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Understanding of Prayer Among African American Children: Preliminary Themes

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Theoretical accounts of African American culture describe spirituality and religion as significant socializing agents for African American children. Empirical studies suggest that prayer is a vital aspect of religious and spiritual fulfillment for African American families. Studies have also found that religious affiliation and cultural background influence the religious development of children. However, religious practices, such as prayer among African American children, have not been studied empirically. The purpose of this study is to describe how African American children understand prayer within a cultural context. This study also explored emotions that African American children associate with prayer. A convenience sample of 36 African American children aged 8 to 13 years participated in a structured interview. Core ideas among their responses were identified with a consensual qualitative coding method. Results from the current study were used to generate hypotheses regarding understanding of prayer among African American children.

Keywords: prayer; African American; children; spirituality; religion

Theoretical accounts of African American culture describe spirituality and religion as significant socializing agents (Brody, Stoneman, & Flor, 1996). African American children and adolescents identify religiosity to be an important aspect of their lives. Most investigations concerning the religious development of children have focused on cognitive aspects of religion;
more specifically, the process involved in religious thinking about prayer. When children have been interviewed, a developmental progression in the understanding of prayer has been seen. However, in spite of the importance of religion and spirituality to African American children, prior studies have focused primarily on religious thinking among children from European backgrounds. This study extends the literature by specifically examining religious thinking about prayer among African American children.

Religious and spiritual involvement have been found to serve as buffers or resiliency factors for African American children at a high risk for poor adjustment (Brody, Stoneman, & Flor, 1996). Woods and Jagers (2003) indicated that African values of spirituality are associated with higher levels of moral reasoning in adolescents. Christian and Barbarin (2001) found that African American children whose parents attended church on a weekly basis were reported to exhibit fewer problems than children whose parents attended church less frequently. In a discussion of these findings, Christian and Barbarin suggested that regular church attendance or religiosity might serve as a positive social support network that enhances self-regulation, delayed gratification, and obedience among African American children. Christian and Barbarin also suggested that parental religiosity or spirituality might contribute to parenting styles that enhance firmer self-control, social maturity, and positive coping skills.

Most empirical studies of religion and spirituality in childhood over the past 40 years have explored the process by which religious thinking develops. Early studies examined religious thinking within the framework of Piaget’s stage-model perspective of cognitive development (e.g., Ainsworth, 1961; Goldman, 1966). These studies indicated that although preschool children exhibited reverence and awe for God when children completed structured interviews, their religious ideas were superficial and often the product of fantasies. Although they might have learned to recognize some religious terminology, they exhibited little understanding of their meaning. It appeared that this vocabulary was later integrated into more advanced understandings of these concepts as children matured cognitively (e.g., Ainsworth, 1961; Goldman, 1966; Morely, 1975; Warten & Dollinger, 1986).

These conclusions were supported with studies that described religious thinking specific to prayer. Elkind (1978) examined childhood understanding of the nature, content and affective components of prayer through interviewing children. According to Elkind, children ages 5-7 years demonstrated “undifferentiated prayer” or dim awareness that prayer was linked to God. The younger children also demonstrated a vague and inconsistent understanding regarding the capacity of animals to pray. However, children ages 7-9 demonstrated “concrete prayer,” which was more of a request for activities and material possessions. Older children (9-10) exhibited what Elkind
labeled “abstract-differentiated” understanding, in which prayer was thought to be a form of direct communication with God that involved belief, thoughts, and emotions.

Similar methods (i.e., interviews) were used to examine belief in the efficacy of prayer among Jewish children in religious and nonreligious schools in Israel (Rosenberg, 1989a, 1989b, cited in Hyde, 1990). Content analysis of interviews revealed four distinct age-related areas requiring the conditions for prayers to be answered. Most children ages 5-7 had simplistic concepts of prayer and how prayer was offered (e.g., wearing proper attire when praying was important). These younger children indicated that the greater the number of people praying, the faster an answer would be received. Religious 8-10 year olds understood prayer as a religious act of thanksgiving that took the place of Temple sacrifice, while the nonreligious 8-10 year olds said people prayed because they believed in God. Nonreligious children also believed that different religious sects prayed to a different God. The adolescents (ages 13 to 15) valued prayer as a psychological need. For example, their petitions were often for very personal desires or needs. Adolescents also described God as a personal friend. The answer to prayers was seen as a part of God’s plan for the world, which was beyond their comprehension.

Empirical support for these Piagetian interpretations resulted in a great deal of debate regarding the applicability of the domains of religion and spirituality to children (Hyde, 1990). It was suggested that young children lack cognitive skills needed to understand the fundamental aspects of religion (Baston, Schoedrade, & Ventis, 1993). However, critics of this literature suggested that studies of spirituality and religiosity among children should consider the cultural context within which the child is socialized. For example, Western stages of faith development could not be replicated across cultures (Furushima, 1985).

Although there is a great deal to be gained from the stage-theories of religious development, studies over the past 40 years have not contained samples of African American children. Nor have these studies taken into account the role of cultural context, which is vital to African American children. In addition, stage-theories of religious development do not consider emotional components of religious experience.

Those studies that do contain African American children in their sample have been limited by the ways religiosity and spirituality have been measured. There has been a heavy reliance on parental report, as opposed to child self-report, of spirituality or religiosity. Religiosity has been measured by parent reports of church attendance, frequency of prayer, or open-ended questions about familial beliefs (Christian & Barbarin, 2001; Skinner,
Correa, Skinner, & Bailey, 2001). However, conclusions drawn from these indices reflect parent perceptions, and researchers have not yet established how religion and spirituality are expressed among African American children.

A clearer look at specific aspects of religiosity and spirituality (e.g., religious practices such as prayer) that exist among African American children would lead to a better understanding of these constructs. More specifically, conceptual understanding of prayer; such as what type of activity the children understand prayer to be should be examined. Componential understanding (understanding of the various aspects of prayer) should be described. Functional understanding, or children’s ability to define prayer according to the various functions it serves, should be considered. Operational definitions or ways in which children recognize an activity to be prayer should also be examined.

Furthermore, no studies have directly explored specific emotions experienced among children while participating in religious activities. In qualitative accounts of spirituality among African American adults, Mattis (2000) found that African American women associate spirituality with a sense of intimacy and positive affect. Thus, studies that explore how emotions might influence religious understanding and attitudes among children might find more meaningful results. For example, understanding of these emotions might lead to a better understanding of the relationship between emotional adjustment of children and religious involvement.

**STATEMENT OF PURPOSE**

The purpose of this study is to broadly describe prayer among African American children, ages 8 to 13 years. More specifically, we examined the understanding and emotional tone of prayer among African American children. Understanding of prayer is examined in terms of knowledge regarding the conceptual aspects, componential aspects, functional aspects, and operational definitions of prayer.

It was predicted that a developmentally progressive pattern in understanding of prayer will be observed. As consistent with earlier studies, the younger children were predicted to understand prayer as a ritual, while the older children were predicted to understand prayer to be more of a conversation. It was predicted that the children would identify culturally specific conceptualizations of spirituality cited in earlier qualitative accounts (Mattis, 2000).
It was predicted that the younger children (ages 8-11) would discuss functions such as petition and thanksgiving. Given that school-aged children in earlier studies had not understood the relational aspects of prayer, it was expected that themes regarding fellowship, adoration, contemplation, and penitence would be discovered only among older participants (ages 12-13). It was also predicted that collectivistic themes that are consistent with Africentric religion and spirituality would emerge in understanding of the function of prayer among African American children. More specifically, African American children were expected to place emphasis on prayer for the well-being of family and community members.

METHOD

PARTICIPANTS

A convenience sample of 37 children, ages 8-13 years, was recruited from two Missionary Baptist churches in a Midwestern city. The church congregations varied from 300-400 members. Both sexes were included in the sample, with 16 males and 20 females. However, younger children (8-11; n = 27) outnumbered older (12-13; n = 9) in the sample (M = 10.1, SD = 1.6). Most of the participants’ parents were employed in professional or technical positions. Table 1 provides a detailed demographic description of participants.

The participants’ parents reported that the children spent, on average, 50.6% of their life as a member of Baptist churches. Of the 33.3% of the children who were reported to have attended another church during their lifetime, all attended other Baptist congregations. Most of the parents indicated that their family prayed together at least 2-6 times weekly. Parents also described most of the children (71%) praying independently. Table 2 provides a detailed description of these variables.

PROCEDURES

Semi-structured interview. Semi-structured interviews were conducted by the principal investigator with individual participants. Open-ended questions were asked to ensure that the responses of participants were not constrained (see appendix). The interview protocol was a revised version of an original protocol that was pilot tested with two children. Modifications to the protocol were made to enhance the quality of responses provided. For example, questions that were difficult for the children to understand were replaced with
questions that used more developmentally appropriate language. These questions were intended to explore understanding of operational definitions as well as componential, functional, and conceptual aspects of prayer. The last question is intended to explore emotion associated with prayer.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TABLE 1</th>
<th>Demographic Description of Participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Age</strong></td>
<td>Percentage</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eight</td>
<td>16.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nine</td>
<td>27.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ten</td>
<td>16.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eleven</td>
<td>16.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Twelve</td>
<td>11.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thirteen</td>
<td>11.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Gender</strong></td>
<td>Percentage</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>44.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>55.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Parental occupation</strong></td>
<td>Percentage</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Officials and managers</td>
<td>4.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professionals</td>
<td>50.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Technicians</td>
<td>12.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Administrative support</td>
<td>16.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Laborers and helpers</td>
<td>8.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>8.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TABLE 2</th>
<th>Religious Characteristics of Participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Child attended other churches</strong></td>
<td>Percentage</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>33.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>66.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Frequency of family prayer</strong></td>
<td>Percentage</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Never</td>
<td>33.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Once monthly</td>
<td>8.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Once weekly</td>
<td>29.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Once daily</td>
<td>20.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More than once daily</td>
<td>8.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Child praying independently</strong></td>
<td>Percentage</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>70.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>29.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\( N = 36 \)
CONSENSUAL QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS

Consensual qualitative research methods (Hill, Thompson, & Williams, 1997) were applied for thematic analysis. Consensual qualitative methods were originally developed from the grounded theory approach, which involves the development of a conceptual network or related constructs about a phenomenon (Strauss & Corbin, 2001). Consensual qualitative methods are based on the assumption that multiple perspectives increase an estimate of validity and are less confounded by research bias (Marshall & Rossman, 1999). The analysis was conducted by a primary team of three coders, who received training in consensual qualitative methods. Interview analysis was supervised by an auditor or primary investigator. Specific steps were adapted from Hill et al. (1997), which involved the following process: (a) transcription, (b) transcript review, (c) within-case analysis, (d) cross analysis, and (e) examining patterns in the data.

TRANSCRIPTION

Interviews were transcribed verbatim by the primary investigator. After transcription was complete, the transcript was reviewed by the interviewer to ensure accuracy.

TRANSCRIPT REVIEW

Team members independently reviewed transcripts, and relevant text from the interviews was selected for further analysis. For example, child responses to all questions were determined to be most related to the study questions. Thus, the responses were selected as “relevant text” and highlighted for coding. For example, the interviewer’s question, “When do you pray?” was not selected as relevant text. However, the child’s response, “If somebody is by themselves and they are scared,” was selected as relevant text.

WITHIN-CASE ANALYSIS

Team members independently generated domains and coded them for each individual interview. A domain is a repeating idea that is expressed two or more times in relevant text of each individual interview. Each response to an interviewer’s question was considered to be a single block of data. These blocks were labeled with the selected domain by writing the domain label next to the text. If the same response could be coded as more than one domain, multiple domains were coded. Each child’s interview was
read and coded individually. Material that did not appear to fit into any
domain was not coded.

Team members then met to develop a consensus regarding coded
domains. Each coded domain for an individual block of data was discussed
until team members agreed on the appropriate domains. The auditor created
an additional consensus version of the coded transcript after the consensus
meeting. For example, the following block was coded independently by
each team member:

Child: “You, like, if somebody is by themselves and they are scared they can
pray and talk to God. If somebody is worried about something, they can talk
to God.” [personal petition]

Child: “You, like, if somebody is by themselves and they are scared they can
pray and talk to God. If somebody is worried about something, they can talk
to God.” [request]

Child: “You, like, if somebody is by themselves and they are scared they can
pray and talk to God. If somebody is worried about something, they can talk
to God.” [coping with negative emotions]

Although each coder independently identified different domains, a dis-
cussion during the consensus meeting led to a unified understanding, in
which all perspectives were accounted for. The coders immediately agreed
that “request” and “personal petition” essentially carried the same meaning.
However, the third coder was required to provide a good rationale for her
“coping” code. After some discussion, the following consensus was
reached:

Child: “You, like, if somebody is by themselves and they are scared they can
pray and talk to God. If somebody is worried about something, they can talk
to God.” [personal petition, coping]

Thus, “personal petition” and “coping” were established as official
domains. Definitions of these domains were clarified and noted in a codebook.

Next, each team member independently summarized the domains into
core ideas. Core ideas encompassed explicit ideas and avoided interpreta-
tions of the implicit meaning of data. Once team members developed these
ideas independently, an additional consensus was reached during a team
meeting. The core ideas were then entered into a consensus version of the
transcript labeled “Abstract,” as specified in the consensual qualitative
method. For example, the following core ideas were independently identi-
fied for Participant 1.
Coder 1:
- Associated positive emotions with prayer
- Says prayer is a way to meet personal needs
- Associates family and maternal figures with prayer
- Also associated prayer with forgiveness and lamentation

Coder 2:
- Prayer is related to positive emotions
- Operational definitions of prayer focus on posture
- Associates family and maternal figures with prayer
- Prayer is for forgiveness
- Prayer is a personal petition

Coder 3:
- Prayer leads to positive emotions
- Prayer is to fix one’s personal situation
- Prayer is defined as a ritual
- God is attainable

During the consensus meeting, coders agreed that Participant 1 exemplified the following core ideas.

Consensus 1:
- Associated positive emotions with prayer
- Says prayer is a way to meet personal needs, such as a difficult situation
- Associates family and maternal figures with prayer
- Also associated prayer with forgiveness and lamentation
- Prayer is defined by posture
- Prayer is defined as a ritual

Last, an auditor reviewed the core ideas agreed upon by the team. The auditor read through all raw materials and ensured that the raw material had been placed in the correct domain. The auditor also determined whether the wording of the core ideas was concise and reflective of the raw data. The auditor’s comments were then communicated to the primary team, who accepted the comments. The domains and core ideas for each case were revised on the basis of the auditor’s comments.

For example, the auditor reminded the coders that core ideas should reflect conceptual, componential, operational, and functional aspects of prayer. Religious concepts unrelated to these study questions should not be included in the core ideas. Thus, the revised version of Participant 1 included the following.
Consensus following auditor’s comments (Participant 1):

- Prayer is a ritual
- Prayer is used to change the outcome of difficult situations
- I recognize prayer by specific body postures
- Female adults in my family pray
- The function of prayer is a request for self
- Prayer is a way to seek forgiveness
- I experience positive emotions during prayer
- I am uncertain regarding the various aspects of prayer

CROSS ANALYSIS

Cross analysis encompassed the more interpretive aspect of coding. The team members determined if similar core ideas existed across cases. Core ideas that applied to all cases were coded as general, categories that applied to more than half of the cases were coded as typical, and categories that applied to less than half of the cases were coded as variant. An auditor then reviewed the cross analysis for an initial revision.

EXAMINING PATTERNS IN THE DATA

The sample was divided into subgroups by age. Younger children consisted of participants ages 8 to 11, and older children consisted of participants ages 12 to 13. Team members determined if patterns in understanding of prayer emerged according to ages of participants. An additional consensus meeting was held, in which agreed-upon patterns were discussed. The auditor provided guidance during this consensus meeting and reviewed these patterns for revision.

RESULTS

THEMATIC ANALYSIS

Conceptual understanding. The children were asked to provide a conceptual definition of prayer, by responding to the question “What does it mean to pray?” Typical and core ideas are listed in Tables 3 and 4, respectively. About half of participants defined prayer as a ritualistic behavior. Responses that met criteria for this core idea referred to prayer as an activity that should be initiated under specific circumstances, such as specific time of day or location. They also provided descriptions of a procedure
regularly followed during the act of prayer. Reference to recitation and/or memorization was also thought to reflect ritualistic behavior. For example, a 10-year-old male stated, “I mostly pray before I go to bed. I think it’s the ‘our father’ prayer.” Another child responded, “My mom told me to pray every time I go to bed.” A 13-year-old female explained, “I like to pray, ‘Now I lay me down to sleep . . .’ before I go to sleep at night. And my mom and dad started a tradition that when I was little that we prayed for like, bless great grandma, bless great grandpa.”

Nearly half of participants defined prayer as a spontaneous activity. This core idea summarizes child statements regarding an unplanned or spur of the moment act. Children who mentioned the spontaneity of prayer appeared to perceive God to be available on any occasion and under any circumstance.

### TABLE 3
**Typical Core Ideas**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>n</th>
<th>8-11</th>
<th>12-23</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Prayer is a ritual</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>80%</td>
<td>60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prayer is used to make a request for myself</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>80%</td>
<td>60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prayer is used to make a request on behalf of others</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>80%</td>
<td>80%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I recognize prayer by specific body postures</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>&lt;80%</td>
<td>80%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female adults in my family pray</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>80%</td>
<td>80%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I experience positive emotions when praying</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>80%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>N = 36</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### TABLE 4
**Variant Core Ideas**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>n</th>
<th>8-11</th>
<th>12-13</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Prayer is spontaneous</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>80%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prayer is a conversation</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prayer is a way to give thanks</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prayer is used to sustain what I value</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>80%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male adults in my family pray</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prayer is used to cope with difficult situations</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>80%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prayer is used to change the outcome of a situation</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>80%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prayer is used to seek forgiveness</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>40%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prayer is used to seek personal development</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prayer is used to build a relationship with God</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>40%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I experience both positive and negative emotions</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>&gt;20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>N = 36</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
For example, a 9-year-old female explained, “You could pray at night or anytime anywhere... It’s a conversation that I need to have with him at that moment.” A 9-year-old female stated, “You could pray with your eyes open, closed, before you go to school in the morning, you could pray at night or anytime, anywhere.” Although the idea of spontaneity may not have been mentioned directly, many children compared prayer among denominations and religious ideologies. For instance, an 11-year-old female stated, “I know that we studied Muslims at my school, they pray like three times a day. But Christians, they pray whenever they want to, like all day, every day.” A 13-year-old female confirmed, “I go to Catholic school and I don’t believe everything that Catholics believe and they have like prayer times, you know, you have prayers that you pray when you eat and prayers that you pray when you are sad. Like, sometimes the Catholic people, they ask you to pray to the saints sometimes when things get lost or stuff like that... just make up my own prayer for certain situations.”

Approximately 40% of participants described prayer as a conversation. The participants often referred to “talking with God” as a means of sending and receiving messages. These responses often were often coded within the “conversation” domain. The following includes several examples of conceptual understandings of prayer as a conversation: “I guess if you’re speaking to God, you pray.” When asked what prayer is, another child stated, “To talk to God, have a conversation with him.”

Componential understanding. The children were asked to describe the different aspects of prayer by responding to the question, “What are the different kinds of prayer?” Many (60%) of the responses were coded within the “uncertainty” domain. The “uncertainty” domain was coded when the children either misunderstood the question or experienced difficulty describing prayer in terms of components. Children who experienced difficulty were often hesitant to respond, frustrated by the question or denied that these aspects existed. For example, a 9-year-old female stated, “It doesn’t matter.” “There’s like... I forgot,” which was a fairly common response. Children who misunderstood the question could only cite one type of prayer. For example, when asked to describe the different kinds of prayer, a 10-year-old female stated, “I have a favorite in Psalms. It’s a prayer where kind of like he leads you.” A 12-year-old male asked, “When you... meditation... is that a prayer? I don’t know the rest.”

Functional understanding. In order to provide a functional definition of prayer, the children were asked to respond to the following questions: “What are some of the reasons why people pray?” “What do people pray
for?” “What happens when people pray?” “Why do you pray?” and “What do you pray for?” Two typical core ideas that emerged were the understanding that prayer is a means by which to make a request for themselves and/or make a request for others. A large portion of prayers for themselves or others were in reference to the expectation that God would change the outcome of a difficult situation (60%). Most of these situations involved illness or the likely death of a family member. These situations may have personally affected their lives or the lives of others. For example, a 10-year-old female stated, “If somebody in her family is very sick, God can help her. To get rid of their problems and just think of something else and put their problems aside and just let the Lord help you. I think that there is a song that says the Lord will bless everything you do, and I think you should take everything to the Lord and he will do it.”

There were a number of variant core ideas expressed. For example, the children often endorsed praying with expectations that God will help them cope with a dilemma (40%). They often expected to cope by praying with parental separation, illness, loss, change, and death of family members. Their responses were coded within the domains of “coping” or “healing.” A 12-year-old female stated, “God can help me through my bad feelings—I prayed for my father whenever he was about to die and he helped me, but he still died.”

Participants also thought of prayer as a way to sustain something valuable, such as the assurance of good health or safety (50%). They spoke of bad omens, which could be prevented. Coded domains such as “protection” and “omen” were included in this core idea. When asked to describe why she prays, an 8-year-old female stated, “If something bad comes, praying will make it stop happening if it’s bad . . . for him to watch over me, care for those who need care, watch over those in nursing home, watch over me and my family as we go to sleep.”

Several children indicated that prayer was a means of personal development (60%). These responses include reference to self-improvement or self-awareness. Many children expressed a desire to follow rules or excel in school, such as a 5-year-old female stating, “The normal prayer to keep my room clean.” Another example is an 11-year-old female who stated, “Like good dreams or doing good on a test.”

A number of children indicated that prayer is a means by which to obtain forgiveness (40%). The children often used the term *forgiveness* and demonstrated understanding by discussing socially undesirable behaviors. After a 10-year-old female indicated that she often seeks forgiveness, she added, “Good things can happen and you could feel much better about yourself if you have done something wrong.”
Thanksgiving also emerged as a variant idea (40%). Like forgiveness, the children often used the terms giving thanks, thanking him, or thanksgiving. They often stated that they were thankful for basic needs, such as food, clothing, good health, and shelter.

Another variant core idea emerged, in which prayer was referred to as being a means of relationship building between oneself and God (40%). The children often expressed a desire to “know” God or be closer to him. For example, an 11-year-old female stated, “I feel closer to God, like, it’s like there’s nobody else there. It’s just me and him and it’s our time together.” They also referred to a relationship with God as an experience in which powerful feelings are involved. Others used the term relationship in their descriptions of prayer. Another 11-year-old female stated, “It’s important and the more I have a relationship with God the more I pray.”

**Operational understanding.** All of the children indicated that the child in the picture was praying. A very common response (<80%) to “How do you know he/she is praying?” was a reference to the child’s posture. Many children stated, “Because she is bowing her head and her hands are together.” Although references to environmental cues such as “the stained glass windows” or “the cross in the background” were made in low frequency, the small number of responses did not meet criteria for a core idea.

**EMOTION**

The children were asked, “Tell me some feelings you have when you pray.” The children were most likely to associate positive emotions (50%) or mixed emotions (20%) with prayer. Positive emotions were coded when words such as happy, love, comfort, solace, pleasure, relief, and gladness were mentioned. Both positive and negative emotions were coded when the children used both positive and negative emotions in the same statement. In the case that negative emotions were described, the children often referred to prayer as a means to cope with those negative emotions.

**OTHER CORE IDEAS**

Most of the children identified prayer as an activity commonly practiced by family members (80%). Within these responses, “female adults in my family pray” was a core idea present among most of the participants (80%). Over half of the participants (60%) indicated that male adults in their family pray. For example, “grandmother,” “grandpa,” “my mom,” or “my sister” were often mentioned. Nonrelatives within their community were rarely mentioned.
PATTERNS ACROSS AGE

Although statistical analysis was not conducted to indicate significant age differences between groups, several patterns were observed among younger and older children. Younger children were more likely to conceptualize prayer as a ritual behavior, while older children were more likely to conceptualize prayer as a spontaneous activity. The older children were also more likely to conceptualize prayer as a conversation (50%), while younger children referred to conversation less often (40%).

Age patterns in terms of functional understanding were observed. Younger children (80%) were more likely than older children (50%) to state that prayer was a request for themselves. Younger children were also more likely to refer to prayer as a way of giving thanks and of developing personally. Older children were more likely to refer to prayer as a means of coping with a difficult situation or to change the outcome of a situation. Older children also made more reference to prayer as a way to sustain what is highly valued. However, no age patterns emerged in terms of the following core ideas: prayer on behalf of others, prayer to seek forgiveness, and prayer to build relationships.

In terms of emotions experienced during prayer, younger children (40%) were more likely than older children to endorse experiencing mixed emotions during prayer. However, more older children endorsed experiencing positive emotions. No age patterns were observed in terms of negative emotions.

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to describe understanding of prayer among African American children. One important finding is that children often made requests on the behalf of others. They also focused heavily on the importance of building a relationship with God through prayer. However, there were several core ideas that were not originally predicted to emerge. For example, most of the children described prayer as a spontaneous conversation with God. They often described their relationship with God as easily attainable, in which they can seek closeness at any time. For many of the children, this process did not involve ritualistic behaviors. For example, the most appropriate time to pray depended on the context of a difficult situation, as opposed to a specific time of day.

Another unexpected finding was a reluctance to define prayer in terms of distinct components. The children found it difficult to respond to the question “What are the different kinds of prayer?” On some instances, they were frustrated by the question or hesitant to respond.
Difficulty responding to this question may have been due to poor wording or lack of clarity regarding the context. It is also possible that the children questioned the relevance of componential definitions. Interestingly, most of the core ideas reflected functional definitions of prayer, as opposed to componential definitions. Thus, one may also speculate that mutually exclusive components of religious practices are not a primary focus for the children.

Overall, these findings may suggest that the understanding of prayer among African American children is fluid and personal. In other words, there are few restrictions on circumstance, time, place, or method of prayer. Furthermore, the reluctance (or inability) to define prayer in terms of distinct components may suggest that prayer is thought to be a fluid concept. Their personal experiences also determine the nature of prayer, which makes individual differences in the meaning of prayer an important aspect to consider.

As predicted, younger children in the current study were more likely to define prayer as a ritual, while the older children were more likely to define prayer as a spontaneous conversation. The older children were also more likely to conceptualize prayer as a coping mechanism or solution to difficult problems. For example, the children often expected prayer to help them cope with parental separation, illness, loss, or the death of family members.

These age patterns may be explained by the development of more abstract reasoning abilities among the older age group. Ritual gives a concrete representation to the abstract ideas (e.g., being cleansed by Christ’s blood during communion). Older children may not rely so heavily on such tangible representations to confirm the existence of supernatural beliefs. These findings are consistent with previous studies that suggest that Piagetian theory can be applied to religious and spiritual development among children.

Alternative explanations for age patterns may consider language skills development or socialization. The older children may have more advanced expressive language skills, which allowed them to verbalize their thoughts with less difficulty. In terms of socialization, older children who might have greater exposure to a specific experience would be expected show more developed reasoning during discussions about the experience. Thus, greater exposure to religious and spiritual contexts among the older children may account for more use of religious jargon. Such jargon may create the appearance that the older children have greater understanding of this religious concept. Furthermore, no statistical analysis was conducted to determine if age patterns are statistically significant and should be cautiously interpreted.

Given that school-aged children in earlier studies had not understood relational aspects of prayer, it was predicted that themes regarding fellowship, adoration, and contemplation would exist only among the older age
group. This prediction was not supported by the current study. In fact, several core ideas regarding relational aspects of prayer emerged across both age groups. For example, a large portion of both age groups described prayer as a means by which to build a relationship with God.

These findings are not consistent with studies that support the application of Piagetian stage-theory to spiritual development. The younger children described and interpreted abstract material, a task for which they are not thought to be capable of at age 8 and 9. For example, core ideas regarding relationship building or feeling emotionally close to God in the absence of tangible representations (e.g., taking communion) requires some abstract representation of religious ideas. Furthermore, the children did not demonstrate misunderstanding of religious concepts or magical thinking, which was common across studies of children that did not include African American populations (Goldman, 1964, as cited in Hyde, 1990). Their responses are also similar to studies with African American adults, in which spirituality is described as relational, intimate, conversational, and coping focused (Mattis, 2000).

Overall, the consistency of these core ideas across age groups may suggest that a developmental progression is not straightforward. Many factors other than age may account for how the children understood a religious concept, such as prayer. Age does not seem to be the best indicator of the desire to build a relationship or seek forgiveness through prayer. Nor may age be a good indicator of religious socialization or greater exposure to religious concepts.

Findings from this study suggest that most of these children associated positive emotions with prayer. Positive emotions appeared to be associated with feelings of closeness to God and the belief that prayers would be answered. Although negative emotions were often mentioned, prayer was described as a means to cope with these negative emotions. Most children in the current study answered questions regarding their emotional experience with little difficulty. They also referred to emotion when responding to questions regarding the functional aspects of prayer.

These findings are consistent with studies that suggest emotion plays a role in religion and spirituality among African Americans. In qualitative accounts of spirituality among African Americans, Mattis (2000) found that African American women associate spirituality with a sense of intimacy and positive affect. The findings were consistent with studies that identify spirituality as a buffer or resiliency factor for African American children at a high risk for poor adjustment (Brody, Stoneman, & Flor, 1996; Christian & Barbarin, 2001). Emphasis on coping may result from empirical research that has supported the notion that religiosity and spirituality are related to positive physical and mental health.
Given the context within which the participants were socialized, themes that are consistent with African American expression of religion and spirituality were expected to emerge. This prediction was supported by several core ideas that are consistent with African American culture. However, the context in which these factors originate should be considered.

Although Christianity had a strong presence among Africans in the Americas during the early years of slavery, Costen (1981) states that the tradition of Black prayer, “speaks more to the African understanding of God than it does to the American form of Christianity to which the slaves were introduced.” In other words, traditional African styles have been incorporated into worship. Pre- and post-Civil War accounts of African Americans describe secret prayer meetings or “hush hollows,” in which Christian religious practice drew much of its essence from traditional African practices (Jones, 1989). Prayer meetings were characterized by spontaneous expression, call and response patterns, and the use of familiar music.

These themes are consistent with other accounts of religion and spirituality among modern African American families. Nobles (1980) noted that African American religious life places emphasis on collective ideals, which have been adopted from an African worldview. African American rituals also continue to emphasize use of music, drumming dance, and song (Jones, 1989). Other core ideals include the belief in ancestry power and spirit possession that have been preserved from African heritage.

Several of these ideals are described by the children in the current study. For example, the children placed emphasis on prayer for the well-being of family and community members. The spontaneous and fluid representation nature of prayer is consistent with African American religious life. For example, difficulty defining prayer in terms of individual components may suggest that the children were developing a more holistic understanding of prayer. Separating and dividing prayer into mutually exclusive parts may have been counterintuitive for the children.

These findings may suggest that understanding of prayer among African American children may be unique when compared to children previously studied. For example, many studies mentioned in the review of literature found that children ages 7 to 9 frequently made requests for material possessions (Long, Elkind, & Spilka, 1967). Although the children in this study may have prayed for material things, they did not mention requests for materials when asked to describe “what people should pray for.” In fact, several children indicated that people should not pray for material possessions unless in great need.
IMPLICATIONS

Although some age patterns were revealed, a developmentally progressive understanding of prayer does not appear to be straightforward. Regardless of age, many children referred to prayer as a ritual, while others defined prayer as a spontaneous conversation. They also described prayer as an activity in which one seeks change or copes with difficult situations. The children placed the most emphasis on prayer as a means by which to build personal relationships with God, or to seek forgiveness or help for others. Nonetheless, there was a great range of differences between participants, which depended on situational contexts (e.g., needing help for a specific problem). During their description of emotions experienced during prayer, they often mentioned feelings of closeness or intimacy with God, which were related to positive emotion.

These results imply that these African American children appear to understand prayer to be a personal experience, with few restrictions on circumstance, time, place, or method. They are most likely to define prayer in terms of emotional, functional, conceptual, and situational-specific perspectives. These perspectives appear to be overlapping concepts that are not linear or mutually exclusive. Overall, these results may suggest that the participants in this study experience prayer as a fluid and personal experience.

Measures of spirituality and religious practices among African American children would be improved if researchers would consider these findings in the future. Given the fluid nature of prayer among this sample, researchers should resist the temptation to apply categories, rigid rules, and stage theories to the study of spirituality among African American children. In light of difficulty applying religious concepts across groups, quantitative measures of religion and spirituality should take into account heterogeneity among the children. Scales could be developed that measure religious concepts in the form most often seen among children. For example, while some emphasis should be placed on ritual, the functional and situational-specific aspects of religious practices should be taken into consideration. When constructing new measures, researchers would also need to include the affective experience of religion and spirituality for children, as well as contextual factors specific to religious socialization.

STRENGTHS AND LIMITATIONS

The consensual qualitative method utilized increased the objectivity of the findings from the current study. For example, use of multiple coders decreased the extent to which poorly justified subjectivity could account for
the interpretations. In other words, potential bias was minimized. The consensual qualitative method also provided a clear method and strategy by which interpretations are derived; this enhances the degree to which these findings can be justified. Moreover, the resulting core ideas were coherent, which provide a theoretical narrative that can be applied to future studies.

Generalizability of the current study is limited by characteristics of the participants that may not be representative of most African American children. As religious and spiritual development is influenced by a child’s cultural context, it is not likely that the results of this study can be easily reproduced with African American children who are not socialized within Christian and/or Baptist contexts. The results of the current study are most likely to apply to African American children socialized within Christian perspectives. This study might be improved significantly if the participants were drawn from a setting in which a variety of religious backgrounds were represented.

Interpretive bias among the coders represents an additional limitation to the qualitative methodology. All coders were African American women from Protestant and Catholic religious backgrounds. They also shared a firm belief that Christian principles are essential to the socialization of African American children. Thus, interview content was filtered through an African American, female-identified, gendered, Christian theological lens. Personal values and interests may also have altered their interpretation of the data. For example, their understanding of prayer as a fluid and personal experience themselves may have led them to search for personal confirmation within the interviews.

It would be helpful if researchers in the future accounted for the potential use of jargon by the children by developing a better indicator of understanding. For example, multiple-choice questions administered following typical religious responses may also be used to check for understanding. These suggestions may have been most helpful to assess componential understanding of prayer.

Future studies should provide a more consistent operational definition of prayer when the concept is introduced to children. The current study was limited by the use of a picture to introduce the concept of prayer during the interview. This picture may not have been an accurate representation of prayer for the participants. Thus, sensitivity to this issue may result in less biased or rehearsed responses from children in future studies.

The current study generated a number of hypotheses that should be explored in future studies. Religious denomination and cultural influences may also impact the way in which religious thinking develops. Development of cognitive abilities may interact with social factors to influence religious
understanding. For example, results suggest that socialization agents such as modeling may influence religious development of children. The findings may also imply that language skills and abstract reasoning abilities influence development of religious understanding. However, the qualitative or exploratory nature of the current study limits the ability to explore these questions. Future studies should apply quantitative methods and statistical analysis to further explore potential age trends. The current study should be duplicated with larger samples among a variety of populations to explore these hypotheses.

APPENDIX

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

The children were asked the following open-ended questions in the order that they appear:

1. “Tell me about what a girl (boy) might be saying when he (she) is praying?”
   If child does not respond to the question, the interviewer may ask the child to pretend that they are praying, “take a guess at what he (she) might say.”
2. “How would we know when a girl (boy) is praying?”
3. “What does it mean to pray?”
4. “What are some of reasons why people pray?”
5. “What do people pray for?”
6. “Are there different kinds of prayer?” If yes, “What are the different kinds of prayer?”
7. “What happens when people pray?”
8. “Do you pray?”
9. “Tell me about a time when you prayed.”
10. “Why do you pray?”
11. “What do you pray for?”
12. “Who do you know that prays?”
13. “Tell me some feelings you have when you pray.” All feelings stated should be followed by, “When do you feel (insert child’s response)”

REFERENCES


