Common Facets of Religion, Unique Facets of Religion, and Life Satisfaction Among Older African Americans

Neal Krause

School of Public Health and Institute of Gerontology, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor.

Objectives. Common facets of religion are those aspects of religion that can be shared by people from any racial group. In contrast, unique facets of religion are available only to people in specific racial groups. The purpose of this study is to evaluate the interface among common facets of religion, unique facets of religion, and life satisfaction in a nationwide sample of older Black people.

Methods. Interviews were conducted with a nationally representative sample of older African Americans. Survey items were administered to assess common religious factors (e.g., the frequency of church attendance) and unique religious factors (i.e., the belief that religion sustains Black people in the face of racial adversity). Subjective well-being was measured with a life satisfaction index.

Results. The findings reveal that both the common and the unique aspects of religion contribute to life satisfaction among older African Americans.

Discussion. Most studies on race differences in religion focus solely on common religious factors that may enhance the subjective well-being of older Whites as well as older Blacks. The findings from this study are important because they call attention to the insight that can be obtained by also taking the unique facets of religion for older Black people into consideration.

Research indicates that involvement in religion may be associated with better physical health and enhanced feelings of subjective well-being across the life course (Koenig, McCullough, & Larson, 2001). Moreover, this literature further reveals that older African Americans may be more likely than older Whites to enjoy these health-related benefits (Krause, 2002a). Some investigators attribute these findings to the fact that older Blacks are more religious than older Whites (Levin, Taylor, & Chatters, 1994). So, for example, a number of studies reveal that older Blacks are more likely to go to church services, read the Bible, and pray than older Whites (Krause, 2003; Levin et al., 1994). This research also indicates that older Blacks are more likely than older Whites to receive informal social support from church members, and they are more likely to feel they have a closer relationship with God (Krause, 2002a).

Although this literature has helped identify some reasons why religion may be an especially important source of resilience for older African Americans, it is incomplete. Religion is a complex, multidimensional construct that can be assessed in many ways (Fetzer Institute/National Institute on Aging Working Group, 1999). So far, empirical work on race differences in religion, health, and well-being in late life has focused exclusively on common dimensions of religion that can be practiced or experienced by older Whites as well as older Blacks. Common dimensions of religion include things like private prayer and attending worship services. Even so, a number of researchers argue that there are other dimensions of religion that are unique to the Black church and only African Americans have access to them. These investigators maintain that broad social forces, such as the history of slavery in America and current problems with racism, have created unique challenges for Black people (Paris, 1995). As a result, religion serves a unique function for African Americans because it helps them confront race-related problems explicitly (Cone, 1975; Mattis & Jagers, 2001; Maynard-Reid, 2000). This unique religious function is important because a growing number of studies suggest that prejudice and discrimination may have an adverse effect on the health and well-being of Black people (Kessler, Mickelson, & Williams, 1999; Williams, Yu, Jackson, & Anderson, 1997).

Unfortunately, there do not appear to be any studies in the literature that empirically evaluate the potentially unique ways in which the church may help Black people deal with race-related issues. Instead, the work in this area consists of either theoretical discussions (e.g., Cone, 1975) or qualitative studies that are based on small convenience samples (e.g., Black, 1999). If researchers want to arrive at a better understanding of race differences in the relationship between religion and well-being, then it is important to empirically evaluate the unique as well as the common ways in which religion may be beneficial for older African Americans. The purpose of the current study is to evaluate this issue with data from a nationwide survey.

The discussion that follows is divided into three main sections. The theoretical underpinnings of this study are developed in greater detail in the first section. Following this, the study sample and survey measures are introduced. Finally, the empirical findings are reviewed and discussed.
Identifying the Unique Facets of Religion Among Older Blacks

There are clear historical reasons why the church may function in relatively unique ways in the Black community. A number of investigators maintain that owing to centuries of discrimination and prejudice, the church became the social center of the Black community (Du Bois, 2000). In addition to being the center of religious training and worship, the church also became the nucleus of social activities and a conduit for the distribution of social services (Billingsley, 1999). As Lincoln and Mamiya (1990) pointed out, the church assumed this pivotal position because it was the only institution in the Black community that was wholly owned and controlled by Blacks.

But the church became more than just a religious, social, and political institution. It also performs three other closely related functions that are grounded in the unique heritage of African Americans. First, writing in 1899, Du Bois (2000) argued, “The church really represented all that was left of African tribal life, and was the sole expression of the organized efforts of the slaves” (p. 29). Through oral history, written history, and music, the church kept the legacy of slavery alive (Raboteau, 1978). For example, through these media, the plight of African Americans was linked closely with the Old Testament story of the exodus of the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt. Knowing that religion helped their ancestors bear the immense burden of slavery is a unique source of pride and strength for African Americans of all generations (Paris, 1995). This is important because a number of researchers argue that pride in one’s race and ancestry is a potent source of well-being for people of color (Twenge & Crocker, 2002).

Second, as Paris (1995) convincingly maintained, the history of Blacks in America gave rise to a set of theological beliefs he called “survival theology” (see also Cone, 1975). According to this view, “the convenantal relationship between African peoples and God has empowered them to endure pain and injustice while not affirming it. It has motivated them to do battle in one form or other against the perpetuation of injustice” (Paris, 1995, p. 48). This means that in addition to fostering pride in one’s own ancestry, the church also provides a theological perspective that helps African Americans cope more effectively with the race-related problems they encounter in daily life. This is exemplified in Lincoln and Mamiya’s (1990) notion of the Black sacred cosmos. According to this perspective, the Black church has absorbed, legitimated, and extended core values of the Black culture in order to help Black people deal with racial adversity. Among these core values are freedom, justice, equality, and racial parity (see also Smith, 1981). As Paris (1995) pointed out, these core values were picked up from the church and further championed by the civil rights movement. Viewed broadly, the work of Lincoln and Mamiya (1990) as well as Paris (1995) shows how religion helps older Blacks better handle problems that arise in relationships with their fellow humans.

Third, the survival theology described by Paris (1995) results in a more supportive and reassuring view of the relationship between God and humans. The literature consistently shows that social feedback from the wider Anglo culture often portrays Blacks as being inferior to Whites (Williams et al., 1997). But religion helps counter these negative self-images by reminding African Americans that people of all races are equal in the sight of God (Cone, 1975). The essence of this perspective is captured succinctly in Maynard-Reid’s discussion (2000) of African American worship services. He argued that “disenchantment, marginalization, dehumanization and second-class citizenship mark their experiences in life in the broader culture; worship, on the other hand, provides the full acceptance and equality they long for” (p. 65). Knowing that God loves Black people just as much as God loves Whites is a powerful antidote to racist images that are encountered in the wider society (Cone, 1975).

The discussion up to this point highlights several unique aspects of the Black church that may enhance the subjective well-being of older African Americans, including a sense of pride arising from past struggles during slavery, the hope and conviction that racial injustice will be overcome, and the belief that all races are equal in the eyes of God. These feelings are largely unique to African Americans because they have experienced racial injustice, whereas Whites have not. If we want to more fully understand the influence of religion on older Blacks, then it is imperative to bring these unique facets of religion to the foreground.

But care must be taken when assessing the unique aspects of religion among older Blacks. Studying the unique facets of religion does not mean that the common dimensions of religion that are shared with older Whites can be overlooked. Doing so would ignore a number of empirical studies that indicate that common dimensions of religion, such as church attendance and religious support, also enhance feelings of well-being among older Blacks (Krause, 2002a). Simply put, it is important to take both common and unique aspects of religion into account at the same time. This was accomplished in the current study by developing a conceptual model that examines the influence of two common aspects of religion (i.e., church attendance and church-based social support) and one unique facet of religion in the Black church (i.e., the belief that religion sustains Blacks in the face of racial injustice). However, instead of merely contrasting the relative effects of these factors, the model depicted in Figure 1 attempts to show how common and unique facets of religion might be linked conceptually and how they jointly operate to enhance feelings of well-being among older African Americans.

Figure 1. A conceptual model of common and unique dimensions of religion.
The conceptual model that was developed for this study has a decidedly social focus. This is captured by the two common aspects of religion (i.e., church attendance and church-based support) contained in Figure 1. There are two reasons for highlighting these social influences. First, ever since the founding of the discipline, sociologists have placed a heavy emphasis on the key role played by social relationships in the church (Durkheim, 1915; Simmel, 1905; Weber, 1922). In fact, for some, social ties were the very essence of religion itself. This orientation is perhaps most evident in the work of Simmel (1905), who argued that “the individual feels himself bound to a universal, to something higher, from which he came and into which he will return, from which he differs, and to which he is nevertheless identical. All these emotions, which meet as in a focal point in the idea of God, can be traced back to the relationship that the individual sustains with the species” (pp. 371–372). But perhaps more important, there is some evidence that the social facets of religion are especially pronounced in the Black church. For example, Du Bois (2000) maintained that “without wholly conscious effort, the Negro church has become a centre of social intercourse unknown in White churches even in this country” (p. 34). Second, as Maynard-Reid (2000) eloquently pointed out, messages of strength and liberation are transmitted through the religious group. This occurs informally, but it is especially evident during worship services. In fact, he argued, “the worship services became the place where liberation was enacted and most keenly felt” (p. 64). This makes sense because of the strong emphasis that is placed in Black culture on collectivism and the primacy of the group in everyday life (Baldwin & Hopkins, 1990).

The core theoretical thrust of the model depicted in Figure 1 is captured in the following linkages. The first link involves a construct that has not been discussed up to this time: the racial composition of the congregation. This refers to the proportion of Black people in a given place of worship. It is proposed in Figure 1 that as the proportion of Black people in a congregation rises, study participants will attend church more frequently. This hypothesis rests on the homophily principle, which states that rates of contact between people with similar social characteristics are much higher than rates of contact among people who are dissimilar (McPherson, Smith-Lovin, & Cook, 2001).

Second, it is proposed in Figure 1 that older African Americans who go to church frequently are more likely to receive church-based emotional support from the people who worship there than older Blacks who do not go to church as often. This proposition is based on research by Ellison and George (1994), who argued that people who attend church more often tend to have more satisfying social relationships than individuals who do not go to church as frequently. As these investigators maintained, the heightened quality of these church-based social ties arises from the common values and role expectations that are shared by fellow church members. This is important because there is some evidence that social ties may be especially close in predominantly Black churches (Griffith, Young, & Smith, 1984; Pargament, Silverman, Johnson, Echemendia, & Snyder, 1983).

Third, it is further hypothesized that older Blacks who receive more emotional support from their fellow church members are more likely to feel that religion sustains Black people in the face of racial injustice. As discussed earlier, Maynard-Reid (2000) maintained that the church provides African Americans with a sense of equality and acceptance in an otherwise dehumanizing world. Gilkes’s (1980) discussion of the “articulation of suffering” shows how this takes place. She argued that it is through social interaction with clergy and fellow church members that many racial problems are validated and Black people become more fully aware that they are not alone in their experience with racism. But it is especially important to note that it is the emotional supportiveness and cohesiveness of the group that facilitate this validation of experience (Gilkes, 1980). Simply put, conversations about sensitive race-related issues and experiences are more likely to arise in environments that are characterized by high levels of empathy, caring, love, and trust. It follows from this that the stronger the social support system is in the church, the more older Black respondents will feel that racial injustice can be overcome.

Finally, it is proposed in Figure 1 that older Black people who feel that religion provides them with strength in the face of racial adversity are likely to have a greater sense of life satisfaction than older African Americans who do not view their faith in the same way.

Viewed broadly, the literature presented in this section suggests that the unique facets of religion among older Blacks are intimately linked with common, group-oriented, religious experiences and that examining the interface between the two should provide valuable insight into sources of well-being among older African Americans. Although the unique facets of the Black religious experience have been discussed in the literature for some time, this appears to be the first time they have been examined empirically using data provided by a nationwide survey of older people.

**METHODS**

The data for this study come from a nationwide survey of older Whites and older African Americans. The study population was defined as all household residents who were either White or Black, noninstitutionalized, English speaking, and at least 66 years of age. Geographically, the study population was restricted to eligible persons residing in the coterminous United States (i.e., residents of Alaska and Hawaii were excluded). Finally, the study population was restricted to people who were currently practicing Christians, individuals who were Christian in the past but who no longer practiced any religion, and people who were not affiliated with any faith at any point in their lifetime. Individuals who practice a religion other than Christianity (e.g., Jews and Muslims) were excluded because it would be difficult to devise a set of religion measures that would be suitable for persons of all faiths.

The sampling frame consisted of eligible persons contained in the Health Care Financing Administration (HCFA) Medicare Beneficiary Eligibility List (HCFA is now called the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services [CMS]). This list contains the name, address, gender, and race of virtually every adult in the United States. It should be emphasized that people are included in this list even if they are not receiving Social Security benefits. Nevertheless, some older people are not in the database because they do not have a Social Security number. This may be due to factors such as illegal immigration.

A five-step procedure was used to draw the sample. First, once each year, researchers at CMS draw a 5% sample of names from
The analyses presented herein are based on data provided by the subset of participants in the wider national survey. This subset of study participants was formed by taking two factors into consideration. First, the analyses are based only on data provided by older Blacks because the main theoretical focus of this study is on the unique religious experiences of African Americans. As a result, questions that dealt with the church sustaining Blacks in the face of racial injustice were administered only to older African Americans. Second, church-based emotional support figures prominently in the conceptual model. However, people must attend church in order to have an opportunity to build close ties with the people who worship there. Consequently, when the study questionnaire was designed, the research team concluded that it did not make sense to ask questions about receiving support from church members if people either never go to church or attend worship services only once or twice a year. Based on this rationale, 126 older Black study participants were excluded from the analyses because the questions dealing with church-based support were not administered to them.

After using listwise deletion of missing values to deal with item nonresponse, the analyses presented are based on the responses of 521 older African Americans. Preliminary analyses revealed that the average age of the people in this group was 73.8 years \( (SD = 6.1 \text{ years}) \). Approximately 36\% were older men. Finally, the older adults reported they had successfully completed an average of 10.9 years of schooling \( (SD = 3.3 \text{ years}) \). These descriptive statistics, as well as the findings presented below, are based on data that have been weighted.

## Measures

Table 1 contains the survey items that are used in this study. The procedures used to score these indicators are described in the footnotes of this table.

### Racial composition of the church.

The proportion of Black people in a congregation was assessed with a single ordinal measure containing five categories ranging from all Black or African American to all White or Caucasian. Preliminary analyses (not shown here) revealed that this indicator exerted the strongest effects on other study measures when it was collapsed into a binary format contrasting all Black or mostly Black congregations (scored 1) with all other congregations (scored 0). The data indicate that 85\% of the participants in this study attended congregations that were all or mostly Black.

### Church attendance.

The frequency of attendance at formal worship services was assessed with a single item. This ordinal measure was coded so that a high score denotes more frequent church attendance. Basic descriptive data for the church attendance measure are as follows: \( M = 7.06, SD = 1.51, \text{ range} = 4–9 \).

### Church-based emotional support.

Three indicators were used in this study to assess the amount of emotional support that older Blacks receive from their fellow church members. These questions are revised versions of the church-based, emotional support items that were devised by the Fetzer Institute/National Institute on Aging Working Group (1999).
These indicators were coded so that a high score denotes more emotional support. In the process of answering these questions, respondents were instructed not to include emotional support from their minister, pastor, or priest. This was done because research by Krause and associates suggests that emotional support from the clergy and emotional support from rank-and-file church members are not related to other facets of religion (i.e., religious coping responses) in the same way (Krause, Ellison, Shaw, Marcum, & Boardman, 2001). Basic descriptive data for the composite that was formed by summing the emotional support items are as follows: \( M = 8.79, SD = 2.42, \) range = 3–12.

Religion sustains Black people in the face of racial injustice.—Three items were developed especially for this study to assess whether study participants find strength in the belief that religion has sustained Black people in the face of racial injustice. A high score on these items indicates that respondents find considerable strength from religion in the face of racial inequality. Basic descriptive data for the composite that was formed by summing the items in this scale are as follows: \( M = 11.70, SD = 2.42, \) range = 3–15.

The measures that assess strength in the face of racial adversity were created during an extensive item development program that is described in detail by Krause (2002b). This program involved a series of detailed qualitative studies with 399 older White and Black people. The goal was to create a series of closed-ended survey questions that capture the way older study participants practice and experience religion in daily life. In the process, an emphasis was placed on using the subjects’ own words and phrases to write the question stems.

Life satisfaction.—A brief three-item measure of life satisfaction was administered to the subjects in this study. The first two indicators come from the Life Satisfaction Index A (Neugarten, Havighurst, & Tobin, 1961). The third-listed item assesses satisfaction with life as a whole. A high score on these measures indicates that study participants feel more satisfied with the way their lives have turned out. Basic descriptive data for the composite that was formed by summing the life satisfaction indicators are as follows: \( M = 10.18, SD = 1.76, \) range = 4–13.

Demographic control measures.—The relationships among the constructs shown in Figure 1 were estimated after the effects of age, gender, education, marital status, and region of the country were controlled statistically. Age was scored in a continuous format. Similarly, education was coded in a continuous format reflecting the total number of years of completed schooling. Gender was a binary variable contrasting older men (scored 1) with older women (scored 0). Finally, region of the country was measured with a binary variable that contrasts older Blacks living in the South (scored 1) with older African Americans living elsewhere in the coterminous United States (scored 0). A control measure for residing in the South was included in the analyses because research indicates that the levels of religious involvement, as well as the nature of religious experiences, may differ significantly for older Blacks in the South and older African Americans who reside in other parts of the nation (Ellison & Sherkat, 1995).

Data Analysis Issues

The model depicted in Figure 1 was estimated with Version 8.50 of the LISREL statistical software program (du Toit & du Toit, 2001). There are three distinct advantages associated with the use of this procedure. First, it is possible to take the effects of random measurement error into account. Second, the factors loadings provided for the multiple indicator latent constructs make it possible to derive information about the psychometric properties of the scales used in this study. Third, it is possible to estimate the direct, indirect, and total effects that operate through the model. This means, for example, that in addition to exerting a direct effect on life satisfaction, the common facets of religion (e.g., church-based emotional support) may also have an indirect effect that operates through the unique facet of religion (i.e., religion sustains Blacks in the face of racial adversity).

The maximum likelihood estimator was used in the analyses presented herein. However, use of this estimator rests on the assumption that the observed indicators have a multivariate normal distribution. Preliminary tests of the study measures (not shown here) revealed that this assumption had been violated. Fortunately, as du Toit and du Toit (2001) reported, this problem can be handled by converting raw scores on the observed indicators to normal scores prior to model estimation (p. 143). Consequently, the analyses presented are based on variables that have been normalized.

RESULTS

The findings from this study are presented in three sections. First, the fit of the latent variable model to the data is examined. Following this, the psychometric properties of the study measures are evaluated. Finally, the substantive findings are reviewed.

Fit of the Model to the Data

The data suggest that the fit of the latent variable model in Figure 1 to the data is good. More specifically, the Normed Fit Index (Bentler & Bonett, 1980) estimate of .946 as well as the adjusted goodness-of-fit (Jöreskog & Sörbom, 1988) value of .961 are above the recommended cutpoint of .900. Similarly, the standardized root-mean-square residual estimate of .026 is below the recommended ceiling of .050 (Kelloway, 1998). Finally, Bollen’s (1989) incremental fit index value of .988 as well as the Tucker–Lewis coefficient (Tucker & Lewis, 1973) estimate of .978 are quite close to the ideal target value of 1.0 for these indexes.

Psychometric Properties of the Observed Indicators

Table 2 contains the factor loadings and measurement error terms for the latent endogenous constructs depicted in Figure 1. These coefficients are important because they provide preliminary information on the psychometric properties of the study measures. Although there are no firm guidelines in the literature, experience suggests that factor loadings in excess of .400 show that the observed indicators have reasonably good reliability and validity. As the data in Table 2 reveal, the lowest factor loading is .501. Consequently, the data suggest that the measures used in this study have adequate psychometric properties.

COMMON AND UNIQUE FACETS OF RELIGION

S113
Although the factor loadings and measurement error terms associated with the observed indicators provide useful information about the reliability of each item, it would be helpful to know something about the reliability of the scales taken as a whole. Fortunately, it is possible to compute these estimates with a formula provided by Rock and associates (Rock, Werts, Linn, & Jöreskog, 1977). Applying this formula to the data in Table 2 yields the following estimates of the multiple indicator latent constructs in this study: church-based emotional support (.772), religion sustains Black people in the face of racial adversity (.757), and life satisfaction (.708). Taken together, these estimates suggest that the reliability of the multiple item scales used in this study is good.

### Substantive Findings

Table 3 contains estimates of the substantive relationships among the latent variables depicted in Figure 1. The findings reveal that the racial composition of the congregation is not significantly related to the frequency of church attendance ($\beta = .035$, ns). More specifically, these results indicate that study participants who attend predominantly Black congregations do not go to worship services more frequently than respondents who are affiliated with more racially mixed congregations. In contrast to these results, the data in Table 3 provide support for the remaining theoretical linkages discussed earlier. More specifically, the findings suggest that older Black people who go to church frequently report receiving more church-based emotional support than older African Americans who do not attend worship services as often ($\beta = .350, p < .001$). The data further reveal that church-based emotional support is related to the unique facet of religion that is examined in this study. These results suggest that older Blacks who receive more emotional support from their fellow church members are more likely to report that their faith helps sustain Black people in the face of racial injustice ($\beta = .241, p < .001$). Finally, the results in Table 3 indicate that the unique aspects of the Black religious experience are related to life satisfaction. More specifically, the findings suggest that older Blacks who feel that religion sustains Black people in the face of racial injustice tend to have higher levels of life satisfaction ($\beta = .161, p < .01$).

The findings reviewed up to this point suggest that both the common and the unique aspects of religion are related to life satisfaction among older Blacks. However, as discussed above, it is important to consider how the unique and common facets of religion operate jointly to influence well-being among older African Americans. Examining the direct, indirect, and total effects that operate through the model helps provide some preliminary insight into this issue.

Initially, the direct effects provided in Table 3 appear to suggest that church attendance is not significantly associated with feelings of life satisfaction among older African Americans ($\beta = .090, \text{ns}$). This seems to fly in the face of previous research findings (e.g., St. George & McNamara, 1984; Thomas & Holmes, 1992). However, when the indirect effects that operate through church-based emotional support and the unique aspect of religion are taken into account ($\beta = .112, p < .001$; not shown in Table 3), the resulting total effect ($\beta = .202, p < .001$; not shown in Table 3) leads to a different conclusion. More specifically, these data reveal that approximately 55% of the effects of church attendance on life satisfaction among older Blacks operate indirectly through the model (.112/202 = .55). This means that Blacks who attend worship services frequently tend to be more satisfied with their lives primarily because of the informal support they receive at church and the strength provided by their faith to confront race-related problems.

Similarly, assessing the direct, indirect, and total effects of church-based support on life satisfaction provides further insight into the relative contribution of common versus unique aspects of religion among older Blacks. The data in Table 3 suggest that more church-based emotional support is associated with greater feelings of life satisfaction ($\beta = .270, p < .001$). However, when the indirect effects of church-based support on life satisfaction that operate through the unique facet of religion are taken into account ($\beta = .039, p < .01$; not shown in Table 3), the resulting total effect ($\beta = .309, p < .001$; not shown in Table 3) is fairly substantial. This suggests that about 13% of the effect of church-based emotional support on life satisfaction operates indirectly through the unique facet of religion that is examined in this study (.039/309 = .13).

Up to this point, it might appear as though the racial composition of the congregation has little to do with the study findings. However, the data in Table 3 reveal this is not the case. Two findings are important in this regard. First, the results reveal that study participants who attend primarily Black congregations report receiving less emotional support from church members than respondents who go to churches that are more racially mixed ($\beta = -.130, p < .01$). In addition, the data indicate that study subjects who attend primarily Black congregations are more likely to believe that religion sustains Black people in the face of adversity than respondents who go to congregations containing more people from other racial groups ($\beta = .159, p < .001$).
COMMON AND UNIQUE FACETS OF RELIGION

Table 3. Common Religious Factors, Unique Religious Factors, and Well-Being (N = 521)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Independent Variable</th>
<th>Racial Composition of Church</th>
<th>Church Attendance</th>
<th>Emotional Support</th>
<th>Religion Sustains Blacks</th>
<th>Life Satisfaction</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>−.021 (−.001)</td>
<td>−.022 (−.006)</td>
<td>−.095* (−.012)</td>
<td>.032 (.004)</td>
<td>−.138** (−.011)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sex</td>
<td>−.121** (−.089)</td>
<td>−.074 (−.234)</td>
<td>−.148*** (−.233)</td>
<td>−.041 (.059)</td>
<td>.104* (.101)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>−.010 (−.001)</td>
<td>.090* (.041)</td>
<td>−.029 (−.007)</td>
<td>−.112* (.023)</td>
<td>−.049 (.007)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Region</td>
<td>.099* (.069)</td>
<td>.127*** (.355)</td>
<td>.035 (.052)</td>
<td>.042 (.058)</td>
<td>.004 (.004)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Racial composition of church</td>
<td>.035 (.150)</td>
<td>−.130** (.279)</td>
<td>.159*** (.311)</td>
<td>−.035 (.047)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Church attendance</td>
<td></td>
<td>.350*** (.175)</td>
<td>.025 (.011)</td>
<td>.090 (.028)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotional support</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>.241*** (.221)</td>
<td>.270*** (.169)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religion sustains Blacks</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>.161** (.110)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Multiple $R^2$                .025 .028 .173 .108 .177

Notes: All estimates derived from the LISREL Statistical Software Program. Standardized regression coefficients are shown, with metric (unstandardized) regression coefficients given in parentheses.

*p < .05; **p < .01; ***p < .001.

DISCUSSION

In their insightful discussion of religion among African Americans, Mattis and Jagers (2001) maintained that current work is “limited” and “disjointed.” Part of the problem, in their view, arises from the fact that researchers have yet to fully investigate the way religion functions in the daily lives of Black people. Because race-related problems in America are ubiquitous (Williams et al., 1997), it is not surprising to find that an important function of the church in the Black community is to address “questions of oppression, and... the quest for liberation, love, hope, and justice” (Mattis & Jagers, 2001, p. 523). This function appears unchanged for over 100 years (Du Bois, 2000). Yet there are few empirical studies of the unique race-related functions of religion in the Black community. This is especially true in social gerontology. This gap in the literature is unfortunate, because the current cohort of older African Americans grew up in an era when racial discrimination and prejudice were especially overt.

The purpose of this study was to meet this problem head-on by assessing whether strength received from religion to deal with racial injustice helps bolster feelings of life satisfaction among older Blacks. In the process, an effort was made to contribute to the literature in two additional ways. First, the race-related functions of religion were examined within a wider conceptual framework that distinguishes between common and unique facets of religion. Second, an effort was made to show that the common and unique components of religion operate jointly to enhance feelings of well-being among older African Americans. Doing so made it possible to highlight one way in which the widely acknowledged communal aspect of religion may operate among Blacks.

Findings from a nationally representative sample of older Blacks revealed that people who go to church often tend to receive more emotional support from rank-and-file church members. The data further indicate that people who get more church-based emotional support are more likely to feel that the church helps sustain Black people in the face of racial injustice. Finally, the results suggest that older Black people tend to have greater feelings of life satisfaction if they believe that religion helps sustain them in the face of racial problems. Viewed more broadly, these results reveal that feelings of life satisfaction among older Blacks are determined, at least in part, by the unique as well as the common dimensions of religion.

The model developed for this study also contained a measure reflecting the racial composition of the church attended by study participants. One finding involving this construct was somewhat surprising. More specifically, the data reveal that those who go to predominantly Black congregations receive less emotional support from church members than those who go to more racially mixed congregations. As there do not appear to be any other studies that have examined this relationship, it is difficult to provide an explanation. Perhaps the findings have something to do with the wider atmosphere of the congregation. More specifically, congregations that are more racially mixed may be especially sensitive to issues involving inclusiveness, and church members may go out of their way to welcome people of all racial and ethnic groups. Clearly, more research is needed to evaluate this as well as other issues involving the racial composition of a congregation and church-based support.

The distinction between common and unique facets of religion may be quite useful for other studies of religion, health, and well-being in late life. For example, the literature consistently shows that older women are more involved in religion than older men (Levin, Taylor, & Chatters, 1994). We need to know if there are unique ways in which religion is practiced or experienced among older men and women, and more research is needed to see if these gender differences are related to health and well-being. The current cohort of older
women has encountered a good deal of gender discrimination during the course of their lives. For example, a great deal has been written about how women have been systematically excluded from positions of higher authority and power in the church (e.g., Ozorak, 1996). It would be helpful to know if religion has helped them deal more effectively with this type of adversity. Similar insights might be gained by probing for common and unique elements of religion among older people in different socioeconomic status groups. The same is true with respect to other racial and ethnic groups. For example, we need to know if religion helps older Hispanics deal more effectively with the racial problems they encounter in American society as well. Further research in all these areas should help place a much-needed emphasis on social structural variations in the relationship between religion, health, and well-being in late life.

So far, the discussion of common versus unique facets of religion has focused primarily on issues surrounding various forms of prejudice and discrimination. Although these are obviously important issues, there is likely to be far more to the unique aspects of religion than this. For example, are there unique ways in which religion may help older, white-collar men successfully negotiate the transition to retirement from lifelong involvement in professional jobs? Does religion help these men find alternative roles (e.g., involvement in volunteer work at church), and does religion provide unique sources of purpose, direction, and meaning for them?

In the process of exploring these as well as other issues surrounding the unique facets of religion, researchers would be well advised to pay attention to the limitations in this study. Three are especially important. First, the data used in this study were gathered at one point in time only. As a result, the temporal ordering among constructs like church-based support and life satisfaction was based on theoretical considerations alone. However, one might just as easily maintain that people who are not satisfied with their lives subsequently have more trouble seeking out, obtaining, and effectively utilizing assistance from their fellow church members. Clearly, these as well as other causal assumptions that are embedded in the model developed for this study need to be rigorously evaluated with data that have been gathered at more than one point in time.

Second, as discussed earlier, 126 older Black respondents were excluded from the analyses because they did not go to church often. This was done because the church-based emotional support questions were not administered to them. However, it is entirely possible that those who do not go to church frequently nevertheless maintain meaningful relationships with the people who worship there. This can happen for the following reason. Some older people are unable to go to church because they are ill or because they are taking care of someone who is ill. Many churches maintain outreach programs that are designed specifically to assist those who are homebound. If older people avail themselves of these services, they may have the opportunity to form close ties with members of a church. Clearly, more research is needed on the relationship between homebound elders and church members.

Finally, more research is needed on the way in which the unique facets of religion among older Blacks are measured. The items developed for the current study ask respondents if they feel that religion helps all Black people deal with racial adversity. However, these indicators do not ask study participants if religion helps them personally deal with racial difficulties. As the two are not entirely the same, we need to know if respondents would answer these questions differently and if they have a differential effect on measures of health and well-being.

Writing over 100 years ago, William James (1902/1997) cogently argued that religion does not mean the same thing to all people. Instead, he maintained that “the divine can mean no single quality, it must mean a group of qualities, by being champions of which in alternation, different men may all find worthy missions. . . . So a ‘god of battles’ must be allowed to be the god for one kind of person, a god of peace, and heaven and home, the god of another. We must frankly recognize the fact that we live in partial systems, and that parts are not interchangeable in spiritual life” (p. 509). In essence, James is saying that religion means different things to different people and that no one model will capture the way religion operates for all. However, James was a psychologist, and his view was cast solely in terms of individual differences. The theoretical framework developed for the current study extends this line of reasoning by bringing social structural issues to the foreground. More specifically, the work presented herein suggests that religion may also mean different things, and operate in different ways, for people in different racial groups. Perhaps the greatest contribution of this study arises from the fact that it highlights this distinction and encourages other investigators to think in similar terms.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This research was supported by the following grant from the National Institute on Aging: “Religion, Aging, and Health” (ROI AG14749).

Address correspondence to Neal Krause, Department of Health Behavior and Health Education, University of Michigan, 1420 Washington Heights, Ann Arbor, MI 48109-2029. E-mail: nkraus@umich.edu

REFERENCES


Received April 11, 2003

Accepted July 3, 2003

Decision Editor: Charles F. Longino, Jr., PhD