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# Spirituality and Transformational Learning: How Urban Residents Abandoned a Life of Violence

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**SPIRITUALITY AND TRANSFORMATIONAL LEARNING: HOW URBAN  
RESIDENTS ABANDONED A LIFE OF VIOLENCE**

**by**

**Sylvia N. Wilson**

**A Dissertation Submitted in  
Partial Fulfillment of the  
Requirements for the Degree of**

**Doctorate of Philosophy  
in Urban Education**

**at**

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**Major Professor**

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**Graduate School Approval**

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**ABSTRACT**  
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by

**Sylvia N. Wilson**

**THE UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN-MILWAUKEE, 2011**  
**UNDER THE SUPERVISION OF PROFESSOR DR. LARRY MARTIN**

Community violence has been a perpetual issue among disenfranchised, African American, urban youth around the world. Many authors argue that high rates of violence among these youth are due to macro-structural characteristics such as inequality, segregation, racial discrimination, and poverty. These macro-structural issues place stressors (social disorganization, joblessness, alienation, mistrust of police, etc.) upon inner-city neighborhoods. Previous research also infers that African American men lack the ability to non-violently cope with these stressors and strains. Thus, this qualitative narrative study investigated the role of spirituality in the transformational process of nine urban, African American men, who had abandoned a life of violence. The purpose of the study was to find out “how” spirituality aided these men in transforming from a lifestyle of violence. The study found that early childhood trauma, along with resentments and feelings of lack, and silenced emotions eventually, caused the participants acceptance, love and protection from the streets. However, living a violent street life often led to internal conflicts and the development of addictions.

When the participants found themselves facing significant jail/prison time, it facilitated a process of reflection and an openness to spirituality. The spiritual quest of these individuals then led to feelings of acceptance, a renewed a sense of individual identity, provided vital networks of social support, facilitated a trusting relationship between the participants and the Creator, and provided a sense of connection with the community.

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Major Professor

Date

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## **CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION**

The American classroom continues to become increasingly more diversified. Today, adult educators must have the ability to relate to those from very diverse backgrounds in order to effectively facilitate learning. Although many educators have learned to contextualize curriculums to fit the audience being taught; one population continues to pose a challenge for adult educators. Despite efforts to accommodate the disadvantaged, urban community, minority groups within these communities continue to lag educationally. Achievement gaps continue to widen on the primary and secondary levels, and the high school dropout rate is considerable. Further, the college dropout rates for this population is double that of whites, according to the United States Census Bureau (2006). Many educators and program planners are finding that conventional ways of planning curriculums are no longer effective with this population. There is a great need to determine how to negotiate the interests, experiences, and challenges of people within the urban community in order to construct programs that are effective for this population (Daley, Fisher, & Martin, 2000).

One of the most challenging experiences that the disadvantaged urban community faces is that of street violence. The effects of street/community violence often spill over into the academic lives of those who are exposed to it (Wordes & Nunez, 2002). Thus, coping with violence and its effects is a subject that is worthy of being addressed. Many researchers have addressed violence, in order to help educators understand its prevalence, causes, and effects within the urban community (Anderson, 2005; Bellair, 2003; Kubrin & Weitzer, 2003; Stewart & Simons, 2006; DuRant, Candanhead, Pendergrast, Slavens, & Linder, 1994; Ng-Mak, Salzinger, Feldman, & Stueve, 2002).

However, the subject of positively coping with exposure to violence and overcoming the challenges related to it has yet to be addressed. Given the complexity of the urban violence epidemic, more research needs to be done in these areas, as it may give insights viable to creating more effective violence prevention education and programs for those who desire to transform out of a life of violence.

Violence among impoverished, minority, inner city youth is disproportionate to that of other youth (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2003; Cotton, Resnick, Browne, Martin, McCarraher, Woods, 1994). Many macro-structural factors like unemployment, segregation, and discrimination contribute to inner-city violence. These macro-structural problems then cause a wide array of community stressors such as joblessness and feelings of alienation and hopelessness (Anderson, 1999). In turn, these community problems cause a great amount of strain on individuals and their families. Research identifies an alternative culture that arises as a result of these issues (Anderson, 2005; Kubrin & Wietzer, 2003; Matsueda, 1989; Magura, 1975). It is a culture in which individuals strive to obtain and maintain alternative means of financial provision, status, and respect. This alternative culture is not only contrary to the mainstream; it is also driven and supported by notions of violence and retaliation. Research shows that mere exposure to violence is one of the most prevalent causes of the perpetuation of violent acts among youth and young adults (Stewart and Simons, 2006). According to Ng-Mak, Salinzinger, Feldman, & Stueve (2002), many youth display a lowered consciousness as a result of their exposure to violence; which often leads them to participate in additional violence.

In many studies, the behavioral and affective responses of and to violence are viewed as “coping mechanisms”—one’s way of not allowing their environment to

overwhelm them or to alleviate the strain caused by their environment. However, this “pathological adaption” to violence, actually normalizes and legitimizes violent behavior for those exposed to it (Ng-Mak, et. al., 2002). Bandura, Barabenelli, Capara and Pastorelli (1996) also suggest that this type of coping leads to a “moral disengagement.” Thus, allowing one to easily move from mere exposure to and acceptance of violence, to actual participation in violent acts. According to Wordes and Nunez (2002), youth who are exposed to violence in such ways, are more likely to have problems in school.

This creates a vicious cycle, as those who fail to complete high school are also more likely to commit acts of violence (Lochner & Moretti, 2004; Western & Pettit, 2002). In fact, Western and Petit (2002) state that in 1996 more high school dropouts between the ages of 20 and 35 were in prison than in full-time employment on the average day. This may be due to the fact that a high school diploma is required for a majority of entry-level jobs (Goldschmidt, & Wang, 1999; Caspi, Wright, Moffitt, & Silva, 1998; Anyon, 2005). Thus, without a high school diploma an individual is less likely to be able to obtain legitimate employment. Without employment, many feel forced to “survive” in other (often non-legitimate) ways. Therefore, the literature suggests that there is a relationship between violent crime, academic achievement, and the unemployment rates of the disadvantaged, urban community.

### **Purpose**

The subject of negative coping (through desensitization and ultimately, participation in violence) has been a topic immensely covered in literature (Durant, Cadenhead, Pendergrast, Slavens & Linder, 1994; Ng-Mak, et. al. 2002; Bellair, 2003; Magura 1975; Attar, 1994; Dempsey, 2002, Kliewer, 1998). There is also a plethora of

literature that discusses the negative psychological effects of exposure to violence (Bandura, 1996; Matsueda, 1989). However, research concerning the ways of positively coping with exposure to violence has been minimal. Further, the majority of these studies have been on the topic of resiliency—one's innate or genetic ability to cope with trauma more positively than others. Nevertheless, the inquiry of teaching or coaching individuals through positive ways of coping with exposure to violence has yet to be widely explored.

An important area of positive coping is that of spirituality. Spirituality has been explored as a positive coping mechanism in the areas of sickness/disease, sexual assault, loss, and mental illness. The relationship between spirituality and positive coping for those experiencing exposure to and transformation from a life of violence has also been investigated. However, the affects of spirituality on long-term, persistent abandonment of violence has yet to be investigated. This topic may give key insight into the process of alleviating violence for urban youth by assisting with the development of violence intervention programming. It could also play a strategic role in the development of programs to improve recidivism rates for violent offenders.

Using spirituality as a positive coping mechanism for men going through the process of desisting from crime has been addressed in the literature (Schroeder & Frana, (2009). Therefore, spirituality could possibly serve as a viable link to helping inner city youth both cope with violence and transition from a life of violence; and thus contribute to the overall reduction of urban violence. Inquiry into how spirituality is used to cope with exposure to violence could also add to the reservoir of knowledge for urban educators and program developers.



The purpose of this study was to explore the transformative processes of those who have used spirituality as a positive coping mechanism to help transition them out of a life of violence. It was to give voice to those who have endured the journey of transformation; thus, giving insight into the process of that transformation and the needs of this population, from the perspective of those who have experienced them firsthand. In doing so, I was able to extrapolate key concepts for the development of successful preventative and transformative programming that could help reduce the rates of violence among urban youth and young adults. Although it is not the direct aim of this research, the information gathered may be able to assist in the development of programming to assist minority, urban youth, living in hostile environments, to graduate from high school and transition into higher education.

For the purpose of this study, transformation is defined as a dramatic, fundamental change in the way one sees himself and the world in which he lives (Mezirow, 1978). According to Merriam and Caffarella (1999), transformation concerns the cognitive process, including the mental construction of experience, inner meaning, and reflection. As stated previously, there is a large body of research that links violence exposure to psychological disorders (i.e., Depression, Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, and Anxiety) and other affective and behavioral problems in youth and young adults (Attar, Guerra, & Tolan, 1994; Dempsey, 2002; Durant, Cadenhead, Pendergrast, Slavens & Linder, 1994; Kliwer, et. al., 1998). However, cognitive dysfunction is also a major concern for this population; and is an important concept within this study. Other authors within the field of psychology define “cognitive dysfunction” as any pattern of thought

that keeps one from being able to function in life in a manner that is non-harmful to themselves (Wakefield, 1992).

The street codes by which many urban youth live, is comprised of particular cognitive schema (“prescriptions and proscriptions,” as coined by Elijah Anderson), or patterns of thought that navigate their daily lives. Unfortunately, many of these schemata become harmful to the individuals possessing them, because they prevent them from being able to successfully navigate through mainstream life (i.e., hold a job, complete their education, develop positive relationships, etc.). According to Dempsey (2002), positive coping could, in fact, mediate between exposure to violence and cognitive dysfunction. Beck (1964) also argues that negative schema could be “neutralized” or reconstructed. Thus, facilitating development and change in the composition or the structure of one’s thought patterns could assist them in learning how to positively cope. It could change the outward appearance or displayed reaction to particular negative schema, from that of violence to nonviolent. This process may also facilitate a change in their viewpoint of themselves and their relationship with the world around them; enabling them to successfully navigate through mainstream culture. Therefore, according to Mezirow (1978), transformation takes place.

### **Research Questions**

The primary research question to be addressed in this study is “How is spirituality used by African American men in urban environments for transforming out of a life of violence?” In this study a narrative methodology was used to interview participants concerning three timeframes of their lives: their life experience before transformation, during transformation, and after transformation (or its continuing process). Participants

were asked to give a narrative about their lifestyle and perspective during the three corresponding times in their lives. Much of the information needed for this study concerning the differing segments of life, naturally came out within the text of their narratives. However, interview questions were asked to obtain further details and other necessary information. The questions were concerning the perspectives (and changes of perspectives) of each participant concerning themselves, their families, violence, relationships, their communities and parenting during the three segments of their lives. They were asked to describe the moment/period of time in which they realized they desired or needed change, and what assisted them in both initiating and, more importantly, maintaining change in their lives.

According to Anderson (1999) a “decent” and “street” individual represents two poles of value orientation and two contrasting conceptual categories. Within his 1999 book, Anderson investigated five major categories of life in which one’s orientation (street or decent) would greatly effect: family life, gaining respect, navigation of street life (drugs, violence, street crime), relationships (mates), and parenthood. Thus, my goal was to extract the most information about each participant’s perspective concerning these areas of life during each point in their life history. I also wanted to investigate how their viewpoints of their self-purpose, worldview and understanding of the transcendent changed. This assisted in discerning differences or shifts within these perspectives before and after/continuing in their transformation process.

### **Background of the Study**

Anderson (1999) indicated that, at its core, the code of the street is the major cause for the perpetuation of street violence in the urban community. He defined the code

of the street as an oppositional culture with “prescriptions and proscriptions or informal rules of behavior organized around a desperate search for respect that governs public social relations, especially violence, among so many residents, especially young men and women” (Anderson, 1999, pp. 9-10). According to Anderson (2005), this culture arises out of the circumstances of the ghetto poor, which includes “the lack of jobs that pay a living wage and the stigma of race; and ad hoc financial system borne of the lack of economic resources, combined with the fallout of drug trafficking and rampant drug use; lack of faith in police ‘protection’ or fair treatment by the criminal justice system; and the resulting alienation and lack of hope for the future” (Anderson, 2005). Macro-structural problems, such as unemployment, poor educational systems, and racial discrimination, place stressors on urban communities, causing them to become disenfranchised, unorganized, and hopeless (Anderson, 1999; Kubrin & Weitzer, 2003). Thus, a culture of violence emerges, in which individuals seek to obtain and maintain resources, status, power, and ultimately, “respect” (Anderson, 1999; Bellair, Roscigno & McNulty, 2003).

According to Anderson (1999) this oppositional culture, not only navigates street life within the inner city community, it also influences the lives of those who don’t live according to street code (whom Anderson coins as “decent”). Even neighborhood schools have become a “stage” where disadvantaged youth come to gain street cred[it] or “respect.” Thus, many youth living according to street code, don’t primarily view school as a place for learning. In fact, many urban youth rebel against the educational system, because they feel that their schooling experience is irrelevant and cannot prepare them for the life challenges that they face (Anderson, 1999). As stated earlier, low education levels are often a precursor to violent lifestyles for urban youth; and violent lifestyles highly

contribute to elevated incarceration and joblessness rates. According to Anderson's study, those who once lived according to the code of the street and try to live a mainstream life, have a hard time coping outside of their familiar "code." They often face barriers that hinder their progress or push them back into street life. Supportive programming to assist with the needs of those coping with violence or transitioning into mainstream life, from a life of crime and violence, has been minimally effective. Without programming that effectively and holistically addresses these needs, many desiring change within the urban community become disenfranchised and develop a sense of hopelessness; and may ultimately return to a life of street violence.

Although there are numerous programs established to both prevent urban violence and intervene on behalf of those who have already committed violent crimes, recent studies show that these programs have been ineffective or minimally effective for long-term abandonment of violence (Schroeder & Frana, 2009; McMahon, 2009). According to Park-Higgerson, Perumean-Chaney, Bartolucci, Grimley & Singh (2008), many individual studies claim to find that programs have an effect on lowering violence. However, a meta-analysis of 26 violence prevention programs shows that they did not produce significant effects, regardless of five major characteristic differences (Park-Higgerson, et. al., 2008). The programs were categorized as: theory-based vs. non theory-based, selective (with only at-risk youth) vs. universal, multiple approach vs. single-approach, 4th grade or lower vs. 5th through 12th grades, and teacher-based vs. specialist-based. Regardless of category, none of the programs were proven to have effects in reducing aggression and violence greater than those of a control group.

Further, Greenwood (2008) states that efforts to prevent delinquency over the past century have been unsuccessful; including those that address the macro-structural issues outlined by Anderson (1999). In fact, many programs use preventive and intervention strategies that align with the most prevalent theories about the causes of crime and delinquency (including negative home/neighborhood environment, lack of job opportunity and lack of socializing). However, the National Research Council conducted rigorous evaluations of preventative programs using strategies supported by these theories in 1994. According to Greenwood (2008), these evaluations concluded that none of the strategies used were effective. Considering these studies, it is imperative that alternative theories that address the community violence epidemic be found. Preventative/intervention programs must be infused with information that will make a connection with the experiences of the people in the community in which they serve, help find alternative ways of coping with those experiences, and holistically address the issues that arise from those experiences.

### **Definitions**

For the purpose of this study, the following definitions will be used:

**Violence**—community violence; which includes (but is not limited to) shoving, punching, kicking, knife attacks, shootings, and verbal abuse against members of the community (Martinez & Richters, 1993).

**Mainstream culture**—the majority of society; those who have a real concern with and have a certain amount of hope for the future. Their attitudes are focused on a drive to build a good life and instill their values in their children (Anderson, 1999).

**Oppositional culture**—a culture that does not align with the values of mainstream society. In particular, “street” culture that shows a lack of consideration for other people, a superficial sense of family and community, and embraces violence as a means of getting and maintaining “respect” (Anderson, 1999).

**Respect**—a form of social capital that is valued when other forms have been denied or are unavailable; especially the concept of being treated “right” or being given the deference one is owed (Anderson, 1999, 2002).

**Transformation**—a dramatic, fundamental change in the way one sees himself and the world in which he lives (Mezirow, 1978).

**Spirituality**—a process that involves the pursuit for discovering direction, meaning and purpose in one’s life (Love and Talbot, 1999), which is complex and includes belief in a supernatural dimension of life, and personal relationship with God; living according to God’s will and holding intrinsic beliefs and values (Mattis, 2000).

**Positive Coping**—the use of problem-solving efforts, seeking information, and obtaining social support in order to cope with exposure to violence (Dempsey, 2002).

**Negative Coping**— the use of withdrawal, aggression or blaming others as a tactic to cope with exposure to violence. These techniques may include ignoring, crying, hitting, fighting, and screaming/yelling (Dempsey, 2002), or adapting negative emotions.

**Harmful Dysfunction**—a condition (psychological or physiological) that results from the inability of some internal mechanism to perform its natural function in that the condition causes some harm or deprivation of benefit to the person as judged by the standards of the person's [mainstream] culture (value criterion) (Wakefield, 1999).

**Youth/Young Adult**—people between the ages of 12-26.

**Decent**—individuals/families that embrace mainstream values and teach them to their children.

**Street**—individuals/families with values that oppose those of the mainstream and embrace those of the oppositional culture defined above.

### **Need for and Significance of Study**

Many authors testify that strain caused by living in a disadvantaged, urban environment can lead to feelings of anger and acts of aggression/violence (Jang & Johnson, 2005; Jang, 2007, Anderson, 1999). According to Collins (2006), impoverished, minority youth are disproportionately represented in the juvenile justice system. One-third of minority youth between the ages of ten to seventeen are identified as juvenile offenders and make up two-thirds of the population detained and committed to secure



facilities (Collins, 2006). A unique relationship exists between strain, anger and African American males—making them more susceptible to negatively and outwardly cope with strain (Jang & Johnson, 2005, Jang, 2007). Thus, there are higher rates of violence among this population. According to Bryant (2011), racism and discrimination also play an important role in the development of internalized racism and the perpetuation of violence by African American males, upon their own communities. All of these topics will be further discussed in chapter two. For these reasons, this study focused on African American men.

More knowledge about how African American males can learn to positively cope with the strain of urban life is needed. Also, as educators and researchers working with the urban population, we must gain an understanding of the emotional, mental and social responses and needs of those who have lived a life of violence. Since conventional ways have not been successful, we must find ways to negotiate the interests, experiences and challenges of those living in the disadvantaged, urban community, in order to effectively construct programming (Daley, Fisher, & Martin, 2000). Thus, understanding and insight is needed to develop new ways of presenting knowledge and facilitating learning that will promote positive long-term change. Despite past theories regarding the reasons urban youth violence occurs, the development of programs that have been based upon these theories have been minimally effective.

The voice of those who have experienced a life of violence, first-hand, and persistently transformed out of it, desperately needs to be heard. Not only can these individuals give further insight into the reasons why violence occurs, but their accounts of transformation can also provide information concerning effective processes of real

change. Past prevention/intervention programming has heavily focused on treating external or environmental ills. Research that addresses internal (cognitive, affective) factors focus on the negative affects of violence upon the individuals exposed to it (i.e., depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, etc.); and the treatment of those resulting problems. However, positively coping with exposure to violence has not been widely explored. This study provides personal accounts of how spirituality was used as a positive coping mechanism for those transforming out of a life of violence. Thus, it may provide insight for how spirituality can be used as a tool for developing more holistic programs for those wanting to abandon a “street” life. This is particularly significant because spirituality has been primarily studied as a mechanism for coping with domestic violence, war, illness, loss and stress (McIntosh, 1995; Koenig, 1995). However, research investigating how spirituality is used as a coping mechanism for exposure to violence, and conduit of lasting transformation for those entangled in a life of street violence, was not yet done.

One of my personal goals as a researcher is to provide a bridge between those in academia, who create educational programming, and those within the community who have “insider” knowledge that will make community programming (and possibly academic programming) more effective. Both of these pools of knowledge are needed to create truly beneficial programs, in my view. Without perspectives from both sides of the spectrum, potentially good programming ideas for urban communities, fail to optimize results. Thus, the audience for this research is program developers and higher education instructors and researchers who seek to develop a greater understanding of urban issues and possible solutions; as well as, those who seek to form partnerships within urban

communities for the purpose of developing more effective community programs. Fostering and nurturing collaborative relationships and understanding between academia, other non-profit organizations, faith-based organizations, and churches may lead to the development of community and educational programming that more fully meets the needs of the urban population.

### **Background of the Researcher**

Over the last 8 years, I have become friends with a number of individuals who have once lived a “street” life. Each of these people grew up surrounded by community violence (including some domestic). As a result of this exposure, these individuals have taken part in violent acts themselves. Yet, at some point in their lives, they realized that they needed and desired change; and eventually did! On the other hand, there are a handful of people that I grew up with who were also exposed to violence. As with the former group, they too realized that change was needed in their lives. However, they were unable to. The difference between these two groups, is that the former group attributes their transformation to their spirituality or “walk with God.” The latter group, to my knowledge, did not consistently seek spirituality to help them cope with their childhood experiences.

These occurrences, and many more have sparked an interest in me. What is it about the spiritual experience that caused one group to succeed in their change process? In addition, if we could find out what is different about that experience, couldn't that knowledge be used to help others successfully change? Another point of interest occurred when I did a small study with urban high school youth about five years ago. The study was an attempt to take those labeled “violently inclined,” and get them to deconstruct the

schema that underpinned much of their violent behavior. Within the study, I found that many participants felt trapped in a cycle of violence, and didn't believe that they could get out. Many of them expressed a desire to change and live nonviolently; but they didn't know how or if it were possible at all.

Thus, I began to inquire of ways in which the experiences of those who have already experienced change, can help those who desire to change and feel trapped in a cycle of violence. In researching the topic, "coping mechanisms" seemed to be a subject that greatly influenced participation in violence for those exposed to it. Again, I found a lot of information concerning negative coping; but very little on positive coping. Since, the individuals that I know have attributed their transformative process to spirituality, I began to research how spirituality can be used to assist coping. What I found was that spirituality had been addressed as a useful tool for coping primarily with loss and illness. I also found literature that attributes short-term desistance from violence/crime to spirituality. However, spirituality has yet to be studied as a long-term coping strategy for street violence.

I consider myself to be a spiritual person. Therefore, staying objective while conducting research on a topic that includes spiritual contexts was a challenge. I am somewhat familiar with the culture created by those seeking to deepen their spirituality. Thus, it was initially a struggle not to allow my familiarity to overshadow the comprehensiveness of data collection. For instance, every culture possesses its own set of terminology and clichés. Many participants used language (i.e., "God spoke to me," "filled with the Spirit," etc.) with which I believe I am familiar. Thus, I had to remember not to assume that I knew what they meant. In order to keep my personal assumptions in

check, was careful to ask each participant to define or describe terminology or spiritual process that I felt familiar with. I also provided each participant with a copy of their interview. They were given the opportunity to clarify any information received therein.

## **CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW**

Violence among youth continues to be a major concern in the United States of America. Among the general increase of youth violence, the violence among disadvantaged African-Americans and other ethnic minority groups seems to be disproportionate (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2003; Cotton, Resnick, Browne, Martin, McCarraher & Woods, 1994). Concern about these alarming rates has been the focus of numerous studies within the past two decades. Elijah (1999) brought to the forefront, many macro-structural issues that may contribute to the disproportionate rates of violence among inner-city residents. There are a number of authors and researchers who have examined these structures and their stressors, and how they relate to the perpetuation of violence. Thus, it has been found that macro-structural characteristics, such as inequality, segregation, and racial discrimination, does account for high rates of minority violence (Bellair, 2003; Kubrin & Weitzer, 2003; Stewart & Simons, 2006).

Anderson (1999) also argues that macro-structural pressures create neighborhood stressors, such as joblessness, isolation, and social disorganization; which causes its inner-city residents to reject mainstream culture and develop a subculture that is contradictory to the mainstream. This subculture, or street code, embraces violence as an alternative means for gaining respect and status. Unfortunately, the adoption of this culture simultaneously decreases the abilities of those who assume it, to navigate through mainstream society. Thus, it minimizes their capacity to obtain legitimate (legal) employment and mainstream social status. Therefore, it also contributes to the underground or illegitimate (illegal) economic systems, which also operate within a code of violence and retribution.

Another body of literature discussing the high levels of violence among youth, takes a psychological approach to explaining this phenomenon. Within this literature, repeated exposure to violence causes desensitization to violent behavior. This desensitization is described as pathological adaptation (DuRant, Cadenhead, Pendergrast, Slavens, & Linder, 1994; Ng-Mak, Salzinger, Feldman & Stueve, 2002); in which decreasing affective response and increasing behavioral response to violence, becomes a coping mechanism for those experiencing neighborhood stressors. In this way, violence becomes “normalized” within the individual exposed to it. Again, this may lead to the perpetuation of violent actions taken by those who have become desensitized to it.

It is important for sociological, psychological and educational fields to understand the causes and implications of the growing rates of violence experienced among disadvantaged youth. This phenomenon imposes many inferences upon these disciplines, and could give insight as to the needs for procedural, structural and policy changes within each field. The purpose of this review is to 1) outline structural causes (historical, macro and neighborhood) for aggressive/violent behavior, 2) make a connection between aggressive behavior and cognitive reasoning/schemata as cultural processes that are a response to (or mediate) the structural characteristics of violence, 3) make a connection between strain, negative emotions and violence, 4) discuss the discourse concerning spirituality, religion, coping and transformation, and 5) review literature on alternative ways of coping that may help to deconstruct adaptive violent behavior. Implications for the field of adult education and suggestions for future research will also be discussed.

## **Methods**

In the literature search used for this project, the electronic databases ERIC, EBSCO, Google Scholar, and OmniFile were used as engines explored. The terms ‘street code,’ ‘code of the street,’ ‘cognition of violence,’ ‘violent cognitive schema,’ ‘religion-as-schema,’ ‘pathologic adaptation,’ ‘moral disengagement,’ ‘spirituality and transformation,’ ‘spirituality and coping,’ ‘spirituality and crime,’ ‘spirituality and desistance,’ ‘spirituality and delinquency,’ and ‘spirituality and therapy,’ were used within this search. Only articles relating to violence, coping, and spirituality were used. Although Elijah Anderson’s book, *Code of the Street*, was used to develop the basic guidance for subject matter; reviews of literature and studies, from peer-reviewed journals were included. Dissertations and other relevant books were also used in the development of this review.

### **The Industrial Age, Consciousness and the African American Community**

Before discussing the macro structural issues that many urban, African American communities face, and how those issues lead to aggression—we must first take a historical look at how those macro structural issues became concentrated within these communities in the first place. The following will discuss the historical development of the African American urban community during the Industrial Age, how the Industrial Age evoked the notions of modernism and instrumental consciousness; and how those conceptualizations, the ending of industrialization, the resulting blight of predominantly African American communities, the reliance of these communities upon public sector social services, and the psychological affects of these issues on urban families and individuals contributed to the development of “street mentality.”



### **African Americans and the Industrial Age**

From the outset of slavery through World War I, African Americans were primarily discriminated against and excluded from the booming industrial sector in the United States (Trotter, 2000). Although numerous African Americans created extraordinary inventions that greatly contributed to the progression of the Industrial Revolution, stereotypes about the character of Blacks gave many manufacturers reasons to discriminate against workforce laborers. However, this quickly changed after the war.

“Only the events of World War I and its aftermath brought African Americans into the Industrial sector in large numbers. As European nations mobilized for war, they disrupted established patterns of immigration to the U.S. and stimulated the search for national sources of labor. In 1917, when the U.S. declared war on Germany and initiated its own mobilization of young men for war, industrialists found it even more difficult to meet wartime labor needs and turned to southern black workers in growing numbers. By 1930 an estimated 5.1 million blacks lived in cities, an increase from about 27 percent of all blacks in 1910 to over 43 percent as the Depression underway” (Trotter, 2000, p. 21)

Although African Americans still had to deal with a great amount of other societal prejudices and racism during this era Cayton, Jr (as cited in Trotter, 2000) recalled that the war opened up good jobs for blacks in shipyards and in many other places they had not worked before. According to Trotter (2000), one reporter from the Associated Negro Press recalled that in the 1920’s and 30’s, blacks that worked for Henry Ford almost obtained a class distinction and often felt a little superior to workers at other plants—especially since they were often able to take advantage of broader ranges of production and supervisory opportunities there. African American women also made gains during this time due to the labor shortages of the war.

Due to wage discrimination and inhumane work environments, African American workers developed “their own independent class-based workplace strategies for

addressing economic inequality” and “forged broad community-based alliances with each other as well as black business and professional people—in churches; fraternal orders; and civil rights activists, nationalist, and social service organizations like the National Association of the Advancement of Colored People, the Universal Negro Improvement Association, the National Urban League, and the black press” (Trotter, 2000, p. 23). According to Trotter (2000), these efforts undergirded and strengthened efforts to build the Black Metropolis; a “city within a city that would serve the needs of African American families and their communities” (p. 23).

Just as African Americans and their communities were beginning to flourish, the Great Depression, followed by deindustrialization occurred. This era resulted in the destabilization of African American workers and their communities, in both the North and the South (Trotter, 2000). However, over 80 percent of African Americans were now living in urban cities due to war and early postwar migration (Trotter, 2000). “While African Americans would continue to rely upon their own work, familial, and community-based institutions for help, such responses were insufficient to address the mass suffering that they faced. Consequently, African Americans would deepen their “political and civil rights struggles and demand greater access to government-supported social welfare and labor programs” (p.23).

### **Modernity, Instrumental Consciousness, and The Industrial Age**

According to O’Sullivan and Taylor (2004) “how we think, how we interpret what we see, indeed, what we see and experience is recognized as critical in the unfolding of our history and our lives” (p. 5). Therefore, environmental disturbances often trigger organisms to restructure themselves and behave differently. Thus, the rising

of the Industrial Age created an environment where Modernity and Instrumental Consciousness could flourish (O’Sullivan and Taylor, 2004). Nisbit (1980) defines modernity as valuing the past, confidence in the nobility or superiority of Western civilizations, accepting the worth of economic and technological growth, and faith in what is alone reasonable. O’Sullivan and Taylor (2004) assert that these conceptualizations focus on tools and tasks and amplify the notion that our value lies within our accomplishments. In other words, we are only as good as what we can produce, and production becomes our ultimate objective. This conceptual environment, thus caused the adoption of instrumental consciousness (O’Sullivan and Taylor, 2004). Instrumental Consciousness, as explained by Wheatley (1992), poses that the universe cannot be trusted with growth, rejuvenation and process; and that if we desire progress, we must provide the energy and momentum to reverse entropic decay. In other words we, as humanity, must forcefully prevent chaos, disorganization and randomness—concepts Wheatley (1992) likened to “death.”

According to O’Sullivan and Taylor (2004), when referring to individuals, consciousness is a mental structure; however, when referring to human systems, consciousness is a culture. Therefore, Modernity and Instrumental Consciousness created a culture that predominantly valued individuals, communities, institutions, governments, countries, etc. according to not only their ability to produce, but also how well they “stayed in their place.” For instance, community-based structures of premodern production were increasingly replaced by industrial work organizations that were similarly modeled to machines (O’Sullivan and Taylor, 2004).

“Workers were trained to perform repetitive, specialized functions with no relation or awareness of the nature of the whole production process to which their

efforts contributed. Work became disconnected from its origins or its outcomes. Motivation to work that provided food, shelter, and quality of life shifted to that of compliance for compensation (Bergquist, 1993). Techniques to ensure compliance were introduced to discipline workers in line with the production and productivity priorities of factory owners” (Morgan, as cited in O’Sullivan and Taylor, 2004, p. 10).

Within this economic and social environment, knowledge was shared on a “need to know” basis. As long as an individual or structure could effectively and efficiently produce what was asked of it, no additional information was deemed necessary. While this type of culture was beneficial and advantageous for standardization, mass production, and creation of wealth; it also fostered dehumanization of the workforce and degradation of the environment (O’Sullivan and Taylor, 2004). Unfortunately, it was a culture that did not value individuality, creativity, self-expression, and autonomous quests for knowledge.

O’Sullivan and Taylor (2004) also point out that an important aspect of modernism is the rising of a few over the many, as hierarchical bureaucracies and/or scientific authorities. In other words, the “experts” or “bosses,” hold all of the power and authority over the masses. The error in this system, is that responsibility can then be easily shifted up through the structure, until it finally gets to “The Man (or Woman)” (Emery, 1999). This conceptualization gives leaders a heroic persona, as “the ones who look after the vulnerable, the unable” (O’Sullivan and Taylor, 2004, p. 10). This dysfunctional dependency system festers disempowerment, discouragement and dissatisfaction among the so-called “vulnerable” (O’Sullivan and Taylor, 2004). According to Bion (as cited in “O’Sullivan and Taylor, 2004), it also causes insecurity and anger leading to avoidance and aggression.

### **Post Industrial African Americans, Modernity, and Instrumental Consciousness**

According to Pettifor (1995), a collective unconscious is, in a medical sense, something that is passed on genetically. However, Jung (as cited in Pettifor, 1995) also seemed to look at collective unconscious as something more spiritual, which we are all somehow tapped into. In other words, it's a common spiritual influence. According to O'Sullivan and Taylor (2004), modernity creates an unconscious process that can take hold of institutions and their citizens, if its focus is on the technical, strategic, logical and producing; while suppressing or repressing the human experience. Those who wish to express their freedom of expression, often must struggle to do so in bureaucratic institutions. According to Jung (as cited in O'Sullivan and Taylor, 2004), the "irrational" qualities of individual expression and human experience never sit idly by when evicted; "they are always looking for a way to make an impact" (p. 11). According to Morgan (as cited in O'Sullivan and Taylor), this is often seen in factors such as stress, lying, cheating, depression, and acts of sabotage.

"As citizens of the industrialized cultures, we are immersed in and surrounded by the mechanistic metaphor that strongly invites us into an instrumental consciousness at work, in our communities and in schools" (O'Sullivan and Taylor, p. 11). Kegan (1994) posits that many people usually accept cultural assumptions that are embedded in social designs, and uncritically accept them as reality. We internalize and identify with the values and beliefs of our social environments, which are often reinforced by our families, peer groups, religions, ethnicities, geographic regions and social status (Kegan, 1994). We must be able to loosen the grip that instrumental consciousness has on our conceptualizations as individuals and communities. A restructuring of our social world—

organizations, institutions, communities, relationships—is, therefore, a critical transformative practice in learning our way toward an ecological consciousness (which emphasizes co-instituted relationships).

Post WWI, many African Americans began to become an intricate part of the booming industrial economy. Although salary disparities still existed, many African American families and communities took pride in being able to sustain themselves and begin to flourish. In becoming a more important part of mainstream society, African Americans began to adopt the instrumental consciousness and modernity of their times. They unconsciously bought into value systems and assumptions of the Age. Evidence of this, is the sense of superiority that many Blacks took on because of working for Henry Ford, as stated earlier. However, when the Great Depression occurred, along with deindustrialization, the economic status of many urban African Americans and their communities, began to decline. The sense of security and self-sufficiency that they once were familiar with, quickly swayed; and African American communities began to be less valuable in a society vested in modernity.

Having to take part in the government-supported social welfare programs in greater numbers, created a sense of dependency upon the systems of hierarchal bureaucracy—perceived to have the ability to now look after their vulnerable families and communities. As earlier stated, this dependency is usually accompanied by insecurity, anger, avoidance, and aggression—ultimately, the disenfranchisement of entire communities. So what were these communities to do with their unconscious notions of modernity and instrumental consciousness, in an environment where they began to quickly lose their ability to produce, as well as their advances in growth,

rejuvenation and process? As posited by Elijah Anderson (1999), this is where street code emerges.

### **Structural Causes of Aggressive/Violent Behavior**

Anderson (1999) attributes high levels of inner city violence to the macro-structural problems facing those areas. A number of these macro-structural issues, especially unemployment, have an enormous impact on the structure of neighborhoods plagued by them. In turn, neighborhood stressors are then said to effect the levels of violence experienced within a particular area. Bellair, Roscigno & McNulty (2003), specifically studied the relationship between the labor market conditions and violent adolescent delinquency within impoverished neighborhoods. Kubrin & Weitzer (2003) researched how overall disadvantages contribute to the lack of social structure and support among residents, which depletes their ability to control neighborhood violence. Anderson (1999) gives details of how individual family structures can determine whether or not youth become socialized into a culture of violence. The following will discuss these authors' findings in greater detail.

#### **Macro-Structure: Poverty**

As stated earlier, macro-structural problems, such as poverty, racial discrimination, etc., create problems in neighborhoods that are saturated by the effects of them. Bellair and associates (2003), researched the effects of concentrated joblessness upon neighborhood violence. Youth between the ages of eleven and twenty participated in their study. Using a school-based cluster sample design, Bellair, et. al., (2003) took a sample of 134 schools, which included 27,000 respondents. This sample was stratified by region, urbanism, school type, ethnic mix and size. Interviews were completed with the

students, and one parent of each student completed an interviewer-assisted questionnaire. Individual data collected were then compared to county level market data derived from the U.S. Census. The interviews focused on self-disclosure of involvement in violent activity (ranging from minor to more extreme cases) and family income. Questions that were considered to contain sensitive information were asked via a computer-based response system; thus, minimizing bias and improving confidentiality. Data on attachment to school, family and peers, and family structure were also derived from the interviews.

Bellair, et. al., (2003) used a regression analysis model to examine the relationship between the labor market opportunity for family income, parental structure, and the adolescent attachments of students exhibiting violent behavior. They found that the likelihood of an adolescent engaging in violence was heightened in locales with low-wage service sector concentration. Although the study's rating system detailing the seriousness of violent actions is questionable (for example, a person who was involved in two assaults using a knife or gun had the same rating as someone who was involved in four assaults using just their fists), the occurrence of overall violent acts within certain neighborhoods is still viable data. The following section takes a look at why such findings may occur.

### **Neighborhood Structure: Social Disorganization**

*"Social disorganization refers to the inability of a community to realize common goals and solve chronic problems" (Kubrin & Wietzer, 2003).*

Kubrin & Weitzer (2003) argue that there are two perspectives of social disorganization theory that explain the prevalence of neighborhood violence within



communities experiencing these stressors. The first argument is that joblessness and other stressors cause an alternative culture to emerge within the community. In effect, the low opportunities for economic sustainability and gain, lead to a sense of hopelessness; which causes individuals to focus on alternative, often illicit, ways of obtaining economic and social gains (Bellair, et. al., 2003; Kubrin & Weitzer, 2003). These alternative ways of life have developed into a culture of street life that is oppositional and rejecting of mainstream values (Anderson, 1999; Matsueda, 1989). This sub-culture also embraces and/or condones violence, toughness and retribution, as an alternative means to gain respect and status (Anderson, 1999; Magura, 1975). Thus, rates of violence in neighborhoods suffering from the stressors of macro-structural problems tend to be statistically higher.

The second argument for the higher rates of violence within disadvantaged neighborhoods is an inversion of the first perspective. This argument states that impoverished inner-city residents don't condone crime and violent behavior; but instead have developed a sense of fatalism (Kubrin & Weitzer, 2003). Since community stressors are experienced at high levels, crime and violence are viewed as inevitable. Thus, residents condemn these actions less vigorously. Therefore, high crime and violence rates are not in existence due to oppositional values held by residents; but instead because opportunities are so limited that it makes it difficult to pursue conventional goals. This perspective also argues that low levels of opportunities within a community, makes it difficult for its residents to develop cultural support to exert social control over those committing crimes. This lack of cohesiveness within the community, affords an opportunity for two major belief systems to be developed. One which values non-

violence within the neighborhood but feels helpless against it, and another which uses violence as an alternative means of coping with the lack of economic and social opportunity.

### **Family Structure: Family Characteristics**

Anderson (1999) argues that the prevalence of violence among inner-city youth, relies heavily on whether they come from either a “decent” or “street” family structure. Decent families almost always have a real concern with and have a certain amount of hope for the future (Anderson, 1999, p. 37). Their attitudes are focused on a drive “to have something” or “build a good life,” while “making do with what you have”(p. 38). Decent families share values more aligned with mainstream society and attempt to instill them into their children. They feel a sense of responsibility towards the younger members of their family and the community; and often build alliances with churches and schools in doing so.

Street families, on the other hand, “often show a lack of consideration for other people and have a rather superficial sense of family and community” (Anderson, 1999, p. 45). They find it difficult to cope with the physical and emotional demands of parenthood and often reconcile their needs with the needs of their children (p. 45). According to Anderson (1999), street family members are more vested in street code and may aggressively socialize their children into it in a normative way. They use the code of the street and its values to judge themselves and others (p. 45). In his ethnographic study, Anderson details the lifestyles, morality, and views on violence, of both decent and street families living in Philadelphia. He found that although decent families do not condone violent behavior and the code of conduct inherent within a lifestyle committed to it, their

children must be aware of it, in order to safely navigate through the highly disadvantaged neighborhoods in which they live. Thus, by means of simply living within neighborhoods experiencing concentrated levels macro-economic stressors, all residents may be exposed to some level of violence.

### **Exposure to Violence**

Although these perspectives help to give some insight as to why rates of violence seem to be concentrated within impoverished, disadvantaged, minority neighborhoods; they do not explain the prevalence of violent acts among non-inner-city youth. Stewart & Simons (2006) conducted a study to determine whether the prevalence of violence among youth was based solely on living within a neighborhood plagued by macro-structural stressors, as stated by Anderson. Within this study 720 Black adolescents, from 259 neighborhoods were investigated. The first wave of self-report questionnaires, in interview format, was completed with these adolescents and their primary caregivers, when the children were between ten and thirteen years of age. The second wave of interviews was done when the adolescents were between the ages of twelve and fifteen (two years later). Participants also took part in a series of videotaped interactions, in which a video camera was set up within the home, and interactions were taped (without the presence of an interviewer) for a little more than an hour. Approximately forty-three percent of the adolescents were male and fifty-seven percent female. Approximately forty-two percent resided in Iowa neighborhoods, while fifty-eight percent lived in Georgia. The neighborhoods from which samples were taken ranged from extremely poor (100% below the poverty line according to the 1990 Census) to middle class (only 20% living below the poverty line), with at least a 20% Black population rate. Thus, sufficient

variability was reached in order to compare detection of relations between community characteristics and varied outcomes.

African-American interviewers were used to conduct the study, in order to maximize rapport and cultural understanding. African-American coders were also used to sort through videotaped and interview data. Raters coded over sixty observational behavior interactions. This included scales of parenting practices, relationship quality, oppositional and/or antisocial behavior, and pro-social behaviors. From the interviews and videos, street code adaptation, violent delinquency, neighborhood characteristics, neighborhood disadvantage, family characteristics, and experience with racial discrimination were also coded. Socio-economic status, family structure, gender, number of children per household, association with violent peers, school attachment, and experiencing stressors were controlled for within the sample. Regression-based techniques, with robust standard error estimates corrected with the Huber-White technique (which adjusts for correlated errors within nested data), were used in analysis.

Stewart and Simons (2006) found that neighborhood violence, neighborhood disadvantage, and racial discrimination all are positively and significantly associated with violent delinquency. They also found that adolescents who associate with violent peers and experience high levels of strain, appear to be more apt to adopt street code/culture. Surprisingly though, socio-economic status (SES), gender, urban, and regional coefficients were not statistically significant in contributing to a youth's adoption of violent culture. These data suggest that there is no difference between high SES and low SES, urban and non-urban, boy and girl adaptation to street code. This may be consistent with Anderson's (1999) claim, youth living within "street" families were also found to be

more likely to embrace street code/culture. However, among these results, it seems as though association with violent peers and exposure to violence are the most significant predictors of an adolescent taking part in violently delinquent activity.

### *Section Summary*

The African American community adopted the notions of modernity and instrumental consciousness, along with the rest of society, during the Industrial Age. However, the community disparity and blight that followed the Industrial Age, along with these conceptualizations, left these communities diminished and full of despair. Many studies show that there is a definite correlation between living in disadvantage due to macro-structural problems and the levels of street violence experienced. There are two major arguments as to why this seems to be the case. The first perspective is that a street culture or code of conduct arises in the midst of community disadvantage; and within this culture, violence is widely accepted and condoned. The second perspective is that violence is not widely accepted within disadvantaged neighborhoods. However, the great amount of stressors placed upon residents, disallows them the ability to build a cohesive neighborhood structure of support to combat violence perpetrated by some of its residents. Anderson (1999), states that acceptance of and adherence to street violence depends on whether one comes from a decent family, or one that socializes its members into the code of the street (street family). Although Stewart and Simons (2006) agree with this notion, they also found that mere exposure to violence (especially through association with violent peers), regardless of neighborhood disadvantage or SES, produces a likelihood of participating in violent delinquency. This may also suggest that

the implications of urban violence reach far beyond the boundaries of the urban environment.

### **Cognition, Coping and Aggressive/Violent Behavior**

A number of authors have concluded that those experiencing and/or witnessing violence in the home or community are more likely to develop a range of psychological dysfunctions, such as Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), depression, and anxiety, as well as other affective and behavioral problems (Attar, Guerra, & Tolan, 1994; Dempsey, 2002; Durant, Cadenhead, Pendergrast, Slavens & Linder, 1994; Kliwer, Lepore, Oskin, & Johnson, 1998). However, despite the strong relationship found between exposure to violence and dysfunctional psychological outcomes, approximately half of youth exposed to violence function normally despite this exposure (Martinez & Richters, 1993, as cited by Dempsey, 2002). Thus, there may be two mediators between the exposure to violence and actual cognitive dysfunction. A mediator represents a link that demonstrates how one variable has an impact on another (Dempsey, 2002). It is a mechanism through which a certain predictor leads to a certain outcome. These mediators are actual coping methods that are viewed as negative or positive. The use of negative coping measures (such as withdrawal, aggression, or blaming others) would be descriptive of someone overwhelmed by their exposure to violence and prone to the development of psychological dysfunction. However, the use of positive coping measures (such as problem-solving efforts, seeking information, and obtaining social support) would be descriptive of one who has developed an alternative that provides better psychological outcomes (Dempsey, 2002). Other authors believe that the cause of negative coping through violence is caused by an internalization of racism (Bryant, 2011). The following

will discuss studies and theoretical frameworks that outline the causes of negative coping strategies being used to mediate between violent exposure and the perpetuation of violent/aggressive behavior.

### **Internalized Racism and the African American Male**

According to Bryant (2011) internalized racism is a social psychological process that affects African Americans as a group and individually. It involves the acceptance of hegemonic hierarchal stratifications of race, which place African Americans at the bottom of the order; and the acceptance of negative stereotypes about African Americans concerning both their abilities and their intrinsic worth. Critical race theory and the Integrative model for the study of developmental competencies in minority children are the two major theoretical perspectives undergirding the construction of internalized racism (Bryant, 2011). Critical race theory explains how race is socially constructed through repetitive ways across systems; and how one's chances in life are determined by their race (Brown, 2003; as cited in Bryant, 2011). This theory also posits that "ubiquity of racism assists in the proliferation of racism's hegemonic economic and social control, cultural beliefs, and ideology to the point that all Americans to some degree are affected, with its debilitating effects being more detrimental to African Americans, who are at the very bottom of the stratified racial hierarchy" (pp. 692-693).

The integrative model for the study of developmental competencies in minority children, explains how racism in society may translate into severe developmental challenges for African American youth. According to Bryant (2011), this model posits that the interaction of social position (race, ethnicity, social class and gender), racism, and segregated environments produce unique conditions that lead to distorted

developmental pathways; strongly affecting the developmental processes for competence in African American youth. These distorted developmental pathways to competencies, are theorized to influence African American youth to participate in violent behavior. Bryant (2011) argues that the macrostructural and disorganization issues facing the African American community do not fully explain the adaptation of violence by its youth. He poses that the violence used in the construction of society's racial hierarchy and the institutionalization of racism, planted seeds that created the resulting violent social structural environment that many African Americans now inhabit. The following will discuss his study.

Bryant's (2011) study included 224 African American males between the ages of 14 to 19. The participants were from a Philadelphia public high school, an educational institution that operates from an African-centered paradigm, a detention facility for juveniles, and youth who were either on parole or on probations and participating in a violence reduction and recidivism program. The participants took part in a questionnaire; which included both demographic information and sections for instruments that measured the constructs of interest. Though they were given a hard copy, the investigator read each question during the investigation, and answered questions for further clarity and understanding. Thirty-six independent and control variables were considered for use in the study. Most were generic risk factor questions for youth violence, such as "Have you ever been arrested?" The subscale measures of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention longitudinal study Youth Risk Behavior Survey (CDC, 2000; as cited in Bryant, 2011) were used to determine delinquent peers, exposure to gangs, drug/alcohol use, and impulsivity. The construct aggressive response to shame was measured and



operationalized by the Aggressive Response to Shame subscale of the Attitudes Towards Guns and Violence Questionnaire, due to the possibility of violence attributed to perceived disrespect. Also, the Centrality and Private Regard subscales from the Multidimensional Inventory of Black Identity were used to measure racial salience. To measure the independent variable, internalized racism, the 24-item Racist subscale of Taylor and Grundy's 1996 version of the Natanolization Scale, which was designed to measure the extent to which Blacks identify with the racist stereotypes that they are mentally defective (intellectually, morally, and emotionally) and physically gifted (athletically, sexually, and artistically), was used.

The dependent variables for the study measured the affinity for African American males to engage in violence. Both behaviors and attitudes were used as constructs to operationalize this affinity. The 17-item Aggressive Behavior subscale from Achenbach and Rescorla's (2001, as cited in Bryant, 2011) Child Behavior Checklist was used to measure the behavior construct; while the Attitude towards Guns and Violence Questionnaire operationalized the attitudes construct. A five-item measure, the Seriousness of Violence Classification-Pittsburgh Youth study, was also used to assess the highest level of violence the youth participated in during the previous 6 months or 1 year. Two additional items, inquiring into the repetition of physical fights and cruelty to animals were added to violence measurement. Bryant (2011) conducted a factor analysis procedure using the variables aggressive behavior, attitudes towards guns and violence and violent behavior, to determine their factor loading. After the factor analysis, Cronbach's alpha of these variables was determined by using standardized items. The

dependent, independent and control variables of the imputed data set were assessed for their bivariate associations with Bonferroni corrections.

According to Bryant (2011), internalized racism was found to be a statistically significant risk factor and key predictor for major components of the propensity for violence. Although, internal racism was not found to be a significant predictor of violent behavior, Bryant (2011) argues that “it is possible that the negative self-concepts and characteristics inherent to internalized racism can become deeply rooted in the minds of African American youth” (p. 701) and that “the insignificance of internalized racism when assessing violent behavior may be attributable to the lack of reporting violent behavior by the participants” (p. 702). This was argued because nearly 65% of the participants reported yes to violent behavior on two or fewer out of seven questions to assess violent behavior. The study also found that with each additional year of age, overall propensity to violence decreased, that racial salience (the extent to which one believes that his/her race has a positive and nurturing aspect and that his/her racial group is an integral part of that self-concept) functioned as a moderating factor between internalized racism and a participant’s propensity for violence (Bryant, 2011). Also, despite its insignificance to violent behavior, internalized racism accounted for 6% more variance in aggressive behavior, 3% more variance in attitudes toward guns and violence and 7% more variance in the overall propensity for violence. Thus, according to Bryant (2011), internalized racism’s unprecedented use to assess male African American youth’s propensity to violence, and “the resulting previously unaccounted-for variances, may be a linchpin in helping to explain the phenomenon we see as African American male youth’s disproportionate overrepresentation in violent activities” (p. 703).

Although Bryant's (2011) study did find that internalized racism may be a contributing factor for propensity toward youth violence among African American males, it was not found to be a significant contributing factor to violent behavior. However, a considerable factor in this finding, may be the fact that only two of the four programs used to recruit participants for the study were actually for youth who displayed violent behavior. Also, it may have been helpful to use a measurement instrument that was more inclusive of other racial stereotypes (instead of only those describing mental defect and physical giftedness), to get a broader understanding of possible identification with stereotypes of Blacks. Lastly, Bryant (2011) controlled for a number of "generic" risk factors (i.e., family characteristics, socioeconomic factors, exposure to violence, etc.); however, no instruments were used to measure the participants' community-level risk factors. Thus, the amount of exposure to violence represented in the data, may have been greatly skewed. Therefore, although the assumption that internalized racism's characteristics could be deeply rooted in the minds of African American male youth is plausible, it is also questionable.

### **Negative Coping with Violence**

Dempsey (2002) collected data from 120 African-American students attending fifth or sixth grade, at three schools. These schools were located within two impoverished housing developments. The sample was composed of forty-five percent boys and fifty-five percent girls. Questionnaires were administered to small groups of five to seven students, who were informed that there were no right or wrong answers. Thus, the results were strictly limited to the self-report of the children. The questionnaire included query to measure the frequency with which the students used a particular coping method, and how

often they felt stressed. The coping strategies were averaged across situations to create mean scores for analysis. The questionnaire also included measures for community exposure to violence, distress symptoms (based on the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders or DSM), depression (based on Kovacs', 1985 Children's Depression Inventory), and anxiety (based on Spielberger's 1973 State-Trait Scale for Children).

Using a zero-order correlations model, Dempsey (2002) found that negative coping was a mediator between violence and PTSD, depression and anxiety traits. Hierarchical regressions were used to be sure of the significance of violence, in relation to the mediator and dependent variables. These tests verified that significance. Although these results are very important, Dempsey failed to specify the negative coping measures used as a mediator between violence and psychological dysfunction. Thus, negative coping was simply described as using ignoring, crying, hitting or fighting, and screaming or yelling as a coping mechanism in response to exposure to violence. Although aggressive and violent behavior can be a symptom of PTSD, depression, and anxiety, it would have been beneficial to know the specific coping measures used to mediate violence exposure and dysfunction.

### **Pathologic Adaptation to Violence**

Although many studies have viewed violence as a form of stress that causes an adolescent to become psychologically overwhelmed (as noted above), there is another theory that other literature argues. Dubrow and Garbarino (1989) and Garbarino and Kostelny (1997), (as cited in Ng-Mak, Salinzinger, Feldman, & Stueve, 2002) pose the thought that youth exposed to chronic violence cope with it by adapting to it, rather than

being overwhelmed by it. Ng-Mak, et. al. (2002) refer to this type of coping as “pathologic adaptation.” In this concept, developing a streetwise mentality or callused attitude spares an individual from emotional harm, while legitimizing the use of violent behavior (Anderson, 1990). According to Ng-Mak and her colleagues (2002), a theoretical version of pathologic adaptation, called normalization of violence, posits that normalizing cognitions are a mediator between violence exposure and its affective and behavioral consequences.

Repeated exposure to violence is argued to result in desensitization to it, which then blunts affective or emotional response to violence, while magnifying behavioral response (Ng-Mak, et. al., 2002). This then suggests that exposure to violence is weakly associated with depressive symptomology, and highly associated with aggressive behavior (DuRant, et. al., 1994). Ng-Mak, et. al. (2002) also suggests that, compared with youth exposed to certain forms or contexts of violence (experience vs. witnessing, family vs. community, etc.), those exposed more heavily to violence should significantly be more aggressive. Again, all of this takes place through the cognitive normalization of violence, which is further explained in the following.

### **Normalization of Violence**

Bandura, Barbaranelli, Caprara, and Pastorelli (1996) and Matsueda (1989), call the development of these normalizing cognitions “moral disengagement.” This is described as a process in which individuals disengage their self-regulatory sanctions (internal moral control) by deactivating internal control and activating justifications for violent or aggressive behavior. Bandura and colleagues (1996) argue that people don’t ordinarily engage in reprehensible behavior unless they have somehow justified the

righteousness of their actions within themselves. Thus, people participate in euphemistic language, advantageous comparison, displacement of responsibility, diffusion of responsibility, disregard/distorting of consequences, the dehumanization of victims, and the attribution of blame, in order to morally disconnect themselves from their violent behaviors (Bandura, et.al., 1996).

*Euphemistic language* is the usage of sanitized language and convoluted verbiage to describe destructive behavior. Through the usage of coded terms or slang, one could describe the use of aggressive behavior without overtly describing what they have done or are about to do. For instance “busting a cap” and “a dome job” are sometimes used to euphemistically reference shooting at someone and shooting someone in the head (respectively). The use of this language makes violent conduct seem benign, thus relieving those who engage in it (Bandura, et. al., 1996).

*Advantageous comparison* is contrasting actions with more injurious conduct (Bandura, et. al., 1996). According to the authors, cognitive transformation of harmful conduct into that which is good or morally purposeful, causes self-approval of violence. An example of this is the thought that retaliation for the death of a loved one, somehow avenges the loved one. *Diffusion of responsibility* is described by Bandura, et. al, (1996) as the division of labor and the sharing of decision-making. Whenever the planning and/or implementation of aggressive behavior is shared, it makes it easier for each individual involved to alleviate themselves from total responsibility.

Through the *disregard or distorting of consequences* for a particular action, people more easily pursue harm towards others (Bandura, et. al., 1996). Through *dehumanization*, people attribute bestial qualities to their victims. Therefore, giving them

the ability to treat them more harshly than humanized ones (Bandura, et. al., 1996). For instance, killing or harming a drug-dealer may be viewed as easier than doing such to a schoolteacher; because the drug-dealer may be viewed as having a lack of feelings and concerns for fellow human beings.

In the *attribution of blame*, people view themselves as victims, without fault, who have been driven to conduct themselves in a violent manner. Instead, the actual victim of violent behavior is blamed for bringing such actions upon themselves (Bandura, et. al., 1996). Anderson (1999) often relates the notion of being “disrespected” as a means for the enforcement of violence within the code of the street. In such cases the victim is said to have instigated the violent reaction against him/her. All of these processes give deeper understanding to the cognitive normalizing of violence, through moral disengagement.

#### *Section Summary*

Numerous authors have delved into the exploration of cognitive explanations for the perpetuation of violence among inner-city youth. Although Bryant (2011) found that internalized racism plays a role in the propensity for violence in African American male youth; it was also found to be insignificant determining actual violent behavior. In studies that focused on macro-structural, neighborhood and family structures, exposure to violence was found to be the most significant prescription to the use of violence amongst youth. This being said, negative coping has been found to be a mediator between that exposure and the violent activities themselves. Although violence as a coping mechanism was not specifically determined in the Dempsey (2002) study, it was included in the range of coping mechanisms defined as negative. Therefore, there is a segment of literature that tries to explain mediating or coping mechanisms.

It has been theorized that pathological adaptation to violence accounts for the strong behavioral aggressiveness of inner-city youth. This theory states that instead of being overwhelmed by violence, disadvantaged youth cognitively adapt to it.

Pathological adaptation is said to take place through the normalization of violence; in which one morally disengages themselves from the effects of violence. Thus, they disengage their internal moral control, by cognitively justifying violent and aggressive actions. Therefore, the overall perpetuation of violence can be said to be the effect of adopting negative coping measures in response to an exposure to violence.

High rates of macro-structural stressors cause social disorganization within neighborhoods, disallowing them the resources to internally control violent behavior. As a result, exposure to violence and aggression is high within these neighborhoods; and youth are challenged to develop coping measures that allow them to navigate through these experiences. Unfortunately, negative coping strategies are usually used, which may lead to a cognitive normalization of violence. In effect, this normalization adds to the perpetuation of additional violent acts, as youth morally disengage themselves and become pathologically adapted to violence and aggression (i.e., the adoption of street code). This process then adds to economic distress, social isolation, and the inability for neighborhood social structures to self-regulate against social problems (Kubrin, Weitzer, 2003); facilitating a vicious cycle of community violence. Thus, alternative ways of coping must be developed in response to exposure to inner-city stressors and chronic violence (Dempsey, 2002).



### **General Strain Theory and Emotional Coping**

Since the 1980's researchers have been studying the effects of stress on delinquency and crime. General Strain Theory (GST) developed as researchers began to theorize that strain was a social psychological variable (Broidy, 2001). However, Robert Agnew (1985, 1992) created a revised theory of GST that contended that strain was not a social psychological variable; but instead, a social structural one. The previous versions of GST focused mainly on lower class criminality. The newer version "allows for an individualized conceptualization of strain that does not rely on the identification of certain universal goals, allowing the theory to take gender, racial, class-based, and other personal differences in goals and strains into account" (Broidy, 2001, p. 10). The following will further explain GST and how it is related to coping for individuals experiencing the stressors discussed in the previous sections.

#### **Agnew's General Strain Theory**

General Strain Theory poses that strain elicits negative emotions, and that those emotions make coping necessary. It identifies three major types of strain: the failure to achieve positively valued goals, the removal of positively valued stimuli, and the presentation of negative stimuli (Broidy, 2001). If legitimate (non-violent, non-deviant) coping mechanisms are either unavailable or ineffective in mediating negative emotions, then illegitimate (violent, deviant) coping mechanisms will be employed (Broidy, 2001; Jang and Johnson, 2005; Jang, 2007). Agnew (1992) also identifies two types of emotions that may be elicited by strain: self-directed and other-directed. According to GST, self-directed emotions are those that are directed inwardly, such as depression and anxiety. Whereas other directed emotions are those that are directed outwardly, especially anger

(Broidy, 2001; Jang and Johnson, 2005; Jang, 2007, Schroeder and Frana, 2009). GST posits that these negative emotions provide motivation for criminal/deviant acts (behavior), since emotional distress creates pressure for corrective actions (Jang, 2007). Based on these conceptualizations, communities that experience higher levels of strain (joblessness, discrimination, etc.), would also experience higher levels of delinquency, crime and violence. However, some research shows that specific emotional responses to stress are what determine if higher levels of community crime and violence will actually be experienced.

### **Negative Emotion, Anger, Gender and Crime/Deviance**

General Strain Theory argues that strain is at the root of delinquency and criminal behavior. However, Broidy (2001) conducted a study that examined strain with other variables, such as anger, other negative affects (depression, anxiety, etc.), legitimate and illegitimate coping. Broidy also controlled for varying demographic and personality variables. Early theories of strain assumed an inverse relationship between class and crime, and that strain was a cause of crime and delinquency (Broidy, 2001). Yet, it is clear that individuals experience and respond to strain in many differing ways—and not all of them are criminal (Broidy, 2001; Jang & Johnson, 2005, Jang, 2007, McMahon, 2009; Wallace & Bergeman, 2002). Therefore, although a relationship definitely exists between strain and crime, there must be conditioning factors that were not examined in early GST.

Broidy's (2001) study involved a nonrandom sample of [a majority] White, middle-class, undergraduate students from Northwestern University in the fall of 1995. Eight hundred and ninety-five students from 7 departments (sociology, human development,

political science, biological science, anthropology, computer science, and decision science) took part in the survey. Self-reported data from this sample were taken to test GST in five categories (strain, negative emotions, legitimate coping strategies, illegitimate/deviant outcomes, and control variables). Participants were asked to respond to the questions based upon their perceptions and feelings in each category, over the past five years. This was done to ensure that participant's responses would reflect their historical experiences and feelings of strain. This is significant because GST hypothesizes that strain will most likely lead to delinquency when it is experienced repeatedly (Broidy, 2001).

First, the survey asked participants to reflect on the success and fairness of their goal outcomes in five major areas (academic/career, social/family life, athletic, financial, and health/appearance). This was significant since GST states that failure to achieve positively valued goals may be a result of goal blockage or unfair goal outcomes (Broidy, 2001). Goal blockage and unfair outcomes, suggests strain in the inability to reach goals. Second, participants were asked to describe how they "feel" when they are unable to meet goals and when they experienced negative life events. Third, participants were given a checklist to describe ways they may behave when faced with blocked goals and stressful life events. These legitimate coping strategy options were developed to reflect the cognitive, behavioral and emotional strategies of coping described in GST.

Fourth, participants were asked to respond concerning their involvement in various deviant behaviors over the past five years. These behaviors included stealing something \$10 or less, stealing something worth more than \$50, selling marijuana or other illegal drugs, hitting or threatening to hit another, purposely destroying another's

property, lying to get something they would not have otherwise gotten, and being arrested. Lastly, Broidy controlled for sex, race, employment status, family class, presence of mother or father during childhood, friends in the area, academic club membership, social club membership, religious participation, self-esteem, emotional and disciplinary environment of participant's family during childhood, peer involvement in delinquency, deviant opportunities, age, marital status, political and sports involvement, parental expectations, and feelings of mastery.

Using ordinary least-square regression models, Broidy tested the survey results to determine three things: 1) if the three types of strain were associated with anger and other negative emotions, 2) if anger and other negative emotional responses to strain were associated with the use of legitimate coping strategies, and 3) if controlling for the use of legitimate coping, will strain-induced anger increase the likelihood of illegitimate outcomes, whereas other negative emotions will not. He found that the effects of strain on negative emotions (other than anger) were constrained to the presentation of negative stimuli and removal of positive stimuli. Although the measures of strain that reflect blocked goals and unfair outcomes were not significantly associated with negative emotions, strain related to stressful life events and unfair goal outcomes positively increased the likelihood of individuals responding with anger.

Broidy also found that only nonangry negative emotions were significantly associated with legitimate coping strategies. Although GST theory suggests that anger has a stronger effect on illegitimate coping than legitimate coping, this study found that the relationship between strain-induced anger and legitimate coping was insignificant. The data also indicated that strain-induced anger significantly increases the likelihood of

illegitimate outcomes, when controlling for legitimate coping. However, other negative emotions and illegitimate coping had a significant negative relationship. Therefore, individuals who respond to strain with negative emotions that exclude anger are more likely to adopt legitimate, noncriminal, coping strategies.

Broidy also found interesting differences in the way that males and females handle strain. Study results indicate that there were no differences in the amount of strain that females encounter in comparison to males. It also found that females and males experience the same amount of anger as a result of strain. However, test results indicate that in controlling for strain, other negative emotional responses were higher among females. Therefore, even though females experience the same amount of strain related anger as their male counterparts, they experience it within a range of other non-angry emotions. The study also indicated that females were more likely than their male counterparts to invoke legitimate coping strategies as a result of stressful life events. This, along with numerous other GST studies and statistics, indicate that males are more likely to commit crime in response to strain (Broidy & Agnew, 1997; Jang and Johnson, 2005).

Interestingly, many other studies have shown that women are actually more distressed than men (Anehensel, 1992; Mirowsky & Ross, 1989; Pearlin, 1989; as cited in Jang, 2007). Thus making their lowered rates of crime compared to their male counterparts, even more astonishing. Broidy and Agnew (1997) focused on differences in ideal types of strain concerning males and females. Broidy and Agnew (1997) suggested that males are more concerned with material success, extrinsic achievements, and distributive justice. Females, on the other hand are more concerned with interpersonal

relations, life's meaning/purpose, and procedural justice. They state that, because of these differences, males are more likely to experience financial, work-related, criminal victimization and interpersonal conflict strains (especially due to their competitive relations with peers). Females were then more likely to experience strains related to interpersonal relationships, gender discrimination and their gender-role at work and home. Thus, Broidy and Agnew (1997) propose that male strains are more conducive to confrontational, and other-directed crime (aggression and violence); while female strains are more conducive to self-directed deviance (eating disorders and drug use) and non-deviant tactics (escape-avoidance, selective ignoring).

Broidy and Agnew (1997) state that other-directed emotions (anger), tend to have a stronger effect on confrontational, other-directed deviance and crime, whereas self-directed emotions (depression and anxiety), tend to have a larger effect on self-directed deviance and crime. However, higher levels of anger (alongside depression and anxiety) were reported when controlling for differences in emotional expressiveness (Mirowsky & Ross, 1995; as cited in Jang, 2007). Thus, Broidy and Agnew (1997) suggest that women tend to internalize their anger and men tend to externalize it. GST states that this is partly because women are socialized to turn their anger inward and blame themselves, while men are socialized to express anger outwardly (Jang, 2007). Broidy and Agnew (1997) also pose that females are not more advantaged than males in protective factors, or factors (such as self-esteem and self-efficacy) that make individuals less likely to respond to strain and emotional distress with crime and deviance. However, women lacking these factors, coupled with strain caused by gender role socialization, gender stereotypes, and gender identities, may be more likely to participate in illegitimate self-directed coping

strategies (i.e., alcohol abuse, selective ignoring) (Broidy & Agnew, 1997). Yet, women who are more strongly invested in the intimate networks may avoid serious criminal behaviors due to the fact that those actions may threaten those ties (Broidy and Agnew, 1997).

### **GST, African Americans, and Religiosity**

One intimate network in which many African Americans participate, is the church. Many researchers have previously found that African Americans report higher levels of religiosity and membership in religious organizations than their White counterparts (Ellison, 1993; Connell & Gibson, 1997; as cited in Jang & Johnson, 2005). Religion and spirituality have been noted to have buffering and coping effects (Herndon, 2003; Koenig, 1995; McIntosh, 1995; Riggins, McNeal & Herndon, 2008). Jang and Johnson (2005) also state that individuals are more likely to respond to strain with other-directed rather than self-directed emotions, when they believe that others are the cause of their adversity. Therefore, due to the macro-structural and economic disadvantages that poor African Americans face, GST poses that they would experience higher crime and violence levels (Jang & Johnson, 2005). Despite this information, the rates of crime and violence among African American men continue to be astoundingly higher than any other group—even their female counterparts. Therefore, Jang and Johnson questioned whether religiosity has a higher emotional coping effect on African American women, than on African American men.

To test this notion, Jang and Johnson (2005) took data from the previous four waves (between 1970 and 1992) of the National Survey of Black Americans (NSBA), a nationally representative panel survey of adult African Americans. The 1970 NSBA

survey was a multistage area probability sampling, based on the national distribution of African Americans indicated by the 1970 Census. Every African American household in America had the same probability of being selected. Eligible respondents had to be 18 years or older, self-identified Black, and a U.S. citizen. One person was randomly selected for a face-to-face interview, from each household that participated. A total of 2,107 respondents were interviewed in 1979 and in 1980, with a response rate of 67 percent. Three telephone surveys were used for the remaining three NSBA waves. For the second interview 57 percent of the original respondents were located and asked to participate—77 percent of them (935) were interviewed, along with 16 new respondents. Seven hundred and seventy-nine respondents (83 percent) of those respondents were interviewed for the third wave; as well as 14 others. The final collection of data was taken in 1992. From a sample of 659 respondents, 623 (94 percent; or 80 percent from of the respondents from the third wave) participated.

Jang and Johnson (2005) decided to focus their analysis on the last wave for two reasons. First, the second wave of data included only one of eight religiosity items that were used in the study, and the third wave added just one more. The researchers felt that this made it inappropriate to use those waves, since religiosity was one of their main concepts. Second, although the first wave of data included various religiosity measures like the last wave, the lengthy interval between the two sets of data (1979 & 1992) made it impractical to use for longitudinal analysis. Also, although both sets measured distress, the last wave would allow them to examine situational (temporary) as well as state (long-term) distress. The final wave included respondents that ranged from 29 to 90 years of age, with a mean of age 53. It was 68 percent female (450), which overrepresented the



general Black population of people 30 and older (in which they made up only 56 percent).

The NSBA interviews asked each respondent about serious “personal problems” that occurred in their lives and the lives of his/her significant other. Forty-two percent revealed having up to two various types of problems (financial, residential, job-related, health-related, and interpersonal). They were also asked to identify how often they fought and argued with others during the time of that distress. Jang and Johnson created nine items that asked the respondents about distress over the past month and 11 items for those who indicated having serious “personal problems.” From these data, three indicators were constructed for situational distress: other-directed emotion (anger), self-directed emotion (depression, anxiety), and physical distress (poor appetite, restless sleep). These distress measures and two indicators of positive feelings (life satisfaction and general happiness), were used as indicators of “expression.” This is consistent with the crosscutting factor model, which states that emotionally expressive people have a tendency to freely express both positive and negative feelings, while distressed people are more likely to express only negative feelings (Jang & Johnson, 2005).

A *self-efficacy index* was constructed by calculating the mean of three items that measured the extent to which each respondent had confidence that his/her life would work out as planned or expected. A *social support construct* was created using three indicators, each including five items measuring potential, perceived and actual support. Three indicators of *religiosity* were constructed using eight items (organizational—attending religious services and activities; nonorganizational—reading religious materials, watching/listening to religious programming, praying, and asking others to

pray; subjective religiosity—perceived religiousness and using religion as a guide for living). Two constructs of *strain* (social and nonsocial) were included in the analysis, by asking participants to identify any of nine listed problems during the last month. If any problems were identified, the respondents were asked to what extent the problem upset him/her. A mean of the items was used to measure strain. A *poor health construct* was also created by measuring health problems, dissatisfaction with health, and self-rated health. Lastly, demographic variables, such as gender, age, family income, marital status, and number of children within the household were also taken into account. From these constructs, a theoretical model based on latent-variable structural equation modeling was created. One-tailed tests for hypothesized relationships and two-tailed tests for non-hypothesized relationships were used to measure statistical significance.

Results indicated that African-American women report higher levels of state or situational distress than their male counterparts when controlling for women's greater tendency to freely express their emotions. African Americans committed to religiosity also reported lower levels of both situational and state distress. Their analysis also revealed that gender effects on distress would have been underestimated, if the researchers did not take religiosity (which suppresses the gender-distress relationship) into account. Self-efficacy and social support were found to fully account for the effects of religiosity on distress. Those with a high sense of control over their lives were less likely to turn to ineffective, non-instrumental, deviant coping behavior, such as aggression. However, the distress buffering effects of religiosity were found to be significant for African American women, but not for men. Further, religiosity had a stronger effect on aggression in female African Americans, than male African

Americans. This finding is explained by the evidence that African American women were more likely than men to experience self-directed distress, especially that of physical distress. These findings align with those of Broidy and Agnew's (1997) which established that individuals are less likely to turn to aggression when they are more likely to experience self-directed distress (which elicits self-directed emotion).

To help further the understanding of levels of aggression between African American men and women, Jang (2007) decided to extend his 2005 study (with Johnson). Recalling Broidy and Agnew's (1997) conceptualization of male and female concerns, Jang (2007) proposed that among African Americans, some of the types of strain predominately thought to be characteristic of men, would also apply to women. According to Jang (2007), some of the strains experienced by males might also be experienced by African American women as often, if not more often, than African American men. This is partly due to the unique role-strain that African American women experience from economic concerns, household maintenance, pregnancy and parenting (Taylor, Chatters, Tucker, & Lewis, 1991; as cited in Jang, 2007). Similar to their non-African American counterparts, African American women are likely to experience higher rates of anger and self-directed emotions in response to strain than African American men. However, African American women are less likely to internalize anger than their White counterparts (Broidy & Agnew, 1997).

Jang (2007) focused his study of GST and African Americans, on the issues of self-esteem, self-efficacy, social support and religiosity as conditioning factors. He examined whether the types of strain and emotional responses experienced by males and females, explain the differences among African Americans in the forms of legitimate and

deviant behavioral responses to strain. Although he found that distress-buffering effects of religiosity tended to be larger for women than men (Jang & Johnson, 2005), more information was needed in order to determine whether conditioning factors directly explained differences in coping between the genders (Jang, 2007). Jang (2007) tested this by using the same data from the NSBA used in the Jang and Johnson's 2005 study. However, the 2007 study used the first wave of surveys rather than the last.

Jang (2007) stated that he decided to use the first wave for two major reasons. First, the second and third waves of data only included one or two of eight religiosity items. Second, the fourth wave, although using an adequate amount of religiosity concepts, lost over half the number of original respondents (from 2,107 to 623). Also, the first and fourth waves of data were not used together due to the same issues with longitudinal analysis as the first (Jang & Johnson, 2005) study. Respondents were asked about serious "personal problems" and how often they engaged in a list of behaviors during the time of those problems (fought and argued, drank alcohol or used drugs, tried to put it out of their minds, kept busy doing other things, prayed or received prayer from others). These items were used to construct the individual's coping behaviors.

The survey also asked those who reported serious *personal problems* about how often they felt distressed at the time, using one measure of anger, and eight measures of depression/anxiety. Respondents were also asked to describe up to two types of strain they experienced. However, most described only one. Thus, in order to get more strain differentiation, the NSBA survey asked the individuals to choose from a list of problems that they encountered during a month prior to the survey. If they responded to any, they were then asked to report how much the problem upset them. The study then used those

problems' upsetting nature and degree of *undesirability* to construct gender types of subjective strain for males (male strain) and females (female strain). Another female strain, concerning *health*, was constructed using 11 items about varying diseases and/or conditions. This was created not only to measure health problems, but also the degree to which those impairments keep the individuals from work and carrying out daily tasks. Jang (2007) also created a measure for housework strain and racial strain—to more decisively measure the differences in female and male strain.

The first NSBA included six items to measure self-esteem, which this study used to construct an index on *self-esteem* (using the mean score of the items). It also included an index of *self-efficacy*, measuring the extent of each participant's confidence in fulfilling life plans and expectations (using four items, instead of the three that were used in the fourth wave). Again, the mean score was used to construct an index for this item. *Social support* was measured by combining standardized scores in two items (feelings of closeness to family members and how many non-family friends they feel free to talk to about their problems). The same eight items used to measure *religiosity* in the first study (Jang & Johnson, 2005) were used for the same construct in this study. Lastly, *sociodemographic* variables (gender, age, social class, marital status, and region of residence) were taken into account.

An ordinary least squares regression analysis was conducted with the data; regressing measures of strain on gender first, depression and anger second, coping behaviors third, and a three-way interaction (gender x negative emotion x conditioning factors) were added individually to the third model lastly. A one-tailed test was used to test for statistical significance for hypothesized/expected relationships and two-tailed

tests were used for non-hypothesized relationships. As a result, African American women were more likely than men to report strain related to health, relationships and housework, than racial and job strain. Yet, they were more likely to report financial strain than men. African American women also reported higher levels of anger and depression/anxiety than their male counterparts. However, while differing in other coping behaviors, African American women reported confrontational coping (fighting/arguing) as often as men. No gender differences in strain from criminal victimization was found.

Interestingly, male strains did not have stronger effects on other-directed (rather than self-directed) emotions. Again, other-directed emotion (anger) had a larger effect on other-directed deviance and coping (fighting/arguing), than self-directed emotion. Thus, self-directed emotions had significant effects on self-directed deviance and legitimate coping (religion), while the effects of other-directed emotion were not significant on these coping behaviors. Self-directed emotion also had a stronger effect on self-directed coping, than other-directed emotion had on fighting/arguing. Jang (2007) also found that the effects of depression/anxiety were the same on fighting/arguing, escapism and religious coping. Supporting the previous findings (Jang & Johnson, 2005), this study also found that the same level of religiosity is more likely to help African American women than men avoid fighting/arguing with others, in reaction to the same levels of anger and depression/anxiety. He also found that if two equally angry African Americans—one male and one female—had the same level of confidence in handling issues and life problems, the woman is more likely to take the escapist approach to cope with this emotion. Finally, self-esteem more strongly linked African American women with the likelihood to pray when angry in response to strain than men.

### *Section Summary*

General Strain Theory has provided a very important theoretical approach for researching the effects of strain on human emotion that leads to crime and deviance. Numerous studies have been conducted using GST throughout the years, to decipher differences in rates of crime/deviance among genders, races, and coping characteristics. These studies have provided relevant information and a foundation for additional links between strain, emotion, coping and violence to be made. This important information includes: the findings that strain caused by stressful life events or unfair treatment may increase levels of anger; anger (an other-directed emotion) is more likely to elicit illegitimate, other-directed coping (aggression/violence); males have a greater likelihood of responding to anger with aggression/violence; females are more likely to engage self-directed emotions in addition to anger in response to strain; the combination of self and other-directed emotion makes a violent/aggressive response less likely; African American women are more likely to engage religiosity as coping mechanisms for strain; and religiosity appears to buffer African American women from aggression due to negative affect more than African American men.

Despite these intriguing findings, the studies also included a number of limitations. Broidy's (2001) study was conducted with a very heterogeneous sample (White, middle-class). However, subsequent studies validated Broidy's findings with African Americans also. Both Jang and Johnson's (2005) and Jang's (2007) studies used only a single wave of data, which hinders causal interpretations of estimated relationships and prevents longitudinal findings. Although Broidy (2001) clearly defined the types of other-directed deviance committed by the participants in his study (stealing, selling

drugs, hitting or threatening to hit, destroying others' property, lying, being arrested), both the Jang and Johnson (2005) and Jang (2007) studies defined and measured aggression vaguely (as fighting or arguing with others). Thus, it is unclear if these studies truly evaluated the level of community violence to be examined in this study (i.e., fist fights, shootings, stabbings, armed robberies, etc.). Both Jang and Johnson (2005) and Jang (2007) also analyzed their data twenty years after it had been collected; bringing into question the validity of the results for present African Americans. Additionally, only 763 (of the 2,107) participants in the Jang (2007) study reported having serious personal problems. Thus, emotional and behavioral response to strain information was missing for many of the participants. Furthermore, those who did report serious personal problems were only allowed to record up to two problems causing strain. Since GST posits that negative emotions will be more likely among those who experience repeated strains (Broidy, 2001), getting an accurate account of how stressful the respondents' lives were may have been hindered.

One of the most important limitations, in my opinion, of the Jang and Johnson (2005) and Jang (2007) studies is the fact that the concepts of religiosity and spirituality were not differentiated from one another or measured separately. Only vague characteristics of religiosity (categorized as organizational, non-organizational, and subjective) were given and inquired into. Therefore, it is unclear as to whether spirituality may have been more helpful or effective than religion in buffering against certain strains. It was also unclear as to whether African American men may be more inclined to concepts of spirituality than religion.



### **Differentiating Religion and Spirituality**

Many definitions of religion and spirituality have been given throughout research over the years. While some authors give very clear and detailed differentiations between the two concepts, others choose to blur the lines or view them as fundamentally the same. However, within the last ten years, more and more authors are choosing to specify these concepts as well as their effects/affects on human development, interaction, and change. More importantly to this study, is that the effects/affects of religion and spirituality on youth and adult deviance, crime and violence are proving to vary in recent studies. Thus, the following will discuss the definitions of religion and spirituality, explain their relationship to one another, and discuss their differing effects/affects on human development and change.

#### **Defining Religion & Spirituality**

In the most general terms, religion is defined as an organized faith tradition (King & Boyatzis, 2004), a system of worship and doctrine shared within a group (Fetzer, [1999] 2003; as cited in Schroeder & Frana 2009), or an organized system of beliefs, rituals, practices, and community, oriented toward the sacred (Josephson & Dell, 2004). Tedeschi and Calhoun (2006) describe religion as an organized group with shared beliefs that explain and describe the specified form transcendent reality takes (as cited in Bray, 2010). Spirituality, on the other hand, is defined as an individual approach to a practice of worship (Redman, 2008), more personal and experiential (Schroeder and Frana, 2009), and more personal and private configurations of feelings and actions in relation to some transcendent entity (King & Boyatzis, 2004). Some describe spirituality as identified with personal transcendence and meaningfulness (Zinnbauer, Pargament, Cole, Rye, Butter, &

Belavich, 1997; as cited in LeBlanc, 2008), and as concerned with the transcendent, addressing ultimate questions of life's meaning, with the assumption that there is more to life than what we can see or fully understand (Fetzer, [1999] 2003; as cited in Schroeder & Frana 2009). Yet others simply define it as relational consciousness (Hay & Nye, 1998; as cited in King & Boyatzis, 2004), and the quest for God, as one understands God (Alcoholics Anonymous, 1976). Given the complexity of defining these terms, some authors choose to use them interchangeably or tie them both into the notion of "religiosity" (Jang & Johnson, 2005; Jang, 2007; Giordano, Longmore, Schroeder, & Seffrin, 2008). Although both terms involve a belief in the transcendent, religion is conceptualized by practices within an organized group; while spirituality is relational and personal. Thus, despite any overlap in meaning, the debate between what each term conceptualizes continues to rage on.

### **Religion vs. Spirituality**

More and more studies involving topics of transcendence are displaying a distinct dividing line between both the perceptions of and the effects/affects of religious and spiritual orientations. Bradley (2009) goes to great measures to make a distinction between religious fundamentalism and spirituality. According to Bradley (2009), religious fundamentalism has little to do with religious quest orientation (which includes exploration, doubting, and searching for truth about one's religion), because it involves a dogmatic agreement with a predetermined set of religious beliefs and rigidly performing practices. However, spirituality includes the process of examining existential questions, having open-minded attitudes towards religious practices, and emphasizing the need to explore one's relationship with a higher power (Bradley, 2009). Most importantly

Bradley (2009) argues that one's religious orientation (fundamental or spiritual), determines how they develop empathy.

Bradley (2009) collected data from 506 undergraduate survey participants, from nineteen sections of a Principles of Sociology class at a large Midwestern University. The average respondents were White, middle-class females, twenty and a half years of age, and never married. The four subscales of the Davis (1983) Interpersonal Reactivity Index (IRI) were used to operationalize the level and type of empathy a person had towards others (the dependent variable). The four subscales of empathy were empathic concern, perspective-taking, personal distress, and fantasy abilities. Each of these subscales were comprised of seven items that were used to measure a particular aspect of empathy (Bradley, 2009). The empathic concern scale measured the ability to experience sympathy and compassion for the misfortune of others. The perspective-taking scale measured one's tendency to adopt psychological viewpoints of others. The personal distress scale measured the participants' capacity to feel discomfort when witnessing or experiencing stressful events and the fantasy ability scale measured one's ability to vicariously place themselves into real or imagined situations. Statements were given that represented different aspects of each type of empathy, and respondents were asked to scale their answers from 1 (not at all like me) to 5 (very much like me).

The participants' fundamentalist religious beliefs (a primary variable) were measured using the Altemeyer and Hunsberger (2004) Revised Religious Fundamentalism (RRF) scale. This scale is comprised of 12 items with statements such as "God has given humanity a complete, unfailing guide to happiness and salvations which must be totally followed" (Bradley, 2009, p. 207). Respondents' answers could range

from strongly disagree to strongly agree. Personal spirituality was measured with 14 items of the Underwood and Teresi's (2002) Daily Spiritual Experience (DSE) scale. Participants were asked to respond to statements such as "I experience a connection to all life," by selecting answers ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree. Sociodemographic controls, including the person's religious affiliation, were also used as covariates. Church attendance and the importance of religion in one's life were also measured.

Bradley (2009) used OLS regression as a primary analytic strategy. For each dependent variable, items were entered into the regression separately, starting with fundamentalism/spirituality scales, then religious affiliation and religiosity variables, and ending with sociodemographic controls. Generally, respondents were found to be more spiritually inclined than fundamental, stated that religion was highly important, and attended church at least once a month. Findings suggested that spirituality would increase empathic concern, perspective-taking and fantasy abilities, even when controlling for religious affiliation and religiosity. However, religious fundamentalism was found to be negatively associated with empathic concern, perspective-taking and fantasy abilities. In other words, the findings support the notion that spirituality, not religious fundamentalism, will assist in the development of three of the four factors of empathy. Personal distress was not found to be related to fundamentalism, spirituality or religious affiliation. Bradley (2009) hypothesized that this may be a result of the positive effects religion/spirituality are known to have on mental health, especially that of anxiety and perceived distress (Hackney & Sanders, 2003; Hill, 2006; Peltzer, 2005; Salsman & Carlson, 2005, as cited in Bradley, 2009).

Spirituality was also found to help develop meaningfulness—the extent to which an individual is able to view his/her life with a sense of purpose and the extent to which he/she views his/her personal goals with clear connections between short and long term goals—in a literature review done by LeBlanc (2008). LeBlanc (2008) posits that in order to understand delinquency among youth, an ecological perspective must be taken. Within the ecological perspective, one examines specific influential contexts, such as self, family, peers, and community, in order to get a better understanding of the risk factors associated with youth violence (Beale-Spencer, Dupree, & Hartmann, 1997; Resnick, Ireland, & Borowsky, 2004, as cited in LeBlanc, 2008). In examining the literature encompassing these topics, LeBlanc (2008) found that much of adolescent delinquency is caused by a search for connectedness and meaning—and to escape the pain experienced by not having a genuine source of spiritual fulfillment. According to LeBlanc (2008), adolescence reflects “a developmental need for meaning and purpose, a desire for greater connection to others, and ultimately, a deeper connection to self” (p. 262).

These concepts also align with Higgins’ (1987) theory of self-discrepancy. According to this theory, when what one desires to be or believe they should be is at odds with what they actually are, it leads to negative emotions (dejection/depression or agitation/edginess). According to Higgins (1987), the greater the intensity and severity of the discrepancy, the more likely one will become vulnerable to misguided cognitive beliefs and behavioral sanctions. This is significant because according to Anderson (1999), the campaign for “respect” is seen as protective, and often forms the core of one’s self-esteem when alternative avenues of self-expression are not available or are not sensed to be. Thus, underlying the adoption of street code is one’s inability to express

themselves as desired, which may lead to feelings of frustration, hopelessness, depression and ultimately agitation. Both religion and spirituality have been noted to reduce problem behaviors and promote positive behavior. However, LeBlanc (2008) found that spirituality had a greater negative correlation with depressive symptoms than religiosity. As stated earlier, spirituality also involves the quest for a deeper understanding and attainment of one's true self, and how they are connected to the world around them. Therefore, spirituality emerges as a better approach for combating street code and factors contributing to the adoption and sustainment of it.

### **Spirituality and Transformation**

Spirituality has been used as a coping mechanism and tool for transformation for many years. One of the most popular examples of this is the Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) program. Alcoholics Anonymous follows a 12-step guideline, intertwined with spiritual quest, to assist those wanting to break free from alcohol addiction. A number of studies have also delved into the issue of using spirituality as a therapeutic transformative tool for those who engage in a lifestyle of violence. The following will discuss two such studies: one involving a program for male batterers, and another involving a program for men seeking to desist from a life of drugs and crime.

#### **Male Batterers**

Domestic abuse is one form of violence that has received great social response over the past 15-20 years (Ronel & Tim, 2003). Many intervention programs have been developed in response to such attention, in an attempt to combat this type of violence. However, according to Ronel and Tim (2003), there had been numerous obstacles in treating male batterers and gaps in existing models of treatment. Predominant norms like

control, especially between the sexes, and the urge to win by any means necessary, presented a unique challenge for combating male battering (Ronel & Tim, 2003). Thus, Natti Ronel (one of the authors) created a new spiritually-based model, called Grace Therapy, as an attempt to address these issues.

Grace Therapy uses the concepts of the AA 12-step program, to combat violence and rage in male batterers. In Grace Therapy, violence is considered to be a phenomenon that works on all three levels of human functioning—behavioral/physical, mental, and spiritual (Ronel & Tim, 2003). The batterers are viewed as men who feel powerless when they try to control what they cannot—namely, their partners. Thus, the men are perceived as ultimately having a spiritual imbalance, an extreme self-centeredness that causes their outbursts. According to Ronel and Tim (2003), “a man is fully absorbed in his existential threats or desires, and this leads him to a mental state that can result in violent behavior” (p. 72). Faith is viewed as a possible outcome of Grace Therapy; signifying emerging spiritual development and a contribution to continued development. According to Ronel and Tim (2003), recovery can be gained by struggling against self-centeredness (selfishness), and towards God-centeredness (unconditional giving).

The Grace Therapy model was used in group therapy for male-batterers during 1994-1999, at the Tel-Aviv Center for the Treatment of Domestic Violence (Ronel & Tim, 2003). It had also been used since 1997 in the Israeli Prison Service. According to the authors, hundreds of men participated in Grace Therapy groups, and dozens of professionals participated in Grace Therapy workshops. Since the first author developed the method and the second author is a former male-batterer, the data collected stemmed from the experiential knowledge with battering and treatment groups using Grace

Therapy. Thus, no statistical or experimental data were collected. The first goal of Grace Therapy is an immediate abstaining from violent behavior. The second goal is a sustained abstinence from attitudes, thoughts, fantasies, expectations, and emotions that may lead to violence. Thus, the purpose of the therapy was not to teach men how to control their anger; but rather, how to experience freedom from anger (Ronel & Tim, 2003). The final goal of Grace Therapy is to achieve self-transformation on a spiritual level—again, one that replaces self-centeredness with God-centeredness.

In order to achieve the first goal, Grace Therapy implements seven concepts of the therapy model: modularity, immediacy, group availability, therapist availability, accessibility, acceptance, and mutual help. Modularity breaks the affiliation process into several stages. It simply engages the principle of taking it “one day at a time.” Immediacy means that whenever the program was contacted by an individual wanting/needing help, a meeting was arranged with that person immediately—sometimes on the same day, but no later than one day. Group availability means that the program made sure that they always had a group available for an individual to participate in. With therapist availability, a participant was given the phone number of a group leader—who would be available for conversation at all times. This was mandatory to help calm participants down if they ever felt that their anger was getting out of control and violence was likely to erupt. Accessibility refers to the place, climate and attitude of the therapy program itself. It was in a comfortable and convenient environment, had appropriate operational rules, and was warm, welcoming and caring. The concept of acceptance meant that all participants were unconditionally accepted. This was done carefully, as not to project an acceptance of their behavior; but rather a personal acceptance.



In order to address the mental perceptions of male-batterers, Grace Therapy seeks to help the participant view their relationship with a significant other as a lose-win, instead of a win-lose. According to Ronel and Tim (2003), male-batterers often perceive that gratification is a limited resource for which both partners are consistently competing. One of the major perceived sources of gratification is that of control. Control brings existential gratification, but also serves as a tool for obtaining other sources of gratification, such as comfort and physical pleasure (Ronel & Tim, 2003). Since it is viewed as a limited resource, male-batterers often believe that the only way of obtaining more of it, is by depriving their partners of it. This win-lose perception of relationship, is a cause of constant tension. Therefore, the win-lose scenario, actually turns into a lose-lose one as “the man is trapped in a powerless situation which he tries to solve by adding more of the same factor that defines his powerlessness” (Watzlawick, Weakland, & Fisch, 1979, as cited in Ronel & Tim, 2003, p. 76). Thus, Grace Therapy attempts to assist the batterer in taking on a lose-win model of relationship, by implementing the spiritual ideology of grace. In the lose-win model, one attempts to provide the other with benefits, rather than demanding those benefits. In this perception, the partner is no longer viewed as an opponent, but as a close and intimate ally (Ronel & Tim, 2003).

According to Ronel and Tim (2003), although in the lose-win model, one partner is willing to lose so that the other can win, it actually becomes a win-win model. In place of a tension for control, threats and desires, a growing sense of trust is established between the partners. If the men give up willingly, it diminishes the need for struggle and loosens his attitudes towards himself, his partner and life—including his concerns with her achievements (Ronel & Tim, 2003). Grace Therapy posits that this attitude usually

transfers over into other relationships, decreasing the batterers demanding and manipulative behavior; bringing reconciliation and restoration. Ronel and Tim (2003) state that this process is definitely not an easy one, and in most cases is achieved partially, gradually and slowly with many relapses. Therefore, Grace Therapy provides social support, and a moral atmosphere created by the grace ideology. Eventually, a man's faith (spiritual development), and satisfaction in his own achievements will also provide support for him to move towards transformation. Ronel and Tim (2003) provided several interview excerpts taken from examples representing the many stages of Grace Therapy, from the viewpoint of individuals who participated in it and observations from therapy. These excerpts backed the workings of their models and gave testament of their validity and effectiveness in working with male-batterers. However, the Grace Therapy model is limited in that no empirical data have been collected.

### *Desisting from Crime*

Schroeder and Frana (2009) conducted a study investigating how spirituality was being used by males undergoing change from a life of criminality. They interviewed 11 men living in a halfway house in the Midwest. The home adhered to the AA model and held regular AA meetings. The men, ranging from 20 years of age to over 50, were interviewed concerning the role of religion and/or spirituality in their lives, and how they currently used spirituality during their intentional move away from crime. All of the men had spent time in prison, struggled with alcohol and drugs and frequently committed serious crimes. The goal of the authors was to attempt to isolate the "how" of the change process as it related to religion and spirituality. Interviews were coded and grouped by

three “distinct emotions most relevant to the lives of the men living in the halfway house—anger, anxiety, and depression” (Schroeder & Frana, 2009, p. 726).

The results overwhelmingly revealed that both religion and spirituality were a coping mechanism in their moves away from a life of crime. Although there were a number of emotional problems revealed in the data, most of the men attributed their criminal offending, in some part, to issues with anger. Many respondents also revealed that one cause of their anger, were feelings of self-hatred. Therefore, religion and/or spirituality were discussed as being the men’s source of calmness, stimulation for changes away from anger toward peace, tolerance, and kindness, and a source of forgiveness to put them at ease with their past identities. Spirituality and /or religion was also viewed as offering hope for a better future (thus, alleviating anxiety), an emotional turning point away from depression and despair, and alleviating loneliness by forming interpersonal bonds with a higher power (Schroeder & Fran, 2009).

Although Schroeder and Fran (2009) do not clearly differentiate between the concepts of spirituality and religion, it is clear (according to definitions discussed earlier in this project) that the respondents were referring to spiritual development. However, this research was limited by the fact that all of these men were living within the halfway house during this process of change. Therefore, the security of the environment in which they lived may have provided the influence needed to maintain and grow within their change process. The real test of whether true change has occurred will only happen when the men return or have access to their previous living environments and the stressors therein. The authors, as well as others, also state that religion and spirituality have not been proven to assist with long-term desistance from crime (Giordano, Longmore,

Schroeder & Seffrin, 2008). Schroeder and Fran (2009) also suggest that research on “how” spirituality is used to cope with negative emotions and life’s struggles should be conducted.

### **Spirituality/Religion and Lifelong Coping**

Although religion and spirituality have not been empirically proven to facilitate lifelong desistance from crime and violence, they have been studied as mechanisms to aide in coping with adversity over the course of a lifetime. Wallace and Bergeman (2002) studied the lifelong effects/affects of spirituality and religion for 10 African Americans between the ages of 58-88. The authors took a qualitative narrative approach, starting with basic questions (socio-demographic) given in an informal, conversational style. After basic questioning, the respondents were asked to tell their stories in their own way. The interviews lasted between 1-3 hours, in the place of the interviewee’s choice and were later transcribed and thematically analyzed. Four major themes arose from the data.

The first theme that emerged within all narratives was that of religion and spirituality contributing to a strong sense of self. The respondents stated that the church was a place where they could feel comfortable being themselves and it provided a safe, supportive and accepting environment. It was also a place that nurtured a responsibility to help and serve others. All of the respondents said that they took part in community service and that it was a very important part of their lives. It helped them to foster an identity committed to caring and giving to others. The participation in community service also helped them to discover their gifts and a sense of “calling” and purpose to their lives. Wallace and Bergeman (2002) pose that having a sense of purpose increased self-

awareness and provided a sense of meaning for the individuals. It also provided a sense of comfort and satisfaction in knowing that they answered “the call.”

A second theme that arose from the data was that of social support. According to the respondents religion and spirituality provided a broad-based support network. While working in the community and church-related service, they were able to connect with others, which provided a sense of reciprocity, as the community also gave them emotional and instrumental assistance. The travels that they participated in with their churches (i.e., conferences) also allowed many of them to see new places and meet new people that expanded their pool of social support. The church also served as a social outlet, as people often went there to meet with friends and have fun, as well as keep active in the community.

Another major theme that emerged from the data, was that religion and spirituality served as a coping mechanism through which individual could find meaning, a sense of coherence in their lives, meaning in times of change, and to understand life’s circumstances—especially those of negative change or events. According to Wallace and Bergeman (2002), the respondents used their beliefs to deal with and find meaning in physical problems, one’s own impending death, the illnesses of loved ones, and the deaths of close family members. Their faith also helped them endure racial discrimination and unfair circumstances. While some believed that God gave them strength to face discrimination head-on and continue to press towards their goals in life, others believed that placing their faith in God helped them to “deal with” the discrimination and the perception that they couldn’t do anything about it—believing that He would take care of it. Either way, their approach to coping with discrimination and other hardships provided

them, to some degree, with a perception of control. According to Wallace and Bergeman (2002), for events that may be threatening and not in one's control, it is possible to gain a perception of control as a result of one's faith, which is something that one can exert control over. Spirituality and religion also gave meaning to the positive aspects of their lives, as many of them considered themselves "blessed" in many areas.

Their beliefs also served as a protective function, guiding the participants through tough decision-making processes and giving direction in complex and confusing circumstances. "Here, the support sought was both informational and/or emotional, provided not by the church community itself, but also by one's personal Higher Being" (Wallace & Bergeman, 2002, p. 148). Lastly, a reoccurring theme from the data, was the role of spirituality and religion throughout one's lifespan. As a result of their early participation in church activities, many stated that they continue to experience spiritual development. Others indicated that their experience with church in their youth led to an emergence of spiritual commitment later in their lives.

Wallace and Bergeman's (2002) study is limited in the fact that it does not consistently decipher the differing effects/affects of religion versus spirituality. However, this study is significant in that it not only outlines the importance of exposure to religiosity, it also addresses the concepts of spirituality being used as a coping mechanism for life's challenges. Although earlier studies discussed the distinct differences in the affects of religion and spirituality in the lives of individuals; this study addresses the important role that the church can and may play in the lifelong spiritual development and emergence of individuals. It identifies the inter-relatedness of the two concepts. So, while some authors may choose to highlight how one concept can exist

exclusive of the other, these authors underscored how each concept can actually foster and cultivate the other.

### **The Role of the Church**

The Black Church has historically served as a major spiritual foundation for the African American family and community (Collins, 2006). According to Martin and Martin (2002), an unprecedented number of churches were built by African Americans after the Civil War and the end of slavery (as cited in Collins, 2006). During this time, the Black Church was concerned with social, economic, political as well as spiritual issues. It served the needs of Blacks living in poverty by providing social services after slavery and by serving numerous other purposes in response to the harsh conditions of life as African Americans (Martin & Martin, 2002, as cited in Collins, 2006). The Black Church remains in position to meet the challenges of racism, sexism and social and economic injustice (Collins, 2006). However, this institution is also falling short in addressing some serious issues facing today's youth. According to Collins (2006), research shows that the church's role in addressing prominent issues facing today's youth, including adolescent delinquency, is disappointing. These crucial gaps in the services provided to poor, inner-city Blacks, points to the reality that many Black churches are not socially active, and those that are need help, according to Dilulio (1999).

### **Psycho-Spiritual Transformation**

There is a limited, yet growing, body of literature that looks at religion as a growing force within cognitive psychology (Hodge, 2006). Within the past three decades, the theory of religion as a cognitive schema or pattern of thought, that shapes events, roles, persons, and self, has emerged (Paloutzian & Smith, 1995; McIntosh, 1995;

Koenig, 1995, Hodge, 2006). Religion is beginning to be investigated as not only a belief system, but a cognitive schema that provides a framework which enables people to engage in cognitive activity related to selective remembering/forgetting, information processing, decision-making, conflict resolution, ego defense, denial, withdrawal, judging, intending, trying, praising, condemning, exhorting, persuading, and doing (Ball-Rokeach, Rokeach, & Grube, 1984; as cited in McIntosh, 1995). Thus, research that studies religion as a coping method in adaptation to stress has also emerged (McIntosh, 1995). As discussed earlier in this project, religion and spirituality are often described as two different concepts. Religion is usually viewed in association with institutional activities (Herndon, 2003). However, spirituality is viewed as “complex and includes belief in a supernatural dimension of life, a personal relationship with God; living according to God’s will, and holding intrinsic beliefs and values” (Mattis, 2000). Thus, according to these definitions, the term “religion as a schema” as it is defined, actually describes a spiritual process—a process that is heavily intrinsic. This process may or may not take place within a religious context. Therefore, I will proceed using the term “spirituality as a schema” in place of “religion as a schema.”

Although spirituality as a schema has only been researched in the context of coping with major life traumas such as the death of a loved one and serious illness (Koenig, 1995), I proposed that it may be a useful tool in the development of frameworks to assist with long-term positive coping in response to exposure to violence. Since negative coping has been explained through the development of morally disengaging thought patterns, it may be possible that negative coping schemas could be deconstructed and replaced by more positive, spiritual ones. According to Beck (1964), patterns of



knowledge are based on associations, or stored constructions of previous experiences; viz memories, impressions, opinions, etc. Thus, a person can deconstruct their thoughts by identifying, appraising, recognizing, and evaluating their validity or accuracy within a situation, according to Beck (1964). Once this process takes place, Beck (1964) argues that the old thought patterns could be “neutralized” or reconstructed, by considering new or alternative explanations of the situations in which they occurred.

Grof and Grof’s (1989) theory of “spiritual emergence” and “spiritual emergency” aligns with Beck’s (1964) theory. According to Bray (2010), Johnson and Friedman explain spiritual emergence as a personal integration of spiritual and transpersonal experiences to attain expanded consciousness and maturity. They also posit that if those experiences produce a psychological crisis, spiritual emergency may occur. An individual’s readiness to transform, or a highly stressful emotional or physical event could trigger these experiences (emergence or emergency), according to Grof and Grof (1989). When sensitively and intelligently supported to the conclusion of one’s process, they bring forth positive transformational outcomes (Bragdon, 1988; Cortright, 1997; Lancaster & Palframan, 2009; as cited in Bray, 2010). These transformational outcomes include a greater interest in living, improved health and personal satisfaction, an enlarged worldview and a greater openness to spiritual experience (Bray, 2010). Grof and Grof (1989) also suggest that successful integration of this process of personal development reduces aggression, leads to higher tolerance of racial, political and religious differences, increases ecological awareness and changes values and existential priorities.

Both Beck’s (1964) and Grof and Grof’s (1989) theories, though including both psychological and spiritual concepts, can be viewed as processes in which transformation

is brought about. According to Merriam and Caffarella (1999), transformational learning is centered on the cognitive process of learning. Transformational learning usually involves the mental construction of experience, inner meaning and reflection (Merriam and Caffarella, 1999). The major question of this research study was “how is spirituality used by African American men in urban environments, for transforming out of a life violence?” Through the knowledge gained from this study, I believe that transformational learning workshops could be administered to help youth, young adults, and youth workers learn how to deconstruct current coping techniques, through spiritual concepts.

There are four major limitations to the proposal of using spirituality as a tool to help disadvantaged youth and young adults cope with neighborhood stressors and violence exposure. The first is that many ethical questions may arise when considering the goal of changing or modifying cognitive processes. Secondly, there is not a total consensus that religion [spirituality] is, in fact, a cognitive schema. Many psychologists view religion as simply a belief system, and nothing more. Thirdly, religion and spirituality are viewed as ambiguous concepts. As mentioned earlier, questions arise as to the difference between religion and spirituality. There is also a great deal of variance as to what the major beliefs are within any particular religion or spiritual sect; even by those practicing such religions (Paloutzian & Smith, 1995), or possessing certain spiritual beliefs. Lastly, no literature was found that supports the ideas that positive coping, in and of itself, necessarily leads to positive outcomes (Dempsey, 2002).

## **Implications for Adult Education**

### **The Soul/Holistic Programming**

Holistic teaching and learning is an increasingly important aspect of adult education. A growing amount of research is being done on the subject of teaching with and learning through the “soul.” Hollis (2005) defines soul as one’s intuited sense of a presence that is other than ego, and the archetype of meaning and the agent of organic wholeness. It is an active place of wisdom, deeper than one’s conscious knowing (Hollis, 2005). Hollis (2005) also states that soul represents the aspect of the self that animates one’s inner and outer worlds, bringing them to life. In other words, the soul is not a place of intellect, but rather an inner part of one’s being, which holds their sense of self and from which they react to the happenings of the world around them.

According to Dirkx (1997) in order to holistically facilitate transformative learning, adult educators must include the concepts of understanding self through spiritual, emotional and mythological dimensions of experience. In fact, the journey of self-knowledge requires the care for and nurturing of the presence of the soul dimension in teaching and learning (Dirkx, 1997). Dirkx (2006) also argues that engaging soul in learning, actually evokes growth and transformation. He states “Our creative, active imagination offers us, if we choose to see them and work with them, spiritual guideposts to our own growth, healing, transformation, and development of self-knowledge. In soul work, development of self-knowledge and authenticity involves a conscious, imaginative engagement of the unconscious dimensions of the self (Dirkx, 2006, pp. 32).”

Adult educators often find themselves unprepared to deal with the affective and imaginative reactions and responses of their students (Dirkx, 2006). Instead of embracing

these expressions of the “soul,” many adult educators shun or ignore them. Further, many don’t know how to incorporate connections to the soul of their students into their teaching methods. According to Dirkx (1997), denying the soul in learning, is denial of a life force and it is felt through the absence of energy, enthusiasm, or vigor. Methods of teaching that totally rely on images that come from without, while ignoring the imagination fail to arouse a connection with soul and prevent transformation from taking place.

Therefore, further research on how spirituality facilitates transformation is very valuable to the field of adult education. This research may give additional insight as to how to engage or more effectively engage the soul in adult education. Specifically, it may provide valuable information for program developers who are interested in creating more holistic curriculums aimed at transforming urban young adults and adults who have been exposed to and/or engaged in violence. Through hearing the stories of those who have attributed their transformation to spirituality, adult educators may be able to develop a greater understanding of the experiences of this population. And hopefully, they will also be able to incorporate the knowledge gained through this study into their work, in order to create more authentic experiences for the urban populations they serve.

### **Academic/Community Alliance**

Patton (1998), in an ethnographic study of inner city gang life, found that the young men, who decided to leave the violent gang life, did so after experiencing a traumatic experience in their life; in most cases, the violent death of a loved one. According to DiBiase (1998) the most significant kind of learning begins when the adult encounters incidents, often in an emotionally charged situation, that fails to fit his

expectations and consequently lacks meaning; or if one encounters an anomaly that cannot be given coherence either by learning within existing meaning schemes or by learning new meaning schemes. Thus, perspective transformational learning occurred for the young men in Patton's study. According to Mezirow, this process is often set into motion by a disorienting dilemma, or a particular life event or life experience such as a death of a loved one, job change or illness that a person experiences as a crisis (as cited in Merriam and Caffarella, 1999). Since the issue cannot be resolved by using previous problem-solving strategies, the learner engages in self-examination, (Merriam and Caffarella, 1999). Self-examination includes critical assessment of assumptions, which leads to recognizing that others have gone through a similar process (Merriam, et al., 1999). This then facilitates the learner formulating a plan of action (Merriam et al., 1999). The plan of action includes "acquiring new relationships, and building competence and self-confidence" (Merriam and Caffarella, 1999, p. 321). The last stage of perspective transformation is the process called reintegration, in which people continue to live their lives based on their newly transformed perspective (Merriam and Caffarella, 1999, p. 321).

With all of this in mind, strong alliances between adult/young adult educators and program planners, community members and religious/faith-based institutions should be developed. These partnerships could provide a plethora of knowledge sharing that would increase the overall effectiveness of adult education within urban communities. Relationships between community, academic/educational institutions and religious/faith-based institutions could assist in developing more relevant, transformative, adult education programs within disadvantaged communities. Feedback from the community

could help educators cater their curriculum to specific populations; including subject matter that is relevant to their life experiences. Partnerships with religious/faith-based institutions could assist in helping those exposed to high levels of violence, in developing better coping mechanisms. Therefore, adult education programs would be more likely to become comprehensive, relevant, and transformative for urban populations.

Given the great deal of literature that supports the notion that disadvantaged, inner-city young adults experience a great amount of violence, research must be done to develop empirically proven ways to help them cope. Although social activism and attempts to change political policies and legislation continues, residents in impoverished neighborhoods continue to experience the stressors of macro-structural problems. Since these problems are not predicted to be eliminated within the near future, alternatives to street code must be established to help stabilize and reduce widespread community violence. It is my hope that information gathered through this study will encourage the development of programs that will help to create legitimate alternatives for economic growth, reestablish strong neighborhood social structure and cohesiveness, and rebuild a sense of moral engagement for disenfranchised, urban communities.

## **CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY**

### **Philosophical Framework**

The purpose of this study was to explore the transformative processes of those who have used spirituality as a positive coping mechanism to help transition them out of a life of violence. Given this purpose, qualitative methods were selected to complete this study. According to Creswell (2005), quantitative research methods ask specific and narrow questions, collect numeric data and conducts inquiry in an unbiased and objective manner. Qualitative research methods, on the other hand, asks broad, general questions, relies on the views of the participants, collects textual data, analyzes data by searching for themes, and is conducted in a subjective manner (Creswell, 2005). One of the major goals of this research is to allow the voices of those who have experienced transformation from a life of violence to be heard. These data are being presented in a way that allows the audience the opportunity to hear, first hand, the problems, issues and needs faced by those who desired and obtained liberation from a life of violence. Since the exploration of how to effectively reduce urban violence and a detailed understanding of transformation from this phenomenon is key to this study, qualitative research was determined as the best fit for this inquiry.

### **Paradigm for Research**

This study was framed by a Poststructuralist paradigm and a Constructivist theoretical lens. According to Richardson and St. Pierre (2005), poststructuralism connects language, subjectivity, social organization and power. Different discourses within language segregate the world and give it meaning in ways that cannot be condensed to one another (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005). This subjectivity allows for

the understanding of differences in belief systems and the cultural experiences of individuals. It also helps to explain the differences in ethics and moral engagement (or disengagement) experienced by both mainstream and street individuals.

The emphasis on the subjectivity of language is particularly significant to this study, which includes discussions of street life and integration into mainstream culture. Richardson and St. Pierre (2005) state that in poststructuralism, meaning for an individual is dependent upon the discourses available to them. For instance, street code thrives on the attainment and sustainment of a notion of respect. Some of the characteristics of respect to which street individuals seek is very similar to those of the mainstream. However, other characteristics of this notion and the means by which individuals obtain it, are differing and even contradictory between the cultures. The manner in which data were collected and analyzed will capture these differences.

According to Guba and Lincoln (2005), constructivism takes on a relativist ontology, a transactional epistemology and a hermeneutical, dialectical methodology. According to relativism, standards for justification, moral principles or trust are sometimes thought to be relative to language, culture or and/or biological makeup (Swoyer, 2010). Key to the transactional epistemological view is the emphasis on the relational quality of subject and object (Connell, 1995). Hermeneutics, according to Denzin and Lincoln (2005), is an analytical approach of texts that stresses how prior understandings and prejudices shape the interpretive process. Constructivists believe that learners construct knowledge through reflection, a personal understanding of relevant structures of meaning, derived from his/her action in the world, according to Fenwick (2000, as cited in Daley, 2001).



There are three approaches within the constructivist theory—the cognitive, cultural and physical contexts. The cognitive approach argues learners create knowledge by linking new information to past experiences to create a personal process for understanding meaning, according to Mott and Daley (2000). Daley (2001) states that the cultural approach locates cognition in the interaction of individuals and culture, rather than primarily within the individual. The physical context approach includes cognition and culture, but it also includes the societal context regarding how individuals adopt knowledge. In other words, one's everyday surroundings and the context in which knowledge will be used (i.e. neighborhood, etc.) shapes the way one acquires new information. This was important for understanding both the development of knowledge/cognitive schemas and how those patterns of knowledge shape the gathering of new knowledge. The cognitive, cultural and physical contexts within the constructivist theory sets the framework for understanding the development of street mentality, as well as the contexts and processes by which transformation takes place.

Again the purpose of this study was to explore the transformative processes of those who have used spirituality to help transition them out of a life of violence. It was to give voice to those who have endured the journey of transformation; thus, giving insight into the process of that transformation and the learning needs of this population, from the perspective of those who have experienced them. Thus, because of the focus on the relative and subjective experiences of the participants, their constructed realities, and the process in which those realities changed, poststructuralism was an ideal fit for this study. Through the findings of this inquiry, data have been reconstructed to produce a greater

understanding of this population and an authentic depiction of their transformative process.

### **Research Questions**

The primary research question for this study is: “How is spirituality used by African American men in urban environments, for transforming out of a life of violence?”

The following interview questions were also asked:

*Interview, Part One (Narrative):* Participants were asked to tell their story; starting with their experiences of life as a child, throughout adolescence, youth and adulthood. They were asked to emphasize how they were introduced to street violence, how they became involved, when they realized a need for change, the process of their change, and how life is now different.

*Interview, Part Two (Semi-structured Interview):* Life Before Transformation—If it was not apparent within their narratives, participants were asked to specifically describe their thoughts and feelings while living a life of violence. They were asked to describe their perspectives on how they viewed themselves, their families, violence, relationships (with women), their community and fatherhood during this period in their lives. They were also asked to describe the moment/period of time in which they realized they desired or needed to change.

Life During/Continuing In/After Transformation—This section of questioning was originally two separate parts of questioning (life during and life after). Surprisingly, although all participants had desisted from a life of violence, most of them (seven of the nine) still considered themselves to be continuing in their transformative process; as it applies to life as a whole. When not apparent within their narratives, participants were

asked to describe their process of change. They were asked to explain the role that spirituality played in learning to positively cope with stressors/strains and other events that may have evoked anger. They were also asked to describe current thoughts and feelings about themselves, their families, violence, relationships, their community and parenting. They were asked to share any other resources that may have assisted with their transformation thus far. They were asked to describe if/how spirituality helps them maintain their changed state. They were also asked to share what resources they thought would help facilitate change in the lives of those who may currently be living a life of violence.

### **Design Considerations**

The investigator's aim for this study was to get a description of each participant's individual experience of transformation; and to find how each of their processes of transformation constructed meaning for their lives. The main goal of this study was to find out how each participant's experience with spirituality aided their process of transformation—to find out whether it brought them to a new/revised understanding of self (individually and as it relates to the world around them). Thus, a narrative design was chosen because it seeks to report individual experiences and discuss the meaning of those experiences for the individual (Creswell, 2005). Narrative was also chosen because it does not require a strict reduction of data during analysis, as in phenomenology. The goal was to allow the voices of the participants to tell the story of their transformational journey out of a life of violence.

According to Chase (2005), narrative researchers first emerged with the Chicago School sociologists who began to collect life histories and other personal documents in

the 1920's and 30's. Despite difficulties with generating sufficient numbers of accounts, as well as the time it took to analyze them, Polish sociologists began to greatly utilize life records. In doing so, they found that changes in entire social classes living in Poland could be explained and understood through autobiographical analysis (Chase, 2005). The Chicago School followed suit with studies based on the life histories of juvenile delinquents and criminals. The main pursuit of these sociologists became the explanation of interactive behavior of individuals with their sociocultural environments. Despite the popularity of such studies, the field of sociology began to favor abstract theory and statistical research methods during the 1940's and 50's (Chase, 2005).

During the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, anthropological use of the life history method emerged. Recording American Indian culture was the primary purpose for many of these studies. During this period the anthropological life history was gathered as a way of understanding cultural groups (Langness & Frank, 1981, as cited in Chase, 2005). It was also used to study change within cultures, brought about by contact with differing cultures and revolutionary movements (Langness, 1965; Langness, et. al., 1981, as cited in Chase, 2005). In the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, the feminist and civil rights movements gave new energy to the life history method (Chase, 2005). More than 2,000 slave narratives were deposited in the Library of Congress in the 1930's and 40's. However, very few of them were available to the public. Yet, in the early 1970's, activists and academics returned to the narratives, and they were published in 18 volumes of *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography* (Chase, 2005).

Journals and autobiographies from the second wave of the women's movement revitalized life history methods. By the 1980's the personal narratives of women became

essential documents for feminist research (Chase, 2005). Despite its history, feminists resisted the use of life histories solely for gathering information concerning history or the impact of society on the lives of individuals. Instead, they believed that it was important to view women as social actors and understand the subjective meanings that women assigned to the events and conditions in which they lived (Chase, 2005). Thus, subjectivity became a major focus.

In the 1960's another form of inquiry began to influence narrative research. Anthropologists, sociologists, and sociolinguists began to explore the idea that people's ordinary oral narratives (as opposed to full life histories) were worthy of further inquiry. During this time Labov and Waletzky (1967/1997) argued that oral narratives are forms of discourse that are characterized by structures that serve specific social functions (Chase, 2005). Orientation, complication, evaluation, resolution and coda were identified as the five sociolinguistic features of oral narratives (Chase, 2005). According to Chase, (2005) *orientation* informs the listener of the actors, time, place and situation. *Complication* is the main action of the narrative. *Evaluation* is the point of the story. *Resolution* is the result of the action, and *coda* returns the listener to the current moment. Many sociolinguists have critiqued Labov and Waletzky's work. However, their research created a foundation for many diverse explorations of the sociolinguistic qualities of oral discourse and for stating the importance of *how* people narrate experience.

The narrative method's focus on experience, subjectivity and the expression of self as it relates to one's sociocultural environment is why I chose it for this study. The psychological approach was taken for this narrative inquiry. According to Chase, the psychological researcher tends to emphasize a story's plot, characters and the structure or

sequencing of its content. McAdams (1997, as cited in Chase, 2005) argued that the content of a life story embodies both one's developed identity and one that's changed over time. Such information is exactly what this research sought to discover. This inquiry was able to capture how the participants developed a sense of self and value before, during/after their transformational experience. Through their stories, basic thinking structures or patterns should emerge, which will allow for an analysis of themes throughout their individual transformative process, and in comparison to one another. The person in context is of prime interest in narrative inquiry; and its purpose is to make meaning of an individual's experiences—to share understanding with readers (Pepper and Wildy, 2009). The emerging themes have given insight into critical areas that should be addressed when developing programs that assist with transformation from a life of violence.

The narratives were collected as semi-structured interviews. Participants were simply asked to share their story. However, to ensure that sufficient and relevant data were collected, follow-up questions (for clarification or to bridge a gap in information) were asked whenever necessary, throughout the narrative. Semi-structured interviews enable conversation to be used to obtain field data (Pepper & Wildy, 2009). This format also allows the researcher to facilitate a less formal conversation, where interaction can be conducted as relative equals (Pepper & Wildy, 2009). I believe that the participants of this study were very comfortable with this type of casual interview; and displayed their feelings of being on equal grounds by inquiring into my background as well. Thus, it is believed that they furnished more detailed information about their transformative life experiences.

## Access

One of the biggest challenges for researchers is the attainment of authentic information. According to Walker (1999), informants can respond to a researcher with either legitimization or suspicion. Legitimization opens the doors for honest communication to take place between inquirer and informant. In order for a participant to respond to a researcher with legitimacy, there must first be a certain level of trust. Walker (1999) states that one of the best ways to establish this relationship with participants is through friendship, sponsorship and/or membership. Through a mutual friend, I became acquainted with the Assistant Chief for the Division of Community Corrections. He agreed to sponsor me while completing fieldwork with local programs. His sponsorship definitely helped to establish trust with the directors, facilitators, and administrators of local programs. Contact was made with those individuals via phone and email, to confirm their willingness to assist me in recruiting participants. Speaking with those gatekeepers to explain my research purpose and process initiated further sponsorship; both with possible participants and with other acquaintances of theirs who could refer or recommend additional possible participants. A sponsor is someone who is respected in the community and legitimizes the researcher, presenting him/her as “okay” to the rest of the community (Walker, 1999). I was able to establish respect and rapport among the leaders/administrators of the programs; which in turn helped me establish the same with the participants. I was also given the opportunity to present my research plan to a men’s group of 30-40 possible participants. With the permission of my sponsors, I provided preliminary informed consent forms to individuals who displayed interest in possibly

participating in the study. Those who decided to participate then contacted me via phone, to set up an interview schedule.

### **Confidentiality**

A major aspect of maintaining respect with participants is the establishment of confidentiality and other ethical considerations. Fontana and Frey (2005) state that informed consent, right to privacy, and protection from harm should be established before inquiry begins. In order to confirm protection from harm, my research proposal was reviewed and approved by the established IRB committee for the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. An informed consent, which carefully and thoroughly informed the participants about the research, was reviewed and signed by all participants before interviewing began. Pseudonyms were used for all sponsors, participants, and people mentioned in their narrative interviews in order to protect their right to privacy. Information revealing the above information was not shared with anyone. The institutions and/or programs from which the participants were gathered were also not revealed. The first two recorded narrative interviews were listened to and discussed with my qualitative research committee member—to critique my interviewing techniques and give suggestion for improvement. All other narrative interviews were not shared with anyone and were transcribed by the interviewer/researcher (myself).

### **Sampling and Sample Rationale**

For this qualitative study, purposeful, typical sampling was used to select participants. According to Creswell (2005), purposeful sampling occurs when researchers intentionally select individuals and sites to learn or understand a particular phenomenon. Further, typical sampling is when the researcher studies a person or site that would seem



to be a typical source for those unfamiliar with the situation or phenomenon (Creswell, 2005). I initially began working with the Assistant Chief of Community Corrections for the City of Milwaukee, in order to identify community programs and sites that used spirituality as a component of transformational learning for those abandoning a life of violence. I then contacted the administrators of three such programs and invited them to participate in data collection for this study. Only one program of the three agreed to assist me in recruiting participants, and as a result, recommended approximately 10 individuals working with similar programs throughout the City (Milwaukee). Thus, snowball sampling was also used during this process. According to Creswell (2005), snowball sampling occurs when participants are asked to recommend other individuals to the study. As a result the administrators of those programs further recommended programs and/or participants. Participants were then allowed to refer additional individuals that may have taken interest in this study. As a result, programs yielded seven participants; and one of those participants recommended two additional participants. All possible participants were contacted after referrals were given, to ensure their interest in participating in this study. Those who referred individuals were also asked to participate in a brief interview to verify, from their perspective, why the referred individual(s) qualified for the study (Appendix G).

### **Criteria for Sites**

Three steps were involved in selecting sites for recruitment of possible participants. First, the Assistant Chief of Community Corrections agreed to recommend a number of sites that offer programming for those transitioning from violent lifestyles. Those sites were chosen based on three criteria: 1) they were sites that had access to

individuals who are transitioning from a life of violence/crime, 2) the site uses spirituality as one of the components of their program for transformational learning, 3) the site predominately serves minority individuals from urban neighborhoods. Second, site/program administrators and faculty (as well as participants) were asked to refer individuals who may be good participants for the study. These individuals were 1) African American males, 2) 18 years of age or older, and 3) have completed the program and/or have displayed and sustained drastic changes in lifestyle (i.e., attitude, mentality, actions, etc.). These criteria were chosen based upon the research that explains the unique vulnerability that impoverished, African American males experience in relation to violence; as well as research stating the complexities in maintaining long-term desistance for these particular individuals (see Chapter Two).

Once sites were selected and displayed interest in participation, preliminary informed consent forms were given to program administrators for distribution to recommended individuals. The preliminary informed consent forms included the title of the research project, the purpose and significance of the study, along with the researcher's email address and phone number. Preliminary questions concerning participation in this research project, were answered by the researcher (myself) via phone.

### **Data Collection**

Oral history narratives were collected from participants for this study. According to Chase (2005), oral history narratives are often used by historians who prefer to focus on the meanings that events hold for those who have lived through them—instead of the historical events themselves. Although some investigators use the narrative method to seek short stories about particular events and specific characters, this inquiry sought to

gather extended stories about a significant aspect of each participant's life—specifically, that of transformation (Chase, 2005). In order to achieve this goal, one face-to-face, open-ended response interview was conducted with 9 participants. All interviews took place within rooms or offices within the respective program buildings.

After a brief introduction, the participants reviewed and completed the informed consent form. The participant's general demographic information was then taken and they were asked if they had any questions about the study before proceeding. Although I did have an interview protocol (see Appendix D, E, and F), interviewees were first asked to "tell their story," from childhood until the present day—in hopes of capturing a narrative that detailed important aspects of their childhood, how they were introduced to street life, how they participated in violence, how they recognized the need or desire to change, and their change process. This was done instead of posing initial questions so that the participants could freely voice their experiences in a manner that was unconstrained by the investigator's (my) perspectives or previous findings (Creswell, 2005).

As the participants shared their stories, I closely listened for whenever topics and/or language that aligned those of specific interest (according to the interview protocol) were mentioned. If protocol questions concerning that topic were not answered within their narrative before moving on to another topic, I would ask for further clarification or more information on that subject matter. Using these techniques, I was able to establish a general and conversational approach. According to Patton (2002), a conversational approach relies on a spontaneous questioning that is part of the natural flow of interaction; while the general approach uses previously outlined issues that

should be explored throughout the interaction. Most responses to the questions outlined in the interview protocol naturally emerged from each narrative. However, even in follow-up questioning, there were times that the participants did not directly answer my questions. This was somewhat frustrating at first. However, I quickly realized that in asking questions that allowed participants to talk about what matters to them, their responses actually did shed light on my research concerns (Auerbach and Silverstein, 2003).

Eight of the nine participants were interviewed within one 120-180 minute session. One participant's interview was cut short due to a miscommunication about the time being allotted to us to use a space within that program's office. Thus, half of his interview was conducted in person, and the remaining half was conducted over the phone. Each interview was audio taped (including the phone interview) and transcribed verbatim, by the investigator (myself) using Microsoft Word. Each participant received a copy of his interview via email or postal service. They were also asked to reply with any clarifications, questions, or concerns.

### **Data Analysis**

After the narrative interviews were transcribed they were prepared for both hand and computer analysis. In addition to analysis by hand, the transcriptions were downloaded into Nvivo, a qualitative computer analysis software for further analysis. The researcher then coded the data. According to Creswell (2005), coding is a process of segmenting and labeling text to form descriptions and themes in data. It is the process of making sense of textual data, dividing it into segments, labeling the segments with codes, examining the codes for overlap or redundancy, and then collapsing the codes into

broader themes (Creswell, 2005). The interviews of each participant underwent two coding processes: 1) the coding for themes within each of the participant's interviews, and 2) coding for themes across all participant interviews. The coding process primarily focused on settings and contexts, perspectives held by the participants, the participant's way of thinking about people and objects, processes, activities, and relationships and/or social structures, as suggested by Bogdan and Biklen (1998). Another goal was to find themes that are concerned with the five major categories of life in which one's orientation (street or decent) would be greatly influential (family life, respect, navigation of street life, relationships, and fatherhood), according to Anderson (2001). In addition to these categories, themes in the areas of strain, community, gender roles, and the Church were also sought.

Once themes were found, further analysis was done to find broader interconnecting themes. According to Creswell (2005), interconnecting themes arise when the researcher connects themes to display a chronology or sequence of events, to develop a theoretical or conceptual model. Themes found definitely displayed sequences of events and sequences of ideology. The investigator was then able to display how both were interconnected to create action or phenomena in the lives of each participant. According to Chase (2005), there are five theoretical lenses that researchers possess in analyzing narrative data. First, narrative is viewed as retrospective meaning making (Chase, 2005). It is a way of understanding one's organization of events and objects into something meaningful—and a way of connecting actions and their consequences over time (Chase, 2005). Many of the participants often backtracked within their narratives, in order to further explain the causes of particular events.

Secondly, researchers view narratives as a way to gain insight into the way an individual shapes, constructs, and perceives self, experience and reality (Chase, 2005). In other words, it allows insight into how a person learns to create a sense of identity, based on numerous environmental factors. Each participant gave significant details about his upbringing as child and the influences that caused him to take part in violence. The third lens taken by researchers views stories as ones shaped by social resources and circumstance (Chase, 2005). Therefore one's community, local setting, memberships, culture and historical location, all enable or constrain their story (Chase, 2005).

Chase (2005) also claims that researchers understand that narratives may differ and are interactive, depending upon the environment in which they are produced. In other words, the same story may change when the storyteller is within a different environment or among a different audience. These concepts were clear in all nine of the interviews conducted. Since one of the main concepts of this research project was that of spirituality and the interviews took place within the confines of their program offices, it was apparent that many of the participants assumed that I was also spiritual. This was clearly perceived in the terminology many participants chose to express concepts within their narratives. I consistently had to ask them to define or describe spiritual concepts that they mentioned matter-of-factly within their stories.

The last theoretical lens for qualitative research analysis proposed by Chase (2005) states that as researchers develop interpretations of the data, they find their own voice as narrators (Chase, 2005). As they retell the stories of others, they too become narrators and must take the other four lenses into consideration. According to Creswell (2006) the act of retelling or the 'restory' of participant's stories, is a unique feature of

narrative research. There are many approaches to taking on this task. For the purpose of this study, I chose to take a sequential, novel-like approach. The restory of the participant's narratives "involves a predicament, conflict, or struggle; a protagonist or character; and a sequence with implied causality (i.e., a plot), during which the predicament is resolved in some fashion" (Carter, 1993; as cited in Creswell, 2006). The restory for this research (Chapter 4), displays large pieces of verbatim data, displayed in chronological order; alongside the corresponding themes derived from the text. I chose this approach of restorying within the analysis for the purpose of keeping the actual voices of the participants in the forefront; and to more heavily support the plausibility of each thematic and theoretical claim. All five of Chase's lenses (2005) assisted in finding the connections in each story and created a more encompassing understanding of the transformative experiences of each participant.

### **Quality Control**

One of the most important aspects of research is maintaining validity. Denzin (1989) suggests that a multi-method approach to research, called triangulation, allows the researcher to use differing methods to achieve broader and better results. Creswell (2005) defines triangulation as a process of corroborating evidence from different individuals, types of data, or methods of data collection in descriptions and themes in qualitative research. In doing so, the researcher should be able to examine each information source to find evidence that supports a theme; which creates a more accurate and credible study (Creswell, 2005). Gathering two to three hour narrative interviews from the nine participants and finding themes both internally and comparatively amongst the group, provided a great amount of triangulation for this study.

Riessman's (1993) four criteria for validating narrative interpretation—persuasiveness, correspondence, coherence, and pragmatic use—were used as additional tools for validating data analysis. According to Riessman (1993), *persuasiveness* is greatest when claims are supported with evidence from participant's accounts and when alternative interpretations are considered. Again, this is another reason why the analysis of data was presented with numerous large excerpts from the narrative interviews. With this technique, the voices of the participants assist in proving the validity of each theme.

*Correspondence* is taking the results of the study back to those who were studied. Riessman (1993) states that it is important to find out what the participants think of your work because their response can often provide theoretical insights and/or provide extended dialogue with the “home communities” from which the studies were derived. Due to time constraints, I was unable to send a copy of my analysis to the participants of this study. However, I have received positive feedback from them concerning their interest in meeting, following the completion of this study, to discuss its findings and possibly present it to the larger community. Although Riessman suggests the correspondence of data analysis, she also posits that the validation of interpreted data via member checks is a questionable process. “Human stories are not static, meanings of experiences shift as consciousness changes. Nor can our theorizing across a number of narratives be evaluated by individual narrators” (Riessman, 1993, p. 66).

Riessman (1993) gives three criteria for *coherence* to be as “thick” as possible—global, local and themal. Global coherence refers to the overarching goals a narrator is trying to accomplish (i.e., telling the story of past actions, or making a certain impression). Local coherence is what the narrator is trying to effect in the narrative itself



(i.e., the usage of linguistic devices to relate events to one another). Lastly, themal coherence involves content—large chunks of interview text about particular themes figure importantly and repetitively (Riessman, 1993). This is important both in comparison to other narratives and within individual interviews. For most of the participants of this study, this was the first opportunity that they've had to tell their entire story. Many of them had previously shared their “testimony” about their previous life of violence with others. However, to begin by telling their stories from childhood through adulthood, was a first for most. Thus, telling their story, drawing connections from their childhood to their adult lives, seemed to be a major focus for participants. Throughout their narratives, much of the same language was used to describe feelings, situations, states of being and experiences. Again, large portions of narrative text was also used to describe overarching themes within the data analysis. Therefore, “thick” coherence amongst the participant’s narratives was reached. Riessman (1993) also stated that *pragmatic use* is a good indicator of validity for narrative interpretation. This measure of validity basically asks whether a study has the potential to become a springboard or foundation for other studies. I do believe that this study can be used as a foundation for additional research. This reasoning is further discussed in Chapter 5.

## **CHAPTER FOUR: PRESENTATION OF DATA & ANALYSIS**

The purpose of this chapter is to present the major themes and subthemes that emerged from the narrative data collected from the nine interviews conducted for this study. As stated in chapter three, each narrative was individually coded, then coded across interviews. Those codes were then collapsed into broader themes and interconnectedness between the themes was taken into consideration. One of the most difficult parts of the data analysis, was that the majority of the themes are, in fact, interconnected; and it was difficult to examine each one within its own context. The following will give a brief overview of the participants, a brief introduction of each participant interviewed, discuss the thirteen major themes and related subthemes that emerged from the data, and give a brief summary of the findings.

### **The Participants**

Nine African American men, living in urban environments were the focus of this study. Two of the participants were recommended from a men's ministry run by a church; one was recommended from a program that provides transitional housing for individuals who have been effected by drugs and alcohol; three were recommended from a program that provides assistance to individuals who have are transitioning from incarceration, back into the community; two were recommended from an urban arts ministry; and one was recommended from a program that consists of a collaborative network of organizations aiming to meet the personal, physical, spiritual and economic needs of the community. Although it was not a requirement to be of a particular religion in order to take part in these programs, all of them were Christian-based organizations. The participants ranged in age from 28 years old to 56 years old; and eight of the

participants have either spent time in a juvenile detention center, county jail and/or prison. One of the participants did not mention spending time in either of these facilities, however, he had been arrested and placed in isolation in the military. The time spent in jail or prison was not always specified by participants (or hard to decipher given the way their narratives were told). Table 1 displays basic demographics, types of violence, criminal activity, whether time was served in juvenile detention, jail and/or prison, and time faced in jail or prison for each participant.

*Corky* was the third of six children born to a bi-racial couple; his mother is German and Irish and his father is Black. He discussed the difficulty of growing up bi-racial in a predominantly Black community; stating that he was often called “white boy” and teased “because of [his] complexion.” This teasing “began [his] little violent life,” as he began “defending [himself] from people picking on [him].” Due to his school troubles and being “overweight,” he was also verbally abused by his mother; who would often call him “Porky” and tell him that he “was never going to add up to anything.” This also led him to “express [himself] in a violent way...fighting, always getting into trouble.” The abuse also caused him to build “up this strong wall of low self-esteem.” Although his parents were married, Corky struggled with their persistent arguing and fighting; and ultimately, their divorce. Feeling as though he “[couldn't] express” how he felt about home life, and that he “just [had] to take it,” he began to “express it in another way.” Around the age of 12 he began hanging out with his older brother and uncles (who were around the same age as he and his brother); and they began to take part in petty theft, drug usage and an early exposure to sex.

Table 1: Participant Overview

	<b>Corky</b>	<b>Rock Sheet</b>	<b>Dre</b>	<b>Tony</b>	<b>Born Again</b>	<b>Melly</b>	<b>Forest</b>	<b>Bee</b>	<b>Abu</b>
<b>Age*</b>	56	47	32	32	55	47	36	37	28
<b>City Raised In</b>	Milwaukee, WI	Chicago, IL	Milwaukee, WI	Milwaukee, WI	St. Louis, Mo	Milwaukee, WI	Milwaukee, WI	Milwaukee, WI	Chicago, Milwaukee, WI
<b>Marital Status</b>	Married	Separated	Single	Single	Married	Single	Married	Married	Married
<b># of Children*</b>	4	4	0	0	2	2	6	2	4
<b>Employment Status*</b>	Retired	Self-Employed	Employed	Employed	Full-Time Ministry	Unemployed	Full-Time Ministry	Employed	Employed
<b>Level of Education</b>	High School	11th Grade	Associates	High School	Associates Degree	9th Grade	Some College	Some College	High School
<b>Religious Affiliation</b>	Christian	Christian	Christian	Christian	Christian	Christian	Christian	Christian	Rastafarian
<b>Type(s) of Violence</b>	Fighting, Threatening w/Weapon	Gang Violence, Fighting, Gunplay	Fighting, Gunplay	Gang Activity, Fighting, Gunplay	Fighting, Sexual Assault	Fighting, Domestic Violence	Gang Activity, Fighting, Gunplay	Gang Activity, Fighting, Gunplay, Sexual Assault	Fighting, Domestic Violence
<b>Other Crimes</b>	Drug Dealing, Drug Usage, Theft	Drug Dealing, Drug Usage, Theft	Drug Dealing, Drug Usage, Auto Theft	Drug Usage	Drug Usage, Theft, Auto Theft	Drug Usage, Theft, Burglary, Auto Theft	Drug Dealing, Drug Usage, Auto Theft	Drug Dealing, Drug Usage	Drug Dealing, Drug Usage
<b>Addiction</b>	Drug & Alcohol	Drug	N/A	N/A	N/A	Alcohol	Drug	Alcohol	N/A
<b>Juvenile Detention</b>	No	No	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No
<b>Jail Time</b>	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	18 months
<b>Prison Time</b>	No	61 days	1yr	13yrs	No	Yes	Yes	No	No
<b>Time Faced</b>	N/A	5 years	5 years	135yrs	10 years	N/A	40yrs	20yrs	2yrs
<b>Time since Change**</b>	28 years	5 years	6 years	8 months	27 years	2 years	5 years	10 years	7 months

\*At time of interview \*\*Time changed since incarceration

However, this eventually led Corky in “the wrong direction in all kinda ways;” which included “selling drugs” and more fighting. He continued using drugs because he felt that they “brought peace” to him; however, this also escalated into an addiction. Corky’s mother eventually had a spiritual conversion during his adulthood; and the change in her character caused him to inquire into spirituality. He stated that he “opened [his] heart to God” shortly thereafter, and experienced “new life”; in which he found “peace,” “security,” and “self-esteem.” Although his wife left him due to his change, he has since remarried and serves as a deacon at his church.

*Rock Sheet* grew up in the projects of Chicago. He lived with his mother, grandmother, and grandfather—all “working” individuals. Rock’s grandfather “wasn’t really a role model to [him].” And he developed “resentments” due to the fact that he “missed out” on a lot because his “dad wasn’t around...He was in Statesville penitentiary.” Rock Sheet attended “a vocational high school” because he enjoyed “fixing things.” He “liked high school....and [he] tried to be a model student,” and also “got [his] first job...and [he] enjoyed being independent.” However, during his sophomore year, “the explosion of the gangs started.” As a result Rock Sheet began to be “taunted” by gang members, as they would often tell him that “we gone get you.” Therefore, Rock Sheet joined a rival gang “to be a part of something...[and] get through it, survive.” He “lost interest in trying to work, at that point...[He] had got attached to the street life.” Although he “didn’t like it [the lifestyle] not one bit from day one,” he began selling drugs, which “sparked and interest even more” due to the fact that he could “accumulate some material things” from it. Rock Sheet also became “curious” about using drugs and “It [addiction] started there.” At the age of 23, he was pumping gas at a gas station when

he recounts “I was shot in the neck [by rival gang members]... [which] severed my cerotic artery... shot me in the head, twice in the chest and in the hand...so they hit me five times.” This incident “blinded [him] in [one] eye.” Although he left the gang after this incident, he “worked different drug spots...to keep [his] addiction going.” It wasn’t until he was “looking at five years in the penitentiary” in his late 30’s that he “surrendered and gave [his] life to God.” At that time Rock Sheet stated “that transformation, I felt it, I sensed it and He showed it to me.” He has since married and started his own business.

*Dre*’s mother was “15 when she had [him].” He “was seven when [his] mom got married.” At that time they had a “pretty happy home, pretty basic home.” “They got a divorce, nevertheless, and [his] mother went her way; [his] [step]father went his way.” Then *Dre* recalled that his “mother got another boyfriend and he was abusive. And...one thing led to another and she stabbed him and killed him.” His mom was “sentenced to five or six years jail time” and “[he] was 11 or 12 and [he] had to move in with [his] stepfather’s parents.” Although “they raised [him] like a real grandson or real son,” *Dre* felt “kinda like an outcast” due to others in the family stating that he was “not [their] cousin” or asking “why he’s around.” This caused him to have “insecurities” and he began “looking for an outlet of somebody to attach to or some love.” *Dre* “got a lot of homeboys, a lot of friends in the streets” and they began “smoking weed...drinking...stealing cars, getting into fights.” After getting into a fight “feeling obligated to [his] friends,” *Dre* received his “first felony at 17.” Ironically, his mom was being released from prison at this time, so as “she was coming out, [he] was going in” After serving his time, he “acquired [his] GED, got into [a] welding program” in an effort

to “straighten [his] life out.” Dre and his cousin then moved in together and they “started [a] business” as independent cleaning contractors. Although they did that “full-time,” and were “getting paid a nice amount of money,” they also began “selling cocaine, selling weed...because [they] just wanted money.” After they got into an “altercation” with some other guys in the neighborhood, things started “falling downhill from there.” He was later arrested on a gun charge and after being released, he “moved in with [his] mother and her new husband.” Due to his frustration with having to live with them, he “got into a scuffle” with his mom’s husband, which violated his probation. He was arrested again. After being released this time, Dre went to stay with his grandmother. However, he soon got into another violent “altercation” with a man in the neighborhood and decided to go “on the run.” He was caught a little over a year later. During his time in jail, this time he began “looking for spiritual enlightenment.” He stated that this is where he “found [his] spirituality” and was “grounded in spirituality.” After being released this time, Dre “joined a church...got baptized,” met a girlfriend, started working on a college degree, and “got hired” with a community program helping others transition from incarceration into the community. His “passion grows daily” as he feels like he is “representing a population that’s not represented well and [he] want[s] to be the best [he] can be at that.”

*Tony* “didn’t know [his] real father” and his stepdad came into his life around the age of three. In his early years, when his family lived in Chicago, Tony stated that his stepdad “was very good to [them].” However, after moving to Milwaukee, his stepfather “got involved with drugs and things began to change.” Tony’s stepfather became abusive towards his mom and “he used to beat her like so bad, her eyes would be shut closed.” He

also stated that his stepfather “would take it out on [he and his brother] too.” Tony recalled instances of being “punched,” “cussed out,” and called “girl names” by his stepfather. He was getting “A’s and B’s” in school, but felt like “it was just never good enough” for his mom and that “it was never accepted.” On the other hand, his brother would “act like a fool” and “wasn’t doing well in school,” but always seemed to be rewarded. Tony stated that he didn’t have a “father telling [him] about what a real man was,” so his “mom began to teach [him]...from her own hurt.” She would often tell him “don’t cry,” which he says enforced in later years to “hold macho, men don’t cry and they don’t show emotion.” He began running away from home at the age of 12, “looking for love.” At the age of 15, he began “hanging out with a particular gang and [he] ended up getting involved in a gang.” He recalled getting “beat” to be a part of the gang and stated that he “was always getting beat so it wasn’t nothing to go through a couple minutes of a beat down.” By this time, he was “very bitter” and eventually he and his brother got into an altercation with his stepdad, where they “beat him to the point where [they] thought he was dead.” Tony’s mom kicked him out of the house because of this incident and he “stayed with gang friends.” He began drinking, smoking and stated that this is “where violence really began to be such a regular thing” for him. Between the ages of 15 to 17, he became heavily involved with street violence and was viewed as “an asset” to the gang because of that fact. He eventually was arrested and sent to a juvenile detention center. In detention, he earned his high school diploma, but also learned “gang laws, gang creeds, colors, teams, rulers, who are they...chains of commands, prayers” and “different pieces on [gang] ideology.” He was released, and got into another altercation with “rival gang member” and ended up “getting shot” and sent back to jail. His “street credibility” grew



at this time because he did not “tell on nobody” who was involved in the incident. He was then seen as “somebody that not only knew what he’s talking about, but who lived the lifestyle, who have people following him now.” Tony was released again; and forty-five days after his release, he was sent back to jail, “facing 135 years for three attempted homicides of police officers.” During his time in jail, awaiting his sentencing, Tony “opened [himself] up” to the love of God. He began having “very powerful” spiritual experiences. He was released after serving only 13 years of his sentence and continues his spiritual quest.

*Born Again* and his siblings were raised by his mother. He stated that there were “four fathers in [his] immediate family” and that his father “was poisoned” and killed when he was only 7 years old. The loss of his father caused Born Again to be “angry with God and the world.” At the age of 11, his grandmother was “raped and strangled” which was a “very painful memory” for him. Growing up, he often remembered his mom “crashed because she [had] drunk so much beer...or she was out in the bar, dancing...a lot of times she wasn’t home.” Around the age of 12, he remembered playing “catch the girl, kiss the girl” with some neighborhood kids. In the process, one of the girls “exposed...her crotch,” and “wanted [him] to apparently have sex with her.” He “was terrified” and ran home to tell his mom “exactly what happened.” When he returned to school, he found that the girl had “told everybody at school about that and they ridiculed [him], persecuted [him].” The boys began to ask him “How old are you? You scared of girls?” and caused him “much turmoil.” Born Again said that he decided that he had to “show them that [he was] not scared of girls;” which “led [him] on a path of forcing [his] way on a young lady or girl.” This led Born Again into a “sexual addiction.” Born Again

said that he also “hated the environment that [he] was in.” because it was filled with “gang rapes...robbery...thievery...stabblings...[and] shootings.” Therefore, he “went into the Marine Corps” at the age of 17 to “get out of the low self-esteem.” After completing training, he thought that his troubles were “left behind in St. Louis.” However, after being stationed in Japan, the sexual assaults “happened again.” He stated that he was then “back down with low self-esteem” and that he started “drinking heavy” and “smoking weed” as a result. After he and some friends “got busted with marijuana,” he received an “honorable discharge” from the military. Born Again was in an “11 and a half year relationship” with his “kid’s mother” and “began to play in nightclubs” as a “percussionist.” The relationship was filled with “partying and drinking and fighting.” After having a “big fight, this big blow up,” Born Again decided to get “a rooming house room.” He remembered “getting high” and starting to look at her 14 year old niece “the wrong way.” He abducted the niece, took her to his room and “was about to lead into that area, of the process of taking her by force” when his “land lady called [him] downstairs” for some help with something. Born Again was facing 10 years in prison for abduction. In the process of preparing to go to court for this incident, Born Again became “depressed” and prayed, asking God to “show [Himself]” to him because he “just [couldn’t] take no more.” He then had a spiritual “vision,” in which he believes God repeatedly told him “I love thou.” He also believed that God told him that he should “tell the truth” concerning his charges and that He would “be with [him].” Thus, Born Again pled guilty to the charges and was sentenced to “the House of Corrections for 6 months.” He “did 4 months out there and led 50 men to Jesus.” He stated that “out there is where I started my preaching skills...the House of Corrections.” He is now in full-time ministry.

*Melly* recalled that he “thought [his] father was the man of the house” growing up. However, when he got older “it got explained to [him] that that was [his] stepdad.” He remembered that his mom and stepfather often argued “when they would drink;” and around the age of 8, he saw his “moms get hit” by his stepdad for the first time. *Melly* stated that his “self-esteem went to its lowest” because he “wanted to help her,” but was fearful. Soon the cycle of “drinking,” “them arguing,” the “police [being] called” and his stepfather being “escorted” became “like a normal thing.” As *Melly* got older, he began “to hit little girls” and remembered that his “demeanor just changed toward them.” He believed that what he “experienced or saw,” along with being told that he was “the man of the house” contributed to this feelings of being a “little super boy.” He felt that he could not express emotion because “men don’t cry.” From his stepfather and mom “getting into their arguing, bickering and physical, mental complications...[he] started kicking it with [his] cousin;” and together they would steal “to keep money in [their] pocket.” However, around the age of 13, another cousin soon “enlightened [him] of a new way...getting money from ‘B’s’ [bitches]” He recalled thinking that was “a better way than just going out stealing,” and soon he “ran into a little, young ‘B’,” and she “hit [his] hand” [began to give him money]. When she began “not giving [him] what [he] was expecting no more,” *Melly* “got a little violent” and “slapped her a few times.” Although he remembered that he “felt a[n] inside feeling like something’s wrong here,” he “ignored that.” At that time, he believed that by “putting hands on a woman, [he’s] dominated to make her do what [he] want her to do.” During his early and mid teens, *Melly* started “stealing cars [and] burglarizing.” Then he “ended up in facilities.” After being released he “started out on the right race, the right path,” but he “veered off, meaning [he] went

totally back to what [he] liked doing.” He began to question his ”purpose” and what he was “gonna do.” However, he “got to drinking alcohol” to “suppress” those feelings. Melly had a daughter, his “first child” around the age of 17, and continued to have “abusive” relationships and went to jail “numerous” times. He recalled walking with his daughter on one occasion where she stated “Dad, you know what’s so messed up?...I got a mama that’s a dope fiend and a daddy that’s an alcoholic!” He told her that “ain’t no family perfect,” knowing that he “had no intentions [to] stop drinking.” Melly recalled that he “just didn’t know how to be no father, no dad.” Melly said that he “pondered on how she would retaliate” when she got older. His answer came when he was “stabbed five times” by his adult daughter because “she felt as though [he] abandoned her.” After this experience, he began to look “at [his] past life pattern” and how he “was getting the same results.” He stated that it “took for [him] to go to jail for the last moment” to realize that he’s “either gonna end up in jail for the rest of [his] life or [he] could lose [his] loved ones, or [he] could end up being dead.” He then “prayed” and “allowed Christ in [his] life.” He, since, has reunited and rebuilt his relationship with his daughter, and strives to give “out positive vides and [be] respectable towards the community.”

*Forest* was the middle of five sons. His “mom and father were married” but his “father left when [he] was about 5 years old.” This was “damaging because he [his dad] wasn’t in the house” and he “was pretty much raised by [his] mom.” Forest began to look to his oldest brother as a “the father figure in the house.” However, “around the age of 11, [his brother] became unruly.” He “was running away...stealing dogs, vicious dogs; he’d train dogs and stuff like that.” Forest’s oldest brother was “in and out of jail,” beginning with his mother “putting him in a group home at first.” “He went in [around] 13

and...was gone until he was like 19.” After his oldest brother got out, Forest and his siblings would watch “everything he showed [them].” Eventually, all five of the brothers were “part of gangs.” During his freshman year in high school, a violent altercation with a rival gang on the city bus ended up beginning “a war for four years.” Forrest recalled how he “got into auto theft” and went to jail at 17. During his time there he stated that he “had some...spiritual awakening.” He read the book “The Divine Revelation of Hell,” which had him “thinking about God.” He prayed, asking God to “let [him] outta there.” However, he was later put “in the same pod” as some friends and “all that left.” The night he was released from jail, he and other gang members “went and shot up...a tavern on the eastside on the way to a house party.” After that, he “got into drug selling” and began to realize that he would not “be able to live a regular life.” But he thought as long as he “had money,” he could “turn it into clean money.” So, he was also “doing music.” During this time, his two sons were “temporarily place with [him] for a while,” after “a situation where their mom had abused [his] older son.” At the time, Forest said that his thoughts of fatherhood were “irrational,” and he thought that he was “just gone train them on how to be hood!” One night, narcotics officers said they were in pursuit of someone and “witnessed [the person] run up [Forest’s] stairs and through [his] house. But when then got into Forest’s home, they saw “the scales, the drugs, and guns all out in the kitchen, laying out. So that made them stop and pretty much do their investigation there.” The court system was “about to give [him] permanent custody” of his boys. Of course, after this incident, that changed. And since he had previously been put on probation for a “felony possession of a firearm” charge; he decided to go on the run. Eight months later he was arrested and sent to jail. This caused him to begin reading the Bible and seeking

God for a “second chance.” Forest also got a chance to reunite with his father in jail, which brought “reconciliation.” His 30 year case was dismissed. He stated that he goes back to the communities he came from, and “instead of pushing that drug, [he’s] pushing the real Rock. The real Rock, Jesus!”

*Bee* is the “youngest of three boys,” and his parents were together when he was young. The “relationship with him [his father] and [his] mom wasn’t the greatest.” He recalls that “there was some abuse going on there.” Bee stated that around the age of 5, “maybe 3 or 4 times a week there would be some kind of...verbal violence.” He also shared that he can “remember a couple of episodes of physical violence and even mom fighting back, but to no avail.” “By the age of 7 [his] dad moved out.” Bee “went through a life of some molestation from [his] uncle,” and began living “a life of fantasy, just growing up...just a numbness to pain between the ages of 7 and...10, 12.” Bee also stated that there was a noticeable “change in [his family’s] lifestyle” after his dad left. Now, his mom was “frustrated about having to work so many jobs and having to take care of all the bills.” All of his brothers finished high school because their “mom would kill [them]” if they “didn’t stay in school” However, shortly after, Bee began “hanging with his brothers and hanging with a support team of people...guys into the streets.” He states that his life was “down spiraling” for the next 10 years. In the beginning he thought “it was cool to have friends, to have people that care for you.” He discussed the “family relationship” among the gang and how “you kinda think that this [violence] is okay to have some kind of love, some kind of family, some kind of protection while you’re living this life in the streets.” Bee recalled a time where he and his gang members were “partying, having fun, drinking and smoking” when “about 20” rival gang members came

with guns. He remembered feeling “powerless to retaliate” at the time and how it “was not a good feeling.” He admitted that about 5 years into the lifestyle he “was tired of the lifestyle,” but he didn’t know “how to start over and find a new set of friends and more people that would be willing to care for [him] even to some degree.” Bee experienced a “slight form of depression,” where he remembers days “not wanting to wake up if [he] didn’t have...something to drink.” He even “contemplated suicide a few times.” Around the age of 24 he “packed up and left” and went to Texas to “get away, take a break, do something different.” However he “began to hook up with the wrong crowd” and his “lifestyle began to just quickly be the same.” At the age of 27, he “was able to get cleaned up” and went “into the military.” After he “had completed basic training, [he] got married” to his “baby mama at the time.” However, “having the mentality that [he] had, the lifestyle of a thug...it quickly turned sour in the military.” He “found [himself] in an adulterous relationship” where “a one night stand [went] bad.” He found himself “looking at 20 years for a rape charge and facing possible incriminating charges in the military.” Bee stated that “at this pivotal point in [his] life,” he asked God to “make [Himself] known” to him. He stated that he started “going to the Muslim church...to Buddhism church...[and] Christian church, all at the same time.” However, he felt that he “found surety in Jesus Christ.” He believed that “Christianity was the only religion that...there was a sure way of getting in heaven once you die—which [he] knew [he] had to do.” Bee was “discharged for the adultery but [he] was acquitted on the rape charge.” He promised God that when he got back home, he was “not going back to the hood.” He was “done with the [gang] life.” Bee now views the community with “love and compassion and a desire to see the community change.”

*Abu* is the middle of three children, and lived in a single parent home during his early years in Chicago. They moved into a “pretty rough” Milwaukee neighborhood where “men that lived in the neighborhood, they was always fighting or just yelling and screaming, making all types of noise—or setting fires all on the side of the house or apartment building...whenever they could find time to do something destructive.” *Abu* stated that with “having to fight sometimes...even running from fights,” he often felt that “[he] may be in jeopardy of maybe losing [his] life.” This caused him to be “real sad” as a child; and he admitted that “not having a father or a mother who was really concerned” was “something that, of course, [he] didn’t know how to bear” at such an early age. He remembered that his view of women “wasn’t a good one” due to him viewing his own mother “in kind of disgust for smoking crack and stuff like that.” Around his sophomore year in high school, *Abu* stated that “not having that father figure or a man that [he could] respect and look up to and want to be like, that carried themselves with dignity and respect to the utmost; [he] started hanging around in the streets and running around with the ghetto hoodlums and being bad, doing bad things.” Thus, after a few violent conflicts in school, *Abu* attended an alternative high school program to receive his high school diploma. In this program, he “made [his] own schedule, so it worked out for [him]” because it allowed him to work and go to school. After high school is when *Abu* stated that he began “trying to be more in relationships with females and honestly, they didn’t work because of so many insecurities that [he] had...and the anger as well.” He moved in with a girlfriend and “once those stresses started kicking in with the bills and stuff,” he admitted that he didn’t know “how to handle it.” During an argument, *Abu* stated that his girlfriend “started thinking that she could put her hands on [him.]” So, he “hit her in the



parking lot” of their apartment, went inside and “locked her out.” After she got inside, he remembered that “she wanted to think that it was okay for us to continue fighting.” He left that relationship. He then began “running into the law” because he started “selling crack cocaine.” Therefore, he went to jail for “four and a half” months and was charged sentenced to “3 years probation.” Despite this, he “was still trying to sustain [himself] selling crack cocaine.” He soon found himself under arrest again. During the arrest Abu “had a scuffle” with the police because he “had the drugs in [his] left hand and [the police] couldn’t get it.” Abu was “maced” and “one of the police officers was choking [him] and had his knees pressed up against [his] chest plate so [he] couldn’t breathe.” It was during this time that he states that he had “a near death experience,” because he “[he] woke up with [his] hands behind [his] back in the fetal position, with no shoes on in the snow. And “before [he] awakened [he] saw an extremely bright light and awakened like that on the ground.” He believes that made him start “to seek and search out the Most High God.” While “in prison for those 18 months,” he “read the Bible and pray[ed] every day.” After 18 months, he was released and felt that he “was different” but he “still wanted to continue to live how [he] was living before.” Abu met an African man that began to “fascinate [him].” They began “to hang around each other and talk.” This man “directed” Abu in reading scriptures and saying prayers. Abu remembered that he “just felt different;” and that this feeling “is something that drove [him] to want to feel it even more because it gave [him] a surge of energy.” He began to study “all history and knowledge about these different types of peoples [who] walked in different areas of the world and was able to do all these great things that they’ve done.” This allowed him to “connect with that through memory,” and it made him “happy” to understand their

“achievements, intelligence, unity, perseverance, strengths, ambitions, motivation and struggle.” Abu was eventually arrested again for “choking” his girlfriend and was sentenced to another 18 months for violation of his probation. He wasn’t charged with domestic violence because she decided that he needed “help.” Abu stated that “out of force, it separated [them] for that time. That gave [him] more opportunity to gather [his] selves.” He takes part in “meditation,” and realizes that “it’s not always necessary for a man to want to continue to always want to express himself being aggressive and angry.” He focuses on “being a well rounded individual.”

### **Themes**

As stated earlier, many of the themes that arose from the data were very intertwined with one another. Also, because the interview narratives covered the participant’s lives, from childhood until the present, I believe that it is necessary to discuss the themes in a restory fashion (as stated in chapter three). In order to fully explain how spirituality assisted the participants in changing from a life of street violence, I included themes that emerged from the participants’ stories—from beginning to end and presented them in linear fashion. I included themes that explain the thoughts and feelings that were described before their change took place, during their change, and as their change continues. Thus, the major themes build upon one another and understanding their interconnectedness is, I believe, is necessary in order to fully explain their significance.

### **Early Trauma**

One of the themes that immediately emerged from the narratives of the participants was that of early trauma. The trauma was often the result of “family

dysfunction” and took place within two major subthemes: *abuse and/or neglect*, and *exposure to violence*. All of these traumatic experiences occurred early in their development, between the ages of three and twelve and caused a great deal of negative affects for them. Tony had one of the most compelling stories of both exposure to violence and being abused during his childhood. He spoke about how life seemed “very good” until his stepfather got involved with drugs around the time he was eight years old; and how the abuse “confused” him.

I actually remember that he used to work at Ace hardware or something like that when I was younger and every time he came home, he would like give us a dollar and you know what I mean really try to be there for us and stuff like that. And um, and so them were very good memories and um, then we moved to Milwaukee. Drugs got involved, or maybe I should say, he got involved with drugs and things began to change you know. His attitude towards us, drinking would pick up, he’d get very abusive with my mom. He used to beat her like so bad, her eyes would be shut closed and you know just, I never really understood that. Like man...this is supposed to be somebody he loves and you beat her like this. Then uh, he would take it out on us too. Um, a few incidents that I remember; one time he told me to sweep the living room floor with the rug, and when you come into the kitchen it was a plain floor, so I’d pick it up. So I swept the rug, you know as best as I could, I was a little kid, I went to go pick it up. He said “You done?” I said, “Yeah, I’m done” and he just punched me right in my face. I’m like [looking confused], and it just confused me like, maybe I’m not understanding something, like... Um, and I wasn’t understanding like why did I just get punched, you know what I mean? “You stupid m-f!” Cussed me out and “you didn’t do a good job!” We didn’t have a vacuum so I just used the broom, you know what I mean. And um, he cussed me out and this and that and that, so I was just really confused.

“My dad wasn’t around”

Another experience that proved to be traumatic for these men, was the lack of a positive male role model. Most of the participants either experienced having an abusive father figure (as displayed in Tony’s narrative above), having their father leave the

family, or not having a father figure at all. Rock Sheet repeatedly expressed his feelings of “resentment” about not having his father around as a child.

I had a granddad that was there, but he wasn't really a role model for me. The guys I hung out with...they had fathers in the family. And I was the only one that didn't. They dad used to take them to baseball games. When driver's ed. came up they took them out to drive. I missed out on that and I kind of had a little resentments that my dad wasn't around. But um, we used to, we went out a couple of times. He was in Statesville penitentiary, my mom, we used to get the Greyhound and go out there. So, I visited him a couple of times. I knew who he was, I seen him. But he was in there all the way till I got like 16 years old, then he was released.

### **Feelings of Lack**

In addition to the sentiments of “resentment” described above, the participants began to experience other feelings of lack and negative emotions as a result of their dysfunctional family life. While some expressed feelings such as “I didn't like anything about me,” feeling “like an outcast” and “never good enough,” having “insecurities,” and developing a “numbness to pain;” other participants admitted actually developing a self-hatred. Abu best expressed the direct correlation between his family environment, his feelings of lack and how it began to make him feel about himself.

Home life, it was um, it was rugged. You know, with sometimes having no lights, no heat, no food and stuff like that. Having a mother who's drinking a lot, spending her money on crack cocaine and stuff like that. No father, and relatives around that, they care, but they really didn't in so many different ways because it was always about them. “It was always about you,” you know. That was a bad trait I picked up from my family because I'm never selfish. I don't see myself being so greedy like most people, who have something and don't want to share it with those who need it. So, looking at the home life and then being so angry and then wanting things to be so different, you know. I used to, I just couldn't stand it, I hated it! It made me start to hate myself. You know, to try to see myself in a different likeness of being who I am, but wanting to be somebody else.

### **Silenced Emotions**

Although the participants developed feelings of lack and negative emotions about their home life, many of them felt as though they were not able to “speak up” about how they were feeling. They did not have any outlets to positively express how their home situations were affecting them. Two subthemes emerged under this topic. The first is that their lack of being able to “express” what they were feeling, caused many of them to express their negative emotions in the “action they take.” In other words, many of them began to act out in violence and other deviant behaviors due to their inability to express their feelings. Corky explained how the pressures at home and his struggles with being teased as a bi-racial child, eventually mounted and was initially expressed through a cycle of fighting at school.

Yeah, I started when I was four, ya know. And uh, the problems, I think really started escalating when I started school at that age for me. Ya know, uh, my parents, I remember them arguing a lot. Ya know, for, I don’t remember all of the reasons why, but it kinda really started getting into my head because I, you know, I always wanted, I know it was one of the things that I always desired, was that they didn’t argue. And that there was peace in the home even at that age. Okay. And uh, so, you know it bothered me, you know. You, as children you can’t speak up. So, you just have to take it. And uh, so, some time went on and one of the things I didn’t like was that I was a bi-racial child...and I went to a predominantly Black school...They would always call me “White Boy.” And uh, so that kinda began my little violent life because I was rebellious. And I would get into fights... So, I would get into fights at school and basically, I guess, I would get suspended. And I think it was really bad for me because they already, you know the Black kids would call me “White Boy,” and uh, my mother would bring me to school and she was White. And so it was like a horrible experience. So, you know, I was kinda trapped in that. Uh, still since you’re a child you really can’t express yourself... I think this is really helpful because people don’t realize that children can’t really express themselves. They can, but they do it in whatever action they take. You know, but they can’t tell their parents, I don’t like certain things, “I don’t like you because you’re White, you’re Black, that you argue” or whatever. Cus you can’t express that so you have to keep it inside or you have to express it in another way.

*“Going to church was just like playing”*

The second subtheme within the inability to express feelings was that most of the participants had some exposure to church and /or religion; but that exposure also did not provide an outlet for self-expression, or assist them with the problems in the home. The fact that they could attend church services and no one took notice of their needs was frustrating for some of them. Born Again seemed to describe his frustration with the church best. In the following he not only describes how he felt as an impoverished child going to church, but his anger in seeing many churches operate in the same manner today.

There was no therapy, there was no classes, there was nobody to help to walk us through. Going to church was just like playing. Go to church and all they doing is passing the offering plate, whooping and hollering, shouting and all this other stuff. Nobody can see that it's a family over here that has some serious problems, cus they too busy focusing on other stuff—and that's pretty much how a lot of churches are today. You know, they got people on welfare, and see if you got somebody on welfare, a pastor should take note of that. I mean, if they're on welfare then, there's a problem and most pastors don't have a clue. Most pastors, “Welfare? Oh they're taken care of. Okay. Pass the offering around. Oh, it's time for the building fund.” Or whatever. No! If you have somebody on welfare, somebody need to be taking note of those kids. Cus, you see the welfare system is the lowest form of service and help that you can get. It really is! And in that system is the food that they give you, it's the lowest of the cheese, the, I mean we ate out of cans most of the time. Potted meat, thick cheese, I mean, what is that gone do for a child's mind? A boy or girl? What is it going to say to them? And it does, it speaks to you. “You're nothing! You're scum!” So no wonder we go around taking stuff, stealing stuff, partying, getting high, being promiscuous...cus too, the average child on the streets of the inner city, they don't see hope, they see survival. And when you're in a, and when you're in survival mode, don't nothing really mean much to you cus you just trying to make it from one day to another.

**Street Family**

Between the ages of 10-16, the participants began to look for an “outlet” or a place outside of the home that would provide the “attachment,” “love,” and “acceptance”

that they did not receive at home. These “outlets” took two major forms within the narratives of the participants. The first was through obtaining a group of “homeboys,” or “friends in the streets.” It was through these groups, that many of the participants began to be involved in “fights,” “stealing,” “drinking,” “smoking weed,” and “sex.” When Dre’s mother was sentenced to jail time for stabbing and killing her abusive boyfriend, Dre had to live with his stepfather’s parents. In his narrative, he explained how he was rejected by some of the family members; and how that eventually led to him look elsewhere for “some love.” And it was with his group of “friends in the streets” that he began to participate in delinquent behavior.

And um, I felt like um, kinda like an outcast I guess. You know kids say some crazy thangs, “that’s not my cousin!” or “why he’s around?” and this and that. You know I was like, okay, you know that kinda play on your, it kinda play you into insecurities. So I guess that was around the time I started looking for an outlet of somebody to attach to or some love. Even though my stepfather would talk to me, but you know he wasn’t really the father to sit down and give you the birds and the bees straight up. You know he would just say, “Boy, you know you need to go to school” you know give you the basic talks that you need. My mother was the one during those first 10 years that would say “don’t cuss, go to school, comb your hair, pull up your pants” you know telling me all the ethical things I needed to know. So but during that time when she went to jail and I moved in with my stepfather’s parents, this is the time I started to rebellion, rebel. And um, got a lot of homeboys, a lot of friends in the streets. We started to, you know get into all kind of things. You know, we started smoking weed, we started drinking, we started stealing cars, getting into fights. Only out of attention, only out of the fact that you wanted to be a part, I wanted to be a part of something because everything else wasn’t solid. These homeboys in these streets was somewhere where I felt a part of.

*“Everything he showed us, we followed him”*

For some of the participants, there was the second form of “outlet;” and they didn’t have to go very far to find it. Many of them had close family members who were already acclimated into a life of delinquency. Therefore, these participants simply

“followed” what those members of the family were doing. Older brothers, cousins and uncles often became the models for these participants; and these models often times led these young men into larger groups of “acceptance.” For Forest, it was his older brother that presented the model that he “followed.” In his narrative, Forest spoke about his father leaving the home early in his childhood, and how he and his brothers began following his oldest brother. His mother tried to keep his oldest brother’s issues under control by sending him to a group home. However, he would eventually lead Forest and his other three brothers into the gang life.

My father left when I was about 5 years old. Which was, for me, it was damaging because he wasn’t in the house. We was pretty much raised by my mom. And my older brother, my older brother was the father figure in the house—and I would say about 11 years old, he began to become unruly. He was running away. I remember we used be like “Ay man!” We would run up to him on the street, and be like “Ay man, we having uh,” we used to love like Hamburger Helper. We’d be like “We having Hamburger Helper!” He’d be like “What?!” He’d come back home for about a week, he and my moms get back into it and he’d leave again. Then, he was like, a good thief. He’d be stealing dogs, vicious dogs; he’d train dogs and stuff like that. So we pretty much just learned how to be a part of the street life—being that he was the father figure in the life. And he got into gangs early on, so we started looking at that and watching him in that. Then, he was going in and out of jail for a while. It started out with my mom putting him in a group home at first. He went in like 13, but from him being in jail at 13 and my moms putting him in there, initiating it, he was gone until he was like 19. And then he got out, he was in Wales, he got out. And uh, we just watch it, and everything he showed us, we followed him. And I got into gangs early on, all of us, all five of my brothers, we all was part of gangs.

### **Feeling Trapped**

Once the participants joined groups outside of their homes, they were introduced to serious crime and violence; and they were encouraged and/or expected to also take part in those behaviors. Initially, many of them expressed that they did not “like” taking part in such actions, or that they out of place. However, they quickly realized that in order to



remain a part of the group, they had to participate in such activities. For some, becoming part of the group was a means of “survival.” Thus, to decide not to participate in the actions of the group and risk rejection, did not seem to be an option for them. Rock Sheet best described the feelings of disdain for participating in his gang’s actions. He describes the other “types” of people in the gang and how he felt that he was different from them. However, he also expressed his feelings of being trapped within the group, in order to survive.

It had got ruthless, and I was the type of person, I always had a heart and I didn’t like hurting people and by the grace of God, I never killed anyone. But I done shot some people, you know. And some of the guys that was in my gang, there was all types of people, killers, rappers, you name it. Just people that, heartless folks, I’m seeing this and I’m all the time, with my whole experience with this, I always knew “This ain’t right, I’m in the wrong place, this ain’t where I’m supposed to be!” You know that unconscious thought in the back of my mind...My thoughts, my thoughts through all of that was, I knew it wasn’t right, you know. But here I am. I didn’t know no way out, you know. So I adapted. I hung with who I needed to hung with, hang with to survive. You know to be a part of something, you know what I’m saying. I didn’t like it not one bit from day one. But this is, I guess this how it go. So I adapted to it. I had to do what I needed to do to get through it, survive, whatever.

*“It transforms you”*

Although the participants initially “didn’t like” the crime and violence that were surrounded by and participating in; as Sheet Rock stated above, they started to “adapt” to it. Many of the participants discussed committing crimes that they never would have taken part in before. However, as Forest stated in his narrative, “it transforms you.” In the following account from Forest’s interview, I asked him to explain his feelings once he began to take part in more violence. He not only explained his feelings of “revenge” and “pride,” but he began to tell a great story in which he revealed how, as the objectives of

the gang itself began to change, he began to see himself and others in the gang “transform” as well—they began to “glorify” money.

Revenge. Revenge, pride, arrogance. Um, back then, it was like everybody was attracted to the bad one. You got those people that just attracted to, to violence, you know—and that feeds you. That feeds into you. And I believe that at some point, cus you know, like I said, we desired it because of how it was being glorified in media and music. But once we went through it, it was totally different. But even once you start going through it, you begin to be transformed, I mean like really. Like there was one time, and this was in my adulthood, I was with this gang—and gangs changed, because gangs used to be neighborhood, tribal. But gangs changed from that, to being about money and about hustling and serving dope and having the most money and being the one that can show that he’s made so much money. That’s what gangs turned out to be about now. That’s what the gangs in Milwaukee are about now. They’re not about, if you’re a Vice lord and I’m a Gangster, we gone fight—it ain’t about that no more. In fact, the Gangster and Vice lord will get together and make money together—and then it’s about, wherever we make money at, that’s what we gone glorify. That’s our gang, that’s our street or whatever.

Later in his account, Forest gave the example of a story to further explain that the transformation that he was speaking of was not only about glorifying money, but also about the way some individuals in the gang began to think about violence—in a way that was not “rational” to him.

I remember right up the street, the next block, I had a dope house right there—and they came to my house. They was like “ay, such and such just got shot.”

“What?!” so I dropped everything, you know, grabbed my gun, come out the house, jump in the car... we looking around for the guy... We looking, the next day, it’s about 20, 30 guys, everybody got pistols. We in about three cars and it was said that these guys were from a particular area. We went over there and we went to the guys’ house but they wasn’t there. None of them was there. So the guys, one of the guys said “Let’s just shoot anybody! Anybody in they neighborhood!” And it was a family on the block, we was in the alley, and it was a family, mother, father, kids, like 6, 7 people all together. They said “We just gone jump out and murder ‘em! Let’s just shoot ‘em!” And I’m like “What?!” It just didn’t sit right with me. I’m like “What?!” Cus at this point, it was, we was one big gang but it was really like two or three clicks, claiming to be one gang because we all hustled in the same area. I’m like, “Man I’m not finna do that! These ain’t the dudes that shot my brother! I ain’t just finna, I’m not just finna

jump out and murder nobody like that!” So, I’m like “It have to be a reason!” which is still wrong. But I’m like “Man, I’m not finna do that! So all my guys, let’s go!” And because we left, everybody left. That’s one of the things that, that I think about, like man that could’ve, that could’ve, that would’ve changed me greatly, I think! But because it didn’t go through, my mind was always there like “Man why would they wanna just jump out and murder anybody?!” You know, like what kinda, I mean, it didn’t, it wasn’t rational for me. So I was like “Man!” And right away I started trying to separate myself from them dudes and stuff like that. But I mean, you start, it even became where it was like division in our click. Like “oh well, ya’ll go ahead and be with these guys cus ya’ll ain’t doing what we trying to do” or whatever. But I started seeing the difference then, you know.

I then asked Forest to back up a little, and explain a bit more about what he meant by being transformed. He responded by explaining how he had experienced this transformation through instances of selling drugs and violence.

I mean that the more and more things that you go through, the more and more you begin to think like that. You know what I mean, you begin to start picking up the hardness of hustling, no matter who you serving to. You know, me and my guy, we used to serve his mom. You know, stuff like that. I wouldn’t have done that in the past. You know “Not your moms!” We serving his moms, you know, we go through and shoot up a house not caring who in it, you know. This the stuff that we began to do. Now I wouldn’t have done that coming in cus it wasn’t rational. But it was stuff that we would do. “Oh they hindering our money so we finna...” you know what I mean. That type of thing, and so it transforms you!

### **Addiction**

Despite the “transformation” described by the participants, many of them still struggled with the strain of their lifestyle. Many of them described being “tired” of the lifestyle; and Bee described this notion in the following.

I think midway through the relationship you think, my thought was “Okay I’m wanna get out of this lifestyle but I’m not really sure how to. And if I do then how do I start over and find a new set of friends and more people that would be willing to care for you even to some degree.” And by the end of the relationship, I had a love for my friends, for my crew, but I had a disdain for them at the same time. “I just don’t want to do this anymore. This is not my life. This is not the goals I set as a kid.”

Even though many of the participants desired to change their lifestyle, they seemed to either not know how to, or were caught in the cycle. The frustration from this caused many of them to turn to drugs and/or alcohol to “suppress” their feelings. Melly told me of a time that he tried to change his life, after being incarcerated a number of times for “stealing cars” and “burglarizing.” He explained how during his previous stay in jail, he “pondered” all of his experiences and tried to change. When he was unsuccessful, he turned to drugs and alcohol.

I got out, I started out on the right race, the right path. But I veered off, meaning, I went totally back to what I liked doing, which was disrespecting people, disrespecting self, disrespecting the community, you know what I’m saying, neighborhood, people in general. To the point where, now I realize that things had gotten literally blown out of proportion as “Who am I? What is my purpose? What am I gonna do?” So I figured that I’d find something to suppress those feelings. Well I chose drugs. Drugs to me, well back then it was like weed, in that little, big ole bag. But that was too mellow! “Naw, I mean, that ain’t what’s up, that ain’t what’s up! I’ve got some suppressed feelings going on and I need to more or less feel free.” You know, so I tried alcohol, “Awe, yes!” Alcohol made me become who I thought I really was! You know, violent, argumentative, superman, you know. It’s just “I can take on the world!” So I fell in love with alcohol.

For many, of the participants in this study, their drug and alcohol usage became addictions.

### **Jail/Prison**

Most of the participants discussed having had a number of run-ins with the law; and they eventually found themselves facing extended jail or prison sentences. During this time many of them described being “broken” by their circumstances. Tony described his feelings after being arrested for a shootout between his gang members and the police. He explains how he was “being true” by not telling on them, although they were “not

supporting” him by coming forward. He was angry about having to face 135 years of prison time alone.

I’m very angry, I facing 135 years for three attempted homicides of police officers. 45 years for each one of them. I’m like, I’m broken, even though I’m not trying to show no emotion, I’m starting to, I’m really feeling the weight of “Dude I’m 19 years old...I’m facing a 135 years in prison.” There were like maybe 15 to 20 something guys on my case with me, wasn’t none of them locked up. They’re questioning me about them, I still won’t tell on them, even though I’m facing all this time. They come to me asking me the ATF, which is the alcohol, tobacco and firearms, which is another part of the Feds, they come question me about the gun that was used in the case cus they said that my gang stole 150 pistols and they wanted them all back. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.” You know what I mean, “I want to talk to my lawyer. I’m not talking to the police. I’m not giving ya’ll nothing!”

“Oh you ain’t tough, you just gonna go...”

“Well I’ll go to jail then!” you know what I mean. In my mind this is my family, you don’t betray family, you don’t go against family. Even though they done broke all the rules to me! But I’m the stupid one still “No, still be loyal, this is family. This is how you do it.” You know what I mean. I’m gonna be an example of how you supposed to show dedication and loyalty to something you say you believe in. That was an aspect of myself, that even though I look back, that even though it was used for negative purposes, I’ve always been that kind of a person. Loyal, that if I’m with you, then I’m with you, full-fledged with you. I mean to the bitter end we just together that’s just how it is, you know. And now I’m even more angry I’m finna go to jail and I’m being true and nobody else is supporting me. You know what I mean like “Aarg!” And even though they not supporting me, I’m still not telling, cus that’s just not a part of my character. I’m not gone betray someone, even though ya’ll betrayed me. I’m just not gonna do that, you know what I mean.

### **Remembering God**

Facing long term incarceration, most of the participants began to seek, or opened themselves up to seeking God. Born Again expressed how, even though there was a possibility of him getting reduced prison time for abducting a young lady and planning to sexually assault her, he still was “depressed” and couldn’t “take no more” of his lifestyle.

They let me out on my own recognizance. Then I got a, they gave me a public defender. I never will forget his name, Peter. He had red hair, Irish and what a gentle man, a nice man. He was so professional and he would, “Oh you know, it’s a he said, she said case. So don’t you worry Mr. Again! We’ve got you, we’re going to take good care of you! I know this judge, he’s a cut throat judge, he goes by the books. You’re facing about 10 years but I think if you do this, we can get it really reduced down for you. Even though you have a bad past record as a juvenile and an adult, I think I still can work this out.” He said, “Just leave it to me and I’ll work this out.”

“Oh yeah, okay, I’m innocent! You’ve gotta help. You’ve gotta help.” You know. “She’s just lying!” You know. I just didn’t want to go to prison, you know. Nobody wants to go to prison. But I went back to my room for a few days. I just sat in my room, cus I was kinda like depressed. And I didn’t want to be around nobody. And I prayed and I said “Jesus, if you’re really real, you need to show yourself to me now. You need to help me now, cus I can’t take no more.”

Most of the participants could recall some sort of spiritual encounter from childhood.

Although these encounters went previously overlooked by many of them, this was a time that many of the participants began to reflect on previous encounters with spirituality.

When Forest discussed beginning to seek spirituality after facing ten years in prison, he recounted remembering a missionary group that used to pick up kids in his neighborhood and take them to a facility where they would participate in activities and watch evangelical films. One film particularly stood out in his mind.

They showed this movie that was about this dude and he lived this wicked life or whatever, and uh, went to hell. He had on a white suit, I remember the white suit. He went to hell or whatever and I think it was just a vision that the Lord gave him—and when he was given a second time, he lived for the Lord. That resonated with me!...Definitely it was uh, the thing that resonated the most as far as spirituality, was the fact that this dude was living a wicked life and it was just that movie! Out of all that time I went...that one time is the only time I remember!

### **God’s Love**

It was both surprising and a relief for the participants to begin to accept the notion of a God that loves unconditionally; despite their violent pasts, and without requirement.

In Tony's narrative, he described how he was introduced to the concept of God's love while in jail, awaiting his sentencing. He explained how he initially had a hard time believing God's love for him.

A particular brotha came my way, I don't remember his name, he told me, he recited to me actually Romans chapter 5, verse 8, that God commended his love for us, that he showed his love for us, that while you were yet a sinner, Christ died for you. I could not understand, how somebody could love me like that. In my own mind I started to go through the list of things...I done shot a man in front of a church, gang banged inside of churches, sold my own grandmother crack cocaine, a list of people I done shot. "You sure you know what you're doing? Are you picking the right person to love, I mean, I'm like the worst of the worst? You don't love people like me. Where I come from, in order to get respect, you have to give it! I've disrespected You on every hand, I done walked up to places of worship, high, guns, shot men. I mean aye, is it something you're not seeing here? I mean, maybe you really don't know me then!" You know what I mean. "Cus there's no way you can love me." But that thought began to bother me, but in a good way. It began to think within myself like, "This is what you've been looking for all your life, man. A love like this!" And that began to intrigue me and inspire me like, man! And that began to bring all kinds of emotions, like "Man somebody actually love you so much even still, while you were in sin, while you was doing all this stuff, somebody actually gave they life so you can have life?" I was like "Man, that's amazing." And um, that right there began to change me because that kind of love, I began to want. I opened myself up to that kind of love. So that began to motivate me and change me.

The consequences of their individual actions are what contributed to them reaching out to God; and it was God's love response that caused them to be able to face the consequences of their violent actions. Although he had a lawyer who ensured him that he could get his sentence reduced, Born Again recalled a "vision" after praying to Jesus for help. He explained how Jesus spoke to him, telling him "I love thou, I love thee," when Born Again had asked Him to "reveal" Himself to him. He also explained his confidence in facing the consequences of his actions after this experience.

I don't know if I fell asleep, I really don't know. All I know is He appeared over my bed and there was just a cloud and the room was just dark. It was dark in the room but the ceiling was like the sky and it was like He was a cloud and there

were a lot of clouds around Him. He was like in the center and all these clouds had faces. I was like “What is this?” But it was so real! But I was in, I really believe in my heart that it was a vision and He spoke to me and said “I love thou.” In King James! “I love thou. I love thou. I love thou. I love thou. I love thee! I love thee!” and I was like “Wow!” And every time He said it, it just started just, I could feel what He was saying! I can’t explain it no better than that. It’s like I could feel every time He said it, it was so powerful. Every time He said I love you, I just start feeling it in my soul that it was real cus I never knew love! I really never knew love. That’s why I think that a lot of times when I went through what I went through with those girls, sexually and trying to take them, really I was searching for love—but love the wrong way. The way that I thought was cool! The way the guys in the community and the gals in the community all was pursuing love too. But we was all pursuing love through sex, through drugs, through alcohol, through all these wrong ways. But at this particular moment, all that was way under my feet....I’m telling you, I felt so at peace and I knew it. He said “You have to go tell the truth in that courtroom.” He said “If you go tell the truth” He said “I will be with you!” He said “I love you. I love you.” And then all of sudden He just faded away... Anyway, just to go from that point, I got saved and then He said “I want you to go and tell the truth.” So I said “Oh boy, 10 years in prison.” He said “Yeah, 10 years in prison, but I will be with you.” I’m telling you, when He told me that He would be with me, Sylvia, I knew He was gone be with me...

### **Changed Identity**

As stated earlier, although many of the participants “didn’t like” initially participating in violence, and later expressed a desire to “get out;” they felt stuck in their lifestyles. During the later part of their narratives, the participants spoke of differing aspects of regaining the self-identity that they had lost after living a street life. Forest best summed up this concept when he was asked to describe the role of spirituality in experiencing life change.

Man, a major role. I believe it does because it shows us our identity, who we are. I mean if we don’t know who we are then we’ll continue to live thinking we are who the rappers on TV say we are, pimps, gangsters, criminals. Or even slaves, or even drug addicts, prostitutes, pimps, you know. That’s who it tells us who we are, so that’s who we try to be! I think a big thing about getting in touch with the God of heaven and earth, is that it gives us our identity back. It tells us that we were chosen before the foundations of the world. It tells us that we are adopted as God’s children. It tells us that God has given us all of the goodness of heaven in



His Spirit that He gives us, that dwells within us. It tells us who we are. That we are bigger than the hood, we're bigger than the world and that God has given us a purpose and a reason in His plan to redeem man, to be here. So that's, I mean, that's the biggest thing for me!

*“And my mentality started changing”*

Another aspect of the participants getting their “identities back” was the changing of “mentality.” Although most of the participants expressed not wanting to take part in violence initially, they soon began to become accustomed to a lifestyle of violence. Even though many of them saw acting out in violence as “out of character” for themselves or they described that they “didn’t like it,” it soon became common within their lifestyle. As the account given earlier in this chapter explained, the participants believed that living a violent lifestyle “transforms you.” However, many of the participants describe undergoing a “mentality change” once they began their spiritual quest; where the things that used to upset them or cause them to act out in violence, no longer maintained the same effect. For some of the participants, this happened immediately; but for others, it was a more gradual process. Dre explained how his mentality began to change after he met a group of men in jail and began seeking spirituality. He explains how he began to think after beginning his spiritual quest, in comparison to how he used to think and react.

I met a group of brothas that, one was a pastor, or he was aspiring to be a pastor, and it was maybe two or three other guys that was in jail looking for spiritual enlightenment. We used to meet every morning and read the Bible, talk about the Bible, pray, talk about spirituality; and this is where I got a sense of spirituality. From that group I started reading in my cell more. I read the Bible all the way through. I wanted to start to read the Koran, but I’m trying to do that now. I started studying more, I read the Dead Sea Scrolls, a lot of religious books, did a lot of praying. And this was a time where I knew I found...even though I knew God, I said okay “this is God right here.” Now I understand, religion and history goes hand and hand, so I really had an interest in it because it was history as well as religion. But anyway that’s where I found my spirituality, that’s where I was

grounded in my spirituality. Where I said, okay “God is everything.” And my mentality started changing, where things that would upset me back in the day was petty now. “That’s, that’s crazy, you were young, dumb, so now you need to focus on being a man.” So I can say that I was angry back in the day because of whatever a lot of Black men go through out there. You know, not having a stable home or not having the things that they want. And when you young like that, and you come from an environment of neglect and negativity, you seem to grasp on to pride. You know your pride gets real big and anything can stab at your pride and set you off. You get too much pride somewhere. So I just got too much pride and I had too much anger. So it all came out in too many different ways back then. I didn’t know how to express myself without getting angry and without blowing up. But, you know, that’s why I say, you know prison, jail; the good thing about that is that it will rehabilitate you because you gotta sit down and look at yourself.

“God ended up taking the weeds”

Many of the participants now saw their previous habits of acting out in violence as barriers to becoming who they really wanted to be and who God wanted them to be. Thus, they described that spirituality assisted their change process through God removing the negative habits and actions from their lives. Melly described the process of God “taking the weeds” out of his life after being asked how spirituality plays a role in experiencing life change.

God allowed, God ended up taking the weeds, which was the drinking, taking the disrespect, the fighting, taking the abusiveness—all these were the weeds that God was taking out. To make me...you know, to like grow...blossom to, it’s like clay...although I was living, I was dead in sin. So when He formed me, shaped me and made me blossom, then I became what He, what I always desired to want to become. But I couldn’t become what I wanted to become because I had so many weeds in front of me, choking me, you know. Like drinking, being abusive, taking pills, not caring, no responsibility, all the negativeness was up against me. But since I allowed Christ in my life that last moment, that last time—that was the big bang!

“I really did find a new life”

While some participants expressed how spirituality assisted them in changing their “mentality” and “removing the weeds” of negative habits; others spoke about how

spirituality gave them a sense of “new life.” This aspect, within gaining their “identity,” seemed to be particularly important for those who had suffered abuse and/or neglect in their childhood. Corky, who was verbally abused by his mother, explained how his determination to “follow the Lord” changed his previous conceptions of himself and his life.

Bottom line was I was serious. You know, I believed that there was finally hope in my life. And so rather than go back to what I was doing, I said I gotta give the Lord a try. I just gotta do this like I did everything else. I just gotta do this and that’s what I did...When I did that, I mean when I made that decision, I was, I was, serious and determined and regardless of the consequences, the flack or whatever else was going to happen in my life, I was determined to do this, you know follow the Lord. Like I did all the other things, now I wanted to forward it to this. And I really did find a new life, you know I said “Wow, I’ve never had this before! Everything was always the opposite of what I’m having now. You know I’m finding peace, I’m finding security, I’m finding self-esteem all of a sudden, you know.” I could believe that maybe I was special, you know. I think it was a lifetime longing that I finally discovered when I discovered that Jesus was real in my life, you know.

### **Support Systems**

The participants expressed that “support systems” were one of the most important factors in their lives. When I asked Born Again what assisted him in maintaining his changed lifestyle, he simply stated “People!” “Support systems” had two major subthemes, both of which explain the major forms in which the participants received support: through individual male role models and through a group/community support system. The following will discuss these subthemes.

#### **“And he directed me to go...”**

There were three major areas in which individual male role models played a vital role in the participants’ change process. Through mentoring and guiding the participants’ search for spirituality, providing prayer support, direction, and accountability, and by

introducing them to larger circles of support. Abu discussed the pivotal role that an African man played in his initiating his spiritual quest.

Every time I would hear him talk, it would just fascinate me. Something lit up inside of me to just want to know more about him. As we started to hang around each other and talk, he would start to, he would tell me about where he was from and his family situation. One day, he had a Bible with him and he stood up and he just started saying some stuff and I asked him what was he saying. He told me and he directed me to go to read Psalms 1-7 and to repeat and recite what he told me and go look on a certain website called Bobo Hill, it's in Jamaica. It's where most Rastafari in Jamaica have their community and village and what not and pray and uphold the Sabbath. I took what he said and went to go look and research and stuff and recited those first 7 Psalms after, saying what he said when he stood there and was basically praying in front me—and something, I just felt different. The different feeling is something that drove me to want to feel it even more because it gave me a surge of energy...So I wanted to know and the more he told me the more it just made me feel alive! So it was something that I knew would give me strength, would give me courage, would give me power within myself to look and go beyond that—what I see and what I knew then, but what I'm now knowing and put it all together.

Most of the participants could name an individual male figures who initially assisted them by supporting their early spiritual quest.

*“A strong support system”*

Although the various forms of social support described by the participants included “spiritual” support and “encouragement,” some of the men also described how members of the spiritual community provided tangible assistance. Most of those that spoke of tangible support described assistance with getting jobs. However, Tony's narrative was by-far the most compelling example of receiving tangible assistance. In the following portion of his narrative, he responded to my question about things that assist him in continuing in his change. He explained how the spiritual community rallied around him after being released from prison with both social and tangible support.

Well things that I think assists me, to keep going, is a strong support system of strong Christian men who understand, and not only Christian men, but Christian family. Dealing with other people too, who support me, you know what I mean. Who really encourage me to keep going, any way they can assist me in reaching my goals, they're there to assist me. So I think that has strengthened my convictions...Um, the car that I have now, to get back and forth to work, a Christian lady who was my old boss, who just met me, helped me to purchase the nice car I got. I paid \$3500 and she gave \$2500. In the winter, well it's still kinda winter, but in the early part of the winter, I didn't have like no coats. And a Christian brotha was like "man you don't have no coat? Why you didn't say nothing?" and he got me like three coats. He said "what size you wear?" got me several pants, and several sweaters and several warm clothes. Take me out to eat! Um, pastor, counseling when it comes to talking, being real!...You know so, accountability that I've been assisted in. Prayer, you know people checking up on me, calling me...Oh, and with jobs, different connections with jobs. People calling people. You know if something happen with my car, people willing to "Oh we know some people that can help and assist free of charge, no charge for you!" And it's like "Man, are you serious?" Like so many people have been so giving to me... So I've been very taken care of since I've been out. I mean really taken care of.

### **God's Revelation**

Many of the participants stated that coming into relationship with God was "valued." Through their spiritual relationship with "the Creator," they were able to personally seek and receive the guidance needed to successfully fulfill the life roles that each of them had. Most of the participants discussed the concept of God still bringing them to an understanding of how to be a father, husband, and man. Their spirituality was definitely viewed as an ongoing journey for these participants. They described making "mistakes," and having "struggles" in the process of learning. When asked how he now defined manhood and fatherhood, Bee began his response with a great sigh, stating that he's still "learning" how to fulfill those roles. He went on to explain how he stays in "relationship" with God, how he "values the relationship of the Lord," and how that guides him in fulfilling his roles.

Man, I'm learning uuuhh! Good question. Defining fatherhood, let me start off, God is first. I define being a man of God as, uh, I define a man of God as giving up your personal, huh wow...it's like I want this to be the perfect answer. I define being a man of God as realizing that as a man of God I make mistakes, but chasing after heart, after God with all of my heart, mind, body and soul. Um, by communicating with Him everyday cus how can you say that you're in a relationship with someone if you don't communicate with them every day. You don't talk to them, let them know how much you love, and you just thank them for being in the relationship with them. By reading, studying His Word and that's, His Bible speaks back to us and lets us know what He's thinking of us. What He likes, what He dislikes...learning to serve Him as Savior and Lord and learning how much of a relationship, learning how much I value the relationship of the Lord. That's what being a man of God is. Being a husband is loving my wife, I'm so cliché-ish with this, as Christ loved the church... forever repentful to her and to the Lord for the way that I've treated her in the past and giving my life for her. Loving her, trying to meet all the needs that she has, as a husband, as a friend, as the father she never had in her life. Just being all the man I can be that she would be a great woman of God. And being a father, for my children, I would say the same thing. Just loving them unto the Lord, letting them know all the past mistakes I've made, letting them know all the dirt I've done, letting them know all the tribulations that come with life.

Most of the participants discussed their belief that God was teaching them. Throughout their narratives, they refer to God “speaking” to them through “inner voices,” “inclinations,” “visions,” “dreams,” other people, and/or the Bible. Regardless of the method, they believed that the Divine was speaking to and leading them.

*“He got a plan!”*

Another aspect of the participants' valuing their relationships with God, was the thought that despite any past or present mistakes, they were confident that they were progressing towards an expected end. They expressed how one reason why they believed they had survived negative past experiences, was because God had “a plan” for their lives. In Rock Sheet's narrative, he described the positive attributes that he believes spirituality brings to his life. He also explained the contrast of those positive attributes

from his past of addiction; and how he believes that God's plan for his life is the very reason he's still alive today.

But today, um, if I worry I got a Counselor. I can go to the Bible and read for encouragement. So I don't have the challenges that I went through then...it's just not the same today. I got more hope, I got more confidence in myself today. I'm encouraged today. All the good things go through my mind like that, encouragement, I can make it if I hold on. I'm willful, I'm just, I'm encouraged. I was discouraged back then. All I was waiting on was to die! I used to say that "I'm gone die one day using this stuff." I knew that. I was just on borrowed time. But God had a plan, I didn't die! I've been shot up, beat up, locked up, still here! Still here, honey! You know what I'm saying. I'm still here, Lord got a plan! He got a plan!

Like Sheet Rock, all of the other participants described how spirituality helped them to deal with the stressors and strains of life. Though these men would revert to "smoking something or drinking something" and/or violence when they experiencing struggles in the past, they now expressed being able to "deal with" these situation—again, trusting that (as Corky stated) "God is going to prevail at some point and get the glory...and use me to testify."

### **Connecting with Community**

Spirituality also allowed the participants to see themselves in others; and in doing so, it gave most of them the understanding to avoid violent conflicts with others. Being able to "see themselves" in others aroused a desire, in many participants, to help others instead of act out in violence during confrontations. When Bee was asked if there was ever a time that he wanted to act out in violence since his change, he responded with the following.

Um, yeah, there has been those experiences where I've wanted to act out. [chuckles] Its funny, most of my experiences have been with young men going down the same road I just came from. Um, of course, like I said, there's always a

part of me, the old man, that wants to make himself known. Um, but I can say for the most part, the maturity that God has placed in me, growth since coming out the army, where it's been by God's grace, I'm quicker to preach to handle the situation. Either trying to preach or, not necessarily preach, well preach, yeah. Trying to persuade the perpetrator, cus I'm not trying to be violent but I can say one that has possibly perpetrated me in some way, where I'm trying to persuade them to be nonviolent in their mind—cus I can see myself in them. So it's not one of those things where I just want to jump up and put them in their place, but it's one of them things where, wow, thank you for the ministry Lord, I see them as being captive. And I think it's easier, I guess once I see them as a captive, I want to see them free. I don't want to see them damned, or condemned or judged or harmed. Just because they want to be violent with me, I see them as being trapped and they need to be set free or something and that's why they have the violence in them.

*“And we all made errors”*

The participants' growing spirituality also became a catalyst for them finding commonality with and forgiving others. Forest had one of the most compelling stories of forgiveness. He explained how, after he'd begun his spiritual quest in jail, he believes God set up an encounter between him and his father, whom he hated. He discussed how it was during this encounter that he was able to “reconcile” with his father, after finding commonality in their “errors.”

So I'm in there and I'm growing...And I got this hate still, but me not knowing that I gotta get rid of that before I can go with the Lord. I'm like “Okay, I'm good.” It's time to go to court for the first time down here for the cases that's pending. They come get me...And it's a van with a cage in the back of it...He opens the gate, he opened the door, and I get in there and my father's in there. That's God!...Then when we get to Milwaukee county and they put us in the same pod and we reconciliated in that pod. My father told me of his error and what he wish he would've did, which is be a man, stay with us, raise us, show us how to live.... And he told me like “man,” I was telling him about the situations I was going through with my girlfriend at the time and how I abandoned her. It appeared to be that she was abandoning me while I was in there, and he told me about how I need to forget about that and forgive her and raise my kids and this and that and the other—and how he wish he would've did it, and how he did all these other things according to his lust and what he felt was right...It was just so many things that we discussed that really took the hate and turned it around. Like



“Man, he’s just a man that made errors, and we all made errors.” So I forgave him and it just jumped forward.

### **Summary of the Findings**

All of the participants experienced some sort of traumatic experience in their early childhood. Many of them experienced abuse/neglect, as well as an exposure to violence. One of the most impactful traumas that the participants faced, was the lack of a positive male role model. All the participants either discuss their father “leaving” the family, having an “abusive” stepfather, and/or not having a father present at all. In dealing with these traumas, these men began to develop “resentments” and other feelings of lack. They also developed negative feelings about themselves (i.e., being “outcast,” having “insecurities,” “hating” themselves, etc.). However, they did not feel that they were able to “express” these feelings to anyone. Their voices were not only silenced in the home, but for many of them, their community churches also seemed “too busy focusing on other stuff,” to concern themselves with their family’s issues.

Due to not having a channel to express their negative emotions, many of the participants then began to express them “in other ways,” such as fighting and skipping school. However, their negative emotions soon led them to also look for “an outlet” and something “to be a part of” outside of the home. For some of the participants, these outlets were groups of “homeboys” or “gangs;” but for others, the outlets were older male models who were already acclimated in the streets. Many times, the participants would “follow” these older models, who would often introduce the participants to broader groups or gangs. As they began to participate in criminal and violent activities with these groups, most of the participants stated that they “didn’t like” partaking in those actions.

However, they discussed “adapting to” the violence and being “transformed” by it—to become more accepting of things that they “wouldn’t have done in the past.”

Most of the participants discussed their continuing internal struggles with their life of violence; and for many of them, their lifestyle had “blown out of proportion.” In order to “suppress” their feelings of being trapped in their lifestyles, many of them turned to drugs and/or alcohol. At some point, the participants discuss a “downturn,” where they finally “started getting caught up” in their actions. Most of the participants were incarcerated or charged with violent crimes; and many of them were facing long jail/prison sentences. For many of them, this experience triggered the remembrance spiritual encounters from childhood. It was during this time that the participants began to seek a “sense of spirituality.”

The participants discussed experiencing God’s love for the first time. Many of them “could not understand” this love, especially because of their past experiences and the fact that they felt they had “disrespected” God in the violence that they had committed. However, after “opening [themselves] up” to this love, they began to see themselves differently. Most of them spoke of their “mentality changing,” the removal of “weeds” (i.e., “being abusive,” “drinking,” “not caring,” etc.); and the replacement of those old emotions with new positive ones (i.e., “peace,” “joy,” “security,” “hope,” etc.). The participants also discussed how “people” provided “support,” “accountability,” “prayer,” and “encouragement” for them to continue their spiritual quest. They also discussed “a strong support system” that provided help with their tangible needs as well. These support systems provided “jobs,” “clothing,” “food,” and even transportation to assist with the transition out of a violent lifestyle.

As the participants continued their spiritual quest, they learned to “value the relationship of the Lord.” Most of them discussed feelings of “still learning” how to fulfill their roles as responsible fathers, husbands, and men. Although many of them discussed making “mistakes” and having “struggles” along the way, they spoke of being “secure in [God’s] love” for them. They believe that God “has a plan” for their lives, and they trust that, even through their struggles, “God is going to prevail” and “give [them] strength” to get through it. Getting through some of these struggles, including overcoming a lifestyle of violence, helped the participants to “see [themselves]” in others. This assisted them with avoiding violent confrontations; as they would perceive others “as being captive” to violence, as they once were. This evoked a sense of desiring others to “to be set free” from violence, instead of wanting to “jump up and put them in their place.”

The participants also discussed the ability to “forgive” through connecting with and understanding the “errors” of others. This was helpful in “turn[ing] around” the “hatred” that many of them felt towards their parents and others who had hurt them during their childhood. Through this process of forgiveness, many of the participants were able to “let go of the bitterness.” This process was also meaningful to these men in learning to “be a real man;” as many of them now saw manhood as “chasing after God with all [their] heart”—which included loving and forgiving just as “He loved [them] and gave [them] grace and forgiveness.”

## **CHAPTER FIVE-DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH**

### **Discussion of the Findings**

#### **Early Trauma & Feelings of Lack**

As stated in chapter four, all of the participants experienced some form of trauma in their childhood (i.e., abuse, neglect, lack of a positive father figure in the home). These experiences, which took place between the ages of 3-12, were very significant for the participants of this study, as they began to shape their views of self, fatherhood, and manhood. Many of them began to detest themselves and view fathers as negligible, harsh, or domineering. They expressed not having an understanding of manhood; due to the fact that they didn't have anyone to show them how to be a man. Due to the dysfunction of their family lives, these young men lacked the love and nurturing necessary for them to develop a positive sense of self and feel lovingly connected with their families.

#### **Silenced Emotions**

Although these feelings of lack were painful to the participants, many of them experienced not being able to express these feelings. In fact, some of the participants recalled being taught "not to cry" or to "be a man" when they expressed their feelings. Others simply felt that they were not able to share their feelings due to simply being a child. Thus, many of their feelings were suppressed or silenced, which contributed to sentiments of anger, bitterness, and hatred. In going to church as a child, some of the participants felt overlooked and/or unimportant in the midst of the goings on. It seemed to them that no one cared enough to reach out to them or their families; whom some of them felt showed apparent outward signs of need/lack. Bee even attended church alone as

a young teen. However, he revealed that “without having a foundation of someone teaching me—not having someone taking me by the hand saying ‘Hey you, my son. Where your momma or your grandmomma or someone?’ ...and keeping me there [shrugs].” In other words, although he was coming alone as a youth, no one ever questioned where his family was or why he was coming alone, or even reached out to him to make him feel comfortable enough to keep coming. Without an outlet for positive self-expression, many of the participants began to express themselves via alternative means, such as becoming a “class clown,” getting into fights at school, or skipping school altogether. However, their feelings of lack further escalated as the participants got older. They eventually began to look outside of the home for other structures to become a part of. These structures, they believed, would fill the void of what was missing in the home.

### **Street Family & Feeling Trapped**

As they joined gangs and other street groups, these structures became pseudo families for these participants; often times with an older male substituting for the positive father figure these young men were missing at home. And although these groups were deeply rooted in street crime and violence, the participants received a pseudo sense of love, protection, and acceptance from them. However, they also learned that these qualities came at a cost. In order for them to be accepted as part of these street “families,” they had to conform to the ways in which they operated. In order for “love” and “respect” to be reciprocated, the participants had to prove that they were “down.” This included taking part in violence and other criminal activities; many of which the participants were initially uncomfortable with. Many of the participants expressed feelings of being “out of character” or “in the wrong place” when they began their lives in the streets. Many of

them admitted simply “following” what others around them were doing, regardless of the fact that they did not fully approve of these actions.

However, after being a part of these groups for a while, the participants admitted adapting to the violence and crime; a few of them stating that their experiences with violence in the home made this adaption easier. Some even admitted “craving” violence, as they began to see the amount of “respect” one would receive from dominating in violent confrontations. According to some participants, when guns and drugs were introduced into the inner cities, in the mid to late 80’s and early 90’s, the notions of respect both shifted and broadened. Gaining respect on the streets then became not only a matter of violence, but also of materialism. As drug dealing became the major focus of many street groups/gangs, the amount of money one could produce and how much of a drug he could “push” (or distribute) became a new measuring stick for respect. As a result of this growing illicit economy, the participants discussed experiencing increased violence in the streets—as groups sought to defend their “territory” or stop other groups from impeding upon their profits.

Since these participants came from poor families, this new economic system was part of what facilitated the broader acceptance of the violence and crime that they once were uncomfortable with. They now, not only bought into the street notions of respect, but also into the possibility of getting “rich” off of the communities in which they lived. Due to their early family traumas, the participants lacked a sense of connection with their families. The church, which represented the community for many of them, also failed to provide for their early needs. Therefore, there was a lack of connections with the community and the families living within it.

### **Addiction**

Despite this seeming acquiescence of the ways of these groups/gangs, many of the participants continued to struggle internally with their lifestyle and the resounding feelings of lack from childhood. The participants described becoming “tired,” “depressed,” and “schizophrenic” concerning their lives—and many of them pondered who they really were. They discussed the desire to feel free from and/or suppress these internal feelings. For many of them, this led to lives of drug and/or alcohol addiction. These addictions actually amplified their affinity towards violence, further entangling them in a cycle of destruction.

It is important to note, that most of the participants in this study had tried to change their lifestyle at some point before their actual change. Throughout their lives in the streets, many of them were sent to jail on a number of occasions. Some of the participants described their many decisions to change while incarcerated for short periods of time. Others described moving out of their communities and/or joining the military for a fresh start. Regardless of their methods, all of the participant who tried to change, note reverting back to the old criminal and violent habits of their pasts.

### **Jail/Prison & Remembering God**

Most of the participants in this study had been to jail or prison on a number of occasions before changing their lifestyles. Many unsuccessfully made commitments to try to change their lives on numerous occasions; either during periods of feeling intensely trapped, or during short periods of incarceration. (The circle cycling around “Feeling Trapped,” “Drug Usage or Addiction,” and “Jail/Prison” in Figure 1, displays the repetition of this cycle.) Eventually, all of the participants experienced a disorienting

dilemma; which took the form of facing an extended jail/prison term for most of the participants. These encounters were pivotal for the participants in two major ways: it allowed for a time of serious reflection of their lives, and it facilitated their openness to accept additional schema that could possibly help them through their situation and change their lives. The participants explained their previous failures to change their lives in two ways: they were either in need of a “mentality change” and/or they were “not ready for God.” The participants who ascribed to the first explanation stated that they eventually realized that if their mindset didn’t change, their own thinking would always lead them into violent and/or other illegal situations. Those who ascribed to the second explanation recalled knowing “of” or “about” God from previous religious and/or spiritual encounters in their childhood. For instance, some of them had a grandparent that had taught them “how to pray” in their childhood. For a few participants, prayer was a part of their lives even when they were “doing all those bad things.” Others recalled attending a church or a church-based community outreach at some point in their childhood. Facing substantial jail/prison sentences either triggered those memories or brought the significance of this spiritual “seed” to the forefront (see Figure 1).

### **God’s Love**

It was during these moments of disorientation, that the participants were introduced to the concept of God’s love. When discussing these initial encounters, many of the participants of this study clearly communicated immediate intrigue with the love of God. The concept of divine love caused a sense of awe, as many of them had never experienced anything like it—especially the notion of love and acceptance given unconditionally. As described in Tony’s narrative in chapter four, these individuals had



never experienced love and acceptance without requirement. This was different than the pseudo love experienced in the groups/gangs they had been a part of; in that their value was not measured by what they could produce or the benefits they could provide. In fact, it was the complete opposite—as all of them were humbled by the fact that God could love someone who had “sinned” against and “disrespected” Him in such extreme ways.

After opening themselves up to receive and accept God’s love, the participants were astounded by how it made them begin to perceive themselves. All of the participants acknowledged a sense of inherent value being restored to their lives. Many of them stated that the restoration of their sense of self-worth brought the fulfillment of a “deep longing” that they’d experienced for a long time. They were freed from need to constantly prove themselves. They learned, that simply being a human being, regardless of failures, faults, and what they could produce, afforded them the privilege of being loved by God. This inherent sense of value is what encouraged them to continue in their spiritual journey, seeking to understand more about God.

### **Changed Identity**

After beginning their spiritual journey, the participants described how it gave their identity back. I think that it is interesting to note here, that their identities were not seen as something newly gained, but rather regained. Through their lives in the streets, these participants lost their ability to see self as having a separate identity from the groups/gangs they belonged to. Before becoming entangled in the street life, the participants discussed wanting to pursue personal life goals (i.e., going to college, becoming an architect, etc.) or having a sense of wanting to be successful and “make something” of their lives. However, once they became involved in the streets, they were

either unable to move forward in those goals or simply lacked the direction to do so. The goals and pursuits of the groups/gangs replaced any personal goals they may have had; and their individuality was lost. However, once the participants began their spiritual journey, they began to see themselves again. They began to experience a change in their mentality, learning that the thoughts and ways of the groups/gangs to which they once belonged, were no longer plausible for them to reach their personal goals. For some of them, this was a humbling experience, as they became disappointed about the time that they had lost to the streets. However, with their renewed sense of self, the participants began to see the vast amount of possibilities that still lay ahead of them. By rejecting their old mentality, they became more equipped to navigate through mainstream society and strive towards personal goals and pursuits. Spirituality helped the participants to learn the importance of self-expression and individuality; and restored their sense of control to navigate their own lives.

### **Support Systems**

All of the participants spoke to the importance of fellowship in their new lives. They discussed the emerging presence of a positive male role-model—having a person who either introduced them to spirituality and/or helped instruct them on how to begin their spiritual quest. Some participants had different positive male role models emerge at differing points in their change process (i.e., while in jail/prison, after being released from jail/prison, etc.). Many of the models within these pivotal encounters often introduced them to larger networks of fellowship; where they received much needed social support, accountability, encouragement, and/or tangible resources. Some participants stated feeling that God had personally led them to a network of fellowship.

These networks embraced the participants, and were where they gained a sense of community and even family for them—enabling them to develop intimate relationships and connect with others on an emotional and experiential level. Fellowship provided a sense of belonging and guidance; as well as provided an atmosphere where the participants could continue to learning how to pursue spiritual growth.

It is important to note here, that the participants were very clear that “people” did not cause them to change or grow spiritually; rather that people were used as “instruments” that assisted them in pursuing their own spiritual growth. This is a very important point to make, because these participants did not merely exchange one form of community involvement (groups/gangs) for another (the church). Rather, it was a personal relationship with “God” or the “Creator,” that they believe facilitated their change. Corky best explained these sentiments in the following when I asked him what resources he would recommend for others desiring a similar change to the one he experienced. He explained his beliefs about the importance of a personal spiritual relationship with Jesus, and then explained what that relationship did for him throughout his change process.

I strongly believe that if the Holy Spirit isn't involved in whatever program you may have, or you're using, than I think man are too involved or people are too involved other than the Holy Spirit. And I don't think people can be the source to deliver you. I mean, they can be instruments, they can be instruments okay. I don't believe the church itself is the source to deliver you. I think it's Jesus, that you have to have that relationship. So my number one source would be calling on Jesus after I've had that, you know started a relationship with Jesus, then I can just call Him for help. And I call Him “help me” you know, “deliver me from my thoughts, these addictions, you know these old habits that want me to go back and do that”

I don't think it was too emotional, but it's, it was this satisfying mindset that “Okay, I'll give you the strength.” I felt like the Lord would say “Okay, you have the power. You don't need to desire that.” He just kept doing that, just kept

delivering me that way....I just had a sense that He was saying that “You can, you can. You don’t have to do it, you’ll be okay.” Over and over and over again. But it wasn’t just a onetime thing... it doesn’t happen by just saying your prayers at night or saying your prayers in the morning when you get up. It’s a day long process of you asking God to intervene and sincerely believing that He will. So that’s my number one source.

Therefore, it was through their personal spiritual relationship with God, that the participants have learned to change their lifestyles.

### **God’s Revelation**

The participants of this study, all attested to God revealing to them, or teaching them, how to fulfill their roles as husbands, fathers, and men. Most of them admitted that they are still in the process of learning. Although they sometimes made mistakes in fulfilling these roles, the participants continued to strive; believing that by “God’s grace,” they will ultimately be successful. This notion was also applied to understanding their past. These men believed, that despite all of the trauma, violence, and other issues of their past, because of “God’s plan” for their lives, they have survived it all. Here the notion of “God’s love” can be seen, not only as a result of their spiritual quest; but as an intercalate part of their entire lives.

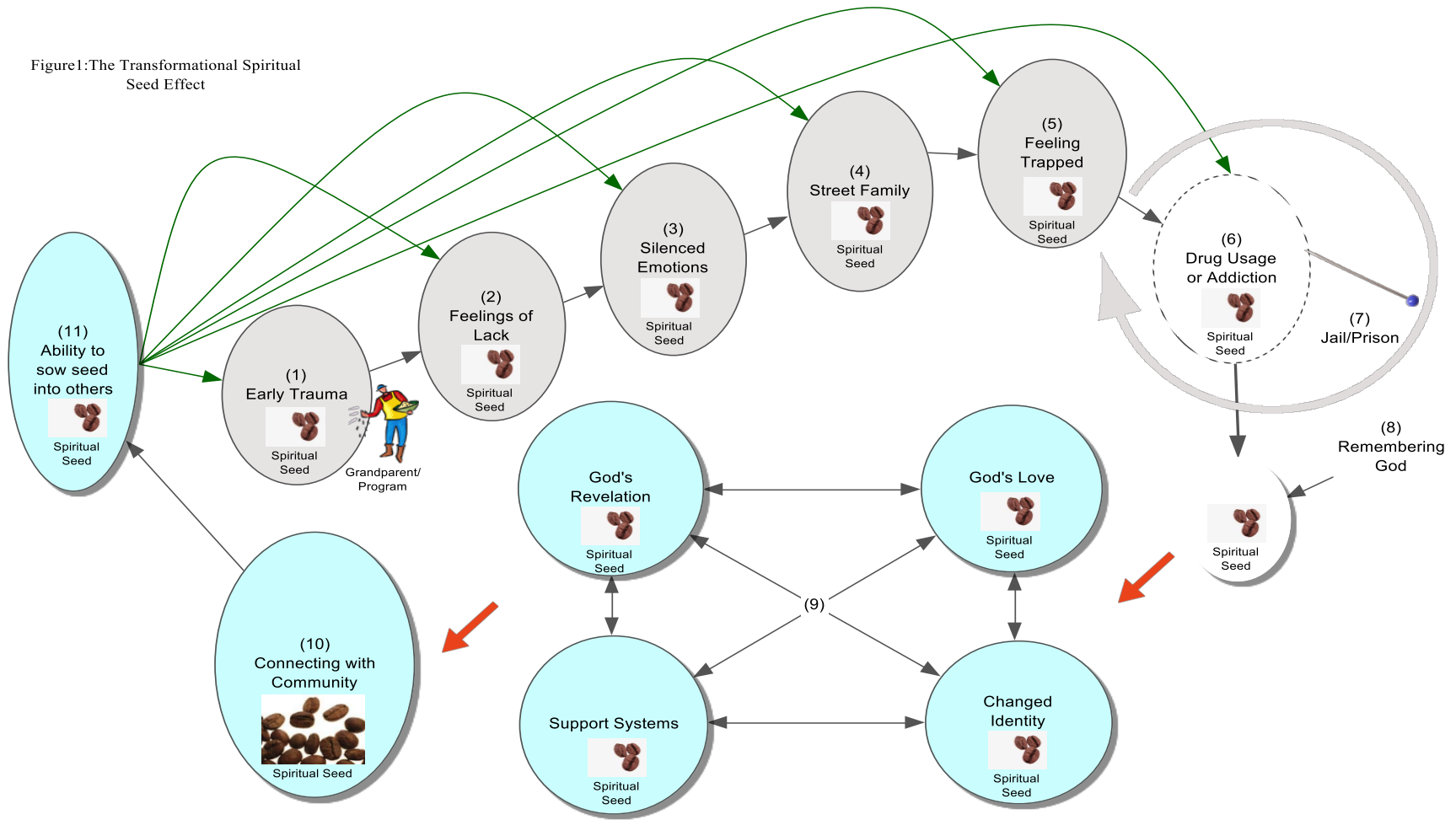
All of the participants attested to using drugs and/or alcohol in their past to cope with stress. However, all of them later gave accounts of how spirituality has helped them learn how to endure the stressors and strains of everyday life. Most stated that a life of spirituality keeps them from ever having to endure the same type of stress that they had while living a life of violence. However, they attested to how learning more about God’s “thinking” helped them overcome life’s obstacles and challenges. Many of the participants attested to the qualities of “peace,” “security,” and “faith” that spirituality provides to help them cope and assist them in no longer succumbing to anger and other

negative emotions as a result of stress or strain. It was clear that by praying, reading the Bible, meditating, and fasting, the participants built up their faith; and were able to believe that God would successfully see them through their challenges. It is important to note that the themes of God's love, changed identity, support systems and God's revelation did not occur in the same way for each participant. These themes occurred within differing sequences and with differing intensities throughout their change process (as displayed in Figure 1). For some, they experienced God's love, changes in their identity, and then support from others. Others experienced God's love, and with the help of a support system, began to experience changed identity. However, all of these elements were experienced by the participants, before connecting with community.

### **Connecting With Community**

Spirituality also assisted in the removal of anger, bitterness, unforgiveness and pride. Through spirituality, the participants were able to reflect on their pasts and see how they were dominated by their ego. This allowed them to see how their thinking was consumed by, having to earn love and acceptance, adherence to street code, materialism and disconnection from the community. They were able to see the error in these ways of thinking—which provided a sense of compassion and understanding when encountering others who once thought (or may still think) in that manner. This reflection facilitated the forgiveness of those who had hurt them in the past, and those who may offend them in the present. They learned to identify with others within the community and the community as a whole. Thus, they were enabled to desire for others, the same mentality and life change that they had experienced. This evoked a passion to give back to the community that they had, (in the words of Dre) “taken from for so long.”

Figure1: The Transformational Spiritual Seed Effect



## **Contribution to the Literature**

### **Early Trauma**

This study affirmed Anderson's (1999) notion of macro structural problems causing violence in impoverished urban neighborhoods. It was clear within the data of this study, that poverty (Bellair, et. al, 2003), social disorganization (Kubrin & Weitzer, 2003), and family structure (Anderson, 1999), played major roles in contributing the issues that influenced the participants' decisions to join a life of street violence. For many of the participants, the effects of poverty were further compounded by exposure to violence within the home. Further proving Anderson's (1999) theory that the prevalence of violence among inner city youth, relies heavily on the orientation of the families from which they come.

The "street" families of the participants definitely lacked "consideration for other people" and had a "superficial sense of family and community" (Anderson, 1999, p. 45). Due to their individual issues, many of their parents found "it difficult to cope with the physical and emotional demands of parenthood" and often reconciled "their needs with the needs of their children" (p. 45). Exposure to violence within the home, largely contributed to some these young men's later participation in violence. For most of them, however, it was the association with violent peers that had the most impact on them taking part in violence. Thus, supporting the findings from Steward and Simons' (2006) study.

### **Feelings of Lack, Silenced Emotions, Street Family, Feeling Trapped, & Addiction**

The feelings of lack that resulted from the early trauma experienced by the participants eventually caused them to "express" their feelings through negative behavior

(i.e., fighting, skipping school, etc.). This is exemplary of the negative coping strategies used by individuals who are overwhelmed by their exposure to violence described by Dempsey (2002). The continued silencing of their emotions led them to participate in violence via street groups/gangs. This supports the findings of LeBlanc's (2008) literature review on the causes of youth delinquency; in which he posits that adolescent delinquency is caused by a search for connectedness and meaning. He further posits that adolescence is a time where there is a developmental need for meaning, purpose, a greater connection to others and ultimately, a deeper connection to self. Given the feelings expressed by the participants of this study concerning their feelings during adolescence, LeBlanc's findings are affirmed. The fact that many of the participants' early experiences with church caused them to feel overlooked, may infer the findings of Bradley's (2009) study—which posit that religious fundamentalism is negatively associated with empathetic concern, perspective-taking and fantasy abilities.

The participants' initial dislike for participating in street violence, followed by their transformation into the street mentality, is indicative of pathologic adaptation to violence (Dubrow & Gabarino, 1989). The participants were no longer overwhelmed by the violence—instead they developed a callused attitude, which legitimized their use of violence (Anderson, 1999). It was unclear as to whether the participants growing propensity towards violence was the result of internalized racism, as found in Bryant's (2011) study. However, these men did discuss how the introduction of materialism that occurred in the 80's and 90's within street gangs, contributed to their acceptance and adoption of violence; as money made from drug dealing became a new tool for measuring respect. According to Anderson (1999), the campaign for respect is protective, and often



forms the core of one's self-esteem when alternative avenues of self-expression are not sensed to be available. Although the data did show some moral disengagement through the diffusion of responsibility, a complete normalization of violence (Bandura, et. al., 1996) was never obtained by most of these participants. In fact, most of them had such a hard time dealing with their violent street lifestyles, they turned to drugs and alcohol for relief. The use of drugs as a mediator between extreme exposure to violence and harmful dysfunction further validates Dempsey's discussion of negative coping as a result of an individual being overwhelmed by extreme exposure to violence.

The three major types of strain (failure to achieve positively valued goals, the removal of positively valued stimuli, and the presentation of negative stimuli) identified by Broidy (2001) were all present in the lives of the participants of this study. As a result, both negative self-directed and negative other-directed emotions were evoked within them (Agnew, 1992). Thus, according to General Strain Theory, these emotions provided motivation for criminal and deviant behavior (Jang, 2007). This process within the lives of the participants also confirms Higgin's (1987) theory of self-discrepancy; which posits that when what one desires to be is at odds with what they actually are, they will be more vulnerable to misguided cognitive beliefs and behavioral sanctions. The data within this study further supports these claims. However, the data also proves that men in this study were very concerned with interpersonal relationships and life's meaning/purpose. Therefore, although it cannot disprove Broidy and Agnew's (1997) suggestion that males are less concerned with these attributes of life than women (because women were not a part of this study), the data does suggest that those attributes are significantly valued concerns of men as well.

### **Jail/Prison & Remembering God**

In Patton's (1998) study of young men who decided to leave the violent gang life, a traumatic life experience (usually the death of a loved one) emerged as the primary reason for the abandonment of their violent lifestyles. DiBiase (1998) also posited that the most significant kind of learning begins when one encounters emotionally charged anomalies that cannot be understood by learning within or extending their existing meaning schemes. Merriam and Caffarella (1999), state that Mezirow calls this state a disorienting dilemma. The narratives of the men in this study definitely supports these notions. All of the young men came to a disorienting dilemma in their lives; a situation that did not fit in to their current understanding and ways of thinking at the time. This caused what Bray (2010) and Johnson and Friedman (2008) called a spiritual emergence; the personal integration of spiritual and transpersonal experiences to attain an expanded consciousness and maturity. These authors also posit that an individual's readiness to transform or a highly stressful emotional event could trigger this emergence. For the participants of this study, this occurred when they began remembering the spiritual experiences or lessons they had been taught in the past, after learning that they were facing extended jail or prison sentences. According to Merriam and Caffarella (1999), since the problems being faced by the individual cannot be resolved using previous problem-solving strategies, the learner begins to self-examine, critically assess their assumptions, formulate a plan of action, and reintegrate their lives based on their newly transformed perspectives. This was also evident in the data of this study, as the men began to self-reflect and open themselves up to spirituality during their times of desperate need.

### **God's Love, Changed Identity, & Support Systems**

According to Beck (1964), patterns of knowledge, based on associations or stored constructions of previous experiences, can be deconstructed by identifying, appraising, recognizing, and evaluating their validity or accuracy. When the participants of this study encountered God's love, they began to journey into this process. As they began to realize the invalidity of their previous schema and learn new concepts, their thought patterns began to be reconstructed by considering those new and alternative explanations of life. This contributed to a change in mentality, and being able to identify themselves based on spiritual concepts, rather than what had been dictated to them by others (i.e., abusive parents, negative role models, street groups/gangs) in the past. This process also included the development of new relationships, building competence and self-confidence, according to Merriam and Caffarella (1999). Therefore, the positive male role models and other forms of support were able to build up the confidence of the participants and enabled them to individually undertake and continue their spiritual quests. This process was similar to that proposed by Ronel & Tim (2003), within their work with male batterers.

It is important to note that the participants of this study encountered spirituality, instead of mere religion when experiencing their change process. What they experienced was personal and experiential, identified with personal transcendence and meaningfulness, and concerned with addressing ultimate questions of life's meaning with the assumption that there is more to life than what we can see or fully understand. These are all qualities of spirituality, according to Schroeder & Frana (2009) and LeBlanc (2008). Their experiences included examining existential questions, having open-minded

attitudes towards religious practices, and emphasizing the need to explore their individual relationships with a higher power (Bradley, 2009). According to Bradley (2009), these are definitely not aspects of religious fundamentalism.

### **God's Revelation**

Jang and Johnson's (2005) study of General Strain Theory on the emotional coping effects of religiosity on African Americans found that the distress buffering effects of religiosity were significant for women, but not for men. The eight constructs used to measure religiosity for their study, included spiritual concepts (as defined in chapter one), such as: reading religious materials and praying. In this study, these spiritual concepts were very significant in assisting these men with coping with stress and strain. Therefore, although this study does not disaffirm Jang and Johnson's study, due to their inclusion of religious concepts, I believe that it does affirm a need for further investigation into the effects of religion versus spirituality on African American males experiencing stressors and strains.

### **Connecting with Community**

According to Bradley's (2009) study, spirituality, not religious fundamentalism, was found to increase empathetic concern, perspective-taking and fantasy abilities. The data within this study confirms to those findings. In continuing their spiritual quests, the participants learned empathy for the conditions of others, the ability to place themselves in the shoes of others and connect with the situations of others. Again, it was these abilities that enabled these men to connect with individuals, forgive others, and develop compassion for the community as a whole. These were qualities that were neither

observed nor experienced in their early church attendance. They were developed through a personal relationship with God.

### **Adding to the Literature**

#### **God's Revelation**

There are three distinct types of family that emerge within the data of this study; the biological families in which the participants grew up, the street families that they turned to, and their current immediate families (i.e., girlfriend/wife, children). As stated throughout this study, the lack of a positive male role model during their childhood, proved to be detrimental to these young men. Without a strong father figure in their lives, they felt as though they “missed out” on a lot of the discipline, instruction, and guidance needed to develop into successful “men.” As a result, many of them grasped hold of the street life, and began following men and groups they believed would expunge their feelings of lack and insecurity. This, of course, was not the case.

Even after becoming fathers, many of them admitted that they “didn’t know how to be a father.” Further, they found themselves making the same mistakes that many of their parents had made raising them—reconciling their needs with those of their children. The violence and lifestyle that made them a part of their street families, were the very things that made them unable to properly fulfill their roles in the lives of their children. Bee acknowledged this by stating the following.

I really wasn’t involved as a dad, as a parent at the time. And my major reason for that was a fear of someone in the streets, someone in the opposition gang or other turf or whatever, may identify or see at the time my baby mama or children, and want to harm them from me or someone I was affiliated with. So, I tried to stay away from them.

After changing from a life of violence, Bee later stated that he is still in the process of learning how to be a husband, father, and man (See God's Revelation in chapter four).

These sentiments were stated throughout the participants' narratives. They all discussed God revealing to them and teaching them how to fulfill their roles in life. When I further inquired into what they were learning about fulfilling their roles, many of them discussed concepts of unconditional love, grace and sharing their past experiences. However, one concept was spoken of repeatedly by these men. Bee called it "laying down your life."

After I asked him to explain this concept, he stated the following.

[long pause] Laying my life down, it means, in a physical way, laying my life down for my wife and my kids, meaning that I would protect them in the best way I can. And no hurt, harm or danger would come to 'em, even if it means physically, literally giving up my life to be with the Lord. And then in a spiritual sense, in a non-physical way at the same time; also giving up my life may be [slaps hand on table] giving up career moves I may want. Giving up my own personal goals. At one point in my life I had a desire to be a major Christian rapper. Since I had rapped for so long, rap was something I still love to do. But I think even laying down that desire and picking a career of laboring a job to provide once again, like I said, for the family, is part of laying your life down. Giving up of yourself, sacrificing yourself, something you may desire that your family may be better off..Sacrificing my time just in learning God, like I said...and studying and understanding His Word. Understanding what God is speaking and part of that is sacrificing because as I learn God, I need to take that same sacrifice and teach it to my family.

Therefore, the participants learned how to make their family their main priority; a

concept completely opposite of what they learned from childhood and in the streets.

Instead of putting themselves first, and pursuing their own desires, they learned the significance of sacrificing for the betterment of their family/children. Most of the men, even those with adult children, discussed wanting to provide the support that they didn't receive earlier in life. These men believed that by allowing God to teach them how to fulfill their roles as husbands, fathers, and men, they could stop the cycle of violence and dysfunction in their families. Abu summarized this notion best when he stated, "And

from what I've been through, what I've seen and what I feel, now is time for it to stop. And what needs to stop is the transferring of pain.”

### **Connecting with Community**

As stated earlier within this chapter, spirituality also assisted in the removal of anger, bitterness, unforgiveness, and pride. Part of this process was the understanding that the participants received in reflecting upon their past mistakes, being able to see themselves in others, and extending to others the same grace, love, and mercy that they received from God. Although this was the main reason in which most of these men did not respond violently in confrontations, this did not hold true for all participants. In analyzing the data, I noticed an interesting pattern. Although none of the men revealed responding violently in confrontations since their change took place—the reasons why they didn't respond violently was different depending upon how long they had been nonviolent.

When asked how they currently respond to anger or confrontation, men who had stopped living a street life less than five years ago, reported not acting out in violence because of the “consequences.” These men discussed an avoidance of violent conflicts by “walking away.” Therefore, these men did not appear to have developed the connection with community that the other participants had. Those who had been living a life of nonviolence for at least five years stated that they usually see “themselves” in the person they are in conflict with. Thus, this evokes a desire to help the individual with whom they are in conflict. Those who had been living a life of change between five and 25 years, discussed getting angry at times, but not allowing that anger to control them; and trying to convince the person they are in conflict with to be nonviolent.

Those who had been living a life of nonviolence for over 25 years discussed being “shielded” and having an unfair advantage in conflicts, because anger did not affect them in the same way that it does others. When asked how he now responds to being disrespected, Corky gave the following response.

Well, I mean [takes a shallow breath], now this is probably not fair because I have, you know I have, I operate under the Lord’s direction. So the principles of the Word of God and things like that. So, even if a person disrespects me now, you know, I feel like they need help in that area. And maybe I can help them. But I don’t retaliate or get even...Or so, if a person wants to abuse me, you know or say something negative to me, or something like that; I just feel that they can’t be experiencing the walk of the Lord the way that I am. And maybe I can help them. So, I don’t I don’t fire back at them like that. I don’t challenge them, I don’t argue with them...I don’t disrespect them. I think that I show them respect even though I feel that they may be wrong... And uh, I find ways to see if I can show them that there’s something working in me. That’s my whole goal in life. Is to show people, as well as the Lord, but to show people that there’s hope.

Therefore, even though the men who had been changed for 25 years or more shared the same desire to help others as those changed for over five years; they also discussed an element of operating in a way in which anger didn’t affect them. This is significant, because it shows the progression of development concerning anger and violence, as one continues in their spiritual quest---moving from conflict avoidance, to controlling anger and reaching out to others to do the same, to not being affected by anger and being an example of what mature spirituality is.

### **Implications for Practice**

The data within this study provides implications for practice within a number of contexts. Programs for African American males and youth, violence prevention and intervention, the criminal justice system, churches and other programs working with previous violent offenders, could all benefit from the information within this research.



The following will discuss implications for violence intervention programming, programming for urban men, religious-based institutions or programs and adult education.

### **Violence Intervention**

At the end of each of the participants' narrative interviews, they were asked to share their recommended set of resources for others desiring to experience a similar change process. Many answers were provided, including: fellowship, jobs, schooling, goal setting and pursuit, self reflection and mentality change, moral support, job training, job assistance, community service, learning the Bible, and continuing to search for knowledge and understanding. In reviewing data from the narratives, two major topics seems essential in considering the development of new violence intervention programming for urban youth and young adults. First, the individual must be ready for change. As mentioned earlier in this study, many of the participants tried to change a number of times on their own; without self reflection and an openness to learn new schema and mindsets. Without this time of reflection and an openness to new learning, transformation was simply not plausible. According to the data of this study and others, only a disorienting dilemma seems to bring about such readiness. And unfortunately, these situations cannot be fabricated within programming.

Second, one cannot ignore the method that seemed to be the most impactful (after the dilemma) to initiating the transformative processes of the participants themselves—being able to connect with someone who had already endured a similar journey. The fact that most of the participants had positive, male-role models who had already endured a journey of change, assist and direct their spiritual quest, was very poignant. Thus, for

those desiring change from a lifestyle of violence, a mentor who has already journeyed out of a life of violence would serve as one of the best resources for them. This method alone may make a very significant difference in the lives of those ready for change.

Intensive mentoring with such an individual may provide invaluable insights, from an already transformed perspective. The lived experience of the mentor will give the mentee the opportunity to hear a fresh perspective on life. Hopefully, making them more aware of the differences between their ego and striving for understanding in their interactions with others; enabling them to make more positive decisions. The mentors would also spend a significant amount of time with their mentees each week; and be in contact with them daily. These mentors would have to also be available “on call.” In other words, they would have to make themselves available whenever the mentee had a need. I would liken the role of these mentors to that of surrogate parents or older siblings.

I do believe that mentors who have used spirituality to transform from a life of violence are specifically important. The fact that the individuals of this study were unable to change outside of their spiritual quest is significant. As stated in chapter two, Dirks (1997) posits that the journey of self-knowledge requires the care for and nurturing of the presence of the soul dimension in teaching and learning. Methods of teaching that totally rely on images that come from without, while ignoring the imagination, fail to arouse a connection with soul and prevent transformation from taking place. I believe that true transformation requires an attention to both external and internal selves.

### **Programming for Urban Men**

Given the findings of this study, learning to fulfill one's roles as fathers, husbands, and men are significant for men. Thus, all social programming for men,

especially those serving disadvantaged, urban men, should include a strong component that addresses them successfully fulfilling their family roles. These programs should provide the opportunity to reflect on current notions of fatherhood, manhood, and being a husband; and examine where those notions originate from. Men within these programs should be guided in the process of setting goals for themselves and their families. Then, they should also provide an opportunity to reflect on the validity and/or plausibility of their current notions when measured against their desires for themselves and their families. These programs should also provide scientifically and/or spiritually based methods for successfully fulfilling those roles. This would give the participants of these programs a chance to evaluate and restructure their thinking concerning their roles, if necessary.

### **Religious-based Institutions or Programs**

When reviewing the data from this research, there were very strong inferences made about churches. The fact that many of the participants' early experiences with attending church did not provide a deeper understanding of spirituality or an opportunity for positive self-expression was both alarming and disturbing. The church could have served as a buffer between the early trauma that these participants were experiencing and their decisions to pursue acceptance in the streets. However, it was evident that these institutions either were unable, unwilling, or unknowledgeable about the need to do so. Therefore, a discussion of two implications for churches and other religious-based institutions or programs follows.

First, many of the participants stated that when they attended church as a child, they didn't "know or understand what was going on." Therefore, although they knew

“about God,” there was no understanding of their personal connection with Him; and thus, no encouragement to pursue a personal spiritual quest. From this information, an increased focus on quest-oriented (see chapter two) teaching is needed within religious-based institutions. This will encourage individuals to seek understanding of religious and spiritual concepts; enabling them to develop personal meaning and relationship. It was this type of questing that facilitated the participants’ discovery of personal identity and life purpose.

Second, some of the participants did not view the church as an empathetic place. When they attended, family problems that they felt could obviously be perceived, were never addressed by the church community. Therefore, the church was not perceived as a place where they could safely express and get help with their feelings of resentment and lack. Therefore, I believe that more emphasis on the development of youth programming is needed within religious-based institutions; especially programs that foster positive self-image and encourage positive self-expression. More emphasis on assessing the needs of youth should also be implemented within these institutions; which could lead to developing partnerships with families. These efforts may facilitate strengthened family units and compassionate connections with the community.

### **Adult Education**

As stated in chapter one, the ability to relate to individuals from diverse backgrounds and successfully facilitate learning, is very important in today’s classrooms. For adult educators and programmers who desire to develop programming for individuals who desire change from a life of violence, the implications of this study are significant. It is important to note that the findings of this study disaffirm some adult education and

development theories. The following will discuss the implications of this study, as they relate to Andragogy, McClusky's theory of margin (as cited in Merriam, Caffarella and Baumgartner, 2007) and the psychoanalytic theory of gender identity development.

Knowles' conceptualizations of andragogy poses that adult learners are more self-directed, possess a reservoir of experience from which they learn, have a readiness to learn that is closely related to his/her social role, desire immediate application of knowledge being gained, have internal motivations, and desire to know why they learn something (Merriam, et. al., 2007). However, for the participants of this study, past experience became a barrier for learning how to change, instead of a resource to draw from or build upon. As previously discussed, although many participants previously tried to change, they were stuck in their "mentalities;" and often found themselves facing the same troubles as before. Thus, learning to live a life of non-violence, could only take place once they were ready to open themselves up to new concepts and knowledge. They then began to build new reservoirs of knowledge (about self, others, and community), rooted in new experiences and perspectives; providing a rich resource for continued learning, growth, and development.

Knowles' (1980) notion of an adult's readiness to learn being closely related to the developmental tasks of their social roles was not supported by the findings of this study. Many of the participants became fathers while living a life in the streets. As stated earlier in this chapter, many of the participants continued in their life of violence, while being a father. For some of them, becoming a father while living the life of the streets, caused them to distance themselves from their children, vow to teach their children about the street life, or neglect their children altogether. Again, most of them shared sentiments

of not knowing how to be a father during that period of their lives. Thus, it wasn't until they initiated their spiritual quest that they began to seek ways of becoming successful fathers.

The participants of this study did become more self-directed as they continued on their spiritual quest. However, they did not “mature” in their self-concepts and become more independent in their learning, until they were well into adulthood. Thus, the assumption that all adult learners are autonomous and self-directed was not asserted within the data of this study. The findings of this study echo the notion that it is important for adult educators to acknowledge and consider the implications of an individual's social and cultural context when developing curriculums and programs for adults (Merriam, et. al., 2007). Not all adult learners share the same characteristics and ways of learning. Therefore, programming for disadvantaged, urban adults must take these differing contexts into consideration.

McClusky's theory of margin (as cited in Merriam, et. al., 2007) posits that the balance of the load of life (i.e., family, work, desires, future expectations, etc.) and one's power (i.e., family support, economic abilities, resilience, coping skills, etc.) is what determines his/her “margin” to participate in learning. The more an individual's power rises above his/her load, the more likely learning is able to occur. However, according to this theory, the participants of this study possessed very limited power in contrast to their load. In fact, it was at the point in life when their power seemed completely depleted (facing long-term incarceration), that they seemed to become most open to learning. Thus, affirming that the context and subjective experiences of the learner are very important in assessing their readiness and/or ability to learn. This further implies the

necessity of subjectivity and relevance when developing adult education tools and programs; especially for disadvantaged urban residents.

The psychoanalytic theory poses that because boys are mothered by females, they come to define themselves as separate and distinct; whereas girls define themselves in terms of attachment to others (Chodrow, 1978; as cited in Ross-Gordon, 1999). However, the findings in this study do not support this theory. The men within this study displayed an enduring desire for connectedness and acceptance. This desire was not only evident in their childhood, but it also extended into their adulthood. This is significant for adult educators and programmers because it gives evidence to males' (both adolescent and adult) need for feeling attachment and acceptance. Thus, youth and adult education institutions and programs should also provide ways to foster experiences that assist in meeting these needs.

### **Implications For Future Research**

Overall, the research results posit that spirituality provides urban, Black men with the resources necessary to develop a sense of self-worth, reestablish their individual identities, and reconnect with themselves and the broader community. However, there were several limitations to this research project. First, all of the nine participants in this study had other known "stabilizing" aspects in their lives. Of the nine participants, six were married and two were in committed relationships, eight were fathers, and six had full-time occupations (jobs or ministry) and one was retired. Thus, the effects of those stabilizers were unclear in relation to the overall sustainment of nonviolence within their lives. Second, the measurement of "sustained transformation" can be brought into question within this research. Of the nine participants, three of them had embarked upon

their transformational journey less than three years from the time they were interviewed—two of them had “sustained” transformation for less than a year outside of jail or prison. Therefore, it is indefinite as to whether these individuals will truly continue in their journey of transformation.

Third, out of the nine men interviewed, eight of them identified themselves as Christians, and one identified himself as Rastafarian. Thus, further research should be done, that is more inclusive of other spiritual affiliations. Differentiation and/or similarities between this study, and other more inclusive studies, could create meaningful linkages; providing evidence of whether the themes within this study were truly “spiritual” or strongly religion based. Lastly, all of the participants for this study were African American men. Similar research should be conducted, that include African American females, and non African American individuals who have successfully transformed from a life of violence.



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## APPENDIX A

### Informed Consent Form (A)

Dear Program Participant:

My name is Sylvia Wilson and I am a graduate student in Urban Education at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. I am conducting a study on the experiences of individuals who have transformed from a life of violence, and who wholly or partially attribute that transformation to spirituality. I would greatly appreciate your participation in this study, as it will assist me in completing my degree and making recommendations for programmers who seek to develop more holistic programs and support services for others desiring to transform from a life of violence. The purpose of this study is to answer the research question: **How is spirituality used by African American men in urban environments, as a positive coping mechanism for transforming out of a life of violence?** Through your participation I hope to understand how spirituality may aid and support adults in their transformative processes.

If you agree to be in this study you will be asked to participate in one 120-180 minute interview related to the experiences within your personal journey of transformation. This study will be seeking to capture the experiences of about 10-15 individuals who attribute their transformation from a violent lifestyle to spirituality.

Data collection for this study will take place between November and December of 2010. There are no known risks associated with you being in the study. Possible benefits include adding to the body of knowledge in the fields of Adult Education, Urban Education, and Psychology regarding the development of more supportive, effective, and holistic programs and strategies for others transforming from a life of violence.

All interview information will be considered confidential and properly secured. No personally identifying information will be used; such as name, specific age, or related institution or programs. Data from this study will be shared with my dissertation committee and may be published in professional journals. Participation in this study is voluntary. You can withdraw from this study at anytime, during the interview process, for any reason. There is no penalty for withdrawing. Once the interviews are completed, I would be happy to share the perceived emerging concepts; as well as the final results with you. In the meantime, if you have any questions or would like more information about the study, please contact me:

Sylvia Wilson  
8920 S Wood Creek Drive  
Oak Creek, WI 53154  
(414) 403-0104  
[refined\\_gold@hotmail.com](mailto:refined_gold@hotmail.com)

Dr. Larry Martin  
School of Education  
Department of Urban Education  
PO Box 413  
Milwaukee, WI 53201  
(414) 229-5754 or (414) 229-4729

**If you have any complaints about your experience as a participant in this study, please call or write:**

Chris Buth Furness  
IRB Administrator  
Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects  
The Graduate School  
University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee  
PO Box 340, MIT 206  
Milwaukee, WI 53201  
(414) 229-5667/3173 phone  
(414) 229-5000 fax  
[chrisb@uwm.edu](mailto:chrisb@uwm.edu)

Although Ms. Furness will ask your name, all complaints are kept in confidence.

This research project has been approved by the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects for a one year period.

## APPENDIX B

### Informed Consent Form (B)

Dear: \_\_\_\_\_

Thank you for your interest in my dissertation research on the spirituality and the transformative experiences of those who have abandoned a life of violence. I value the unique contribution that you can make to my study and I am excited about the possibility of your participation in my research. The purpose of this letter is to reiterate some aspects of the research that we have already discussed and to secure your signature on the participation agreement section located at the bottom of this letter.

The research model I am using is a qualitative narrative approach which I am seeking comprehensive depictions and descriptions of your experience. In this way I hope to illuminate and answer my research question: **How is spirituality used by African American men in urban environments, as a positive coping mechanism for transforming out of a life of violence?** Through your participation I hope to understand how spirituality may aid and support adults in their transformative processes.

If you agree to be a part of the study you will be asked to participate in one 120-180 minute interview related to your personal transformative experiences. You will be asked to recall specific life happenings, situations, or events that you've experienced while you journeyed through your transformative process. I am seeking vivid, accurate, and comprehensive portrayals of what these experiences were like for you: your thoughts, feelings, and behaviors, as well as situations, events, places, and people connected to your experience.

This study will be seeking to capture the experiences of 10-15 individuals who attribute all or part of their transformation from a violent lifestyle to spirituality. Data collection for this study will take place between November and December of 2010. There are no known risks associated with you being in the study. Possible benefits include adding to the body of knowledge in the fields of Adult Education, Urban Education, and Psychology regarding the development of more supportive, effective, and holistic programs and strategies for others transforming from a life of violence.

All interview information will be considered confidential and properly secured. No personally identifying information will be used; such as name, specific age, or related institution or programs. Data from this study will be shared with my dissertation committee and may be published in professional journals. Participation in this study is voluntary. You can withdraw from this study at anytime, during the interview process, for any reason. There is no penalty for withdrawing. Once the interviews are completed, I

would be happy to share the perceived emerging concepts; as well as the final results with you. In the meantime, if you have any questions or would like more information about the study, please contact me:

Sylvia Wilson  
8920 S Wood Creek Drive  
Oak Creek, WI 53154  
(414) 403-0104  
[refined\\_gold@hotmail.com](mailto:refined_gold@hotmail.com)

Dr. Larry Martin  
School of Education  
Department of Urban Education  
PO Box 413  
Milwaukee, WI 53201  
(414) 229-5754 or (414) 229-4729

**If you have any complaints about your experience as a participant in this study, please call or write:**

Chris Buth Furness  
IRB Administrator  
Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects  
The Graduate School  
University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee  
PO Box 340, MIT 206  
Milwaukee, WI 53201  
(414) 229-5667/3173 phone  
(414) 229-5000 fax  
[chrisb@uwm.edu](mailto:chrisb@uwm.edu)

Although Ms. Furness will ask your name, all complaints are kept in confidence.

This research project has been approved by the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects for a one year period.

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## PARTICIPANT AGREEMENT

I agree to participate in a research study exploring “The spiritual and the transformative experiences of those who have abandoned a life of violence.” I understand the purpose and nature of this study and I am participating voluntarily. I grant permission for the data to be used in the process of completing a Ph.D. degree, including dissertation and any other future publication. I also grant permission for all interview sessions to be tape recorded or computer generated. As a participating adult in this study I understand that :

- I have a right to withdraw at anytime, for any reason,
- I have a right to review perceived emerging concepts and the final report
- I have the right to ask any questions before, during or after the interview process has been completed
- Data will be collected by conducting one 120-180 minute interview

---

Signature of Participant

Date

## APPENDIX C

### Project Summary

The purpose of this research project is to examine the personal experiences of individuals who have abandoned a life of violence. This study will only involve individuals who attribute all or part of their transformation to spirituality. The research methodology that will be employed is qualitative, using one-on-one interviews as the main format for collecting data. During these personal interviews the researcher will be seeking comprehensive depictions or descriptions of an individual's lived experiences with spirituality and transformation. The main goal of this research is to gain insight into how individuals describe their lived experiences of spirituality and transformation.

The target population will include participants who have completed transformative programming which utilized spirituality as one of its main concepts for transformation, located in southeastern, Wisconsin. Purposeful sampling techniques will be used to locate and select 10-15 individuals who have personally experienced the role of spirituality within their transformative process. Recruitment and data collection for this study will take place between November and December of 2010. Initial contact with possible participants will be made by the primary researcher through face-to-face discussion, email or phone conversations. Contact will also be made through the program directors and administrators. There are no known risks associated with participants being a part of this study. However, possible benefits include adding to the body of knowledge in the fields of Adult Education, Urban Education, and Psychology regarding the development of more supportive, effective, and holistic programs and strategies for others transforming from a life of violence.

Research participants will be asked to participate in one 120-180 minute interview related to their personal experiences involving spirituality and transformation. This research is seeking vivid, accurate, and comprehensive portrayals of what these experiences were like for you: your thoughts, feelings, and behaviors, as well as situations, events, places, and people connected to your experience. Research participant's names and program affiliations will be kept confidential. Each participant will be assigned a pseudonym when reporting general narratives and descriptive statements. Confidentiality of information will be ensured and group themes and topics will be reported and discussed. Descriptions of the experiences and themes will be extracted from the data will be shared with my major professor Dr. Larry Martin, dissertation committee members and may be published in professional journals.



## **APPENDIX D**

### **Interview Guide (Part I)**

#### **Life Before Transformation**

- Please tell me about how you grew up, how you were introduced to street violence, and when you began taking part in it.
  - How did you learn about street life/code?
  - What are the values that you utilized in the streets?
  - How did you like your life according to those values?
  - During this time, how did you see/view your family and/or family life?
  - During this period, what was the role of “respect” in your life?
  - How did you make decisions and choices that showed the value of life in the streets?
  - During this period how did you view relationships with the opposite sex?
  - How did you view the role of parenthood?
  - What were some of the stressors of life that you endured, if any?
  - How did you view the community?
  - How did you view the church?
  - How did you view your role as a man?
- What types of violence did you engage in? What are some examples of this violence?

- What was the most serious act of violence that you engaged in? What were you thinking during this violent act? How often did you participate in such acts?
- Could you describe the moment/period that led you to desire or need to abandon a life of violence.

## APPENDIX E

### Interview Guide (Part II)

#### Life During Transformation

- What led you to consider an alternative to violence?
- How did you come to identify spirituality as an alternative to violence?
- Describe the transformation process that you experienced.
  - How would you define spirituality?
    - Is there a difference between spirituality and religion? If so, can you describe that difference?
  - Describe what caused you to believe that spirituality would be important to your change process.
  - Describe to what extent you attribute your change to spirituality
  - In what ways did your sense of self, life and others shift during your process of change?
    - How did you view yourself differently?
    - How did you view your family and family role differently?
    - How did your sense of “respect” change?
    - How did you relate to the streets during this change?
    - How did your relationships with the opposite sex change?
    - How did your view of your parental role change?
    - What life stress did you encounter during this time and how did you deal with it?
    - How did your sense of community change?
    - Did your views of the Church change? How?
    - Did you redefine your role as a man? How?
  - How did spirituality play a role in these viewpoint changes?
  - During your change process, did you encounter situations/circumstances that made you angry?

- How did you react?
- Did spirituality play a role in how you reacted?  
How?
- Did you experience instances/periods of regression during your change process
  - What were the causes of this regression? If not, how did you manage not to regress?
  - How did you rebound and get back on track?
- Were there any other resources that assisted with your transformative process?
  - If so, what were they? If not, what resources would you have liked to assist you and how?

## APPENDIX F

### Interview Guide (Part III)

#### **Life After (in Continuation of Transformation)**

- How long has it been since you last engaged in violence?
- Have you experienced any situations that made you want to be violent? What are some examples? How did you deal with them?
- How is your life different now that you have experienced this change?
  - How does spirituality help you maintain this change?
  - Are there other areas of your life that you believe spirituality has helped you change your views about? Which ones? How?
  - Since your change experience, what would you say to your former (pre-change) self if you could?
  - What tools do you believe would better assist you in continuing in your transformed state?
  - What are some of the resources that you believe would be helpful for others desiring a similar change experience?
  - Do you believe that spirituality plays a major role in discovering and/or experiencing life change? Why/why not?
  - Are you experiencing ongoing changes in your views?
    - About family? How?
    - About respect? How?
    - About your relation to the streets/street life? How?
    - About relationships with the opposite sex? How?
    - About parenthood? How?
    - About your community? How?
    - About life's strains? How?
    - About your role as a man? How?

## **APPENDIX G**

### **Interview Protocol for Participant Referral**

- How long have you known the referred participant?
- What do you know about the referred participant's actions and/or [criminal] record that qualifies them to participate in this study, in your opinion?
- Do you believe the referred individual is transformed? If so, how long have you known the referred participant to be transformed?
- How do you know that the referred individual is transformed (i.e., what evidence proves that he is transformed)?
- Can you give examples of changes in the referred participant's actions and/or views [of the streets, family, respect, relationships and parenthood] since you've known them?
- What do you believe is the likelihood of this individual returning to street life?

## CURRICULUM VITAE

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## EDUCATION

University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, Milwaukee, WI  
**Ph.D. in Urban Education** **2011**

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## PUBLICATIONS AND PAPERS

*"Spirituality and Transformational Learning: Insights for Abandoning a Life of Street Violence"*

Paper Presented at the UWM School of Education Research  
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*"Spirituality and Transformational Learning: How an urban community abandoned a life of  
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Paper Presented at the 17<sup>th</sup> Annual African Diaspora Adult  
 Education Research Conference Pre-Conference, Chicago, 2009.

*"Spirituality and Transformational Learning: How residents of an urban community abandoned a  
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Paper accepted for the American Association for the Adult and Continuing Education Conference  
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