

Examining the Role of Spirituality in the Lives of African-American Women who Use Crack through the Lens of Soul Theology

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1. Background

Substance use, particularly cocaine and heroin use, contributes to a major vector of HIV infection in U.S. urban cities, not only through sharing "drug works" but also through risky sexual practice. Various prevention and intervention strategies have been implemented to address both drug use and sexual risk behavior. Research suggests that spirituality and religious faith may mediate as well as play a protective role in physical and mental health of the African Americans.

- Studies have suggested an association between religiosity and avoidance of alcohol and drugs.
- Strength of religious faith and belief in a benevolent and meaningful world were shown to be independent predictors of sex-related HIV preventive behavior.
- Due to the importance of religion and spirituality in the lives of African Americans, especially those who are older and women and the possible impact they have on the reduction of risk behavior, it is imperative that we understand the role religion and spirituality plays in the lives and health of substance abusing women.

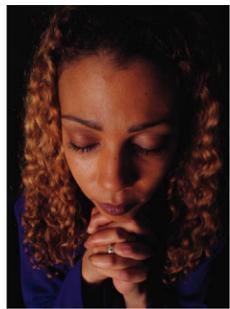


Purpose

The purpose of the present study was to explore the role of spirituality and religion in the lives of African American urban women who use crack generally and by using tenants from Soul Theology. More specifically this paper aims (a) to contribute to the existing literature that explains the impact, effects and role spirituality and religiosity the lives of urban African American substance abusing woman and (b) to conduct an initial investigation of whether there is support for Soul Theology, a culturally specific theological framework which posits that some spiritual beliefs empower and promote physical and mental healing as African Americans go through life challenges.

Definitions Used for this Study

- Religiosity** is a comprehensive sociological term used to refer to the numerous aspects of religious activity, dedication, and belief.
- Spirituality** is both the belief in and the personal relationship between humans and God or a Higher Power.



2. Methods

As a follow-up of the Women's CoOp I—a randomized control intervention trial—the Women Focused HIV Prevention with African-Americans (Women's CoOp II), aimed to examine the long-term intervention effects of a longitudinal woman-focused HIV-prevention intervention as well as examine how African American crack using women work on recovery issues and develop personal power. (See Wechsberg, Lam, Zule & Bobashev, 2004). The participants, depending on when they first enrolled, were out of the Women's CoOp I study for two to five years. Women's CoOp II was conducted from July 2004 to July 2008 in Wake and Durham counties of North Carolina, specifically the Raleigh-Durham area. The study had several components: Intake, semi-structured interviews, 6-, 12-, and 18-month follow-ups. For the purposes of this study, we focused on the semi-structured open-ended interviews, which addressed the unique economic hardships, social contexts, and struggles of women's lives that affect their alcohol and drug use, victimization and sexual risk. These interviews were conducted to explore in greater detail what happened in the past few years to the women since participating in the first HIV prevention intervention study (Women's CoOp I).

- Qualitative Analysis
 - Deductive Category Application
 - Inductive Category Development



Women's CoOp Site

2. Methods (continued)

Study Participants

- Eligibility Criteria
 - Participated in the original Women's CoOp, where they had to:
 - be at least 18 years of age;
 - report engaging in unprotected sex during the past 90 days;
 - admit using crack on at least 13 of the past 90 days.
- Recruitment
 - Women who participated in the original Women's CoOp were recruited using the locator forms and street outreach in Raleigh-Durham, NC starting April 2003.

Method — Qualitative Study

- Procedure
 - Women consented to be taped and shared their stories of how they work on recovery issues and develop personal power.
 - The following topics were covered in the interview:
 - Remembering the Women's CoOp Study
 - Education and Training
 - Employment
 - Living Arrangements
 - Drug Use
 - Relationships/Partners
 - HIV
 - Personal Power
 - Violence
 - Involvement with the Criminal Justice System
 - Use of Services
- Analysis of Transcript Data
 - Qualitative Component — Core Beliefs
 - Deductive Category Application (DCA) is based on codes that have been determined prior to reading the data. These codes are typically generated from research questions and/or theory.
 - We used tenets from *Soul Theology* to analyze the interview transcripts.
 - Qualitative Component — Emerging Themes
 - Inductive Category Development (ICD) involves formulation of codes, as the data are read and re-read. Codes are changed and redefined as various themes emerge and reoccur.
 - We also used ICD to determine emerging themes in the transcripts.

3. Results — Qualitative Study

Table 1. Participants for Semi-structured Interviews — Demographic Information

Women	(n = 20)
Mean age (sd) in years	44.2 (9.93)
Age Range	31–54
Marital Status	
% Single (n)	45 (9)
% Married (n)	10 (2)
% Separated (n)	10 (2)
% Divorced (n)	20 (4)
% Living with sexual partner (n)	10 (2)
% Widowed (n)	5 (1)
% Homeless (n)	35 (7)
% Participated in Treatment Program since last study (n)	50 (10)
% Received more education (n)	25 (5)
% Stopped Using Crack (n)	40 (8)
% Trading Sex (n)	55 (11)
% Expressed Spirituality/Religiosity in In-Depth Interview (n)	80 (16)

Subset of Participants Who Expressed Spirituality/Religiosity

Even though interview questions did not cover spirituality or religiosity, 16 of the 20 women throughout the interview expressed these topics as they related to recovery and personal power. Of these 16 women:

- 6 (38%) women reported no longer using crack
- 8 (50%) women reported no longer trading sex
- 11 (69%) women reported having a place to live

4. Core Beliefs — Soul Theology* (Deductive Category Application)

Soul Theology posits that some spiritual beliefs, thought to have been developed through years of slavery and oppression, empower African Americans through life challenges. Some of those beliefs are:

- The Providence of God
- The Goodness of God and creation
- The Grace of God
- The Justice of God
- The Omnipotence of God
- The Omniscience of God

The Providence of God

"...God is in charge...It is the deep and sweeping assertion that the whole universe is friendly and benevolent, and that its Creator is able and willing to turn into good ends whatever may occur." — Excerpt from *Soul Theology*

"But if I did, just take it in stride and just remember my goals [staying clean from crack], that sooner or later, and I put faith in God that sooner or later, when it's time, He's going to let me know it's time [to be clean from crack]." — Participant 16

"...June the 26th, so, you know, I know as long as I stay clean, something's going to happen. You know, if I do the footwork, God is going to help me through." — Participant 17

The goodness of God and creation

"It is the belief that the experience of creation and life itself must be ultimately beneficial or good." — Excerpt from *Soul Theology*

Interviewer: Okay. Where do you see yourself in two years?
 Participant 15: I don't know. I try to live day to day because [you never know what might happen]. I pray every morning, pray every night. That's the best I can do. God is good to me. He is.

The Grace of God

"...God is gracious. The crowning and ultimate trait of the Eternal is understanding forgiveness or unconditional, unmerited acceptance." — Excerpt from *Soul Theology*

"A lot of stuff, I knew it, but I ain't never paid no mind to what I cared about, but to really give a damn about living, I never, some of the pains that I realize I've done, and that I have let be done to me, for the sake of what? Sake of a drug. Or whatever you need money for, having to put up with people just to have somewhere to stay, and let them give me a meal. I ain't never thought I had to do that. When I could have felt like I couldn't go out there and sell myself, I had to deal with whatever. I felt that way. I felt stuck. Through the Grace of God I got up out of there. I ain't telling my man. He still think I'm in Chapel Hill. [laughter]." — Participant 1

5. Summary of Additional Emerging Themes (Inductive Category Development)

In addition to the *Soul Theology* themes, additional themes emerged through ICD which further described how our sample of African American women crack users incorporates spirituality and/or religiosity into their lives. Those themes are:

- God's Grace (Something bad should have happened but it didn't because of God) – 9 quotes
- When situations got rough I called on God – 5 quotes
- Church involvement helped with reduction/cessation of substance use – 5 quotes
- Attending church and/or associating with Christians had a positive influence on me – 5 quotes
- God saved me from negative consequences of sexual risk/drug use – 5 quotes
- God/Faith is important to getting clean – 5 quotes
- Prayer, meditation and reading spiritual materials help me – 5 quotes
- Look to God for strength/help – 4 quotes
- God took care of me/God helped me – 3 quotes
- God blessed me (Something good happened to me because of God) – 3 quotes
- My faith is a big part of my life – 2 quotes

The following are 3 quotes that support some of these emerging themes:

Theme: Some women reported that their faith in God was important and that their faith was part of changing their drug-using lifestyle.

"I feel blessed to learn that I have goals that have been accomplished that were set some time ago. Plan and work on those plans and God will deliver." — Participant 2

The Justice of God

"God is just...God is also fair and impartial...[There is this] idea that there is only one true God, and this Deity requires ethical accountability. 'For whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap.'" — Excerpt from *Soul Theology*

"I, I stopped right there to let him, let them go past me. They pull in front of me, snatch me. One grabs me from the front and the other one grabs me from the back and help him in the back push me in the car at gun-point, took me on 147 and drug me in the bushes and raped me. I laid on my back. And the reason why, people said, 'When you're telling that, you don't cry,' because you know what? God gave me the, He granted me the, how you say it? He, He granted me my serenity to be able to save another's life. And I got tired of crying over it. Now I, I learned to accept it, you know. If I hadn't have been out there, it wouldn't have happened to me, you know. If I hadn't have been out there trying to get money to get, to get high, it wouldn't have happened to me." — Participant 12

The Omnipotence of God

"Omnipotence means all-powerful...Nothing can exist that is free of the ultimate control of the Creator and Lord of the universe. Human [choice], of course, amounts to a kind of exception, but it is ordained by God and constitutes a divine self-limitation." — Excerpt from *Soul Theology*

"Yeah, I'd like for him to take [an AIDS test] right when we be there together... You know what I'm saying? It's too late now. We're trying to make a baby... He should have thought about that. You was the one to say [inaudible] no more. You know. We are as one. Okay. We are as one. But if something come back, at least we'll be sitting up there healthy together. It wasn't like it was intentionally... You know what I'm saying? We should have did this beforehand... But I'm not worried about it. God got me. I already know that... It's going to be all right. He got me." — Participant 12

The Omniscience of God

"[Omniscience means] God knows everything." — Excerpt from *Soul Theology*

"We keep being honest, as they say we keep being honest, truly with ourselves, and it ain't about telling God and other human beings what God, God already knows, so it's to tell yourself. 'Yes, I am an addict. Yes, I have a disease that wants me dead. Yes, my disease take me to levels where I should not go. Yes, I risk my life, I risk my health.' 'Don't know if a man will turn around, strangle you and then cut your throat up. Cut your, I mean, you never know, you know, and then you, 'Oh, I was on drugs. I did a crazy thing.' 'No, you had a choice. You know, sometimes it don't seem like why I'm in addiction that I got a choice, but I got a choice.'" — Participant 1

*There are 10 core beliefs. Six focus on beliefs that articulate understandings of God's attributes which have been experienced by the African American community. The remaining core beliefs extract anthropological insights into the culture and religion of African Americans. For the purposes of this study we used the first six for DCA.

6. Discussion

- Like other research, this study supports the importance of spirituality or religiosity for positive health outcomes.
- One of the most interesting points about the results of semi-structured interviews is how much spirituality and/or religiosity were intertwined in the responses of the women, albeit we did not ask any spirituality or religiosity questions. This indicates that spirituality and/or religiosity is an important factor in the lives of African American women who use drugs. And according to them it has played a vital part in developing their personal power, sense of identity, coping with situations related to drug use, recovery and mental health.
- Based on the quotes from the women, *Soul Theology* is supported and provides an initial framework for understanding how African American women substance users cope through life's challenges. Additional themes indicated that involvement in church and/or with church members had positive impact (i.e., reduction/cessation of drug use) on the lives of African American substance using women. Also, women reported that prayer helped them cope with challenges that emerged in their lives and their faith in God helped them to get clean.
- More specifically our study findings of urban African American women, who use crack, were both consistent and different from the existing findings of research on rural African American women who use cocaine (Brown, 2006). In both studies women used their faith in God to address their addiction. Also, women believed that God kept them or was their caretaker during those times when they were using drugs and in times of major crisis. In our study however, women mentioned that God was not only was their caregiver, but 'He' provided strength for them so that they felt more empowered to take care of themselves rather than depend on a man for help. Both groups of women also reported that the church was integral in their lives, however the rural women spoke only in terms of church attendance, where the urban women spoke of both church attendance and relationships with Christians who helped them change their play things (crack), playmates (people who used drugs) and play places (place where participants got high). Bible reading and praying were also consistent for both rural and urban women in these studies. Unlike urban woman, rural women reported that they participated in spiritual/religious enrichment by watching television or listening to radio. They also mentioned that they felt as though they were not living according to their religious upbringing.
- Although we derived important information from this study we also had limitations. First and foremost, we did not include questions with regard to women's spirituality or religiosity. Because it was not a focal area of investigation, the depth in which we explored these aforementioned topics was not as thorough as it could have been. Although much care was given by the four interviewers and two analysts to adhere to the protocol of the study without leading the participants or having bias during coding and interpretation, there is a possibility that occurred. Furthermore, although each one of the six tenets of *Soul Theology* that we examined was supported, some of the tenets were only supported by one to three participants. Had the study focused on understanding religiosity and spirituality directly, perhaps we would have had more support for each one of the tenets. Additionally, this study only had 20 participants; therefore we are not able to generalize these findings to all African American women who use crack cocaine.
- We recognize and respect that spirituality and religiosity are an integral part of African American crack using women's lives. We believe that a healthy balance of spirituality and religiosity, coupled with a comprehensive intervention, will assist women in reaching their goals to be free from crack cocaine and other life challenges that these women face.

7. Implications

- The Women's CoOp has been shown to change African American women's drug use and sexual risk. However, intervention effects have not been sustained over time. Because the women in our study demonstrate that spirituality and religiosity are important to their lives and that strength of religious faith is related to reduction of drug use and increase in confidence in abstaining from drug use, integrating a spirituality and/or religiosity component into the Women's CoOp intervention may be among the next steps as we further develop the Women's CoOp study.
- Future research should explore
 - what elements of spirituality and religiosity (e.g., core beliefs of *Soul Theology*) to add to the intervention as well as
 - how these factors should be implemented into an intervention.
- The spiritually enhanced intervention should then be piloted among African American substance using women and perhaps men as well.

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