe this church congregation as being predominately Black?

6. How many times per month do you attend worship services at this church?

7. Do you have a leadership position in the church? If yes, what is your role in the church?

8. Do you engage in religious activities at home (e.g., prayer; reading the Bible)?

9. Would you be willing to discuss your thoughts about religious involvement in a group setting with other Black women?
Appendix D

Dear Pastor:

My name is Robin Warrington and I am a doctoral candidate at Simmons College School of Social Work. As a part of my dissertation research, I am conducting a study entitled *Coping Self-Efficacy Among Religiously Involved Black Women*. The purpose of this study is to explore the ways in which religious involvement helps Black women to cope with stress. Findings from this study will lead to the development of a religious coping scale for Black women. Development of this scale will allow researchers to better understand the religious coping experiences of Black women and the role of the Black church in helping these women to believe in their ability to overcome stress. Additionally, findings from this study may lead to improved therapeutic interventions and initiatives, as well as stronger collaborations between the faith community and mental health providers.

[Name of church] is one of four churches within the greater Boston area that is being invited to participate. I am looking to recruit (10-12) women from your church to participate in this study. Participants selected for the study will be asked to attend one 2-hour focus group session and complete a brief religious coping questionnaire. During the focus group session, which I will moderate, participants will be asked to share their thoughts and opinions about their personal experience of stress and the ways in which their faith and the Black church experience has helped them to cope. All participants will receive a cash stipend for their involvement in the study. No identifying information will be used in the reporting of this study.

Should you be available, I would like to request a brief meeting with you in order to share more information about my study and to discuss your church’s potential involvement. I will contact the church office within the next few days to try to arrange a meeting time that is convenient for you.

I can be reached at robin.warrington@simmons.edu or (617) 319-0769.
Thank you for your interest in this study and I look forward to speaking with you soon.

Sincerely,

Robin J. Warrington, ABD, MSW, LICSW
Dear Study Participant:

Thank you for your willingness to participate in the research study “Coping Self-Efficacy Among Religiously Involved Black Women”. The purpose of this study is to explore the ways in which religious involvement helps Black women to cope with stress. Findings from this study will be used in the development of a religious coping scale for Black women. Such a scale will allow researchers to better understand the religious coping experiences of Black women and the role of the Black church in helping women to feel confident in their ability to overcome stress. This study is being conducted by myself, a doctoral candidate at Simmons College School of Social Work in fulfillment of dissertation requirements.

As part of your agreement to participate in this study, you are being asked to attend a 2-hour focus group session. The focus group session will be held at your church and other Black female churchgoers from your congregation who have been selected to participate will also be in attendance. You may also be invited to attend a follow-up focus group session within a few weeks and/or complete an electronic religious coping questionnaire at the conclusion of this research.

During the focus group session, which I will moderate, study participants will be asked to discuss the ways in which their faith and the Black church experience has helped them to successfully cope with stress. Your responses will be kept confidential and no identifying information will be used in the reporting of this study. For your participation, you will receive a $25 cash stipend at the end of the focus group session.

The first focus group will be held on ____________. Light refreshments will be provided. Please plan to arrive 15-20 minutes prior to the start of the focus group so that you may sign a participant consent form and complete a brief survey. Copies of these items are included with this letter in case you would like to review them before our first meeting.

Should you have any questions, please feel free to contact me at robin.warrington@simmons.edu or (617) 319-0769.

Thank you again for your participation in this study and I look forward to meeting you soon!

Many blessings,

Robin J. Warrington, MSW, LICSW
Appendix F

CONSENT FORM

RESEARCH STUDY TITLE: Coping Self-Efficacy Among Religiously Involved Black Women
DATE PREPARED: February 1, 2014
PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR: Robin Johnson Warrington, MSW, LICSW, PhD Candidate
Simmons College Graduate School of Social Work, 300 The Fenway, Boston, MA 02115

STUDY DESCRIPTION AND RESEARCH PURPOSE: You are invited to participate in a research study entitled “Coping Self-Efficacy Among Religiously Involved Black Women”. The purpose of this study is to explore the ways in which religious involvement helps Black women to cope with stress. Findings from this study will lead to the development of a religious coping scale for Black women. Development of this scale will allow researchers to better understand religious coping experiences among Black women and the role of the Black church in helping Black women feel confident in their ability to overcome stress. Additionally, findings from this study may help to improve therapeutic interventions and initiatives, as well as strengthen collaborations between the faith community and mental health providers. This study is being conducted by Robin J. Warrington, a doctoral candidate at Simmons College School of Social Work in fulfillment of dissertation requirements.

PROCEDURES: Participants selected for the study will need to attend one 2-hour focus group session. Additionally as part of your involvement with this study, you may also be invited to attend a follow-up focus group session and/or complete an electronic religious coping questionnaire at the conclusion of this research. The focus groups, which will be made up of Black female churchgoers, will be conducted by social work researcher, Robin J. Warrington, MSW, LICSW. During the focus group session(s), study participants will be asked a series of questions about the ways in which their faith and the Black church experience has helped them to successfully cope with stress. Focus group sessions will be audio-recorded and later transcribed for data analysis. Data analysis will involve the identification of common themes across study participants and focus groups, as well as unique experiences that some participants may have. Your identity as a participant in this study will be kept confidential and no identifying information will be used in the reporting of this study.
PARTICIPATION IS VOLUNTARY: Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. You may refuse to answer any questions or discontinue your participation at any time without penalty or consequence.

RISKS, DISCOMFORTS, AND PROTECTION AGAINST RISK: Study participants may experience some risks associated with this study. These risks are minimal and include a breach of confidentiality and possible emotional distress. First, participants may face a breach of confidentiality as a result of third party access to the research data (i.e., professional transcribers) and/or study participants divulging personal information about focus group discussions with persons outside of the group. The following precautions will be taken to minimize the risk for breached confidentiality: 1) all study participants will be required to sign a confidentiality agreement stating that they will not share personal information discussed in the focus group sessions with persons outside of the group; 2) a confidentiality agreement will be signed by all third party transcribers; 3) all confidential materials related to the study (e.g., signed consents, contact information, surveys) will be secured in a locked file cabinet in the lead researcher’s office for a maximum period of 2 years following the completion of this study; and 4) all study findings will be reported in aggregate with no recognizable links to the identity of individual participants or church groups.

Secondly, the risk of emotional distress may be present for some study participants as stressful situations are discussed. This risk is expected to be minimal given the study’s focus on identifying the ways in which religious involvement has helped Black women to cope with stress. Should emotional distress occur, the lead researcher is an experienced, licensed clinical social worker who can assist study participants in managing any levels of distress experienced during the group and make referrals for additional supports as needed. Additionally, all study participants will be provided with a referral listing of local mental health professionals (including Christian counselors) who are available to provide additional supports if needed.

BENEFITS: You may receive some benefit from your involvement in this study as you reflect on and discuss moments when you have successfully managed stress, and the role your faith has played in these experiences. You may also benefit from knowing that your participation in this study will help researchers to better understand the religious coping experiences of Black women and lead to more expansive study in this area.

COSTS: There is no cost to you associated with this research, other than the time spent during the interview and your transportation costs.

COMPENSATION: For your participation in this study, you will receive a $25 cash stipend at the end of the focus group session. Should you be selected to attend a follow-up focus group session, you will receive an additional stipend at that time.

CONTACT INFORMATION: If you have any questions about the study or your participation, you may contact Robin Johnson Warrington, MSW, LICSW, Principal Investigator @ 617-319-0769 or Johnnie Hamilton-Mason, PhD, Doctoral Committee Co-Chair @ 617-521-3911.
If you have questions about the research, your rights as a research subject or if you experience any research related injury, you may also contact the Human Protections Administrator in the Simmons College Office of Sponsored Programs at 617-521-2414.

I, ________________________________________, have read the contents of this Consent Form and have had the opportunity to discuss any concerns or questions with the researcher. I fully understand the nature of my involvement in this study and the potential risks involved. I have decided to volunteer as a participant in this study.

__________________________________________  __________________________
Participant                                  Date

__________________________________________  __________________________
Researcher                                   Date

APPROVED

March 18, 2014

Approval good for 1 Year

Simmons College IRB
Appendix G

Confidentiality Agreement

As a participant in the focus group research study "Coping Self-Efficacy Among Religiously Involved Black Women", I understand I may at times hear fellow study participants share personal and sensitive information about themselves. I agree to keep private all such things that are discussed in the focus groups. I will refrain from discussing the private matters of any study participant outside of the focus group setting.

________________________________________
Participant signature

________________________________________
Witness signature

____________________
Date
Appendix H

Brief Participant Questionnaire

Thank you for your participation in this study. Please complete the following questions about yourself as best as you can. Please do not include your name on this questionnaire. If there are any questions you prefer not to answer, please feel free to skip them. There is no penalty for skipping questions.

1.) What is your current age?
   _____ years old

2.) Which ethnicity best describes you?
   ___ African-American
   ___ Afro-Caribbean
   ___ Afro-Latino
   ___ Sub-Saharan African
   ___ Mixed race
   ___ Other: please specify ________________________________

3.) What is your primary language spoken? ______________________

4.) What is your relationship status?
   ___ Single
   ___ Partnered
   ___ Married
   ___ Separated
   ___ Divorced
   ___ Widowed

5.) What is your highest level of education completed?
   ___ Some high school
   ___ High school/GED
   ___ Some college
   ___ Associates degree
   ___ Bachelor’s degree
   ___ Master’s degree
   ___ Doctoral degree
   ___ None/Other

6.) What is your occupation? ________________________________

7.) What is your annual household income?
8.) How many people are in your household (including yourself)?
   ______ person(s)

9.) What is your religious affiliation?
    ___ Christian
    ___ Non-Christian

10.) What is your denominational affiliation?
     ___ Baptist
     ___ Methodist
     ___ Pentecostal
     ___ Non-denominational
     ___ None
     ___ Other: please specify
Appendix I

Stress and Coping Questionnaire

The following questions are related to your experiences with stress and your use of religious involvement to help you cope with stress. Please identify the responses which most closely describe your feelings and/or experiences.

1.) Which stressors have you experienced during the past year? Please check all that apply.

___Family problems or changes
___Problems with friends
___Relationship issues
___Health problems
___Hospitalization
___Disability
___Health problems or disability for a family member
___Death of a family member or close friend
___Financial problems
___Exposure to crime/victim of crime
___Experience of a trauma
___Legal problems for yourself or a family member
___Work related issues
___Parenting issues
___Educational or school related problems
___Housing problems
___Addiction problems
___Addiction problems for a family member
___Church/faith related issues
___Racism, sexism, or other forms of discrimination
___Other: please specify ___________________________________________

2.) What have been the biggest stressors you’ve faced in the past 3 months? Please use the space provided below to identify 1-3 stressors which have impacted you the most during this period. You may find it helpful to identify topic areas from Question #1 or identify other stress areas not included above.

_________________________________________
_________________________________________
_________________________________________

3.) How likely is it that these stressors can be changed or fixed?
4.) How much control do you feel you have over these stressors?
   ___ No control at all
   ___ Little control
   ___ Some control
   ___ A lot of control
   ___ Complete control

5.) How often do you attend church during a typical month?
   ___ I don't attend church
   ___ Fewer than once a month
   ___ Once a month
   ___ Twice a month
   ___ Three times a month
   ___ Four or more times a month

6.) Which services and/or church activities do you attend in a typical month? Please check all that apply.
   ___ Sunday worship service
   ___ Weekday worship service
   ___ Prayer service
   ___ Bible study
   ___ Sunday school
   ___ Women's fellowship/bible study
   ___ Choir fellowship
   ___ Singles or marriage ministry fellowship
   ___ Other: please specify _________________________________________

7.) How important is church involvement to you?
   ___ Not important at all
   ___ Slightly important
   ___ Moderately important
   ___ Important
   ___ Very important

8.) Which forms of personal religious devotion do you engage in outside of church? Please check all that apply.
   ___ Prayer
   ___ Worship
   ___ Reading/studying the Bible
___Reading/studying other Christian material
___Fasting
___Witnessing to others/sharing your testimony
___Fellowshipping with other believers
___Listening to Christian or Gospel music
___Watching Christian programming on TV
___Viewing Christian podcast and/or videos online
___Live streaming religious services online
___Other: please specify ____________________________________________________________________

9.) How often do you practice some form of personal religious devotion outside of church?
   ___Never
   ___Rarely
   ___Occasionally
   ___Frequently
   ___All the time

10.) How important is it to you to engage in some form of personal religious devotion outside of church?
    ___Not important at all
    ___Slightly important
    ___Moderately important
    ___Important
    ___Very important

11.) How helpful would you say religious involvement is in your efforts to cope with stress?
     ___Not at all helpful
     ___Slightly helpful
     ___Moderately helpful
     ___Helpful
     ___Very helpful

12.) How confident do you feel in your ability to cope with stress?
     ___Not at all confident
     ___Slightly confident
     ___Moderately confident
     ___Confident
     ___Very confident

13.) How important is religious involvement in helping you to feel confident in your ability to cope with stress?
     ___Not important at all
     ___Slightly important
     ___Moderately important
     ___Important
     ___Very important
14.) What is usually your first approach to dealing with a stressful situation? Please check only one response.
   ___ Ignore the problem and hope it goes away
   ___ Look to God to fix the problem
   ___ Look to God to help me to solve the problem
   ___ Tackle the problem on my own with the abilities God has already given me

15.) Which of the following supports do you typically use to help you cope with stress? Please check all that apply.
   ___ Receive individual counsel from Pastor and/or other church leader(s)
   ___ Receive professional counseling/mental health services outside of church
   ___ Talk with trusted family members and/or friends
   ___ Other: please specify __________________________________________

Thank you for your participation in this study.
Appendix J

Counseling Resources

South End Community Health Center
1601 Washington Street
Boston, MA 02118
617-425-2060
Sehec.org

Boston University
The Danielsen Institute Clinic
185 Bay State Road
Boston, MA 02215
617-353-3047
http://www.bu.edu/danielsen/clinic/
*Offering Christian counseling

Treniece Lewis Harris, PhD
Westside Behavioral Health, LLC
22 Christy’s Drive 2nd Floor
Brockton, MA 02301
(508) 580 – 4611 ext. 201
*Offering Christian counseling
Appendix K

Original Interview Guide

1.) How do your religious beliefs and practices help you to cope with stress?

Probe: Which specific elements of your religious beliefs and practices help you to cope with stress? How does participation in church help you to cope with stress?

2.) In what ways do your religious beliefs and practices help you to find solutions to problems or stressful situations that you experience? (problem-focused coping)

3.) In what ways do your religious beliefs and practices help you to manage your feelings about problems or stressors that are not easy to resolve or for which a solution is beyond your control? (emotion-focused coping)

Probe: Which strategy do you employ most often (e.g., using religious beliefs and practices to find solutions to your problems or to manage your feelings about the problems or stressors you experience)?

4.) How do your religious beliefs and practices impact the way you look at a stressor (i.e., what you determine as stressful; whether it is amenable to change, whether you are able to cope with it or not)? (appraisal)

5.) How do your religious beliefs and practices help you to feel confident in your ability to cope with stress? (self-efficacy)

Probe: Specifically, how does your participation in church help you to feel confident in your ability to cope with stress?

6.) What difference do you think this confidence makes in your actual ability to cope with stress? (self-efficacy)

7.) How do you differentiate between confidence in yourself, confidence in God and confidence in your ability through God? (agency)

Probe: When faced with a stressful situation, do you typically try to fix the situation on your own; look to God to fix the situation; or look to God to help you fix the situation?

8.) How do sermons and other spoken words at church impact your views about stress, its meaning, and your ability to cope with it? (verbal persuasion)

9.) How does the experience of participating in church alongside other believers help you to better cope with stress? How does it help you to feel more confident in your ability to cope with stress? (vicarious experience)
10.) In what ways does church participation help you to reflect on your past triumphs over stressful situations? How do these reflections help you to better cope with current stressors? (enactive mastery experience)

11.) In what ways does your involvement in church impact your mood? What types of feelings and emotions does church participation generate? How does this impact your ability to cope with stress? (physical/affective states)

12.) Do you feel you face particular stressors because of your race or gender? How does church participation help you to manage these stressors? (intersectionality)
Appendix L
Revised Interview Guide

Main Question

• How do your religious/spiritual beliefs and practices help you to cope with stress?

Coping style

• In what ways do your religious/spiritual beliefs and practices help you to find solutions to problems or stressful situations that you experience?

• In what ways do your religious/spiritual beliefs and practices help you to manage your feelings about problems or stressors that are not easy to resolve or for which a solution is beyond your control?

• Do you more often use your religious/spiritual beliefs and practices to find solutions to your problems or to manage your feelings about the problems or stressors you experience?

Appraisal

• How do your religious/spiritual beliefs and practices impact the way you look at a stressor (i.e., what you determine as stressful; whether it is amenable to change, whether or not you are able to cope with it)?

Self-efficacy

• How do your religious/spiritual beliefs and practices help you to feel confident in your ability to cope with stress? How does your participation in church help you to feel confident in your ability to cope with stress?

• What difference do you think this confidence makes in your actual ability to cope with stress?

Race/gender

• Do you feel you face particular stressors because of your race and/or gender? If so, how do your religious/spiritual beliefs and practices help you to manage these stressors? How does church participation help you to manage these stressors?
Church participation

- In what ways does church participation help you to reflect on your past triumphs over stressful situations? How do these reflections help you to better cope with current stressors?

- How do sermons and other spoken words at church impact your views about stress, its meaning, and your ability to cope with it?

- How does the sense of community you experience at church help you to better cope with stress? How does it help you to feel more confident in your ability to cope with stress?

- In what ways does your involvement in church impact your mood? What types of feelings and emotions does church participation generate? How does this impact your ability to cope with stress?