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African American Women: The Role of Education, Spirituality, and
Resilience in their Transition from Poverty

by

Donna McGee Scott

A Dissertation
Submitted to the Graduate School,
the College of Education and Psychology
and the Department of Educational Research and Administration
at The University of Southern Mississippi
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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ABSTRACT

African American women born into impoverished families often have difficulty moving beyond their low socioeconomic circumstances (Cozarelli, Wilkinson, & Tagler, 2001). Although education has been shown to influence the lives of African American women, limited research has been conducted relative to the influence of education in their transition from poverty. Also, while there is considerable evidence regarding the authoritative role of spirituality in the lives of women, and for African American women in particular (Mattis, 2002), little research has focused on how African American women utilized spirituality as a source of strength in response to the challenges of poverty. The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to examine the lived experiences of African American women who were born and reared in impoverished families; yet, these women have transitioned from poverty and function as successful adults. A phenomenological design allowed for a deeper investigation into the stories of 10 participants and provided a deeper understanding of the lived experiences of these women (Moustakas, 1994). Upon completion of face-to-face interviews with each of the study participants, data were analyzed and as a result, nine major themes emerged: (a) Setting Goals; (b) Support Systems; (c) Hard Work and Determination; (d) Opens Doors of Opportunity; (e) Never Give Up; (f) Having a Personal Relation with God/Jesus Christ; (g) Tithing and Giving; (h) Resilience within My Own Culture; and (i) Church is Important.

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DEDICATION

I acknowledge and thank my Heavenly Father for making all things possible. It is because of His grace and mercy that I have come this far.

I am grateful for the women who participated in this study. Their willingness to share their struggles and victories is commendable. It is my sincere hope that their stories may provide inspiration and encouragement to other women who are struggling with a life of poverty.

Without the love and support of my family, I could not have done this dissertation. I want to especially thank my husband, Howard and children for the sacrifices they made throughout this process. I would also like to thank my sister, Rhea who has been with me, not only through the dissertation process, but throughout my journey in life.

Finally, I dedicate this dissertation to the memory of my parents, Emma Lee and Unior McGee.

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CHAPTER I – INTRODUCTION

Background

The legacy of African American women began with slavery and has traditionally been characterized by sexual, racial, and economic exploitation (Collins, 2008). Throughout history, African American women have encountered multiple forms of oppression. Dating as far back as slavery, they were discriminated against as Black people (Waring, 2003). After the abolition of slavery, these women encountered the racism that is part of the American experience as well as being discriminated against as women (Warring, 2003). African American women are often faced with issues beyond merely the sex discrimination experienced by other women because they are both female and part of an ethnic minority group (Collins, 2000). These issues have led to additional challenges that African American women face in society.

Poverty is one of the barriers that many African American women are faced with overcoming. Over the years it has been noted that poverty is not a random occurrence but is acute among subgroups defined by race (minority groups), gender (women), and age (elderly and children) (Sue & Sue, 2003). Fourteen percent of U.S. households headed by women are considered impoverished (U. S. Census Bureau, 2017). While many individuals experiencing impoverished conditions experience them temporarily, African American women experience persistent poverty (DeNavas-Walt, Proctor, & Hill, 2006). Furthermore, as women age, they are at increased risk of living in poverty as compared to their male counterparts (DeNavas-Walt et al., 2006).

Pantazis, Gordon, and Levitas (2006) identified poverty as a sociological problem, which renders individuals inadequate for various reasons. When the supply of

jobs does not meet the demand of individuals seeking employment or the jobs that are available pay low wages, people can become impoverished (Pantazis et al., 2006). However, income is only an indirect measure of poverty. It is what individuals are able to purchase with income that determines their standard of living (Pantazis et al., 2006). Payne (2005) described two types of poverty that occur in individuals. Generational poverty occurs when families have lived in poverty for at least two generations (Payne, 2005). Often the attitude of individuals in generational poverty is that society owes them a living (Payne, 2005). Situational poverty occurs when there is a lack of resources resulting from a particular event (i.e., death, chronic illness, divorce, etc.) (Payne, 2005). Individuals in situational poverty often possess an attitude of pride and a refusal to accept charity (Payne, 2005). Regardless of the causes, poverty has devastating consequences for the people who live in it (Sanders, 2011).

The U. S. Census Bureau (2017) reported that 12.7% of the United States population or 40.6 million people lived in poverty in 2016. The poverty rate for women aged 18 to 64 was 13.4%, while the poverty rate for men aged 18 to 64 was 9.7% (U. S. Census Bureau, 2017). The poverty rate for women aged 65 and older was 10.6%, while the poverty rate for men aged 65 and older was 7.6% (U. S. Census Bureau, 2017). African Americans in poverty totaled 22 %, or 9.2 million people, living in poverty (U. S. Census Bureau, 2017). Contributing to poverty rates are the numbers of adults who have not continued their education beyond their high school diplomas or General Education Development (GED) certificates and are, therefore, disqualified from higher paying employment (Hansman, 2010). Individuals not possessing a high school diploma were the only educational attainment group to have a decline in poverty between 2015 and

2016 (U. S. Census Bureau, 2017). During 2016, 24.8% of individuals aged 25 and older without a high school diploma were in poverty (U. S. Census Bureau, 2017). The 2016 poverty rate for those with a high school diploma but no college was 13.3% (U. S. Census Bureau, 2017). Among individuals with at least a bachelor's degree, 4.5% were in poverty in 2016 (U. S. Census Bureau, 2017). Individuals possessing, at minimum, a bachelor's degree in 2016 represented 34.2% of all people aged 25 and older, compared with 14.6% of people aged 25 and older in poverty (U. S. Census Bureau, 2017).

Research indicates that socioeconomic status (SES) encompasses academic achievement and is evident in the early years of education (Morgan, Farkas, Hillemeir, & Maczuga, 2009). The academic, developmental rate of children from low SES households is slower than children from higher SES households (Morgan et al., 2009). Additionally, children from low SES households have fewer experiences that encourage the development of reading skills, such as phonemic awareness, oral reading fluency, and vocabulary (Buckingham, Wheldall, & Beaman-Wheldall, 2013). It is also noted that children from low SES households enter high school with average literacy skills five years behind those of higher SES households (Reardon, Valentino, Kalogrides, Shores, & Greenberg, 2013). According to the Maryland Independent College and University Association (2016), individuals within the top family income quartile are eight times more likely to obtain a bachelor's degree by age 24 as compared to individuals from the lowest family income quartile. Although African American college enrollment rates have increased, their college completion rates have not increased at the same pace as their White counterparts, and a gap in college attainment remains (The Education Trust Report, 2003).

The attainment of a college degree has been reported as one of the most reliable routes out of poverty for women (Rose, 2000). According to Bullock and Limbert (2003), education is one of the most prevalent ways of attaining upward mobility, other than marriage. Additionally, education aids in one's ability to engage in higher-order thinking, increases parenting skills, helps one become a better citizen, and provides one with a source of personal pride (Dill, 1998). While the attainment of an education has also been correlated with financial freedom, it is also associated with a sense of heightened personal pride, control, and empowerment (Holyfield, 2002). Likewise, spirituality is an important part of the human experience

It has been widely observed that spirituality, including religious participation, is commonly an important aspect of life and a significant source of strength in African American communities, especially for women dealing with issues of poverty (Bell & Bell, 1999). Spirituality typically refers to the ways that people search for a sense of deep meaning and purpose in life and relationships, form moral frameworks, and understand and connect with the nature of ultimate or transcendent reality however understood (e.g., theistic, atheistic, animistic, and others) (Jacobs, 2010). Spirituality may be expressed in religious and nonreligious forms (Banerjee & Canda, 2009). Research has established that spirituality, especially in the form of community-based religious support systems, provides sources of vital strength for many African American people (Corbett, 1997). A prominent theme in empirical studies is that spirituality involves a positive sense of meaning and purpose (within or without religious involvement) as well as religious participation is commonly associated with higher levels of personal well-being, social support, and crisis (Koenig, McCullough, & Larson, 2001). Individual

conceptualizations and experiences of spirituality are greatly influenced by culture, gender, and social-economic class (Wade-Gayles, 1995).

Many generations of African Americans have used faith and spirituality as a source of strength and support when faced with poverty, adversity, and discrimination (Washington & Moxley, 2003). When confronted with the adverse effects often associated with oppression and deprivation, African Americans have often used faith and spirituality, through inspirational song and prayer, as a means of coping or countering those challenges (Washington & Moxley, 2003). Further, spirituality often serves as a connection for individuals to discover different ways of thinking, feeling, and behaving as a means of helping them find support and hope in stressful situations (Washington & Moxley, 2003). These resources have also provided opportunities for creativity and personal expression, alleviation of stress, help for individuals to maintain control, remain hopeful, and discover meaning and purpose in life (Bussing, Ostermann, & Matthiessen, 2005). As resources, faith and spirituality are especially important when oppression impedes motivation and hinders progress in individuals towards meaningful change and outcomes (Bussing et al., 2005). Additionally, the literature has noted the importance of prayer and other expressions of faith as sources of personal strength and self-resilience during times of adversity (Thayne, 1997).

Although African American women are faced with numerous obstacles, many of them are successful in transitioning from poverty. This success may very well be attributed to their resiliency when faced with these challenges. Some individuals are nurtured in environments that teach them to be resilient and have the ability to overcome obstacles (McCreary, Cunningham, Ingram, & Fife, 2006). Resilience, as an inner

resource, is the ability to succeed in the face of obstacles (Werner-Wilson, Zimmerman, & Whalen, 2000). It results when a person is able to activate internal resources and to resolve stressors occurring in their life (Christopher, 2000). Stages of resilience naturally occur and affect behaviors of individuals throughout their life (Masten, Best, & Garmezy, 1990). How resilient people are at various points in their life may depend on their circumstances, as well as the interaction of personal, behavioral, and social factors (Masten et al., 1990). Other models used to study resilience have found that environmental factors, social support, societal conditions, personality, and life events often influence a person's level of resilience (McMillan & Reed, 1994).

Several factors have been associated with resiliency including individual attributes such as high self-esteem and internal locus of control, positive use of time, family backgrounds and parental involvement in children's lives, and supportive communities including religion and social clubs (Masten et al., 1990). While many African American women have been faced with numerous barriers (educational attainment, racism, sexism, etc.) and adverse living conditions (e.g., poverty, inadequate access to healthcare, etc.), they continue to exhibit a great deal of resilience (Jones, 2006).

Statement of the Problem

African American women born into impoverished families often have difficulty moving beyond their low socioeconomic circumstances (Cozarelli, Wilkinson, & Tagler, 2001). Although education has been shown to influence the lives of African American women, limited research has been conducted relative to the influence of education in their transition from poverty. Also, while there is considerable evidence regarding the

authoritative role of spirituality in the lives of women, and for African American women in particular (Mattis, 2002), little research has focused on how African American women used spirituality as a source of strength in response to the challenges of poverty.

Evidence reveals children raised in high-risk environments are able to thrive and develop into productive citizens (Luthar, Cicchetti, and Becker, 2000); however, there is little evidence as to how these individuals escaped poverty and how this process may vary depending on an individual's circumstances and characteristics (Hardaway & McLoyd, 2009). There is also a scarcity of research focusing on the experiences of African American women who have transitioned from poverty or that explores the possibility of shared characteristics among them. Finally, research regarding resilient African American women has generally focused on an understanding of resilience towards physical illness (e.g., diabetes), trauma (e.g., intimate partner violence, natural disaster), and aging (Singh, Garnett, & Williams, 2012); however, there has been little exploration regarding the resilient qualities of African American women and their transition from poverty. Johnson (2010) believed that although education can change the destiny of impoverished women, few are able to break the cycle of poverty and move into the arena of self-sufficiency. It remains unclear as to how these women were able to overcome an impoverished lifestyle.

Theoretical Framework

Black feminist thought and Resilience theory both serve as guides for this study. Black feminist thought gives voice to African American women in the face of adversity and provides a foundation for studying the decision-making processes of these women (Davis-Sowers, 2012). Both theories lend themselves to understanding the lived

experiences faced by individuals. Resilience refers to one's ability to bounce back after adversity and to withstand hardship (Wolin & Wolin, 1993). Black feminist thought seeks to eliminate oppression and the practices and ideas that justify its existence (Collins, 2008). Werner (1984) identifies resilient individuals as those who, despite being raised in harsh, stressful environments, are able to lead successful lives. Black feminist thought is about empowerment and resilience in the lives of African American women despite adversity (Collins, 2000). In their study of six African American women born in the segregated south, van Wormer, Sudduth, and Jackson (2011) found that resilience was learned in early life and continued throughout their lives despite physical vulnerability and personal loss. Combining the tenets of both Black feminist thought and Resilience theory allowed the researcher to give voice to the African American women in the study regarding their experiences and gain an understanding of their persistence to leave poverty in spite of adverse conditions.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative study was to examine the lives of African American women who were born and reared in impoverished families, yet these women have transitioned from poverty and now live as successful, educated adults. A phenomenological approach was used to explore the experiences of these women and the role of education, spirituality, and resilience, in their transition from poverty.

Research Questions

This study was guided by the following research questions:

1. What factors contributed to the successful transition from poverty of the African American women in this study?

2. What, if any, influence did education have on the participants' transition from poverty?
3. What does resilience mean to the women in this study?
4. In what ways did resiliency contribute to the participants' successful transition from poverty?
5. What does spirituality mean in the case of the women in this study?
6. In what ways did spirituality contribute to the participants' successful transition from poverty?

Delimitations

The study was delimited to African American women who lived in low-wage family households as a child and/or experienced poverty during some stage of their early adult life. The study was delimited to women who have completed a bachelor's degree or higher (master's degree or doctorate degree) and have transitioned from poverty. Furthermore, the study was delimited to women who work in a career that provides adequate resources as compared to their childhood and define themselves as successful. Nine of the participants resided in the state of Mississippi, while one participant resided in the state of Tennessee.

Justification

Although the United States is perceived as an economic world leader, poverty adversely impacts a significant proportion of its citizens. African Americans, for instance, face numerous issues that affect their quality of life including lack of adequate health insurance, impoverished neighborhoods, drug abuse, crime, and impeded access to quality education (Edwards, Crain, & Kalleberg, 2007). Although the college enrollment

rates of African American women have steadily increased, their college completion rates have not increased at the same pace as their White counterparts, and a gap in college degree attainment remains (The Education Trust Report, 2003). Remaining in college and obtaining a degree may be imperative to moving these women towards self-sufficiency. Further research may lead educators to understand the importance of assisting African American women with various support systems needed to ensure college retention.

While many individuals experience temporary impoverished conditions, African American women experience poverty at higher rates and remain in poverty for longer periods in comparison to other groups (Cawthorne, 2008). Oftentimes African American women have been products of generational poverty and may lack the skills and/or education necessary to transition from poverty. In order to understand how many African American women have been able to overcome adversity, it was necessary to explore the aspects of African American life and culture that may serve as significant factors (Miller & MacIntosh, 1999). By doing so, it may be possible to prevent a recycling of impoverished families and reliance upon government assistance. The information in this study provided further insight into the experiences of African American women who have journeyed out of poverty. Further, the information gained from this study may be useful to women who are striving to improve their quality of life. Additionally, this study has filled some of the gaps in the literature regarding African American women.

Assumptions

This study relied on the assumption that participants would accurately assess their childhood socioeconomic status. Participants shared their stories openly and honestly without coercion. Participants provided an accurate depiction of their beliefs and experiences from their own worldviews.

Definitions

African American Women – For the purpose of this study, African American women refers to women who define themselves as African American or of African descent. This may include women with biracial and/or African backgrounds.

Poverty – Having insufficient income to pay for basic necessities of life, such as food, clothing, and shelter (Serr, 2004).

Resilience – The ability to overcome and deal with debilitating environmental or social influences through such specific techniques as prayer, positive family support, community resources, positive peer association, and mentors (Kail & Cavanaugh, 2000).

Education – For the purpose of this study, education refers to formal education acquired through attending schools at secondary and/or higher education levels.

Spirituality – The way individuals seek and express meaning and purpose and the way they experience their connectedness to the moment, to self, to others, to nature, and to the significant or sacred (Puchalski et al., 2009).

CHAPTER II – LITERATURE REVIEW

The concept of the poverty threshold was adopted as a means of determining whether or not a family was impoverished. The definition is set by the government and includes a set of income thresholds that vary by family size and composition. It uses income before taxes and does not include capital gains or noncash benefits (U. S. Census Bureau, 2017). If a family has an annual income less than the family's threshold, then that family is considered to live in poverty (Gradin, 2012). Overcoming poverty may be a daunting task; however, many rise above these obstacles and succeed (DeParle, 2004; Lott & Bullock, 2001). The methods that these individuals, especially African American women, used to make this transition remain unclear and are open to further investigation. Few studies have specifically addressed education, spirituality and resilience as a means of transitioning from poverty. This literature review provides a brief overview of what has been studied, thus far, regarding the experiences of African American women and how they make meaning out of their experiences.

Poverty in America

Poverty has been a continued challenge throughout history in the United States with the poverty rate fluctuating over the years. Data reveals that in 1968, for example, the poverty rate was 12.8%; in 1974, the poverty rate was 11.2%; in 1986, the poverty rate was 13.6%; and in 2004, the poverty rate was 12.7% (Eldersveld, 2007). According to the U. S. Census Bureau, (2017), in 2016, 12.7% of the United States population lived in poverty.

While the United States is perceived as an economic world leader, poverty continues to unfavorably impact a significant percentage of its citizens (DeLeire &

Lopoo, 2010). Impoverished families have faced various challenges related to economic mobility. Although disadvantaged households have lower debt because they lack access to credit as a tool for economic mobility, economic hardships remain common within their families (Stack, 1974). Families living in impoverished neighborhoods are faced with numerous social problems including substandard housing, poor education, inadequate medical and dental care, hunger, poor nutrition, drug abuse, crime, family stress, violence, and despair (Dunlap, Golub, & Johnson, 2006). According to Payne (2005), "Poverty is characterized not only by a lack of financial resources, but also the extent to which individuals possess other resources such as emotional stability, spiritual guidance, physical health and mobility, support systems, and role models" (p.7). Payne (2005) further argues that while financial resources are extremely important, they do not explain why some individuals are able to successfully leave poverty while others remain in poverty. Impoverished individuals are faced with daily and unique challenges, which may hinder their capacity to rise above their circumstances (Wilson, 1987). Kozol (1995) argues that stories of individuals successfully leaving poverty could be misleading because of the glamorous tales of escaping poverty are often not based on reality. In his book, *Amazing Grace*, Kozol (1995) details the harsh, deplorable living conditions of impoverished children growing up in a New York neighborhood, and the daily injustices they face as impoverished citizens. Kozol (1995) further notes that the experience of leaving poverty for most individuals is often complex and challenging.

The adverse economic impact of poverty is often compounded by society's prejudged attitudes about individuals living in poverty (Popple & Leighninger, 2008). Society frequently views individuals living in poverty as ignorant, stupid, lazy, and

incapable of improving themselves (McCombs, 2009). According to Kerbo (2003), poverty is not a random occurrence but is actually more acute among subgroups defined by race (minority groups), gender (women), and age (elderly and children). Further, racism, sexism, poor education, and limited access to quality jobs are also contributing factors to poverty (Schiller, 2001).

Challenges Faced by African American Women

Although the United States is a wealthy nation, women are often faced with harsh economic challenges. Recent statistics reveal that an estimated 14% of American women are living at or below the poverty level (U.S. Census Bureau, 2017). Poverty is a major challenge facing households headed by women, with women in America being more likely to be poor than men (Women's International Network News, 1992). Of the 3.3 million African American households headed by women in 1989, 46.3% lived in poverty (Women's International Network News, 1992). Although large portions of these women were employed (56.8%), they rarely earned enough income to rise above the poverty level (Women's International Network News, 1992). Additionally, African American women are faced with the added stressors of race, class, and gender oppression (West, 2002). Emelech and Lu (2004) noted in their study that African American women experience extreme economic hardships attributed to being both women and minority.

Economic Security

Recently, there has been an increase in the number of women participating in the workforce. As of 2016, 59.4% of women over the age of 16 worked outside of the home (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2017) compared to 33.9% in 1950 (Fullerton, 1999). While workforce participation has increased, women are often faced with differences in

earnings as compared to men; and despite evidence of gains over the past two decades; racial minorities and women continue to earn less than their white counterparts (U. S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2017). On average, women in the United States working full time, year-round are paid 79 cents for every dollar paid to men (U. S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2017). The gap widens for African American women who are paid, on average, 60 cents for every dollar paid to white, non-Hispanic men (U. S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2017).

According to the U. S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (2017), during 2016, 79.9 million workers age 16 and older were paid at hourly rates, which represented 58.7% of all wage and salary workers. Among those paid hourly wages, 701,000 earned the federal minimum wage, and approximately 1.5 million earned wages below the federal minimum (U. S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2017). Of the numbers reported, more women than men worked in jobs that paid the minimum wage or less (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2017). In 2016, more than 3.7% of African American women held positions that were at or below the federal minimum wage in contrast to less than 1.8% of white men (U. S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2017). Minority female workers more commonly occupy low-wage positions such as housekeepers, home health care workers, and servers compared to other higher paying positions (U. S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2017). Unequal wages complicate the challenges of poverty for African American women and these gaps make it more difficult for them to move out of poverty (Lovell, Hartmann, Williams, 2008).

Racial Stereotyping

African American women have experienced a long history of interlocking oppressions at the intersection of sexism, racism, and classism (Collins, 1998; hooks, 2005). Collins (1998) contends that too often, controlling influences are used to justify racism, sexism, poverty and other forms of oppression as a natural part of everyday life. With this mindset, these stereotypes play a vital role in the idea that African American women should be blamed for their own oppression (Collins, 1998). Opposing this idea are those who argue that poverty, not controlling images or race, is to blame for the oppression experienced by African American women (Collins, 1998). Some have even argued that with the election of President of Barack Obama, the United States has proven that racial relations have been mended and people are no longer discriminated against on the basis of race (Teasley & Ikard, 2010). Often, discrimination can occur without intent, when unconscious stereotypes distort one's impressions of individuals (Reskin, 2002).

Several of the controlling images and stereotypes that continue to plague the lives of African American women date back to slavery. Throughout history, media, and culture, these women have been placed in various categories or relegated to certain images: (a) as a selfless, always giving, and maternal Mammy; (b) as an outspoken and argumentative Sapphire; (c) as a promiscuous, seductive Jezebel; (d) and as a lazy, unwed Welfare Queen (Limbert & Bullock, 2005; West, 2008).

The mammy image originated in the South during slavery and attempted to present slavery as a paternalistic system with slaves and slave owners taking care of each other rather than reflecting actual cruel reality (McElya, 2007). It depicts the African American female as an overweight, bandana wearing, domestic servant, whose primary

role was taking care of White children and their families better than her own (McElya, 2007). She was expected to be nurturing, self-sacrificing, happy and caring (West, 2008). This mammy image continues today, as many African American women are portrayed as obese, lazy, stupid and incapable of performing or qualifying for significant job opportunities or positions (Collins, 2000).

The sapphire image emerged in the 1940's and 1950's and was developed through the character (Sapphire Stevens) from the popular radio show *Amos and Andy* (McElya, 2007). The sapphire image was the complete opposite of the mammy image and depicted African American women as angry, loud, aggressive, and contemptuous towards black men (West, 2008). Her physical features were depicted as medium in stature with a dark brown complexion. Her primary role was to utilize verbal assaults to intimidate and emasculate the African American male (West 2008). This image has been utilized as an excuse to impose harsh workloads and violence on women who possess unfeminine or masculine characteristics (Thomas, Speight, & Witherspoon 2004; West, 2008).

Jezebel is a biblical figure found in the Books of Kings and is portrayed as a conniving harlot (West, 2008). The Jezebel image originated during slavery and was imposed on African American women during a time when white slave owners controlled their sexuality and reproduction (Collins, 2000; West, 2008). The Jezebel image portrayed women as subhuman, having insatiable sexual desires. Therefore, they could not be raped nor victimized because they were deemed loose, promiscuous, and desiring of sex regardless of the circumstances (West, 2008). As a result, these women were blamed for their own sexual oppression (Collins, 2000). These oppressions and controlling images continue today as African American women are often viewed as

sexually promiscuous women having insatiable desires (Collins, 2000; Russell & Hodges, 2005).

The welfare queen materialized in the 1970's when former President Ronald Reagan described a woman who had successfully cheated the government out of thousands of dollars by defrauding the welfare system (Limbert & Bullock, 2005). The welfare queen reflects the image that all African American women are lazy, scheming, conniving unwed women who conceive children early in life and rely on government assistance as a means of support (Collins, 2000). This controlling image reinforces the idea that all African American women are undeserving of government assistance because they take advantage of its agencies (Hays 2003; Limbert & Bullock, 2005).

Socioeconomic Status and Health

Being both African American and poor is often associated with numerous indicators of poor health and disabilities (Fiscella, 2003). Studies have hypothesized that socioeconomic factors account for many of the health disadvantages of African Americans. Poverty increases exposure to negative physical, psychological, behavioral, and social environments that influence health (Halfon & Hochstein, 2002); limits opportunities for education and achievement (Ratcliffe and McKernan, 2012); restricts access to adequate health care (House, 2001); and exposes individuals to numerous stressors that create problems and poor health over time (Pearlin, Schieman, Fazio, & Meersman, 2005).

Poverty is viewed as one of the most consistent indicators of mental distress and depression among women (Belle & Doucet, 2003). It has been suggested that increased depressive symptoms in low-income women are significantly higher than that of women

in other income groups; and these symptoms often go untreated in women (Kessler, 2003). Poverty contributes to daily stressors regarding essential needs and limits the capacity to participate in recreational activities (Starkey, Keane, Terry, Marx, & Ricci, 2013). African American women experience financial challenges, relationship issues, poor health, and unemployment, which can contribute to the onset of depression (Starkey, et al., 2013). Poverty may also be paired with the absence of social support and, therefore, make low-income women more susceptible to anxiety and depressive disorders (Watson, Roberts, & Saunders, 2012).

Racial differences in risk for depression and anxiety may also fluctuate in women, and poverty is one of the most consistent correlates of depression (Starkey, et al., 2013). High levels of depressive symptoms are common among impoverished women (Kessler, 2003). Studies have shown that African American women experience higher rates of depression and anxiety compared to Caucasian women (Gazmararian, James, and Lepkowski, 1995); however, some studies reveal African American women as having lower rates of depression (Dunlop, Songs, Lyons, Manheim, & Chang, 2003; Riolo, Nguyen, Greden, & King, 2005). Contributing to lower rates of anxiety and depression may be related to psychosocial resources, emotional resilience, social support, and ethnic identity (Riolo, Nguyen, Greden, & King, 2005). Higher rates of anxiety are generally related to higher rates of poverty, poor health, and the shame and stigma associated with accessing mental health care services in African American communities (de Groot, Auslander, Williams, Sherraden, & Haire-Joshu, 2003).

African American Women and Education

Education greatly influences society and many individuals employ this tool as a means of overcoming the barriers of poverty as well as increasing their financial and social conditions (Swail, Redd, & Perna, 2003). Bullock and Limbert (2003) note the significance of attaining an education as a means of improving one's socioeconomic status. Bettie (2002) revealed that as early as high school, teenage girls, especially those having had older sisters attend college, understand the importance of acquiring a higher education. As early as the 1980s, researchers identified education as one of the most reliable avenues out of poverty for women (Rose, 2000). During a 2008 speech to the NAACP, Barack Obama expressed the importance of the classroom in the fight for social and economic justice (Speak Out Foundation, 2009). Individuals who possess a bachelor's degree earn double that of those who only possess a high school diploma (Baum, Ma, & Payea, 2013). Likewise, those who possess professional degrees earn double that of those who possess a bachelor's degree (Baum et al., 2013). In addition to increased income potential, acquiring an education also correlates with an increase in self-esteem and empowerment (Holyfield, 2002).

Throughout history, African American women have faced challenges, difficult situations, and have encountered numerous adversities. In spite these daunting conditions, however, they continually make progress towards degree attainment. By 2010, African American women accounted for 66% of all four-year degrees obtained by African Americans and they continue to progress regarding entering institutes of higher learning (Jones-DeWeever, 2014). Although graduation rates in African American women are increasing, they are still not keeping pace with their White, Latina, or Asian

American counterparts (Guerra, 2013). Like people in all walks of life, African American women understand and embrace the role that education plays in their lives (hooks, 1994). It provides both social and personal empowerment in the lives of these women (hooks, 1994).

Benefits to Educational Attainment

Bullock and Limbert (2003) identify education as one of the most prevalent ways of attaining upward mobility apart from marriage. The researchers note the value in obtaining a college education as it relates to improving socioeconomic status (Bullock & Limbert, 2003). Educational attainment not only provides economic returns, but also produces non-economic benefits (Bullock & Limbert, 2003). Individuals with higher education generally earn more and are more likely to be employed (Ma, Pender, & Welch, 2016). According to Ma and colleagues (2016), during 2015, women working full-time with a four-year degree had median earnings of \$51,700 (Ma et al., 2016). However, 25% earned less than \$37,000 with 25% earning more than \$75,800 (Ma et al., 2016). During the same time period, men working full-time with a four-year degree had median earnings of \$71,400 (Ma et al., 2016). However, 25% earned less than \$47,000 with 25% earning more than \$102,000 (Ma et al., 2016). It was noted that within occupations employing large numbers of high school graduates and college graduates, those individuals possessing only a high school diploma had median earnings ranging from \$30,000 for retail salespersons to \$50,000 for wholesale and manufacturing sales representatives and first-line supervisors of nonretail workers or production and operating workers (Ma et al., 2016). Individuals possessing at least a bachelor's degree had median

wages ranging from \$38,000 for general office clerks to \$85,000 for first-line supervisors of nonretail workers (Ma et al., 2016).

There are both short-term and long-term economic and non-economic benefits to attending and graduating from college (Trostel, 2012). The short-term benefits include learning experience, involvement in extracurricular activities, participation in social and cultural events, and enhancement of social status (Trostel, 2012). Long-term benefits include increase in earnings, more enjoyable or better work environment, more informed purchases, lower chance of facing unemployment, better health, and longer life (Trostel, 2012). Further, economic and non-economic benefits for society at large are improved as a result of educational attainment (Ma et al., 2016). Adults with higher levels of education are more active citizens, earn more than others and enjoy better working conditions, and they contribute more to society through higher tax payments (Ma et al., 2016). Society also benefits through crime reduction and reduced dependency on public assistance programs (e.g., SNAP, Medicaid, and TANF) (Baum, Ma, & Payea, 2013). Higher education generally improves quality of life in a variety of ways. Adults with higher levels of education are more likely to participate in volunteer programs, understand political issues, which may lead to higher voting rates, live healthier lifestyles, and have greater access to healthcare (Baum et al., 2013).

Barriers to Educational Attainment

Literature reveals that education is an important aspect in the lives of African American women, as it can provide self-sufficiency and empowerment in one's life. Although these women value the importance of obtaining an education as a means of enhancing their socioeconomic status, they face numerous barriers that hinder or

decelerate their success (hooks, 1994). Financial barriers are one hindrance to their success, particularly for first-generation students (St. John, Paulsen, & Carter, 2005). Although they may be qualified to enroll in school, some either do not enroll or are unable to continue because they lack the financial resources to complete programs (St. John et al., 2005). Oftentimes, financial aid may be available; however, the type of financial aid matters (St. John et al., 2005). African American students are often resistant to taking out loans, resulting in financial barriers (St. John et al., 2005). The level of education of other family members, cultural belief systems, and community may also influence their educational experiences (Nettles, Thoeny, & Gosman, 1986). While all students often face the challenge of time management, relationship issues, and academic pressures when attending college (Kreig, 2013), African American women experience additional challenges on college campuses (Howard-Hamilton, 2003). They are faced with the “double jeopardy,” effect, referring to individuals having two disadvantages at the same time (Howard-Hamilton, 2003). Participants in a study conducted by Greyerbiehl and Mitchell (2014) identified themselves as having dual oppressions of being both African American and female.

The lack of academic preparation poses added challenges for African American students seeking a college degree. Academic preparedness is generally regarded as the necessary reading and math skills that an individual needs in order to be placed in entry-level college credit-bearing (non-remedial) courses (National Center for Education Statistics, 2014). A student’s pre-college academic performance can be measured by one or more of the following: high school GPA, college preparatory courses, advanced placement courses, quality of the high school attended, and college entrance test scores

(Swail et al., 2003). African American students, especially those from highly impoverished schools, are far less likely to be prepared for college (ACT, 2015). Further, the number of job opportunities requiring a college degree is also becoming more prevalent (Carnevale, Smith, & Strohl, 2013). It is estimated that by the year 2020, two-thirds of jobs will require college experience, and 30% of those jobs will require, at minimum, a four-year degree (Carnevale et al., 2013).

Not only is it important that students enroll in college, but they must also complete college in order to meet certain job qualifications and/or employer requirements (Bryant, 2015). However, many African Americans find this to be a challenging task brought on as a result of graduates leaving high school lacking the skills necessary to meet the demands of college classrooms (Bryant, 2015). A lack of exposure to higher order skill development has hindered the development of reasoning skills in various academic areas and the success rate of students in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics disciplines is far lower than that of students who do not come from underrepresented backgrounds (Doerschuk, Bahrim, Daniel, Kruger, Mann, & Martin, 2016). Reading, writing, test-taking, vocabulary, and study skills are often barriers to minority persistence in college (Doerschuk et al., 2016; Swail et al., 2003). Deficiencies in these areas may be detrimental to students facing the demands of college classrooms and student success (Swail et al., 2003).

For many low income and minority students, finances and the availability of financial aid is a high priority concern for their families (St. John et al., 2005). The decision to enroll in and complete college is often based on the amount of financial aid they receive (Swail et al., 2003). Tuition costs are reduced by financial aid; therefore, an

offer of financial aid is an important predictor of African American college enrollment (St. John et al., 2005). Grants for college tuition are more likely to be awarded to students coming from low-income families (Swail et al., 2003). About 46% of all African American undergraduate students receive federal Pell grant awards (Institute for Higher Education Policy [IHEP], 2010). However, grants alone do not always cover the full cost of tuition (IHEP, 2010). Reportedly in 2003-2004, 70% of African American students had remaining debt after the award of grants (IHEP, 2010). Approximately 54% borrowed to meet the need, a proportion that is higher than their peers (IHEP, 2010). Also raising a concern is the idea that student loans are becoming the primary source of financial aid, especially for those who are apprehensive about borrowing money to pay for school (St. John et al., 2005). Studies have indicated that minorities often avoid loans and when loans are used, persistence can be negatively impacted (St. John et al., 2005). An attempt to defray the cost of tuition and avoid loans may explain why many African American women are choosing to work or attend school part-time.

African American students often experience numerous barriers while enrolled in institutes of higher learning. An understanding of the unique challenges that African American women face while enrolled in institutes of higher learning is essential for the implementation of strategies to support their success while enrolled in higher education (Bartman, 2015). The lack of mentoring and role models on college campuses often provide challenges for students (Bartman, 2015). There are few African American faculty and staff members represented in institutes of higher education, which impacts the experience of African American women college students (Bartman, 2015). In a study conducted by Louis, Russell, Jackson, Blanchard, and Louis (2014), the participants

reported that self- confidence in their success was directly related to their relationship with their African American mentors. Hughes and Howard-Hamilton (2003) contend that mentorships and the provision of supportive environments should not be the sole responsibility of other African American women. Louis et al. (2014) posit that because there are limited African American faculty members, non-African American faculty must support African American students.

Although students often experience stressors and challenges while navigating through college life, African American students are often faced with additional stressors (Howard-Hamilton, 2003). African American women contend with the added dimension of racism and sexism; and the amount of racial injustice they face may impede their academic success and educational outcomes (Howard-Hamilton, 2003). A study conducted by Smedley, Myers, and Harrell (1993) identified several issues experienced by African American students at predominantly White institutions:

1. Not having enough professors of my race
2. Few students of my race
3. Racist institutional policies and practices
4. Difficulty having friendships with non-minorities
5. Rude and unfair treatment because of race
6. Being discriminated against
7. People close to me thinking I'm acting "White."
8. Concerns regarding my ability to succeed in college. (p. 440)

Fleming (1984) found that African American women were more assertive on predominantly White campuses. However, it was also noted that while these women

reported gaining more from their academic experience on predominantly White campuses, they also reported feeling socially ostracized and isolated and as a result, experienced emotional pain (Fleming, 1984).

Baumgartner (2010) also acknowledges the challenges of race in education and notes the need for further discussion regarding the impact of race and racism in the field of adult education. First, contributions made in the field of adult education by people of color have been ignored (Baumgartner, 2010). While much literature outlines the work of Myles Horton and Malcolm Knowles, the contributions of Septima Clark, Alain Locke, and Nannie Burroughs are less recognized (Baumgartner, 2010). Second, racism tarnishes adult educators' history of engaging in social justice movements such as the women's liberation movement (Baumgartner, 2010). Third, racism impacts the dynamics of adult education classrooms through the devaluation of African American professors and the exaltation of White professors (Baumgartner, 2010). Harlow (2003) reports that students view African American professors as being less competent than their White counterparts. Finally, African American researchers face greater challenges publishing research on their race (Hendrix, 2002). Baumgartner (2010) contends that "Racism remains an injustice that affects the individual, the field of adult education, institutions, and society" (p. 114).

African American women have reported feelings of isolation from family members while navigating the college experience (Winkle-Wagner, 2009). Winkle-Wagner (2009) conducted a study of 30 African American female, first-generation, students and their college experience. The women in the study reported feelings of pressure from family members to perform well (Winkle-Wagner, 2009). Since they were

representatives of their entire families, and expected to do well, they expressed feelings of being unable to share the challenges they faced on college campuses (Winkle-Wagner, 2009). Other women have reported the challenge of balancing college with work and family, lack of focus and motivation, and a lack of assistance and engagement (Dulabaum, 2016).

Spirituality

Due to the diverseness of the term and the manner in which various people interpret it, spirituality may well be one of the most difficult concepts to understand and articulate. Researchers have defined spirituality in various ways. Jagers and Smith (1996) proposed that spirituality is a worldview that is central to the cultural concept of most persons of African descent. According to hooks (2000), spirituality is a commitment to a specific paradigm that respects the principles of interconnectedness and the inner being. Hodge (2001) suggests that spirituality does not have to involve or exclude religion, but is more related to a personal experience with God or a higher power. Potts (1991) proposed that spirituality is a belief in a sacred force existing in all things. Matthis (2000), contends that spirituality is complex and measures must include the following components: (a) belief in a transcendent dimension of life, (b) relational dimension that may develop between an individual and God), (c) living according to God's will, and (d) possessing intrinsic beliefs and values. Spirituality involves a trusting relationship with a higher power fostering meaning and purpose in one's life (Letiecq, 2007).

“Spirituality based on worldviews influence the way people understand and interpret their life experiences; meanings attached to events and experiences are often

spiritual interpretations” (Ortiz, Villereal, & Engel, 2000, p. 24). It contributes to resilience, holistic healing, the effective promotion of health, and enhanced coping mechanisms and has been documented as useful in the treatment and prevention of substance abuse (Bent-Goodley, 2004; Friedman, 2000). Spirituality functions as a belief system that directs an individual’s behaviors and values (Musgrave, Allen, & Allen, 2002). A person can have a deep sense of spirituality without any formal religious participation (Musgrave et al., 2002).

Spirituality and Religiosity

Spirituality and religiosity are terms that are often used interchangeably and may sometimes overlap (Koenig, George, Titus, & Meador, 2004; Matthis, 2000). Spiritual and religious beliefs have been identified as influencers in African American’s understanding of forgiveness, hope, justice, and their response to oppression (Lincoln & Mamiya, 1990). Spirituality and religion are significant in structuring African Americans’ interpersonal relationships, their ideas regarding social obligations, as well as their definitions of community, and choice in relationships (Billingsley & Caldwell, 1991). Spirituality and religion are instrumental in the shaping of African American political views and patterns of political participation (Calhoun-Brown, 1996; Reese & Brown, 1995). Moreover, spirituality and religion are identified as influencers of the physical and psychological well-being of African Americans (Blaine & Crocker, 1995). Finally, it has been noted that spirituality and religion influence African American folk healing practices and their efforts to cope with adversity (Lincoln & Mamiya, 1990).

Although there are significant overlaps between spiritual and religious experiences, there are important distinctions that are made by lay people (Matthis, 2000).

Spirituality extends beyond religion and may or may not be related to a formal organization (Miller & Thoresen, 2003). Religiosity generally refers to an institutional affiliation and a formally organized doctrine of beliefs, rituals, and behaviors (Zinnbauer et al., 1997). It is the degree to which individuals adhere to the prescribed beliefs and practices of organized religion (Zinnbauer et al., 1997). Religion refers to collective expressions of myths, rituals, teachings, music, and symbols (Fowler, 2000). According to some researchers, spirituality transcends personal, scientific, and physical boundaries, whereas religion is defined by boundaries of religious doctrine (Miller & Thoresen, 2003). Religion, however, is one way people choose to practice their spirituality (Hafner & Capper, 2005). The spiritual realm may also encompass elements of the metaphysical (e.g., nature, ancestors), which are often unaddressed in religious settings (Taylor, Chatters, & Levin, 2004). Spirituality may also be conceived as the beliefs and experiences that are founded in and further developed by an individual's relationship with God (Armstrong, 1996). While scholars may view religion and spirituality as different, all communities, especially communities of color, do not view them as different (Martin & Martin, 2002).

The Role of the African American Church

For many African Americans, religious participation occurs in the church; and the genesis of self-help or independence within the community has been the African American church, a term used to signify churches with predominantly African American congregations (Asante, 1990; Karenga, 1988). Not only has the church served a spiritual purpose or as a place of worship, but it has also served as a social support institution (McRae, Carey, & Anderson-Scott, 1998). The African American church has provided

and helped African Americans by offering a meeting place; providing spiritual guidance; actively working for social progress for African Americans; providing personal assistance; establishing guidelines for moral behavior; and being a source of unity (Taylor, 1988) as well as serving as a setting for emotional expressiveness; educational endeavors; and pastoral counseling and care (Armstrong & Crowther, 2002). It has served as a linkage, bringing people together for a common goal, helping individuals manage stressful situations, promoting empowerment, and providing role models (Brody, Stoneman, & Flor, 1996). Eugene (1995) proposed a model of mental health that incorporates the African American church. In her research, she indicates that the African American church assists African American women with maintaining their mental health by providing a therapeutic community that allows for (a) articulating suffering, (b) identifying the persecutors, (c) providing an asylum for African American women to release their frustrations and pain without judgment, and (d) validating African American women's experiences in America (Eugene, 1995). It has been noted that formal religious participation correlates to stronger families and stronger feelings of self-worth (Brody, Stoneman, & Flor, 1996; Christian & Barbarin, 2001). The African American church continues to play a significant role in the lives of many African Americans and for many, it is considered to be the second most important establishment, with family being first (Moore, 1991).

Spirituality as Strength for African American Women

Often referred to as the backbone of the family, African American women have served as primary nurturer and caretaker within the family (Staples, 1990). Research involving African American women reveals that spiritual engagement may promote both

interpersonal and intrapersonal functioning, leading to more positive family relationships (Banks-Wallace & Parks, 2004). African American women often utilize their spiritual beliefs in coping with daily struggles associated with living in a socially and politically oppressive system (Watt, 2003). Spirituality has been a protective factor in the African American community and often serves as a survival strategy for overcoming adversity (Boyd-Franklin, 2010). For African American women, spirituality is a coping mechanism and a means of understanding the day-to-day struggles and forms of oppression that they face (Matthis, 2000).

Spirituality and Physical Health

Spirituality influences various aspects of women's lives and is significant in influencing their health behaviors. Spiritual well-being is essential to the optimal health of women (Matthis, 2000). Research findings reveal spirituality as a key component in determining women's daily self-management of type 2 diabetes (Samuel-Hodge et al., 2000) as well as influencing their approaches towards breast cancer screening (Phillips, Cohen, & Tarzian, 2001). Wyatt, Harkins, King, Wofford, & Jones (2002) propose that intentionally including spiritual support, as a treatment, may be an important supplement to their traditional therapeutic treatment of hypertension in African American women. Samuel-Hodge and colleagues (2000) suggest that the importance of spirituality may not be fully appreciated by health care professionals as it relates to overall women's health.

Spirituality and Mental Health

African Americans are generally less likely to seek mental health services than other racial and ethnic groups (Conner et al., 2010; Williams et al., 2007). Those who do seek services often attend fewer sessions and drop out of programs before completion

(Miranda & Cooper, 2004). As an alternative to utilizing formal treatment services, however, African Americans, particularly women, are more likely to use informal sources of coping with mental health issues such as social support networks and the religious community (Ward, Clark, & Heidrich, 2009).

It has been suggested that in some medical settings, patients' spiritual beliefs pose a significant influence over health beliefs, and some spiritual beliefs may have a direct effect on clinical outcomes (King, Speck, & Thomas, 1994). For example, studies found that when exploring end-of-life care and physician-assisted suicide, it was revealed that both patients' and physicians' spiritual and religious beliefs affected attitudes and behaviors that influenced patient care (Ganzini, Johnston, McFarland, Tolle, & Lee, 1998). Many women diagnosed as HIV-positive consider spirituality an important resource when coping with the stressors and demands associated with living with HIV disease (Arnold, Avants, Margolin, & Marcotte, 2002; Bosworth, 2006). Guillory, Sowell, Moneyham, and Seals (1997) conducted focus groups among African American women living with HIV to explore the use of and experiences attributed to spirituality and found that participants reported a strong reliance on God, and viewed spirituality as essential to daily life and healing. Commerford and Reznikoff (1996) reported that their sample of nursing home residents revealed that those who attended church regularly were less likely to be depressed than irregular attendees. Spiritual causal attributions have been associated with higher levels of coping and adjustment to life events (Gall et al., 2005).

Spirituality and Substance Abuse

Studies indicate that African American women are abusing drugs with increased frequency and are estimated to exceed the national average of 6.2% for women of all races/ethnicities (National Survey on Drug Use and Health, 2013). Oftentimes, African American women experience barriers to seeking and completing treatment programs for substance abuse (Stevens-Watkins et al., 2016). Spirituality can greatly impact women in the recovery process. Members of AA (Alcoholics Anonymous) view the 12-step program as guidance for a person's lifestyle, with spiritual processes such as reliance on God or on a source of power higher than one's self as a key component to recovery (Miller, Meyers, & Tonigan, 1999). Additionally, length of sobriety has also been positively associated with spirituality (Poage, Ketzenberger, & Olson, 2004). Pardini, Plante, Sherman, and Stump (2000) conducted a study of 237 recovering substance abusers and identified increased faith and spirituality as predictors of heightened perceptions of social support, optimistic outlook on life, greater resilience to stress, and decreased anxiety levels. Similarly, Kendler, Gardner, and Prescott (1997) reported in their study of over 2000 female twins, that lifetime risks for alcoholism and nicotine dependence were inversely associated with seeking spiritual comfort, prayer, and personal devotion. Spirituality has been identified as a significant predictor of recovery and/or treatment outcomes (Piedmont, 2004).

Spirituality and Adult Learning

The role of spirituality in adult learning is an emerging theme in adult education literature. Tisdale and Tolliver (2001) note that spirituality plays a significant role in the human experience; and continues into higher education and vocational education

(Merriam & Brockett, 2007). Spirituality has become an increasing influence in the field of adult education (English, 2005). As a result, the influence of spirituality in adult education has become more definitive as there are increasingly more discussions of the subject (English, 2005). Tisdell (2008) notes the impact of these influences in four primary ways. First, several adult educators had earlier careers in ministry (Tisdell, 2008). Second, more recent adult education authors are noting the influence of spirituality and soul on adult learning (English & Gillen, 2000). Tisdell and Toliver (2001) suggest that humans construct knowledge and make meaning from their experiences including spiritual experiences. Dirkx (2001) suggests having students express their emotions and feelings about learning experiences. A third influence is in the arena of workplace learning (English, Fenwick, & Parsons, 2003). English et al. (2003) believe that spirituality is important in workplace learning as it relates to the well-being of employees while bridging the gap between the personal and professional being. Further, there is a focus on how spirituality informs thinking and practice in the workplace or as it relates to working for the benefit of everyone (English, Fenwick, & Parsons, 2003). Finally, there continues to be a strong presence and influence of spirituality in adult education settings for those educating for social justice (English, 2005; Tisdell, 2003).

There are various spiritual experiences that lead to learning, and those spiritual experiences take place at particular moments in time (Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007). However, making sense of that experience or learning from the experience happens over time (Merriam et al., 2007). Spirituality is generally based on beliefs and experiences in what is considered sacred in life; however, how one

internalizes these experiences can directly influence their beliefs and behaviors (English, 2005). Although some individuals internalize their spirituality and focus on inner peace through prayer and meditation, others may be more focused on practical actions and may not engage in spiritual discourse unless specifically addressed (English, 2005).

Adult educators see and are interested in the connection between spirituality and learning experiences. In her study of how spirituality informed the lives of 31 adult educators from various cultures, Tisdell (2003) provides a comprehensive definition of spirituality and presents seven assumptions about spirituality as it relates to educational settings:

1. While spirituality and religion are different, many individuals connect it to religion.
2. Spirituality provides a sense of wholeness and connection to all things through a higher power or spirit.
3. Spirituality creates meaning from one's experiences.
4. Spirituality is always present in educational settings, and although not always acknowledged, it is important.
5. Spiritual development moves one toward greater authenticity.
6. Spirituality is the construction of knowledge through essentially symbolic and instinctive processes, which may include music, art, and symbols related to culture.
7. Spiritual experiences are usually unexpected. (pp. 28-29)

Tisdell (2003) also addresses various types of spiritual learning experiences.

Results from the study reveal that the first set of spiritual experiences appeared to be

universal in nature within all cultures (Tisdell, 2003). Examples of these related experiences included giving or witnessing a birth, witnessing a death, or having a near death experience resulting in a new sense of purpose in one's life (Tisdell, 2003). Next were spiritual experiences involving significant nighttime dreams and daytime synchronicities (Tisdell, 2003). These consecrated moments offered a sense of direction, healing, hope, and inner peace to participants (Tisdell, 2003). The final spiritual experience took place in the form of meditation, with individuals engaged in consistent spiritual practice through prayer or meditation reporting having had more positive life experiences (Tisdell, 2003). A final spiritual experience reported more in women and people of color, was related to identity (Tisdell, 2003). Women discussed reclaiming certain aspects of their childhood religion and traditions through a more woman-positive spiritual lens (Tisdell, 2003). Likewise, people of color reported the reclaiming of a more positive cultural identity after learning the history and spirituality of their culture (Tisdell, 2003). It was noted that the spiritual part of those experiences came about as participants discovered new power in renewing past experiences and reclaiming images, mystic stories, and music that resonated from their childhood (Tisdell, 2003).

Examining the importance of spirituality in adult learning has left several scholars considering the question of integrating spirituality into the curriculum (Dirkx, 1997; English, 2000; Tisdell, 2003; Vella, 2000). As stated in her assumptions about the nature of spirituality, Tisdell (2003) suggests that spirituality is ever present in the learning environment and is an important part of the human experience. Tisdell (2003) examines spirituality, learning, and culture, and suggests that spirituality has an important role in the construction of meaning-making. Tisdell (2003) further argues that although one's

spirituality is manifested through cultural experiences, symbols, and myths, the meaning of those experiences and how they are valued are vastly different depending on the culture. According to MacKeracher (2004), spiritual learning connects individuals to a higher consciousness and makes connections to others in meaningful ways.

MacKeracher (2004) proposes that there are seven conditions associated with spiritual learning, and adult learners are more likely to be involved in spiritual learning if they (a) have a higher state of consciousness, (b) are open to new experiences and ideas, (c) are aware of their own state of consciousness, (d) are not judgmental regarding their experiences or thoughts, (e) are reflective of their thoughts and experiences, (f) participate in interactive dialogues to share their experiences, and (g) look for unlikely connections.

Vella (2000) contends that in order for moments of spiritual learning to take place, there must be space in the learning environment that is safe, open, and supportive. Vella (2000) outlines three principles that guide adult educators in providing safe and supportive space in the learning environment—dialogue, respect, and accountability. Dialogue allows space for one to speak freely without adverse consequences and space where one listens to the experiences of others without judgment (Vella, 2000). Further, dialogue builds a sense of community that is people centered, thereby, providing an opportunity for learners to connect with others (Merriam et al., 2007). The teacher serves as a resource person, rather than an expert; as a guide, rather than a professor; and as a mentor, rather than an instructor (Merriam et al., 2007). Additionally, the teacher designs learning experiences that are supportive as well as challenging to adult learners (Merriam et al., 2007). Respect holds educators accountable for designing learning experiences as

well as guiding all encounters with adult learners (Merriam et al., 2007). According to hooks (1994), the role of the educator is not only to provide adult learners with information, but also to share in the spiritual growth of the learners. Therefore, educators must provide environments that promote respect and conditions where learning can take place (hooks, 1994).

Resilience

Much of the early resilience research focused on children with fewer studies focusing on adults (Hill, 1998). Many of the studies conducted attempted to understand children and their exceptional ability to overcome adverse challenges and avoid later psychiatric disorders as adults (Masten & O'Conner, 1989; Richmond & Beardslee, 1988; Werner 1984). A great deal of research has been grounded in the disciplines of psychiatry and developmental research with much of the research focusing on three individual-level factors geared towards increasing resilience in the face of poverty (Seccombe, 2002):

1. **Personality Traits and Disposition.** Personality traits include positive self-concept, sociability, communication and problem solving skills, intelligence and scholastic competence, autonomy, self-esteem, androgyny, and good mental and physical health (Wolin and Wolin, 1993);
2. **Family Protective and Recovery Factors.** Family protective and recovery factors condition the family's ability to tolerate challenges and helps families bounce back from a crisis (McCubbin, McCubbin, Thompson, Han, and Allen, 1997); and

3. Community Strengths. Community institutions provide support and foster resiliency in children and adults (Blyth and Roelkepartian, 1993).

Several definitions of resilience have evolved over the years. The term resilience is derived from the Latin roots meaning, to jump or bounce back (Wolin & Wolin, 1993). Rutter (1987) defined resilience as a buffering agent that protects individuals from psychotic disorders. Resilience is the ability to cope with disruptive, stressful, or challenging events and provide the individual with protective skills (Richardson, Neiger, Jensen, & Kumpfer, 1990). Richmond and Beardslee (1988) and Beardslee (1989), described resilience as self-confidence, curiosity, self-discipline, self-esteem, and control over one's environment. Other researchers have described resilience as the capacity to rebound from adversity, misfortune, trauma, or other transitional crises (McCubbin et al., 1997). As an inner resource, resilience is the ability to succeed when faced with misfortune (Werner-Wilson, Zimmerman, & Whalen, 2000).

Attributes of Resilience

Resilience results when individuals are able to make meaning out of stressful situations and utilize inner strengths to resolve challenges (Christopher, 2000). According to Masten and Reed (2005), two critical judgments are necessary in identifying and characterizing individuals as being resilient. First, individuals must be initially doing well or be well adjusted relative to a set of expected behaviors; and second, individuals must have experienced extenuating circumstances that pose a risk to positive outcomes (Masten & Reed, 2005). Factors that contribute to resilience include informal social support systems, a sense of spirituality, and a sense of hope (Todd & Worrell, 2000).

African Americans living in impoverished conditions often show resilience by overcoming adverse living conditions. Poor African American children are more likely to experience violence, stress, poor health, and abuse (Children's Defense Fund, 2014). African American children live in unsafe neighborhoods with gun violence being the leading cause of death among children ages 1-19 (Children's Defense Fund, 2014). African American children are less likely to graduate high school and more likely to score in the lowest percentiles of any racial group on the ACT college entrance exam (Children's Defense Fund, 2014). African American children are 40% more likely to be uninsured than white children, more likely to live in single parent households, and have the greatest risk of any racial/ethnic group to be funneled into the prison system (Children's Defense Fund, 2014). Despite the obstacles that children and adults often face, many are able to overcome these odds and lead successful lives (Seccombe, 2002). Additionally, a number of poor couples have healthy relationships, successful marriages, and do not use violence as a means of dealing with stressful situations (Seccombe, 2002). Many impoverished children have excellent health, are not engaged in violent activities, and are successful in school (Seccombe, 2002).

Using academic achievement and an operational definition of resiliency, Gordon (1995) identified 40 African American high school students residing in low socioeconomic, high stress homes. The study revealed that, when compared to non-resilient students, the resilient students had healthier self-concepts, felt more positive about their cognitive abilities, and placed more emphasis on extracurricular activities and material gain (Gordon, 1995). Focusing on future financial security and expanding personal independence were also characteristics of students that achieved academically in

spite of their stressful environments (Christian & Barbarin, 2001). Most agree that resilience develops over time and resilient people are survivors (Beardslee, 1989).

Research regarding resilient African American women has generally centered on the following areas: resilience related to physical illness (e.g., diabetes), trauma (e.g., intimate partner violence, natural disaster), and age groups (Singh, Garnett, & Williams, 2012). DeNisco (2011) conducted a study of African American women diagnosed with Type 2 diabetes. The study explored the relationship between resilience and diabetes and found that participants with higher resilient scores had better glycemic control (DeNisco, 2011). African American women survivors of Hurricane Katrina showed substantial resilience in the aftermath and devastation of the storm (Thomas, 2012). Their resilience was manifested through the manner in which they made meaning out of their experiences after the devastation (Thomas, 2012). They reported being able to cope with their situations through trusting in a higher power, living in the moment, activating resources, creating community, and doing for others (Thomas, 2012). van Wormer, Sudduth, and Jackson (2011) studied the resilience of older African American women who had worked as maids in the Deep South. Their study examined the resilience of these women and the intersections of racism, sexism, and classism (van Wormer et al., 2011). Resilience for these women comprised community bonding, strong religious faith, and resistance to oppression. Davis (2002) identified characteristic of resilience that helped women deal with abuse, which included spirituality, a sense of humor, support systems, and hope. Additionally, Rose's (1990) qualitative study of women's inner strength stressed the importance of investigating women's experiences for successful characteristics as opposed to dismissing certain traits as weaknesses.

Social Support Systems

It has been noted that various factors within the community affect resilience and how families operate (Bowen, Richman, & Bowen, 2000). Social organizations are significant components to rearing resilient adolescents and developing resilience in adults (Seccombe, 2002). According to Brown and Gary (1987) social supports have been identified as significant buffers of stress in the mental health of African American women. African Americans greatly depend on support systems such as family, relationships, social organizations, and informal networks (Billingsley, 1992; Boyd-Franklin, 1991). Boyd-Franklin (1991) points out the importance of these organizations for providing comfort and support to African Americans during times of stress and challenges. These various networks provide support and act as a buffer to the numerous negative societal conditions faced by African Americans (Thorton, 1998).

Theoretical Framework

Black feminist thought and Resilience theory both serve as guides for the present study. Both theories lend themselves to lived experiences faced by individuals. Black feminist thought gives voice to African American women and provides a foundation for studying the decision-making processes of these women (Davis-Sowers, 2012).

Resilience refers to one's ability to bounce back after adversity and to withstand hardship (Wolin & Wolin, 1993). Werner (1993) identified resilient individuals as those who, despite being raised in harsh, stressful environments, were able to lead successful lives. Combining the tenets of both Black feminist thought and Resilience theory will allow the researcher to give the African American women in the study voice regarding their

experiences and gain an understanding of their persistence to leave poverty in spite of adverse conditions.

Black Feminist Thought

African American women have experiences that are very different from other women as well as from African American men (Howard-Hamilton, 2003). They are faced with the interlocking experiences of race, gender, and class, which follows them throughout every life experience (Collins, 2008). The difference in wages for work that African American women perform, the communities in which they live, and the relationships that they share with others suggests that, collectively, African American women have different experiences than those who are not African American and female (Collins, 1989). The struggle for upward mobility continues more so for African American women in the areas of political representation, economic/family stability, professional/business development, health, and educational achievement than African American males, White females and White males as a whole (Jeffries, 2015). Black feminist thought aims to raise the political consciousness of those with an Afrocentric worldview, while challenging patriarchal structures and gender inequalities (Brock, 2010). It creates a space and voice for traditionally silenced and marginalized groups to have the opportunity to voice their opinions regarding social inequalities (Pratt-Clark, 2012). Personal stories may create opportunities for women who were able to transition from poverty to share their experiences.

According to Few (2007), the concept of Black feminist thought resulted from Black feminist activists and scholars feeling disconnected from White, middle-class, liberal feminist discourse. Black feminist thought is produced by ordinary African

American women (Collins, 1989). Collins (2000) argues that the very essence of Black feminist thought provides theories that interpret and clarify the views of African American women. It provides an interpretation of the experiences of African American women by those who share commonalities (Collins, 2000). Some of the most renowned Black feminists include Barbara Smith, Patricia Hill-Collins, bell hooks, Angela Davis, and Audre Lorde (Ransby, 2001). Several themes have emerged through the writings of these theorists that shape Black feminist thought.

Jones (2000) posits that African American women are faced with multiple oppressions and are not given the option of fighting only one battle. Additionally, Black feminist scholars have brought to the forefront the issue of gender inequality within the African American community (Collins, 2000; hooks, 1995). In the early nineteenth century, African American women were viewed as domestic servants maintaining households and as support systems for their spouses rather than as financial contributors to the household (Guy-Sheftall & Bell-Scott, 1989). Educational attainment was not intended for persons (particularly African American women) who were considered to be less human than others (Guy-Sheftall & Bell-Scott, 1989). During the civil rights movement, positions of leadership were reserved for African American males and African American females were not recognized for their works in the political arena (Simien, 2004). Further, Black feminists maintain the benefits of feminism within the African American community as it challenges patriarchy as an institutionalized oppressive structure and advocates for the building of coalitions (Simien, 2004). Collins (2000) asserts that Black feminism is a social justice project and building coalitions is vital to advancing that project. Finally, Black feminist thought maintains that the shared

experiences with race, class, and gender oppression provide African American women with a sense of belonging to a group (Simien, 2004). These shared experiences with interlocking systems are the essence of what prompts African American women and advocates to political activism (Wilcox, 1990).

Collins (2000) posits that Black feminist thought acknowledges African American women's historical struggle against multiple oppressions. It examines how Black women negotiate and dismantle the interlocking experiences of race, class, and gender (Collins, 2000). African American women empower themselves by creating self-definitions that enable them to confront and eradicate malicious images of Black womanhood (Collins, 2000). Black feminist thought further includes an activist and political standpoint into their research by raising awareness and empowerment in the lives of African American women (Collins, 2000).

Resilience Theory

The present study seeks to investigate how some African American women have the ability to effectively recover from adverse (raised in poverty) events, while others seem to remain in deplorable situations. Being able to move forward despite challenging circumstances demonstrates resilience (Tugade & Fredrickson, 2004). A concise statement in resilience theory is that individuals are compelled by an inner force to seek self-actualization, altruism, wisdom, and harmony with a spiritual source of strength (Richardson, 2002). Werner and Smith (1992) referred to resilience as an innate self-righting mechanism. While resilience does not eliminate risks and adverse conditions, it may provide African American women with the endurance necessary to effectively deal

with stressful events. Rutter (1987) notes that not all individuals surrender in the face of adversity; some are able to overcome their challenges.

Richardson (2002) proposes that resilience research occurred in three stages. The initial stage of resilience research focused on uncovering internal and external qualities possessed by individuals that help them in the face of adversity and promote resilience (Richardson, 2002). This stage focused on identifying the strengths of resilient individuals (Richardson, 2002). The second stage focused on understanding how individuals acquire the strengths and qualities identified in the first stage (Richardson, 2002). The final stage focused on discovering one's motivation to restore unity while facing disruptions in life (Richardson, 2002).

Resilience theory has been researched across numerous disciplines. In the area of change management, it is regarded as the ability to exhibit both strength and flexibility during the change process, while displaying minimal functional behavior (Connor, 1993). It is defined in the field of psychology as the ability to bounce back and endure adversity by repairing oneself (Wolin & Wolin, 1993). In the arena of psychiatry, humans employ psychological and biological strengths to successfully master change (Flach, 1988). Developmental psychopathology describes resilience as the ability to cope with challenges and threats while maintaining an internal and integrated sense of self (Garmezy & Masten, 1986). In the field of human development, resilience is viewed as the ability to withstand or successfully maneuver adversity (Werner & Smith, 2001).

Resilience theory has also gained recognition in the medical profession where it is defined as the ability to recognize pain, recognize its purpose, and tolerate it until things begin to normalize (O'Leary & Ickovics, 1995). In the field of epidemiology, it refers to

the ability to overcome stress and rise above disadvantage (Rutter, 1979). In the field of nursing, resilience refers to the ability to regenerate power to respond to the internal or external environment for survival, growth, or development (Jones, 1991).

Resilience theory provides conceptual scaffolding for studying and understanding why some youth grow up to be healthy adults in spite of exposure to adversity (Rutter, 1987; Werner & Smith, 2001). Werner and Smith (2001) discuss the longitudinal study of more than 600 children born on the island of Kauai, Hawaii. The study examined the effects of growing up in high-risk environments (Werner & Smith, 2001). Many of the children faced adversity throughout their childhood including impoverished conditions, parents who had not graduated from high school, perinatal stress, familial alcoholism, violence, divorce, and mental illness (Werner, 2005). The research revealed that two-thirds of the children developed behavioral problems by the age of 18 years. However, one-third of the children developed into stable adults (Werner & Smith, 2001). The researchers followed the participants until they reached age 40 and found that the majority of the two-thirds, previously identified with behavior problems, were now stable adults (Werner, 2005). A key finding was that resilience can be developed at any point in life course; and although surrounded by risk factors, the participants who showed the most resilience were those who had access to protective factors (Werner, 2005).

Although numerous resilience studies focus on children, resilience is not limited to children (Howard, Dryden, & Johnson, 1999). Resilience is internal and manifests throughout a person's life (Luthar, Cicchetti, & Becker, 2000). The literature indicates that resilience is multifaceted and refers to people being determined to survive (Bandura,

1989) and endure hardships (Rutter, 1987). Taormina (2015) proposed an adult personal resilience framework that identifies four key dimensions:

1. **Determination:** Determination refers to one's intentional decision to excel through difficult situations regardless of the challenge. Determination reflects a cognitive dimension of personal resilience. Through this process, individuals faced with difficult tasks are determined to conquer obstacles regardless of the sacrifice.
2. **Endurance:** Endurance is the stamina that individuals possess when confronting arduous situations and persevere in spite of challenges. Endurance may be cognitive or physical. Individuals may survive physical injuries, thereby enduring physical suffering. On the other hand, endurance can also be cognitive. Individuals may overcome harsh circumstances and oppression in life.
3. **Adaptability:** Adaptability is one's capacity to adjust and/or change when faced with adversity. Adaptability refers more to a cognitive rather than physical aspect. An individual may have a behavioral change but cannot readily change his or her physiological structure.
4. **Recuperability:** Recuperability enables individuals to recover. It is the power to overcome physically and cognitively adverse situations and return to a state of normalcy.

Polidore and colleagues (2010) outlined seven resilience themes in their study of rural African American teachers:

1. Religion: It is noted that sources of encouragement often come from a belief in God and/or a moral obligation to others.
2. Flexible locus of control: Rotter (1964) developed the concept of locus of control. Individuals possessing internal locus of control believe that they control events taking place in their life and the outcomes. On the other hand, there are individuals who possess external locus of control and blame outside forces for a lack of success. Flexible use of each locus of control appears to benefit resilient people (Walsh, 1998).
3. Individual's positive outlook: The third theme examines one's ability to remain optimistic in the face of adversity. Individuals who are more optimistic when facing adversity are often more resilient (Seligman, 1990). Optimists see adversity as a challenge and make decisions that transform problems into opportunities.
4. Autonomy: Individuals with a strong sense of autonomy take control of their own surroundings regardless of the circumstances. Those who feel as though they can influence events, exemplify greater resilience over time (Walsh, 1998; Werner & Smith, 2001).
5. Commitment: Resilient individuals tend to be committed to their relationships and their activities (Walsh, 1998).
6. Change: Viewing change in a positive manner promotes resilience over time (Walsh, 1998).

7. Positive relationships: Positive role models are important to resilient people regardless of whether they are family, friends, teachers, clergy, or spouses (Walsh, 1998; Werner & Smith, 2001).

Wolins and Wolins (1993) identify seven resiliencies that are internal and can be manifested in both children and adults: insight, independence, relationships, initiative, creativity, humor, and morality. Regardless of traumatic life events that an individual may have faced, they can foster any of these seven resiliencies and, as a result, overcome any damage caused by the adverse situation (Wolins and Wolins, 1993). Resilience research focuses on understanding how children and adults have overcome and recovered from adverse situations. The results of this study could potentially add to the body of research, as it is limited in areas specifically related to African American women transitioning from poverty.

Summary

A review of the literature reveals the ongoing challenges faced by African American women and the numerous struggles they face on a daily basis. Further, the literature review presents details of the obstacles that African American women face as it relates to poverty, racial stereotyping, and educational attainment. Historically, African American women have experienced interlocking oppressions at the intersection of sexism, racism, and classism (Collins, 1998; hooks, 2005). African American women often utilize spirituality as a means of coping with daily struggles associated with living in a socially and politically oppressive system (Watt, 2003). This review provides an overview of how African American women utilize spirituality in their daily lives as well as in adult education settings. The chapter presents the theoretical frameworks that

guided the study: Black feminist thought and Resilience theory. Black feminist thought is relevant to the unique perspectives and lived experiences of the African American women in this study. The concept of Resilience theory is critical in understanding the characteristics of resilience exemplified by the women in this study and how it influenced their upward mobility from poverty.

CHAPTER III - METHODOLOGY

The goal of this study was to critically examine the lived experiences of African American women who were raised in poverty in order to understand the significance of education, spirituality, and resilience in their transition from poverty.

Study Design

A qualitative approach employing a transcendental phenomenological methodology was used for this study. According to Creswell (2013) qualitative research is appropriate when a complex issue is explored in order to gain a clearer understanding of the issue. Unlike quantitative research, which involves measuring variables and making generalizations, qualitative research is useful in focusing on a specific human experience in order to better understand the meaning or essence of the experience (Moustakas, 1994). The goal of this study was to examine the lived experiences of African American women who were born and reared in impoverished families; however, these women have transitioned from poverty and function as successful adults. A phenomenological approach was used in order to gain a deeper understanding of the lived experiences of these women.

A phenomenological design allowed a deeper investigation into the stories of the participants and provided a clearer understanding of the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). Phenomenological researchers delve into the past experiences of individuals and seek to understand the lived experiences of the individuals, the consciousness nature of the experiences, and describe the essence of an experience as opposed to explanations (Moustakas, 1994). Phenomenology is concerned with the uniqueness of the experience from the perspective of the individual experiencing the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994).

Creswell (2013) adds that phenomenological research is appropriate when there is a need to gain additional information regarding a phenomenon. The researcher explores the shared commonalities of several individuals as they experience a phenomenon (Creswell, 2013). Whereas other expressions of qualitative research focus on uncovering themes and patterns within the data to develop theories of processes (grounded theory), cultural descriptions (ethnography), or to derive correct understanding in text (hermeneutics), phenomenology focuses on the wholeness of the experience and a search for the essence of a phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). Phenomenological research is often used in areas where there is little knowledge, and seeks to describe the meaning that experiences hold for those who have lived them (Donalek, 2004). According to Collins (2000), African American women life experiences play a major role in their views of the world and their epistemologies. The phenomenologist attempts to understand human behavior from the vantage point of the individual (Christensen, Johnson & Turner, 2010). Collins (2000) points out that African American women draw from their life experiences and use the wisdom they have gained, as a result of the experiences, in order to survive in a world that has been repressive.

The use of a transcendental approach provided a focus on the descriptions of the experiences of the participants as opposed to the interpretations of the researcher (Moustakas, 1994). A transcendental phenomenology focuses the study around the textural descriptions and structural descriptions of the study, which lead to the essence of the experience (Creswell, 2013; Moustakas, 1994). According to Creswell (2013), the textural descriptions examine the experiences of the participants and the structural descriptions develop through the manner in which the participants experienced the

phenomenon. Transcendental phenomenology focuses on a concept developed by Edmund Husserl known as epoché (bracketing) (Moustakas, 1994). Epoché, as described by Moustakas (1994) requires the researcher to set aside personal biases and preconceptions and take a fresh look at the phenomenon being investigated. According to Moustakas (1994), this model utilizes four primary phases: (1) epoché, (2) phenomenological reduction, (3) imaginative variation, and (4) textural-structural synthesis. The phenomenological design using a transcendental approach (Moustakas, 1994) was appropriate for this study because more in-depth information was needed to uncover the meaning and essences of the participants' experiences.

Research Questions

1. What factors contributed to the successful transition from poverty of the African American women in this study?
2. What, if any, influence did education have on the participants' transition from poverty?
3. What does resilience mean to the women in this study?
4. In what ways did resiliency contribute to the participants' successful transition from poverty?
5. What does spirituality mean in the case of the women in this study?
6. In what ways did spirituality contribute to the participants' successful transition from poverty?

The research questions tie to the guiding theories of this study by examining the lived experiences of the women in the study. Moustakas (1994) contends that, in phenomenological research, when developing research questions, the investigation should

have social meaning and personal significance. Moustakas (1994) further contends that the research question(s) does not make predictions, determine the cause and effect relationship, measure, rate, or score; however, it does highlight a thorough and accurate description of the participant's experience.

Participants

The study involved ten African American women who were: (a) born and reared in poverty; (b) possessed a Bachelor's degree or higher; (c) transitioned from poverty; (d) work in a career that provides adequate resources as compared to their childhood; and (e) define themselves as successful. According to Creswell (2013) the sample size in a phenomenological study should remain relatively small in an effort to document the rich, lived experiences of the participants. Participants included in the study were delimited to African American women who were college educated, having a Bachelor's degree or higher; and lived in poverty as a child, however, are no longer living in poverty. Moustakas (1994) outlines specific criteria for participant selection, emphasizing the importance of employing participants (referred to as co-researchers) who have a deep interest in the topic of the phenomenon and a willingness to participate in lengthy interviews. Snowball sampling was used to identify participants who met the criteria for inclusion in the study. Participants were recruited through various organizations (sororities, churches, professional organization), via email, word of mouth (community), and referrals (participants). As participants were chosen, they were asked to recommend other potential participants for participation in the study.

Research Instrument

The researcher is considered as a key instrument in qualitative research (Creswell, 2013). The researcher served as the primary instrument in this qualitative study. The role of the researcher in a phenomenological study is to gather information. The researcher, based on a phenomenological approach in order to gain meaningful inquiry, developed questions for the proposed study. A semi-structured interview protocol was used to conduct interviews, which consisted of 34 focused open-ended questions to allow participants' experiences to be explored (Creswell, 2013). Questions were phrased in a manner that allowed the researcher to probe for greater depth and quality. Creswell (2013), notes that the use of a phenomenological approach when performing interviews provides the researcher with in-depth information, thus providing an understanding to the research question(s). The study of a human phenomenology, such as resilience, requires a research method that allows the researcher to conduct an in-depth exploration of the phenomena. The interview protocol in the present study solicited inquiry that helped participants make meaning out of their experiences through an in-depth exploration. Moustakas (1994) notes that phenomenological interviews involve an informal, interactive process and utilizes open-ended comments and questions. A phenomenological approach allowed the researcher to gather data about the lived experiences of African American women born and reared in poverty. This methodology ensured that the perspectives, voices, and journeys of the participants were depicted in their own words. The very essence of Black feminist thought provides theories in order to interpret and make clear the views of African American women (Collins, 2000). The

personal stories gleaned as a result of a phenomenological approach align with Black feminist thought.

Procedures

In order to conduct the study, permission to solicit participants was obtained from the Institutional Review Board at the University of Southern Mississippi. Once permission was granted, participants were recruited through various organizations (sororities, churches, professional organization), via email, word of mouth (community), and referrals (participants). Women who responded positively to the email as well as those who were recommended by word of mouth and referral were contacted by telephone and a brief overview of the research and the expectations for participants was explained. Women who indicated a continuing interest in the study were scheduled an interview appointment at a mutually agreed upon time and place.

Data Collection

Prior to participating in the interviews, participants were given a more detailed synopsis of the purpose of the study and informed that their participation was voluntary and anonymous. Interviews with participants were scheduled in Fall 2017. All interviews were scheduled at a time and place chosen by and convenient for the participant. They were conducted during weekday afternoons and on weekends. Five of the ten interviews took place in participants' homes, two took place at the participants' personal business, and three took place at a local university library that had private rooms available for public use. Interview questions for the study were developed by the researcher in order to gain meaningful inquiry (Appendix A).

Interviews were conducted face-to-face in order to gain rich descriptions of each participant's experience. The interview process began with introductions, an explanation of the research, and the interview process. The informed consent document was explained with particular attention to confidentiality and anonymity. Participants were informed as to how their identities would be protected, risks and benefits of participating, who would have access to their interview transcripts, how their answers would be analyzed and reported, and that the interview would be audio recorded. Participants were also informed that they could voluntarily remove themselves from the study at any time without prejudice. After answering any questions that research participants had regarding the study and/or interview process, informed consent documents were signed and dated by participants' and the researcher and the interviews began. Each participant was asked 34 questions. Interviews were audio recorded by the researcher and later transcribed. While it was anticipated that interviews would last between 90 and 120 minutes, most interviews lasted between 60 and 90 minutes. The transcribed data, audio recordings, and informed consent forms will be kept in a secure, locked file cabinet in the researcher's home in order to protect participants' confidentiality. All data, transcripts, and recordings will be kept for a period of one year and then destroyed by the researcher.

Data Analysis

The study used a transcendental phenomenological approach to examine the lived experiences of African American women who were born and reared in impoverished families; however, these women have transitioned from poverty and function as successful adults. In order to protect the confidentiality of participants, pseudonyms were assigned to each participant. Following each audio- recorded interview, data were

transcribed using a word processing program (Creswell, 2013; Moustakas, 1994).

Transcribed narratives served as the data for this study. Data were analyzed to ascertain themes and patterns that emerged through the interviews. The proposed study used transcendental phenomenological methods to examine the lived experiences of the women included in the study.

As stated earlier in this chapter, a transcendental phenomenology focuses the study around the textural descriptions and structural descriptions of the study, which lead to the essence of the experience (Creswell, 2013; Moustakas, 1994). Once participants, who shared a common phenomenon, were identified, the researcher used epoche in order to set aside personal experiences as a means of bracketing out any biases, refraining from judgments, and abstaining from the ordinary way of perceiving things (Moustakas, 1994). The epoche prepared the researcher to be able to view the phenomenon in a new way and to explore the phenomenon from different perspectives (Moustakas, 1994). Although Moustakas (1994) argued that total removal of bias was not possible, the epoche made the researcher more aware of internal biases before conducting the research.

Interviews were transcribed within 24 hours of each interview. Only one interview per day was scheduled. This allowed the researcher time to transcribe and makes notes for each individual interview. All interviews were transcribed verbatim by the researcher. The researcher was careful to listen to the recordings repetitiously in order to clarify any unclear responses and check for errors. Once interviews were transcribed, the researcher listened to each recording again while matching the audio recording with the transcripts to ensure the transcripts were accurate in terms of content. While conducting the interviews, as part of the phenomenological reduction process, the

researcher recorded personal notes in order to describe what was observed as participants described their common lived experiences related to the phenomenon. Moustakas (1994) explained that horizontalization takes place after epoche and bracketing in order to identify themes and shared understandings. Horizontalization required the researcher to list and create preliminary groupings of significant statements given that were relevant to the participants' experiences (Moustakas, 1994). Therefore, the researcher read each transcript several times and recorded significant phrases, ideas, concepts, and words. The goal was for the data to be treated equally. Each participant's perspective and data were given equal weight and the data were assembled and compared to understand its commonality and differences (Moustakas, 1994). The significant statements by participants were used to identify themes (Creswell, 2013; Moustakas, 1994). In order to fully describe the phenomenon, a discovery of similar themes among different participants added to the rich, descriptive analysis of the phenomenon.

The textural descriptions focused on describing the lived experience of African American women who were born and reared in poverty, however, these women have transitioned from poverty and now lead successful lives. The textural descriptions used specific quotes from the participants to more fully describe the phenomenon. The structural description of the experience focused on underlying subtleties of the experience of being born and reared in poverty, yet transitioning from poverty and leading a successful adult life. This included details about participants' past experience of living in poverty. The textural-structural synthesis utilized data from interviews, the researcher's intuition, and reflection. According to Moustakas (1994), reflection throughout the research study helps create the structures for the essence of the experience. The

descriptions through the textural-structural synthesis clarified the participants' lived experiences, thus culminating in a full, composite description of the essence of the phenomenon.

Trustworthiness

Creswell (2007) described the process of triangulation as coherent justification of a theme based on data collection from several perspectives from participants. The themes identified in the current study derived from multiple sources such as participants' background information provided during preliminary discussions, interviews, the researcher's observation notes during interviews, and reflections. Transcribed interviews, the researcher's observation notes, and continuing reflection by the researcher were strategies used to collect and analyze the data for the current study.

Member Checking

Member checks were used as a means for certifying internal validity or credibility. Transcribed interviews were analyzed by the researcher and significant statements relative to the phenomenon were identified. The researcher afforded participants the opportunity to give feedback on the emergent findings in order to lessen the possibility of misconstruing the meaning of what they shared. Member checking was utilized by inviting study participants to review their own interview transcripts for errors and provide feedback to the researcher. Two participants provided the researcher with feedback. Other participants reported that their responses were accurately recorded and that their experience in the phenomenon was appropriately represented.

CHAPTER IV – RESULTS

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to examine the lived experiences of African American women who were born and reared in impoverished families; however, these women have transitioned from poverty and function as successful adults. A phenomenological design allowed for a deeper investigation into the stories of the participants and provided a deeper understanding of the lived experiences of these women (Moustakas, 1994).

A review of the literature revealed no qualitative studies focusing primarily on African American women and the influence of education in their transition from poverty. Also, while spirituality has often been a major factor in the lives of African American women, little research has focused on how these women utilized spirituality as a source of strength in the challenges of poverty (Matthis, 2002). A further examination of the literature revealed a scarcity of research focusing on the experiences of African American women who transitioned from poverty as well as the possibility of shared characteristics among them. Thus, this study focused on the shared similarities and experiences of African American women who have transitioned from poverty.

Chapter four presents a description of ten African American women who were born and reared in poverty. The chapter presents a comprehensive set of findings that resulted from in-depth interviews with the participants. It describes the phenomenon using the participants' voices and provides an overall understanding of the experience.

Research Questions

1. What factors contributed to the successful transition from poverty of the African American women in this study?
2. What, if any, influence did education have on the participants' transition from poverty?
3. What does resilience mean to the women in this study?
4. In what ways did resiliency contribute to the participants' successful transition from poverty?
5. What does spirituality mean in the case of the women in this study?
6. In what ways did spirituality contribute to the participants' successful transition from poverty?

Description of the Sample

The target population for this qualitative phenomenological study included African American women who were born and reared in poverty, possessed at minimum a Bachelor's Degree, and worked, at some point during adult life, in a field requiring a degree. The study utilized snowball sampling to ensure that the participants had experienced the phenomena being explored. The Interview Protocol (see Appendix A) included questions that asked demographic data to inquire about the participant's marital status, city and state where born and reared, age, education, and occupation. Table 1 provides a snapshot of participants and includes the aforementioned demographic information. Participants in the study have been assigned pseudonyms in order to ensure confidentiality.

Table 1

Participant Summary Data

Pseudonym	Age	Marital Status	City and State (born/reared)	Education	Occupation
Mary	34	Married	McComb, MS	Ed.S. (Currently pursuing Ph.D.)	Teacher
Ruth	44	Married	Mt. Olive, MS	M.Ed.	Consultant
Naomi	74	Widow	Baton Rouge, LA	M.Ed.	Entrepreneur
Esther	58	Married	Natchez, MS	Ph.D.	Consultant
Elizabeth	54	Divorced	Hattiesburg, MS	M.Ed.	Therapist
Rachel	60	Widow	Hattiesburg, MS	M.S.N.	Nursing Director
Sarah	37	Married	Moss Point, MS	Ph.D.	Teacher
Martha	51	Married	New Orleans, LA	M.Ed.	Interventionist
Hannah	46	Married	Jackson, MS	Ph.D.	Assistant Superintendent
Deborah	56	Divorced	Hattiesburg, MS	B.S.	Paralegal

Wives, mothers, sisters, business owners, supervisors, Christians, advocates, and consultants were a few of the delineations or descriptions of the 10 African American women participating in this study. Although the women came from varied backgrounds, they shared many commonalities regarding their journey. Their journeys out of poverty were remarkable and distinct, and they were able to overcome many obstacles and barriers to become the women that they are today.

Interviews with participants were scheduled in Fall 2017. They were conducted during weekday afternoons and on weekends. Six of the ten interviews took place in participants' homes; and four took place at a local university library. All interviews were scheduled at a time and place chosen by and convenient for the participant. All of the participants maintained positive attitudes throughout interviews and the interviews felt more like candid conversations.

Description of Participants

The following section presents a brief description of the ten participants included in the study.

Participant 1: Mary

Mary, a 34 year-old, married, African American woman was born in McComb, Mississippi. Her highest degree is an Education Specialist and she works full time as a school librarian. Mary is the oldest of two children. Her mother conceived one child at the age of 15 and the other at age 16. She grew up in a single parent household where her great-grandmother was the primary caregiver. Mary grew up in a household of women who (generationally) were never married. Her great-grandmother was not married, her grandmother was not married, and her mother was not married. Growing up, Mary remembered that she “never had nice things.” She stated:

I was one of those kids who you might see a roach come out of their backpack because we lived in a home that had roaches. I remember that was embarrassing because you try to shake your backpack but sometimes one would still be there. We didn't have nice clothes. I remember that I had some shoes that I really liked. I tell myself that I wore them because I

really liked them (because they were too little), but I don't know if I wore them because I really liked them or because they were the only shoes that I had that looked worth something.

Mary lived in a house that had two adjacent trailers where her aunts lived. She described the homes as being so close that you could "jump from one person's front steps to the other." As a child, Mary had a great love for education and was encouraged by her grandmother. Mary reflected, "Even though we were in poverty, my grandma was always telling us to do good in school and we had really good teachers." Mary continued, "I remember teachers always wanting us to do good and to excel and I am pretty sure that was one of the main reasons I wanted to become a teacher."

Participant 2: Ruth

Ruth, a 44 year-old, married, African American woman was born in Mt. Olive, Mississippi. Her highest degree is a Master of Education. She is a former principal and currently owns and operates an educational consulting firm. Ruth is the oldest of two children. Ruth's parents were 15 years old and unmarried when she was born. Her parents later married at age 21. Neither of Ruth's parents attended college and she was raised in a mobile home. Growing up, Ruth did not have the same advantages as other children.

In first grade, I rarely had snack money. I was not allowed to take piano lessons, under the pretense that there was no one to pick me up after school. I would resolve each excuse my parents gave me for my not engaging in activities that cost money, but they would still say no. No one told me that we lived in poverty, but by the time I was in third grade, I

suspected that we could not afford the things that my peers' families could afford. Hence, I did not ask for things.

Ruth described being in third grade and raking the yards of the people in her community after church on Sunday in order to earn snack money for the school week. By the time she was 15, she was working a 40-hour week at the Sonic Drive-In in order to purchase clothing. Ruth remembered being encouraged by her coach, grandmother, and mother. She reflected on how seeing their hard work encouraged her and stated, "Equally significant in my life was just the realization of how hard my mother worked to have so little, and I remember making up my mind early in life that I would not be poor."

Participant 3: Naomi

Naomi, a 74 year-old, widowed, African American woman was born in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. Her highest degree is a Master of Education. She is a retired educator and now owns her own lucrative floral business. Naomi was raised in the small community of Scottlandville, LA (now called North Baton Rouge) near Baton Rouge, Louisiana. Naomi was raised in a two parent home. She remembered that during the period when she grew up, jobs (for African Americans) were not in the business industry, but rather in someone's home. According to Naomi:

When I got ready to graduate from high school, my father said I would have to get a job or go to school. Well, I had a good choice there because the jobs in the area back then were not in businesses...they were in someone's home. You had to go and cook, and wash, and clean up in someone's home and I knew that was not going to be my cup of tea...and

these people were White...and I said I am not going to do that, so I decided to go to school.

Participant 4: Esther

Esther, a 58 year-old, married, African American woman was born in Natchez, Mississippi. Her highest degree is a Ph.D. She is a retired educator and currently works as an adjunct professor and educational consultant. Esther is one of eight children reared in a two parent home. She grew up in a close family surrounded by siblings, cousins, aunts and uncles from both her mother and father's side of the family. Esther remembered having a very supportive church family and attended church on a regular basis.

We went to church every day, Lord every day, because my dad was the senior deacon at the church and so back then, he opened the church, made sure the heaters were on in the winter, and he was also the Sunday School Superintendent. So we went to Sunday School and he opened up for prayer meetings...so we were there. And my mom was an usher and so every time the church doors opened, we were there.

Because Esther had siblings who were much older, she experienced things that other youth in her impoverished community could not.

What I feel is unique about my growing up was my older siblings...my brothers especially. They were old enough to be our parents because they started parenting young. It was like my mother and father had two sets of children, so a couple of them were grown by the time I got to go to junior high and high school. So, from the time I was nine until I was about 13,

my mother would send me and my sister to California to visit my older siblings. She said if something happened to her and my dad, because they were older, she wanted us to know our siblings so that they could take care of us. And so, every summer, we got on the bus for three days and rode the bus to California. I got exposure to camping and traveling because my brother was in the Air Force and he had been exposed to a lot of things and so he was taking us places and doing things, and the funny thing about that is, when I would come back and tell people I had done these things, they would say I was lying. Even my teachers didn't believe me. They would say I was making stuff up, and so I just stopped telling people.

Participant 5: Elizabeth

Elizabeth, a 54 year-old, divorced, African American woman was born in Hattiesburg, Mississippi. Her highest degree is a Master of Education. She currently works as a therapist. Elizabeth is the youngest of eight children and grew up in a two-parent home. As Elizabeth reflected on her childhood years, she remembered being embarrassed by the house where she grew up.

The house that I grew up in was raggedy. You could see from the inside out in it. Our floors were not the best, even the walls and stuff...they were not the best, but over the years my dad began to do carpentry work and he began to remodel it.

Elizabeth described her parents as not having enough to pay bills. Her dad worked “two or three jobs” in order to keep food on the table and pay utility bills; however, “sometimes the utilities would still get cut off.” Although they did not have very many

tangible items, Elizabeth reflected on the love that she felt as a child. She spoke of family watching television together, sitting down to dinner as a family, laughing and talking together. Elizabeth stated, “I truly believe that because of that love and that unity, it took away from not having a pretty house or a house that looked like some of my other classmates’ houses.”

Participant 6: Rachel

Rachel, a 60 year-old, widowed, African American woman was born in Hattiesburg, Mississippi. Her highest degree is a Master of Nursing. She currently works as a full-time department director. When reflecting on her experience of living in poverty, Rachel stated the following, “What stands out for me in thinking about my life experience is that where you start in life is not necessarily where you finish up in life.” The greatest barriers that Rachel remembered most as a child were losing her father at the age of 12, being raised by her widowed mother, and having a child as a teenager. After watching her father suffer through an illness due to heart issues, Rachel knew that she wanted a better life. She also spoke of and credited accepting Jesus Christ as her personal Savior as making a difference in, and being a turning point in her life.

Participant 7: Sarah

Sarah, a 37 year-old, married, African American woman was born in Moss Point, Mississippi. Her highest degree is a Ph.D. and she works as a full-time teacher. Sarah and her two siblings were reared by her mother and stepfather. Sarah grew up in an abusive situation and was often beaten (as well as her mother and sibling) by her stepfather. Sarah grew up in a neighborhood where “drugs were sold on the corner and it

was not uncommon to hear gun shots, nightly, in the neighboring apartments.” She remembered playing sports as a means to escape her home life.

Summers were the worst! Mom was always at work, so stepdad thought it was his time to either lock us out of the house or try to molest two out of the three girls. If he allowed us to go outside and play, he would lock us out until that night when my mom came home. He was abusive to everyone except my baby sister.

Sarah remembered that they did not have much money, but her mom worked three jobs so that they would have food to eat. As a child, Sarah, her siblings, and mother would often walk more than a mile to church. “My mom was not allowed to drive the vehicle, so we walked mostly everywhere,” stated Sarah. Because she wanted a better life, Sarah spoke of setting goals, going to school, and working multiple jobs as a means to having a better life.

Participant 8: Martha

Martha, a 51 year-old, married, African American woman was born in Hattiesburg, Mississippi, however, she spent several of her childhood years living in New Orleans, Louisiana. Her highest degree is a Master of Education, and she works full time as an educational interventionist. Martha and her husband have been married for more than 25 years and have three children. She credited her upbringing as a basis for the strong marriage that she and her husband have. She stated, “We have worked quite hard building our relationship as husband and wife and as parents to raise our children to value the Lord, family, and education.” Martha was raised primarily by her grandparents; however, when her grandmother died, she went to live with her parents who had, what

she described as, an “unstable on/off relationship.” Her mother later moved the children to New Orleans, Louisiana for four years before returning to Hattiesburg. Growing up with her grandparents, Martha always had food to eat because they had a garden; however, after moving away from her grandparent’s home, she remembered having “a few hungry days.” Martha was also a teen parent and described that as being a challenging time in her life.

When I was faced with being a teenage mother, gloom and doom stared me in the face as for my future, but God had other plans. That was quite a trying time for me, but I was determined to not allow myself to be a welfare recipient, but rather rise to the occasion to find adequate employment to be able to provide for my child and to soon after pursue my educational career.

Because Martha wanted better for herself and her child, at age 23 she started college for the first time and worked a full-time job.

Participant 9: Hannah

Hannah, a 46 year-old, married, African American woman was born in Jackson, Mississippi. Her highest degree is a Ph.D. and she works full time as an Assistant Superintendent. Hannah grew up in a two-parent family. Her mother was her father’s third wife. Her father had three children from previous marriages and five children with Hannah’s mother. Hannah’s mother also had one child from a previous relationship. She grew up in a home with six children. Her dad was a high school graduate; however, her mom did not finish high school (later received a GED). Growing up, her mother drove a school bus and worked part-time as a housekeeper, and her dad began attending college

and preaching. During this time, the only source of income they received was from her mother's two jobs. Although her father was a preacher, he did not always have a church to pastor. They also received a small amount of food stamps and lived in subsidized housing. As a child, Hannah began cleaning houses with her mother at the age of seven and reflected, "As each child became old enough, we would start working in order to help the family and have spending money." Hannah always wanted to attend college; however, she was unable to attend her first college of choice.

I wanted to go to USM when I was in high school. I applied to USM and I got in and actually had gotten a dorm room, but then my mom asked me how were we going to pay for it. So, I just thought we would just get loans cause I always heard about financial aid, but I didn't understand that and my mom didn't understand it either and my dad had gone to the seminary in New Orleans. My older sister had gone to Hinds so she didn't really understand it either...so I found out I could not afford to go to USM, so I ended up going to Jackson State University and I stayed at home with my mom and continued to work so I could help pay tuition.

Later in her educational career, Hannah received her Education Specialist and Doctorate degrees from the University of Mississippi.

Participant 10: Deborah

Deborah, a 56-year-old, divorced, African American woman was born in Hattiesburg, Mississippi. Her highest degree is a Bachelor of Science and she works full time as a paralegal. Deborah grew up in a two-parent home. She described her house as sitting between a railroad track and a church on a dead end street. Growing up,

Deborah's father was an alcoholic and her mother was confined to a wheelchair. Her younger sister had a child at a very young age. Deborah stated, "Few people let their children play with my sister and me." When reflecting on her education, Deborah remembered her mother instilling in her that it was important.

My mother instilled into us that we had to go to school to get an education.

That was drilled into us. She never said that it would keep us off food stamps. It was more for us to be self-sufficient so that we wouldn't have to depend on a man to take care of us.

Deborah spoke of wanting a better life for herself because she did not want to feel the humiliation that she had experienced as a teen of having to stand in line for food stamps and assistance from public programs.

Themes

The researcher, based on a phenomenological approach in order to gain meaningful inquiry, developed questions for the study. A semi-structured interview protocol was used to conduct interviews, which consisted of 34 focused open-ended questions to allow participants' experiences to be explored (Creswell, 2013). Questions were phrased in a manner that allowed the researcher to probe for greater depth and quality. As the data were analyzed, themes emerged as a result of the repeating ideas within the data regarding experiences that participants had in common. Participants' quotes are used to solidify the themes and provide answers to the research questions. In order to describe and develop themes from the data, the major research questions must be answered in order to have a clearer understanding of the phenomenon through thematic development (Creswell, 2013). Themes may be compared with study participants'

personal experiences or with existing literature related to the topic (Creswell, 2013).

Upon completion of the face-to-face interviews with each of the study participants, data were analyzed and as a result, nine major themes emerged: (a) Setting Goals; (b) Support Systems; (c) Hard Work and Determination; (d) Doors of Opportunity Opened; (e) Never Give Up; (f) Having a Personal relationship with God/Jesus Christ; (g) Tithing and Giving; (h) Resilient within My Own Culture; and (i) Church is Important. Table 2 outlines major themes and descriptions of the lived experiences of African American women who have transitioned from poverty.

Table 2

Themes and descriptions of African American women who have transitioned from poverty

Major Themes	Descriptions
Setting Goals	Reaching the unreachable Education as priority
Support Systems	Never giving up Empowering others Family and friends
Hard Work and Determination	Dedicated and committed
Opens Doors of Opportunity	Education is life changing
Never Give Up	Bounce back Strength in the face of adversity
Personal Relationship with God/Jesus Christ	Belief in God Faith Prayer
Tithing and Giving	Biblical Concept Trusting God
Resilient within My Own Culture	Family Friends Societal ideas
Church is Important	Support systems Serving others Church is a refresher Offers encouragement

Setting Goals

The first theme to emerge from the study was setting goals. This theme surfaced as a result of examining factors that contributed to the successful transition from poverty of the African American women in the study. The participants spoke of setting goals as a strategy used to transition from poverty.

Deborah reflected on a time in her life that she and her family received food stamps and other government assistance. During her interview, she talked about not wanting to remain in that lifestyle and how she set goals for herself as a means of escape.

You have to set goals. You have to have something within yourself to succeed and not want to live in poverty. I never wanted to ever stand in a food stamp line again or go sit in the lobby of a social service office. It's not that I looked down on the people who needed it, I just didn't want to live like that. I knew I could do better. It appears that poverty is a chosen lifestyle for some individuals, but for me, that wasn't an option.

Likewise, Sarah spoke of setting goals as a strategy and stated, "I try to live by the Word [Bible]. Proverbs 29:18 tells us that people without a vision will perish; therefore, I set goals and refused to stop until I reached each one."

Elizabeth described "seeing herself as successful and focusing on her goals." Elizabeth spent time writing her goals down so that she could "put a picture before her eyes" and recalled, "I wrote it down and I would go back and look at it here and there." She also "avoided negative people" and only associated with individuals who wanted the same things that she wanted and could serve as encouragement to one another. When asked how she considered herself to be a successful woman, Naomi simply stated, "I

have set goals and worked to achieve them.” Esther spoke of the importance of setting specific goals and how she would advise other women who may be struggling with a life of poverty to not give up just because their goal is not reached immediately.

You should set specific goals that you want to reach and don’t let anybody take that from you. Because you may not be able to reach those goals in the time that you set, but if you didn’t reach one, go back to it and continue to work through it. So know who you are, set your goals, and be determined not to give up. So you know you set those goals and then don’t give up because it is so easy when stuff just keeps knocking you down to just sit down or to lay down totally. It’s so easy to do that because you feel like, why do I keep fighting and all the fight has been taken out of me. So just be determined and don’t give up.

When asked about how she was able to move out of poverty when so many other women remain trapped in chronic poverty, Rachel reflected on a time in her childhood when her father was sick and remembered, “it was my earnest desire to become a nurse because I was there with my father when my mother...worked when he was sick...and this was kind of like a young age.” She continued her story reflecting on the development of her goals.

Like I said, he died [her father] when I was 12 years old and I never lost that desire [becoming a nurse]. So the ability to move out of poverty, when so many of them remain in poverty is not having a vision or a dream or a desire to do. That somehow motivates you to want to do better. You have to believe in yourself. I came to a point that I realized that my

experience did not dictate who I was. And I believe that if you believe in yourself and then make the decision to do something differently...if you're in a state of poverty, believe in yourself that you can change where you are.

Mary's story of goal setting centered around a time when she walked away from a relationship and chose to go to school. She recalled the story of how she dated a young man at a very early age and even considered having a family with him. She described how life changing this could have been. However, in the end, she chose to pursue her education instead.

In poverty, a lot of times girls are pretty promiscuous and all of my friends were. I lost my virginity at 13 and that could have gone very wrong.

Between 13 and 18, I was monogamous and that was the only person that touched me. I really thought that this would be my husband. The guy lived in poverty too! They lived in a trailer too and his mom was a single parent with three children. Over the course of the relationship, he tried to talk me into us having a child together and at this point I think we were like 17. While I did consider it, and now it is embarrassing, I thought about it and said, if we were going to be together forever, then we can have this baby later. I was in love with this guy and he had the potential to single handedly help me destroy all of what could be my potential. So, I chose to let that go and to go to college. I not only chose to go to college, but I chose to excel in college. I kept pushing myself and believing in God. Here I am now, married with two kids and pursuing my Ph.D. I

guess believing in myself, believing in God and believing that I could reach my goals...not letting my circumstances define me!

Support Systems

African Americans greatly depend on support systems such as family, relationships, social organizations, and informal networks (Billingsley, 1992; Boyd-Franklin, 1991). The theme of support systems emerged as participants described the importance of family and friends. Several participants spoke of the importance of a healthy support system in women's upward climb.

Hannah felt that it was important to have positive friends and explained, "Positive friends are important. It is important when someone can relate to you and you need somebody to pick you up and talk to you about stuff and so that networking is important." Likewise, Mary stated, "they [support systems] are important and it is also important that they are positive. Because, you can have a support system, but are they a support system that is lifting you up?" In addition, Mary mentioned the importance of having people in your life that will "encourage you and say, it's okay, you can do it." Mary continued and stated, "So I feel like the type of people you surround yourself with, whether positive or negative, will directly affect your success." Furthermore, Mary discussed in greater detail the importance of her support system and stated:

I have a great support system. I can't imagine being the person that I am without the support system that I have. You have to have those who want to see you win. I have friends that are great at different things and I have people that I can call at any given moment and they are going to help me

with whatever I need help with. A support system and being mentally and spiritually strong are important.

Although Deborah did not have a strong “friend” support, she reported having strong family support. Deborah stated, “I think that it’s important to have a network of ‘sister friends.’ She further stated, “Although, I don’t have a strong network, I do have an awesome sister who is always there for me and encouraging and praying for me.” Esther spoke of finding support systems that would not be judgmental and in her words, “You know, those that’s going to love you through whatever you are going through and get you where you’re trying to go and then someone who’s going to be with you when things are really, really down.” Rachel reported the benefits of having a healthy support system as a means of helping women to become more successful during challenging times.

It is good to have good, healthy support systems. I truly believe that God did not design us to live solely independent of others. So, if you find people who have good support systems, they usually fare well and overcome whatever that support needed may be...as long as they have a good, healthy support system.

Additionally, Martha expressed the importance of family as a support system when working towards a specific goal.

You honestly never know who you will need for assistance in the future, so it is always best to build a network around you for needed support. I needed my sister, for two years to help babysit my two younger children so that I could go to college. I did not trust anyone else with making sure that my children were being taught to read at very early ages. Had I not been able

to depend on her, I don't believe I would have received my Master's degree when I did.

Ruth discussed the importance of being surrounded by support systems that are open and honest.

I think people need a support system, but it needs to be a support system where the people not only care about you but can be honest with you...honest enough to bring to our attention where we are going wrong. As well, the support system does not simply need to be accountability, but a system where the supporter could actually provide strategies. If a person is simply there to tell us where we are missing it or simply for accountability, we still do not have a means to leave the situation. We simply do the best thing we know to do, which may not be helpful in leaving poverty.

Naomi recalled the importance of her church family being an important support system for her through times in her life when she was faced with crises.

My church is a big support system for me because when I have gone through different crises in my life...like when my sister passed away, the church was there for me. When my son was hit with this hurricane back in September, my church was there supporting me. When I am going through a crisis, my church is there encouraging me. They are with me and they are praying with me. So, church is a big support system for me.

Esther talked about how much women need each other for support and reported, “We cannot do this by ourselves. Having a support system in any situation, I believe, will determine whether a person will succeed or not succeed.”

Hard Work and Determination

Hard work and determination was the third theme to emerge within the study. Several of the study participants were no strangers to hard work. Participants reported working hard as one of the strategies that they used to move out of poverty. The stories told by the women are stories of how they worked hard because they were determined to overcome circumstances that they were faced with. Several of them spoke of how their determination framed their adult life.

Sarah explained how one of the strategies that she used to get out of poverty was to “work harder than the next person.” She further described how she would “work extra jobs while attending college and worked hard to obtain multiple degrees.”

Likewise, Martha described how her hard work, “work ethics,” and determination helped her to move out of poverty. She reported that she worked hard to stay focused on her job with the police department and during the time when she strived to finish school.

When asked what would be a major factor in why women stay out of poverty, Mary responded:

Determination! Women choose to stay out of poverty, eliminate the lack factor, be it mentally or physically. Most women will delve into making sure that they obtain the education necessary to secure a lucrative position in society so that they would be able to provide for themselves and their children, whether married or not.

Deborah recalled starting to work early in life because she wanted something better. She spoke of working small jobs as a teenager to help support herself. She described how her work ethic has carried over into her adult life.

The step that I have taken to not return to poverty is to work hard. I started playing the piano at church at age 16. I was able to help pay for my piano and my saxophone when I was in the high school band. I was always a good typist, so I typed term papers and other reports for people. I still play piano in church in addition to my regular job. I have been blessed with a good job. I've worked for the U.S. government for the past 26 years. My job tends to get stressful at times, but it does provide so that I am not in poverty. I also have a crochet business. I believe that if I trust God, work hard, and am determined to succeed, then I will not return to poverty. I do not have poverty thoughts. The Bible says that you will have what you say.

Ruth also recalled how as a child, she knew that she did not want to live in poverty and worked hard to help her family.

Believe it or not, I was determined not to be poor as an adult when I was in the third grade. I did not mind working hard, but I knew that something was not right that I worked raking yards on Sunday while my cousins got the opportunity to play. I did it without complaining and without any push from my parents, but only because I knew they struggled.

Ruth continued and explained the mindset of her family regarding hard work and stated, "Although we were poor, my grandmother, who is probably the most influential person in

my life, never possessed a poverty mindset. She worked hard, taught us to work hard, and saved.”

Naomi reflected on a time when she was a college student and had to receive governmental assistance (food stamps) in her early adult life.

When I was in college, I had to end up getting food stamps for about six months because my income was not one that would tolerate taking care of my children. I ended up on food stamps for six months or so, and then I got off of them, but it wasn't like they [government] were going to keep me there. Some people want to stay there and be complacent but I was determined that I would not just get food stamps.

Hannah recalled a story of how she worked as a caregiver for an elderly White woman and how the experience made her realize that she wanted a different lifestyle than what she had observed in her mother and other family members.

Growing up, there was very little money coming in. If we got clothes, my mama would go to Goodwill or garage sales and those kinds of places. So as a child, I always knew I wanted to make a change. I always wanted to work. So when I turned 16, I got my first job with...well my mom grew up in Columbus, so it was something for them to keep or help White families with their children, with older family, or whatever the case was. So when I turned 16, I got Ms. Lewis. I would have to spend the night with her on the weekends and go over after school. She had another person to take care of her too, but it was cheaper to have someone like me, you know, for longer hours. I would sleep over there. She was a very

racist lady, very racist. I remembered asking her if I could give my boyfriend her number because, you know, I was over there all the time. She said, and she used the “N” word, she said she didn’t want him calling her house. So, I just went to my room. When my mom picked me up, I told her that I didn’t want to stay with this lady anymore. My mom said, ‘you’re going to make this money cause you know we need it!’ But anyway, I guess I cried so much that she didn’t make me do it. But, I just knew I didn’t want to be like that and have a life like that. I wanted to go to school and get an education.

Education Opens Doors of Opportunity

The overarching theme when speaking to the women regarding the importance of their education was that education opened doors of opportunity for them that they might not otherwise have had. When speaking of the value of her education, Deborah explained how education related to poverty for her.

Education is extremely important. It’s not just about the prospective job, but it exposes you to so much. It opens doors...it opens up a new world for you. All I know is, I have lived in poverty and I do not want to live in poverty ever again.

Sarah very candidly said, “Education is very important to me. I think that an education allows you to have more options than the average person.

Ruth reflected on how her education made it possible for her to hold a teaching position and ultimately opened doors for her to become a principal.

My degrees made it possible for me to teach. I became an effective teacher. As well, when I became a principal, which can only be attained with further education, my school was able to close the achievement gap between our school and their more affluent peers. This movement, due to education, opened doors for me to make more money, get out of debt, and choose better decisions when rebuilding my life.

Mary expressed the importance of having an education so that one is able to successfully function in society.

Education opens so many doors. It's so many things that without an education, you won't be able to understand and...people who are uneducated are the easiest people to manipulate, the easiest people to get over with or get over on, which is evident in our society. I obtained a degree because in society, there are so many things that can be taken away, however, my education can never be taken away from me...my qualifications. By getting each one of those degrees, it makes me less likely to return to poverty, because it gives me multiple realms in which I can work to ensure that my family doesn't have to live in poverty.

Likewise, Rachel indicated that education has opened doors of opportunity and promotion for her.

I think education will open doors of opportunities and promotion. To me, it has actually opened doors for me of opportunity and promotion. I think some system in our society requires education and it depends on what a person wants to achieve in life.

Never Give Up

The theme, never give up, emerged as the participants in the study described why they considered themselves to be resilient. Oftentimes, when living in poverty, the opportunity presents itself to remain in the condition for which you are familiar. It is often easier to remain in a state of familiarity rather than to “push your way through” and achieve something better. For the participants in the study, never giving up meant that regardless of their situation, they pressed their way through their circumstances until they embarked upon a better life.

Deborah indicated that she considered herself to be a resilient woman although she had seen tough times throughout her life and stated, “There have been plenty of times when things got tough in my life. They are still not perfect, but I haven’t given up. I have a fighting spirit to succeed. Anything else is considered a failure.”

Sarah stated, “I have fought through tough times and people to get where I am. No matter what the problem was, I cried, prayed, and overcame those adversities.”

Ruth reflected on things that she learned about herself as she transitioned from a life of poverty.

I have learned that spending needlessly is a constant battle and that I have to sometimes engage in self-talk (a Ruby Payne strategy) to talk myself out of major purchases. I have also learned that I can accomplish anything with persistence and consistency.

Rachel described the many difficulties and a few “set-backs” that she has faced in life. In spite of the challenges she stated, “I have always overcome them and I feel like I have come back stronger and I have learned from them.” When reflecting on her resilient

behavior, Naomi shared, “I’m not giving up! I’m just finding a way around what I should do and how to accomplish the goals and how to set goals. I work hard at it! Just don’t give up...never give up!”

Martha shared a time, as an adult, when she had to remain focused within her family.

I consider myself to be a resilient woman because, I don’t give up on myself! When my husband went overseas to obtain work, I had to keep the foundation that we both laid and build upon it as our children grew. It was tough, but I pressed forward, stayed the course and persevered!

Esther shared the following thoughts regarding resilience and never giving up and having the ability to stand strong.

When you say resilient, it’s not about you always being the one to have to be doing things and letting people see how strong you are. It’s about knowing that if it’s necessary, I got something in me that’s going to make me stand up and face this challenge. And I’m going to face it in a way that we’re going to come out the better for it. So I don’t have to tell people how strong I am or how I am whatever I am. I just have to live it. And when challenges come, then what I got in me is going to show up and you’re going to see it.

Mary shared how she always tried to have a “positive attitude” during hard times and believed that her “mental, physical, and spiritual” were strong enough that she was able to “bounce back” during adversity. Mary further stated, “If you are mentally and spiritually healthy, I feel like you can overcome anything.”

Personal Relationship with God/Jesus Christ

The theme personal relationship with God/Jesus Christ emerged as the subject of spirituality transpired within the interviews. Several of the women in the study cited having a personal relationship with God and/or Jesus Christ as a part of their spirituality and a means of coping when faced with adversity.

Ruth described the relationship that she had with Christ from a very early age. She further discussed how this relationship continued into her adult life.

I gave my life to Christ in the first grade and was quite serious about it. My giving my life to Christ was the result of a group bringing Bibles to my school. From that day, I have loved reading God's Word and, in life, I have learned to trust His Word. I pray daily, study the Word of God and practice what I read. I seek to be in good standing with God, but realize that only grace keeps me there and not my own works. I use what God has done for me to help others.

Deborah described her spiritual experience and reported a strong belief that God has watched over her throughout her life.

I believe in God, and I believe that He is in control of all. Spirituality is having a relationship with Christ. My faith in God has sustained me throughout my life. I know that God has taken care of me and He's made it possible for me to be where I am.

According to Elizabeth, spirituality is about "having a personal relationship with God. Elizabeth described her views regarding spirituality and religion and asserted that,

“religion is more about doing things.” She further contended that she goes to church because she, “has a relationship with Christ,” not to “get a relationship.”

Rachel reported that she “accepted Jesus Christ shortly after having a child as a teenager.” Rachel stated, “Accepting Christ as my personal Savior made a tremendous impact on my life.” She further stated, “When I look at spirituality, I think of more of your relationship with your creator.”

Martha simply stated, “I view spirituality as a personal, very personal relationship with God, while religion is simply a practice...something to do or be a part of for recognition’s sake only.”

Elizabeth described her relationship with God as being, “life” and reported the importance of fellowship and her relationship.

Your relationship with God is not about a process or procedures cause sometimes it’s all out of whack. And not saying out of whack in a bad way. Sometimes, what everybody would think was the norm, sometimes with God, that’s not the norm. So, He does things in a different way. Sometimes, people think you are crazy with the stuff that you do and the chances that you take because you have a strong spiritual relationship with Him. It’s not about religion. I know the scripture says not to forsake the fellowship, but I could “not” go to church, and “still” have a relationship with God. My relationship with God directs me on how I should treat people and how I should live my life as an example so that people see Him [God] in me.

Tithing and Giving

The theme of tithing and giving offerings emerged when discussing the impact of spirituality/religion in the participants' transition from poverty. Tithing is a concept that is taken from the Bible and is practiced in many churches and religious organizations. Several of the participants' referenced tithing and/or giving [offerings] as a means of transitioning from poverty.

Esther shared a story of how she came to understand the concept of tithing through an experience that her father had related to tithing. When asked what impact spirituality had on her transition from poverty, she replied:

Paying my tithes. When I grew up, we had dues in church and every time we had dues, everyone paid a dollar or fifty cents or whatever it was for these little fun raisers trying to make the church work. As I got older and matured...and tithing didn't come through my religious experience, it came through my father. He had gone to a church conference somewhere and had sat with some church leaders and one of the sessions that he went to was on tithing. So, he brought that back to our church at home and folks fought it...that's my money. So, he kept trying to explain to them that God gave it to them and they have the ninety percent but the ten percent is His [God]. So, for me, my tithing is what helped me to see differently. And then my daddy would tell us that the next ten percent we needed to pay ourselves, so that was my savings, and then the other eighty percent is what I paid my bills out of. So, my dad taught us that...because somebody taught him. So when people be fussing about paying tithes, I

be writing my check because I know what God will do if you do what He asks you to do.

Martha referred to her faith and referenced spirituality and giving of offerings as a means of transitioning from poverty. According to Martha, “There was a time when finances had run out, but I continued to pray and ask God to help me to really hold on and not give up.” She continued her story and remembered that, “I kept giving [tithes] when I needed the money and I never saw another hungry day.” Martha also described how she kept believing that God would “see her through” tough times and, “He did, does, and will.”

When asked how spirituality/religion had impacted her transition from poverty, Rachel replied:

Learning about tithing and giving offerings as it relates to the principle of God’s Word. I know THAT principle works! If you obey that, there are promises, and you can be assured that you can come out of poverty if you understand God’s principles. Obey those principles and you don’t have to worry about poverty.

Ruth also spoke of financial giving when asked how spirituality impacted her transition from poverty, “I learned how God feels about debt and poverty and I developed a desire to give more to the works of God to have a greater input in building His kingdom and His people.”

Resilient within My Own Culture

Oftentimes, when individuals are working to improve themselves, family, friends, and other women of color do not understand. While one may have systems of support in

place, there are often those within the community or culture that do not understand your “journey.” When discussing barriers that the participants have had to overcome, several of them spoke of judgments and stereotypes within their own culture.

Ruth spoke of challenges that she faced, by members of her family and friends, as she struggled to move out of poverty.

One of the biggest barriers I have had to overcome is giving up to go up.

In my culture, when you attempt to leave poverty, often the people you love the most see your move as a move out of their lives instead of a move from one socio-economic status to another. Hence, they mock and accuse you with words such as, ‘You think you are White,’ as if getting out of debt is White...as if wanting better is White...as if speaking in a way that would open doors for you is White. I have had to learn to walk away from people who drag me down, criticize me, or pull me backward and not feel guilty about choosing better for myself. This is not to imply that I have walked away from my family and friends, only the ones who clearly could not appreciate my desire to better myself. And, quite honestly, it was not that I walked away. We simply grew apart and I was okay with that distance that developed.

Esther commented on her experience with other African American women within her culture as she strived to transition from poverty.

One big barrier for me trying to advance and trying to do better was other Black women who didn’t want to see you be successful. Sometimes, you could see how they would just try to throw roadblocks in your way so you

would just have to be skeptical about who you pulled into your circle because everybody who says they are with you...sometimes they are not with you at all.

Mary described feeling that she had to meet a certain standard and look a certain way in order to meet the criteria that society had set for African American women.

Being an African American woman in the United States, with the way society is and the way we are looked at...and we are judged by our size because we are not a size 0 and a size 2. Being judged by all the curves that African American women have. When you look at social media and the coils in our hair...all of those things are things that have had us wanting more. You know, in my life, I have wanted fairer skin because that's what has been shown to be beautiful...my skin color. In my life, I wanted fairer skin. Sometimes, I wear the weave because the long hair is what's being portrayed as beautiful. So, even in the looks department, there was a feeling of not being enough. The feeling of trying to conform to what society's idea of beauty is. I think that's a big barrier.

Naomi reflected on how she felt as a child growing up because she had a lighter skin complexion and straight hair (as opposed to kinky hair). Naomi did not look like the average child in her community, and was, therefore, criticized by members of her own culture.

Many of the Black people in the area where I grew up...they thought that because of the color of my skin that I had privileges. And I didn't know anything about that. Because my complexion was lighter, they would

come to our house and say, ‘You think you’re this and you think you’re better than everybody else,’ and I would say, what are they talking about? Sometimes it would be depressing.

In addition to living in poverty, Martha also had a child at an early age and described how she felt within her community: “When I was 17, I had to overcome having a child at that age and knowing how to move forward due to the pitiful, and shameful look in the eyes of others within my community, as well as my own.”

Likewise, Rachel had a similar experience and stated, “Having a child at a young age, I had to overcome the stigma of people saying that I would be on welfare all my life and that I was going to have more children as an unwed mother.”

Church is Important

It has been noted that the African American church is important in the lives of women who are trying to leave poverty. The women in the study described the African American Church as a place of encouragement, support, and spiritual refreshing.

According to Deborah, “I am in church every Sunday. I’d say that church is important to me.”

Elizabeth spoke of her connection with her church and how it puts her in touch with others who have the same beliefs that she has.

I attend church on a regular basis and church is very important in my life. Church is important in my life because that is the place where I have other people who believe like I do or who feel like I do. I know who I am in Christ and go because of what He has done for me and because the Word tells us that we need to assemble ourselves together in church. I’m not

going to church to get saved, I am going because I am already saved. And so, when I go and I connect with other believers of that same mindset, then now it's like it helps me. We are encouraging each other. We are building each other up. Church is a support system. We have to have it [support system] and church is just one venue that we can go and get that support.

Rachel stated, "I am affiliated with a church and I attend on a regular basis. Church is important to me because I enjoy serving others. Sarah shared, "I attend Sunday service. I teach Wednesday night Bible study to the children. Church is my all." Hannah and her family attend church in two locations. She spoke of the importance of her children attending church.

We go to church every Sunday. It is very important. We go to Poplarville. That's where my husband is from. His father was a minister too. So, we go there probably twice a month and then we go to church in Hattiesburg twice a month, so we go to church. We want our boys to grow up in church. I do more with the youth groups now than I do for me as a woman.

Martha referenced church as a spiritually nourishing support system. She described the importance of being around others who have the same beliefs as she does.

My church life is very important to me because when I assemble myself with those of like precious faith, God is in the midst and it builds me up! For me to obtain that support from my brothers and sisters is spiritually nourishing.

Mary referred to church as being a refresher. She described how attending church helps her to put things in perspective.

I attend church on a regular basis and it is very important. It's that release. It's like a renewal, it's like a refresher. It refreshes you for the next week. Church is a refresher. It makes everything okay. It helps you realize it wasn't that bad. Even when it seems bad, it wasn't that bad. It's like a spiritual fill-up. You use it throughout the week and it replenishes your heart, mind, body, and soul. I'm a Baptist, but I feel like different denominations are less important than to have some type of spiritual higher power.

Chapter four presented a description of ten African American women who were born and reared in poverty. The chapter presented an analysis of the data obtained in face-to-face interviews. Data analysis identified nine themes related to the research questions: (a) Setting Goals; (b) Support Systems; (c) Hard Work and Determination; (d) Doors of Opportunity Opened; (e) Never Give Up; (f) Having a Personal Relationship with God/Jesus Christ; (g) Tithing and Giving; (h) Resilient within My Own Culture; and (i) Church is Important. The chapter presented a comprehensive set of findings that resulted from in-depth interviews with the participants. It described the phenomenon using the participants' voice and provides an overall understanding of the experience.

CHAPTER V – DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to examine the lived experiences of African American women who were born and reared in poverty; however, these women have transitioned from poverty and now function as educated women who lead successful lives. Data were collected in this study to address research questions. An interview protocol utilizing 34 in-depth, open-ended (Creswell, 2007) questions was developed (see Appendix A). Face-to-face interviews were conducted in order to collect detailed data from the study participants to address the research questions. Below the findings are drawn across all participants pertaining to their lived, personal experiences.

Discussion of Research Questions

The following section provides a discussion of the research findings based on each research question and review of the literature. The results from this study confirmed nine themes that discussed the lived experiences of African American women who were born and reared in poverty, yet have transitioned from poverty and lead successful lives.

Research Question One

The first research question asked what factors contributed to the successful transition from poverty of the African American women in the study. The emergent themes from this study that address research question one were: Setting Goals; Support Systems, and Hard Work and Determination.

Setting Goals

Study participants acknowledged that they set goals for themselves and worked to achieve those goals. Although the women in the study set different goals for different reasons, the goals that they set all centered around having a better life than what they

were currently experiencing. One participant spoke of “not wanting to stand in a food stamp line again.” Another participant reported wanting to enter the health care profession because of the death of her father. Still, another participant desired to attend college because of the possibilities that college would afford her. The adversities for which they were faced inspired them to set goals and work to attain those goals. The study participants also reported “keeping their goals in front of them” and even when it looked as though they might not reach their goal, that caused them to work that much harder. Individuals often set goals to lose weight, to begin eating healthier, or to give up habits such as smoking or other tobacco use; however, the participants in this study set goals that would help them to move beyond their adverse circumstances. By setting goals, the participants knew what direction they wanted to take and they were able to remain focused. Also, the goals allowed them to measure their progress. As participants “kept their goals in front of them,” they were able to determine whether or not they had accomplished the goal or how far they were from accomplishing the goal. Their goals also provided them with the motivation and inspiration to continue their journeys. When faced with adversity, goals may not be reached immediately; however, participants reported the importance of remaining focused and not giving up in the midst of obstacles. Participants in this study reported believing that because they set specific goals, they were more focused on achieving their goals.

According to Locke and Latham (2006), setting high goals lead individuals to put forth a greater effort and greater persistence in order to obtain the goal. The researchers further contend that goals often motivate individuals to use their already existing ability

(Locke & Latham, 2006). Goal setting works to increase behavior by enhancing the direction and persistence of a task-directed effort (Locke & Latham, 2012).

Support Systems

Study participants communicated the value of support systems as a vital part of women's upward climb from poverty. Study participants noted that healthy support systems involving positive family and friends were important. During challenging times support systems provided encouragement as participants worked to achieve specific goals. The study participants stressed the importance of having healthy support systems. The participants reported having strong support systems filled with people who loved and encouraged them. This included support from family members who babysat their children while they attended school to further their education. Additionally, they reported having support systems within their church during times of crisis. They further reported having systems of support during times when they simply needed encouragement as they were struggling to reach goals. Boyd-Franklin (1991) points out the importance of these supports for providing comfort and support to African Americans during times of stress and challenges. Often, support systems provide buffers to the numerous negative societal conditions faced by African Americans (Thorton, 1998). Research reveals that African Americans greatly depend on support systems such as family, relationships, social organizations, and informal networks (Billingsley, 1992; Boyd-Franklin, 1991). Each of the women in the study reported having had some type of support system throughout their experience.

Hard Work and Determination

Study participants noted that hard work and determination were key factors in their transition from poverty. Some participants recalled making decisions as early as their childhood to move out of poverty. Other study participants reported wanting a “better life” and being determined to work hard in order to make a difference in their circumstances. Several of the participants in the study reported that they felt that they worked harder than the next individual because they wanted to escape poverty. Several participants reported working multiple jobs at some point in their life, even during their childhood. Participants reported having good work ethics on jobs because they were determined to have a better life. These work ethics led them to job promotions and raises. Other participants reported working hard to attend school whereas many others in their community had not. Several of the participants reported working full-time while attending school part-time. Further, they reported that family members provided babysitting services for their children while they attended school. This provided them with the opportunity to focus more on their education and complete their degrees. Participants expressed that they felt determined to leave the life for which they were born and reared. Gringeri (2001) reported the use of multiple jobs as a strategy to meet the economic needs of a family. Research indicates that individuals who escape the cycle of poverty often do so through a combination of hard work, formal and informal support (Gray, 2005). According to Taormina (2015), persons faced with difficult task may be determined to conquer the obstacle regardless of the sacrifice.

Research Question Two

The second research question asked what, if any, influence did education have on the participants' transition from poverty. The following theme resulted from research question two: Opens Doors of Opportunity. Study participants reported, overwhelmingly that education "opened doors of opportunity" for them. Study participants shared stories of how they utilized education as a means of transitioning from poverty. Bullock and Limbert (2003) note the significance of attaining an education as a means of improving one's socioeconomic status. All study participants reported coming from families where their parents had no formal education; however, they wanted to accomplish more than their parents had accomplished. Study participants maintained that education was "life changing" for them. They also reported that by the acquisition of their degrees, and positions that the degrees have afforded them, they are less likely to return to poverty. Studies indicate that individuals who possess a bachelor's degree earn double that of those who only possess a high school diploma. Each of the participants realized the value of an education and how it "opens doors of opportunity." Participants reported that education has opened doors to promotions, more options than the average person, and ultimately made them less likely to return to poverty. Ma et al. (2017) reported that a college education opens the doors to many opportunities that would not otherwise be available to most individuals. The researchers further posit that many occupations are open only to those with specific degrees or certificates. Likewise, those who possess professional degrees earn double that of those who possess a bachelor's degree (Baum et al., 2013). All of the study participants in the study reported that education was an influence in their transition from poverty because with the acquisition

of a degree, they were able to secure employment in fields that provided adequate resources for financial security.

Research Question Three

The third research question asked what resilience means to the African American women in the study. Two themes emerged from research question three: Never Give Up and Resilient within My Own Culture. As women who have transitioned from poverty, study participants described resilience as the ability to bounce back in the face of adversity.

Never Give Up

Resilience is the ability to cope with disruptive, stressful, or challenging events and provide the individual with protective skills (Richardson et al., 1990). Wolin and Wolin (1993) reported that resilience is the ability to “jump (or bounce) back.” Study participants provided descriptions of obstacles that they faced throughout their childhood and, in some cases, into their early adult life. However, in spite of the obstacles and hardships they faced, they reported having something inside of them that caused them to overcome and persevere. Further, study participants reported believing that they could accomplish anything with persistence and consistency; and as a result, believed that it made them even stronger.

Resilient within My Own Culture

The theme of being resilient within my own culture emerged as the discussion progressed regarding resilience. Six of the participants in the study spoke of instances where they had to be resilient within their own culture. They shared stories of having to overcome barriers because of their light skin complexion. They were faced with

challenges because they exemplified the desire to have a “better life.” Others faced challenges due to their body image. Some faced adversity because they had children out of wedlock and many within their culture did not believe they would ever “amount to anything.” Regardless of the challenges they faced, these women reported overcoming each obstacle and ultimately “bouncing back.”

Research Question Four

The fourth research question asked what ways did resiliency contribute to the participants’ successful transition from poverty. The theme that emerged from research question four was: Never Give Up. The theme, never give up, was overarching in both research questions three and four. Rose’s (1990) qualitative study of women’s inner strength stressed the importance of investigating women’s experiences for successful characteristics as opposed to dismissing certain traits as weaknesses. Study participants revealed that they were resilient in the face of challenges as young women striving to escape impoverished lifestyles. They described themselves as having a “never give up” attitude. Study participants shared stories of setbacks, hard times, and obstacles. However, they each spoke of how they pressed just a little bit harder despite challenges because they were determined to make a change in their life. They were determined not to give up. Study participants further reported how their “never give up” attitude has carried over into their adult life as they have strived for multiple degrees and promotions within their careers. Although the participants lived in poverty as children and some into their adult life, they have shown and maintained resilience. The participants in the study contended that because they were resilient, they were able to thrive when faced with adversity. One participant reported having a “bulldog tenacity” when it comes to not

letting go of a dream. As a result of their tenacious attributes, they were able to reach goals and overcome an impoverished life.

Research Question Five

The fifth research question asked what spirituality means in the case of the African American women in the study. The theme that emerged from research question five was: Personal Relationship with God/Jesus Christ. A belief in God was expressed by all of the participants during their interviews when describing their meaning of spirituality. The study participants reported that, for them, spirituality means having a personal relationship with God/Jesus Christ. Several of the women in the study reported having had spiritual encounters with God. They reported that prayer was a part of their daily lives and that their faith in God has sustained them throughout their lives. Furthermore, the women reported that they believed that there was a distinct difference in spirituality and religion. They reported religion as being about processes and procedures. However, they viewed spirituality as having a personal relationship, encounter, or experience with a higher power; and in their case, that higher power was God. According to Fowler (2000), religion refers to collective expressions of myths, rituals, teachings, music, and symbols. Spirituality, on the other hand, engages a trusting relationship with a higher power to foster meaning, hope, and purpose in life (Letiecq, 2007).

Research Question Six

The sixth research question asked what ways did spirituality contribute to the participants' successful transition from poverty. The themes that emerged from research question six were: Personal Relationship with God/Jesus Christ (which also emerged in research question five), Church is Important, and Tithing and Giving.

Personal Relationship with God/Jesus Christ

As stated in research question five, participants in the study described their spiritual relationship with God as a contributing factor in their transition from poverty. Historically, spirituality and religion served as sources of comfort, strength, and sustaining power as African Americans endured years of slavery, discrimination, and oppression. Study participants reported prayer and meditation, during times of adversity in their lives, as sustaining them and giving them strength to continue to strive for a better life. It was through their faith, spirituality, and religious practices that Africans were able to endure such harsh circumstances (Taylor et al., 2004).

Church is Important

Study participants reported the importance of church in their lives. They reported church as providing a place of refuge and peace. Study participants reported that church provided a support system of others who believe the same way and who offered encouragement in times of need. They further expressed that church was a source of personal growth providing affirmation and guidance. All study participants reported having attended church, on a regular basis, as a child. Furthermore, all study participants reported attending church, on a regular basis, as adults and acknowledged the importance of “church family” as they have transcended from poverty. For African Americans, in particular, religious institutions serve as important spaces within which to communicate, make meaning of, and negotiate the challenges of being both African American and a woman in a racist and sexist society (Higginbotham, 1997). According to Brody et al., (1996), the African American church has served as a linkage, bringing people together for a common goal, helping individuals manage stressful situations, promoting

empowerment, and providing role model. McRae et al. (1998) reported that the church not only serves a spiritual purpose or as a place of worship, but it also serves as a social support institution.

Tithing and Giving

When study participants were asked how spirituality/religion had impacted their transition from poverty, four study participants reported financial giving of tithes and offerings as a contributing factor in their transition from poverty. Tithing is a biblical concept that is practiced in many churches and religious organizations. Study participants indicated that they believe this concept and believe that it has played a major role in their transition from poverty. Study participants believe that as they give tithes and offering in the church, they are not giving to the church as an organization but to God through organized religion. They believe that because they have been obedient regarding this biblical principle, that God has blessed them to have more financially and to have more doors of opportunity opened to them. Participants indicated that others may not believe in the biblical principle of tithing; however, they expressed their belief that this practice has been helpful to them in their upward mobility.

Results Related to Theoretical Framework

Black Feminist Thought

In order to give voice to African American women and their lived experiences, this study employed the framework based on Black feminist thought. Themes emerged as a result of the repeating statements, ideas, and stories that the participants had in common. The themes and stories provided insight and descriptions of what study participants have been confronted with as African American women. Their experiences

with the interlocking oppressions of race, class, and gender were revealed through their stories. Each participant shared their own unique story of facing obstacles related to these oppressions.

According to Pratt-Clark (2012), Black feminist thought creates a space and voice for traditionally silenced and marginalized groups. African American women are faced with the interlocking experiences of race, gender, and class, which follows them in every life experience (Collins, 2008). Bell, Orbe, Drummond, and Camara (2000) noted that Black feminist thought is grounded on the premise that African American women, as a group, share commonalities of perceptions and experiences. Collins (2000) noted that the very essence of Black feminist provides theories produced by African American women in order to interpret and make clear the views of African American women. It provides an interpretation of the experiences of African American women by those who share those commonalities (Collins, 2000). Black feminist thought maintains that the shared experiences with race, class, and gender oppression provide African American with a sense of belonging to a group (Simien, 2004).

Collins (1986) defined a set of assumptions that support Black feminist thought. The first assumption is that the structure and thematic content are connected to the historical and physical conditions of the lives of African American women (Collins, 1986). The second assumption asserts that African American women have a distinctive perspective of their experiences thereby sharing commonalities as a group (Collins, 1986). Other important factors related to this theory emphasize the importance of understanding intense challenges that African American women face of being a double minority (Collins, 1986). The third assumption is that the diversity of class, region, age,

and sexual orientation shaping African American women lives has resulted in different expressions of these common themes (Collins, 1986). The fourth and final assumption is that African American intellectuals will produce facts and theories about the African American female experience which will clarify and standpoint for African American women (Collins, 1986).

The African American women in the study shared their unique experiences of living in poverty as well as their journey out of poverty. They shared commonalities and experiences as identified through the themes that emerged within the study. African American women are at the center of this study and have provided various expressions of common themes. It is important to understand the experiences of African American women who have endured the interlocking oppressions of race, class, and gender, as well as other barriers while striving to leave poverty. This study has provided additional information to the literature as conveyed through the stories of the African American women who told them. As an African American female researcher, the researcher hopes to contribute to Black feminist thought through documenting the personal experience, and understanding the lived experiences of African American women who have journeyed out of poverty.

Resilience Theory

The African American women in the study described themselves as having a “never give up” attitude. They shared stories of adversity and how they felt stronger as a result of overcoming the challenges that they had faced. Each of the participants reported church as an important part of their upbringing as well as an important part of their adult life. Although the participants acknowledged being grounded in their faith, prayer, and a

belief in God, they were not excluded from the barriers of growing up in impoverished African American neighborhoods and as African American women as they developed into adulthood. The participants in the study faced racial barriers within their own culture as well as from members of other ethnicities. They faced barriers of not having sufficient resources in order to meet necessary needs within their families. Regardless of the barriers that they faced, the participants reported their determination to overcome each one of them. Further results of this study revealed that participants possessed positive relationships through family and friends. They expressed the need and desire for healthy support systems. The participants expressed that healthy support systems helped them to be resilient during times of adversity. The women in the study have demonstrated resilience in their educational endeavors and well as in their professional careers. Several of the women in the study were parents as they pursued college degrees. One participant reported that a family member cared for her children while she attended school. Other participants reported working full-time or part-time while attending school.

Resilience has been described as the ability or process of remaining intact in the midst of potentially and often destructive environmental factors (Morales & Trotman, 2004). It is the premise that individuals are able to bounce back from negative life experiences and often become even stronger in the process of overcoming them (Morales & Trotman). Wolins and Wolins (1993) identify seven resiliencies that are internal and can be manifested in both children and adults: insight, independence, relationships, initiative, creativity, humor, and morality. Regardless of the levels of problems individuals may have experienced from traumatic life events, they can foster any of these

seven resiliencies and, as a result, overcome any damage caused by the adverse situation (Wolins & Wolins, 1993). Higgins (1994) maintains that resilient adults, similarly to resilient children enjoy positive relationships, are skilled problem solvers, and seek self-employment. Further, the literature indicates that resilience is multifaceted and refers to people being determined to survive (Bandura, 1989) and endure hardships (Rutter, 1987).

The women in the study revealed their “determination” to overcome the harsh realities of the impoverished lifestyles for which they were born and reared. Their stories provided insight into their experiences as well as ways in which their resilient behaviors helped them to move out of poverty.

Limitations

The present study used qualitative phenomenological research to examine the lived experiences of African American women who were born and reared in poverty, yet these women have transitioned from poverty and now lead successful lives. The use of a phenomenological design allowed a deeper investigation into the stories of the participants which provided a clearer understanding of the phenomenon. However, the procedures of the investigation were time-consuming and required a careful review of the data in order to discover meaningful results. The interview protocol included 34 questions and interviews lasted between 60 and 90 minutes. The researcher was conscious of the participants’ busy schedule and tried to ask questions from the interview protocol and not prolong their time. All interviews were face-to-face. Each interview took approximately three hours to transcribe. Interviews were conducted in participants’ homes, at the university library, and personal businesses over the course of two months.

Participation in the study was voluntary. Limitations were expected to be found due to the sensitivity of the topic. The study was delimited to African American who were born and reared in poverty. Ten African American women met the guidelines of the study and agreed to participate. The population sampled for this study was within the established guidelines for qualitative research. However, while several of the participants in the study were born and reared in other cities, the majority of them currently live in the same geographic location. All but one of the participants currently reside in the State of Mississippi. One participant resides in the state of Tennessee. Additionally, the results of the study may not be generalized to the entire population. Although invitations were sent to various organizations, the majority of the study participants were recruited through participant referral.

Future Research

The voice of African American women is missing from the research, especially those who were born and reared in poverty yet have transitioned and now lead successful lives. While the women in the study indicated that they have not reached their full potential, they defined themselves as successful in transitioning from poverty. They further defined themselves as successful at being self-sufficient and not relying on government or family financial assistance. There is a scarcity of research focused on the shared characteristics of these women; therefore, there is a need to continue the work on understanding the lived experiences of women who have transitioned from poverty.

Research regarding resilient African American women has generally focused on an understanding of resilience towards physical illness (e.g., diabetes), trauma (e.g., intimate partner violence, natural disaster), and age groups (Singh et al., 2012); however,

there has been little exploration regarding the resilient qualities of African American women and their transition from poverty. The African American women in the present study highly regarded their resilient behaviors as a means of transitioning from poverty. Although the women in the study maintained that they had support systems in place, they provided stories whereby they exemplified resilience in the face of adversity within their own culture and spoke of having a “never give up” attitude.

Additionally, the African American women in the study stressed the need for positive support systems as one transcends from poverty. Within their stories, they referenced family, friends, and church as support systems that were in place for them during their experience. They had support systems in place as they attended college as well and during crises. They viewed support systems as crucial as they maneuvered the cycle of poverty. The results of this study reveal that there is a need for support systems in the lives of African American women as they strive to attain education and reach personal goals.

Finally, the women in the study referenced goal setting as a vital strategy in their upward climb. The women in the present study noted that they set goals and were determined to achieve those goals regardless of their circumstances. The goals set by participants helped them remain focused. Although the women in the study made sacrifices in order to achieve their goals, they acknowledged that they concentrated, remained committed, and overcame obstacles that they encountered along the way. While there are qualitative studies that focus on African American women and goal setting, they are generally job- or health-related goals. The results of this study add

additional information to the literature regarding goal setting as one strives to leave poverty.

Examining the lived experiences of African American women is a goal of adult education. Therefore, expanding the current study could perhaps lead to a more thorough understanding of resilience in African American women who have transitioned from poverty, as well as additional questions being answered.

1. In what ways did goal setting contribute to the participants' successful transition from poverty?
2. What, if any, influence did having support systems have on the participants' transition from poverty?
3. What, if any, barriers have you faced within your own culture as you have transitioned from poverty?

Summary

Employing the theoretical frameworks of Black feminist thought and Resilience theory, this study aimed to describe the lived experiences of African American women who were born and reared in poverty, yet have transitioned and lead successful lives. Data analysis identified nine themes related to the research questions: (a) Setting Goals; (b) Support Systems; (c) Hard Work and Determination; (d) Doors of Opportunity Opened; (e) Never Give Up; (f) Having a Personal Relationship with God/Jesus Christ; (g) Tithing and Giving; (h) Resilience within My Own Culture; and (i) Church is Important. Although these themes emerged from all of the participants, their individual unique stories were necessary for understanding their lived experiences.

Study participants shared similarities in their lived experiences of being reared in poverty as well as their motivation to attain a more satisfying lifestyle. Likewise, their views of education, spirituality, and resilience were similar. Resilience and spirituality provided strength and direction needed to fulfill their desire to have a better life than the one in which they were reared. Further, the study participants, overwhelmingly, viewed education as a means of “opening doors of opportunity” that they might otherwise not have had.

This study provided insight into the ways in which African American women have been resilient in attaining and maintaining their goals as they journeyed out of poverty. The participants identified barriers that they faced throughout their childhood and into adult life as well as strategies they utilized to overcome those barriers. The voice of African American women who have transitioned from poverty is missing from the research. The results of this study are intended to add to the research in hopes of gaining a better understanding of the lived experiences of African American women who were born and reared in poverty, yet have transitioned from poverty and live as self-sufficient adults. This study has provided additional information to the literature as conveyed through the stories of the African American women who told them.

APPENDIX A – Interview Protocol

1. Tell me about yourself; where you grew up; your family life.
2. Tell me about your educational experience (your college degree(s), areas of study).
3. When you think about your experience, what significant incidents stand out for you?
4. As a child, were you aware of the fact that you were living in poverty?
5. Many people experience barriers or adversity growing up. Can you tell me about any adversity you experienced growing up?
6. Was there a specific turning point in your life where you decided you wanted to make a change in your situation?
7. How were you able to move out of poverty when so many other women remain trapped in chronic poverty?
8. What specific strategies did you use to move out of poverty?
9. Can you tell me about any barriers you have experienced as an adult (if any)?
How are they different from those you experienced as a child?
10. What would you say is the greatest barrier you have had to overcome and why?
11. What would you consider to be a major factor in why women stay out of poverty?
12. What financial strategies/maintenance have you used to prevent you from returning to poverty?
13. Are there gender differences related to poverty?

14. If married, can you tell me your thoughts regarding having a spouse, with an additional income within the household, and how it helps movement out of poverty?
15. If single, what fears or concerns that the lack of an additional income (spousal) could one day present a financial challenge for you?
16. Oftentimes people look for support systems through friends, family, or other networks. Do you feel that these networks are important in women's upward climb? How so?
17. Have you had experiences where local governments either promoted or inhibited poverty transitions through governmental programs? If yes, please explain.
18. How do you define success?
19. How do you consider yourself to be a successful woman?
20. What has been the number one driving point of your success?
21. Describe your spiritual/religious experience.
22. Are you affiliated with any formal religious organization (church, etc.)? If yes, do you attend on a regular basis? How important is your church in your life?
23. Spirituality and religion can be somewhat synonymous. How do you view the two?
24. Can you give me a specific example of how spirituality/religion has impacted your transition from poverty?
25. What steps have you taken to ensure that you do not return to poverty? This could be other than financial.
26. How important is education to you?

27. How have you educated yourself concerning poverty?
28. Do you feel that education is a factor in transitioning from poverty? If yes, how so?
29. What are some things that you have learned about yourself as you have made this transition?
30. Do you consider yourself to be a resilient woman? If yes, how so?
31. What do you attribute your resilient behavior to?
32. Would you be willing to share some of your specific struggles that you have faced along the way?
33. Will you give me an example of some victories that you have experienced?
34. What advice would you give to other women who are struggling with a life of poverty?

APPENDIX B – IRB Approval Letter



INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD
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NOTICE OF COMMITTEE ACTION

The project has been reviewed by The University of Southern Mississippi Institutional Review Board in accordance with Federal Drug Administration regulations (21 CFR 26, 111), Department of Health and Human Services (45 CFR Part 46), and university guidelines to ensure adherence to the following criteria:

- The risks to subjects are minimized.
- The risks to subjects are reasonable in relation to the anticipated benefits.
- The selection of subjects is equitable.
- Informed consent is adequate and appropriately documented.
- Where appropriate, the research plan makes adequate provisions for monitoring the data collected to ensure the safety of the subjects.
- Where appropriate, there are adequate provisions to protect the privacy of subjects and to maintain the confidentiality of all data.
- Appropriate additional safeguards have been included to protect vulnerable subjects.
- Any unanticipated, serious, or continuing problems encountered regarding risks to subjects must be reported immediately, but not later than 10 days following the event. This should be reported to the IRB Office via the "Adverse Effect Report Form".
- If approved, the maximum period of approval is limited to twelve months.
Projects that exceed this period must submit an application for renewal or continuation.

PROTOCOL NUMBER: 17091101
PROJECT TITLE: African American Women: The Role of Education, Spirituality, and Resilience in their Transition from Poverty
PROJECT TYPE: Doctoral Dissertation
RESEARCHER(S): Donna Scott
COLLEGE/DIVISION: College of Education and Psychology
DEPARTMENT: Educational Research and Administration
FUNDING AGENCY/SPONSOR: N/A
IRB COMMITTEE ACTION: Expedited Review Approval
PERIOD OF APPROVAL: 09/14/2017 to 09/13/2018
Lawrence A. Hosman, Ph.D.
Institutional Review Board

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