Religiosity and spirituality are defining features of African American life. However, within psychology, research on African American religiosity and spirituality has proceeded without benefit of a conceptual framework. This paper labors toward a framework that examines the roles of religion and spirituality in the development and maintenance of social relationships. We review empirical research on the role of religion and spirituality in the lives of African Americans with an eye toward illuminating the affective, cognitive, and behavioral mechanisms through which religion and spirituality shape individual, family, and communal relationships across the developmental span. Future directions for quantitative and qualitative research on African American religious and spiritual life are suggested.

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Levin, Taylor, & Chatters, 1995; Taylor & Chatters, 1991. Others have focused on the mediating effects of religion on psychological (Williams, Larson, Buckler, Heckmann & Pyle, 1991; McAdoo, 1995) and physical health (Wallace & Williams, 1997). However, little empirical attention has been given to the functions of religion and spirituality in the everyday lives of African American people. As such, although sociological and psychological research can cogently argue that religion and spirituality are important in the lives of African Americans, these disciplines can say little about why religion and spirituality are important, or about their roles in structuring daily affairs.

Further, within psychology, research on African American religiosity and spirituality has proceeded without benefit of a conceptual framework. This paper labors toward such a framework. Of particular concern is the development of a framework that examines the role of religion and spirituality in the development and maintenance of social relationships. This paper has three points of focus: First, we discuss the utility of a conceptual framework that explores the role of religion and spirituality in relational life. Second, we provide a brief treatment of prevailing empirical literature on the functions of religion and spirituality. We focus particular attention on critically appraising the small body of research on the psychological functions of religion and spirituality in the lives of African Americans. We are concerned both with the conceptual and methodological aspects of these studies. Finally, we situate the discussion of existing literature on African American religiosity and spirituality in a relational matrix. In doing so we highlight the affective, cognitive, and behavioral mechanisms through which religion and spirituality may function in interpersonal relationships across the developmental span. Using this relational framework, we suggest specific future directions for the quantitative and qualitative study of African American religious and spiritual life.

**THE SIGNIFICANCE AND UTILITY OF A RELATIONAL FRAMEWORK**

Although religion and spirituality appear to be reemerging in mainstream psychology, much of the work in this arena continues to be concerned with individual quests. This focus on the individual has obscured attention to the powerful ways in which religion and spirituality guide and influence relational life. Certainly, sociologists and social psychologists have asserted that religion and spirituality play a role in the search for intimacy (Geertz, 1989; Houf, 1945). However, these assertions have been examined almost exclusively in the context of macro-level relationships (i.e., the constellation of individuals into cultural groups). Our goal in this work is to articulate a conceptual framework that will focus attention on the ways in which religion and spirituality operate within everyday interpersonal relationships. Of particular concern here is the development of a framework that examines the role of religion and spirituality in the relationships of African Americans (see Figure 1).

The conceptual framework offered in this paper emerges out of a fundamental assumption that religion and spirituality are relational phenomena. The very act of believing in God places one in relationship with, and immediately invites reflection on one’s connections and obligations to, this Other (e.g., God). Because we are broadly concerned with relationships, we use this framework to highlight the complex roles of religion and spirituality in social interactions within and across multiple levels of human ecology (e.g., individual, family, and community/society). We do not assume that religion and spirituality operate in the same ways across the developmental span.
As such, we advocate for rigorous empirical research on the complex functions of religion and spirituality at the various stages of development. We also advocate for attention to early and lifelong religious and spiritual socialization processes. We also recognize that religion and spirituality may not operate in the same ways for men and women, or for people from different cultural, regional, and class backgrounds within the African American community. As such, we highlight the need for attention to the ways in which these factors shape the religious and spiritual lives and the relationships of African American men and women.

Our relational framework focuses attention on the process of religious and spiritual socialization. In that regard, it attends to the roles of socializing agents (e.g., mothers, fathers, extended family members, peers) in the transmission and maintenance of religious and spiritual values within and across generations. Equally important, the framework is concerned with the mechanisms by which religious and spiritual socialization occur.

In addition, this relational framework highlights the affective, cognitive, and behavioral correlates of religious and spiritual experience. We insist that religion and spirituality both stimulate and operate through a range of affect, cognition, and behaviors. As such, we are concerned with the links between religion, spirituality, and such experiences as guilt, anxiety, altruism, hope, happiness, forgiveness, trust, love, the search for relational commitment, the search for personal significance, the construction of a sense of community, and involvement in acts that promote social justice. The significance of these affective, cognitive, and behavioral states for the relationships of African American people is examined. Finally, we are interested in relational outcomes. These outcomes include but are not limited to relationship quality, relational commitment, and relationship selection (e.g., partner and friendship choice).

An important caveat is needed here. In this paper we take a deliberately positive bent toward religion. Certainly, history provides us with ample evidence of the ways in which religion has been misused by European Americans to legitimize oppression, domination and other negative practices. In addition, religion has been misused by African Americans to promote patriarchal and class domination within the African American community (Baer, 1993; Higginbotham, 1993; Ozorak, 1996). However, despite these misuses of religion, we insist that the principles of religions are focused on promoting positive interactions between individuals. There is abundant anecdotal as well as empirical evidence of the ways in which religion and spirituality have been used to...
promote positive life outcomes. Given our interest in normative development, we elect to focus our attention on these more positive functions of religion and spirituality.

THE FUNCTIONS OF RELIGION IN EVERYDAY LIFE

“Religiosity” and “spirituality” are distinct but confluent domains of human life. The similarities between religion and spirituality have inspired active debate about the meanings of these terms, and about the extent to which they name the same or different experiences. To date there is no scholarly consensus on their meanings, and no agreement about the strategies that would allow us to effectively assess their respective roles in everyday life (Mattis, 2000; Zinnbauer et al., 1997).

In this paper, we define “religion” as a shared system of beliefs, mythology, and rituals associated with a god or gods. “Religiosity,” by extension, is defined as an individual’s degree of adherence to the beliefs, doctrines and practices of a religion. Following from the definitions offered by Jagers and Smith (1996) and Mattis (2000), we use the term “spirituality” to refer to “an acknowledgement of a non-material force that permeates all affairs, human and non-human.” Using these definitions as points of departure, we argue that religion is one, but by no means the only, practical manifestation of spiritual life. We note that within the secular realm of African American culture there are folk beliefs and traditions that suggest that spiritual forces play an active role in the world of the living. Such a secular spiritual orientation can exist apart from religious beliefs and practices.

Many psychologists have dismissed religion and spirituality as inadequate strategies for defending the psyche from anxiety, fear and existential angst (see, e.g., Freud, 1961). Recently scholars in psychology have challenged this narrow and reductionist vision of religion and spirituality (see Pargament & Park, 1995). Despite these recent challenges, psychology’s appreciation of the functions of religion and spirituality continues to lag behind that of other disciplines. With a few notable exceptions (e.g., Shweder, Much, Mahapatra, & Park, 1997), psychologists have failed to integrate scholarship from other disciplines (e.g., theology and anthropology) into our understanding of the meanings and functions of religious and spiritual experience. This failure has seriously hampered efforts to illuminate the complex functions of religion and spirituality in everyday experience.

In an effort to develop a meaningful and complex picture of the functions of religion and spirituality in the lives of African-American men and women, our present analysis integrates some early work in social science. Houf (1945) outlined several functions of religion. He asserted that religion assures individuals of superhuman help; helps to negotiate periods of crisis; portrays the nature and problem of evil; offers a path to salvation; integrates personality by providing opportunities to understand the meaning of life, and to gain mastery over self; shapes individual and group life; and supports sound moral values. Geertz (1973) adds that religion also provides individuals with a shared world view that they can come to experience as persuasive and meaningful.

Work conducted in Black theology over the past three decades further extends and challenges our understandings of the functions of religion. Many African American theologians have argued that African American theology has been shaped by the social and political contexts within which it emerged (Cone, 1986; Grant, 1989). African American religiosity, Cone argues, is thematically and existentially concerned...
with questions of oppression, and with the quest for liberation, love, hope, and justice. Although some have wisely cautioned against accepting essentialist and simplistic visions of African American identity and African American religious life (Anderson, 1995), the arguments proffered by liberation theologians warrant attention.

In addition to their thematic concerns with liberation, love, hope, and justice, African American religions have developed particularized visions of both the relationship between humans and God/Allah and the mission of believers (Cone, 1986; Grant, 1989; Lincoln, 1997; Long, 1997). In African American Christian and Muslim traditions, God, Christ, and Allah are seen as champions of the oppressed, and as symbols of victory over oppression. By appropriating the trickster figure popular in African and African American folk culture, and by envisioning God and Christ as tricksters and usurpers, religious African Americans remind themselves and each other of the prospect of “making a way out of no way” (Long, 1997). Calling upon this trickster sensibility, African Americans have used their religious and spiritual convictions to subvert White, racist, and patriarchal hegemony; construct subjectively meaningful personal, racial, and gender identities; reify their humanity; agitate for social justice; and maintain a sense of community (Long, 1997; McKay, 1989). Further, African American religiosity and worship traditions emphasize both a profound sense of intimacy with the divine, and a horizontal extension of that intimacy into the human community (Carter, 1976; Costen, 1993; McKay, 1989). The importance of relationship and intimacy in African American religiosity is evident in penetrating examinations of traditional African American liturgical styles, styles of communal worship, prayer, and call-and-response musical traditions (Carter, 1976; Costen, 1993). However, psychologists largely have failed to situate African American religiosity and spirituality in an explicitly relational framework. As such, we have missed the opportunity to examine the ways in which religion and spirituality help to structure African Americans relationships with God, each other, European Americans, and with others in society.

Individual-Level Factors That Promote Relationships

Much of the research on the functions of religion and spirituality has focused on their roles in “self”-centered pursuits. In addition, much of this work has focused on the role of religion and spirituality in the lives of adults. Despite these limitations we endeavor here to take a life-span approach in our review of research on the individual-level functions of religion and spirituality.

Early theorists in psychology, including G. Stanley Hall and Erik Erikson, identified religion as a central force in childhood and adolescence, and argued that religious conflicts, and efforts to resolve those conflicts, are key to adolescent identity development (Youniss, 1992; Wulff, 1991). However, empirical research in psychology generally has ignored the powerful role of religion and spirituality in child and adolescent development. Those researchers who have examined the role of religion and spirituality in the lives of young people have found that, among adolescents, religion and spirituality promote personal well-being and mitigate against negative behaviors and outcomes. Religiosity is negatively related to substance abuse, early sexual involvement, delinquent behavior, suicidality, and risky health behaviors among adolescents (for reviews, see Donahue & Benson, 1995; Wallace & Williams, 1997).

These findings are consistent with the findings of research conducted with African American youth. Empirical research suggests that internalized religious and spiritual values may be crucial to the prevention of antisocial behaviors and the promotion of
positive social attitudes and behaviors among these youth. In their work with a sample of sixth-grade, urban-residing African American youth, Jagers and Mock (1993) found that a spiritual orientation was associated with fewer reported acts of delinquency, and with an increased focus on such prosocial values as cooperation, empathy, and justice. Stevenson (1997) and Stevenson, Herrero-Taylor, and Cameron (in press) have found that African American adolescent males who hear, and presumably internalize, messages about religion and spirituality tend to engage in greater levels of anger control and fewer acts of overt aggression than their counterparts. These findings suggest that religion and spirituality play roles in adolescents’ efforts to achieve emotional and behavioral self-regulation, particularly in times of interpersonal conflict. Taken together, the work of Jagers and Stevenson and their colleagues suggests that beyond their roles in mitigating antisocial responses, religion and spirituality play crucial roles in promoting prosocial attitudes and behaviors among African American youth.

Research conducted with predominately White participants has shown that religion plays a role in the promotion of individual physical (Dull & Skokan, 1995), and emotional health (Ventis, 1995). Religion and spirituality also have been found to promote personal well-being and to mediate negative outcomes for African American adults. For example, Blaine and Crocker (1995) report religious salience to be positively associated with psychological well-being among African American college students. Importantly, it appears that this relationship may be partially mediated by respondents’ belief in the life-enhancing meaning of God and self-affirming religious affiliations. Religiosity also has been found to be negatively associated with symptoms of psychological distress among African American women (Handal, Black-Lopez, & Moergen, 1989). It appears that religion may affect well-being by providing concrete strategies for coping with distress and adversity (Knox, 1985; McAdoo, 1995; Neighbors, Jackson, Bowman, & Gurin, 1983), and by providing real and/or perceived emotional and moral support (Maton, 1989; McAdoo, 1995).

In addition to their role in coping, religion and spirituality have been theorized to play a part in the development of prosocial attitudes and behaviors among adults. However, empirical research on the link between religiosity, kindness, and prosocial orientation among European American adults has yielded mixed results (Batson & Ventis, 1982). The inconsistencies in the findings of these studies owe, in part, to the range of ways in which researchers define and measure religiosity. It also is noteworthy that these studies typically have relied on European American samples, a fact that inspires serious questions about the extent to which their findings are generalizable to African Americans. However, in one of the few studies of kindness and prosocial orientation of African American adults, interviewers involved in the data collection phase of the National Survey on Black Americans were asked to assess the congeniality of respondents. Ellison found that highly religious African American men and women, and those who engaged in frequent private devotional activities (e.g., prayer), tended to be perceived by interviewers as more open and cooperative, less suspicious, and more congenial than less religious individuals (Ellison, 1992). Likewise, individuals who reported that religion and spirituality influenced their daily lives and their personal behaviors were rated as friendlier and less hostile than their counterparts. The characteristics associated with these more religious African American people are qualities that are promotive of positive interpersonal relationships.

Psychologists have failed to attend closely to the affective and cognitive correlates of religiosity and spirituality. Generally, it has been assumed that religion and spirituality serve to reduce “negative” and/or uncomfortable affect (e.g., fear and anxiety)
and to achieve “freedom from worry and guilt” (Freud, 1961; Houf, 1945; Ventis, 1995). Indeed, empirical research on coping confirms that religion and spirituality mitigate fear, anxiety, frustration, depression, and hopelessness (Lupfer, Tolliver, & Jackson, 1996; Pargament, 1997). However, this affect-modulation approach to religious and spiritual life ignores the reality that although religion and spirituality may serve to mitigate uncomfortable affect in some situations, they increase those affective states under other conditions. Further, although increased feelings of fear, guilt, and worry have been treated as negative effects of religious and spiritual life, it must be appreciated that these and other affective states can and do prompt individuals to move away from self-absorption, and to adapt prosocial attitudes and behaviors. For example, research has shown that guilt is an important ingredient in young children’s moral development (Kochanska, 1991). Guilt is associated with mutually beneficial intentions, willingness to make reparations, and to engage in nonhostile, constructive discourse (Tangey, Wagner, Hill-Barlow, Marscall & Gramzow, 1996). Recent research highlights important roles for a gamut of other affective correlates. For example, Jagers (1997) has focused on empathy as an important correlate of religious and spiritual life. Further, in a qualitative study of the functions of religion and spirituality in the everyday lives of African American women, Mattis (2001b) found that religion and spirituality inspired a range of affect including happiness, love, hope, peace, calm, faith, pride, shame, humility, guilt, optimism, strength, courage, confidence, trust, and forgiveness.

The cognitive and behavioral correlates of religiosity and spirituality also deserve empirical attention. For example, attention must be paid to the role of religion and spirituality in the personal search for meaning and significance (Burris, Jackson, Tarpley & Smith, 1996; Ellison, 1983; Pargament, 1997). Religious and spiritual experiences are characterized, in part, by efforts to grapple with the sacred, and to extend that sense of sacredness into human relationships (Pargament, 1997). However, empirical research has not examined the link between religion, spirituality, sacredness, and the development of African American people’s interpersonal relationships. Mattis (2001b) notes that critical self-reflection, personal growth, self-definition, and reflections of life purpose, destiny, social responsibility, justice, and the search for significance are also crucial areas for future research on the cognitive implications of religion and spirituality. The behavioral correlates of religion and spirituality include such prosocial behaviors as altruism, caring, honesty, modulation of affect, respect, self-sacrifice, and achievement. Connections between religion and spirituality and prosocial attitudes, emotions, and behaviors among African American children and adults remain to be systematically examined.

Although much of the existing research in the psychology of religion has used the individual as the unit of interest, it must be appreciated that the positive psychological and social outcomes achieved by individuals emerge out of their relationship with a Higher Power (e.g., God), or other humans. Religion and spirituality both shape and are shaped by the interactions of individuals with others. As such, the dynamic interplay between religion, spirituality, affect, cognition, behavior, and relational life deserves empirical attention.

**FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS**

Family provides the primary context for the cultivation of religious and spiritual life. It is in the family that children first learn religious values. It is also in the context of family relationships that children have their first opportunities to observe and practice
the relational values that we believe are inherent in religion and spirituality. The importance of the link between family and religious life is also evident in the language used by African American believers. For example, the African American community thrives on such aphorisms as “the family that prays together stays together.” Further, African Americans frequently refer to importance of having a “church family.” Despite the obvious importance of religion and spirituality to African American families, the available empirical research on the role of religion and spirituality in African American family life has been conceptually and/or methodologically limited. As such, within psychology we know virtually nothing about the ways in which religion and spirituality function to sustain the integrity of African American family life. We also know virtually nothing about the process by which religious and spiritual values are cultivated and/or maintained within African American families. Although little is known about the substantive functions of religion and spirituality in everyday family life, we review a cross-section of the available research in order to develop a snapshot of the roles of religion and spirituality in African American family functioning.

Using data on a national probability sample of African Americans, Taylor and Chatters (1991) found that married African American people tend to report greater levels of involvement in organizational and private devotional activities than unmarried individuals. Married men and women are also more likely to report that religion is important to them and to identify themselves as more religious than their unmarried counterparts. Scanzoni (1971) found that for African Americans the church and religion had a number of family-relevant functions. The church and religion reinforce parents' moral values, give meaning to marriage and family, reinforce values related to the role obligations of spouses, and outline criteria regarding mate selection; and the church provides a venue in which individuals can meet potential life-partners.

More recent empirical research has examined the link between religious involvement and family outcomes. For example, Brody, Stoneman, Flor, and McCrary (1994) found that parental involvement in formal, organizational religious activity was predictive of positive family outcomes, including positive parent–youth relationships. Maternal religiosity was associated with lower levels of inconsistent parenting, lower levels of marital conflict, better quality of marital interaction, and higher levels of support to their spouses regarding child rearing and care giving. Paternal religiosity was related to positive youth outcomes. However, this relationship was mediated by men's relationships with their spouses. Within African American families religion also serves as a cultural resource that mitigates against male provider role-strain (Bowman, 1990). That is, highly religious families tend to be more understanding and more supportive of men who are unemployed or underemployed. In sum, religion plays a role in maintaining positive relationships within nuclear families.

Religion also plays an important role in the lives of unmarried women, including unmarried mothers. In a qualitative study, McAdoo (1995) asked a sample of single African American mothers to specify the role of religion in family life. These women reported that religion provided emotional support, moral support, fostered family unity, helped by just being there, and provided answers to prayers. Although McAdoo and others have explored the role of religion in nontraditional (e.g., non-nuclear families), scholars generally have not taken into account that African American definitions of family extend beyond sanguinal lines of kinship. As such, the extent to which these functions of religion and spirituality hold for other caregivers (e.g., grandparents, godparents, and fictive kin) within African American families has not been systematically explored.
Since many African Americans employ relatively fluid definitions of family we would be remiss if we failed to consider the African-American Christian church’s role in creating proxies for family relationships. The oppressive social and political conditions faced by African Americans have radically altered both African American family structure and the traditions and patterns of social obligation that guided African American family life (Gilkes, 1997). African American religious institutions have responded to this assault by deliberately replicating family structure, kinship obligations, and authority. Within the African American Christian tradition, this replication has been achieved, in part, through the elevation of older women to the role of church and community mothers (Brown, 1994; Gilkes, 1997).

“Church mothers” serve crucial functional as well as symbolic roles within African American religious and secular communities. Church mothers extend their influence into institutional life as well as into the personal lives of individuals in the church and secular communities. These women also serve as repositories of church and community tradition, dispense advice to men, women, and children, and proffer values that are intended to maintain family, institutional, and community cohesion. Finally, they serve as representatives of traditional systems of authority, wisdom, and respect within the community and “church family.” Gilkes (1997, p. 369) argues that “the actuarial realities of Black life are such that elderly Black women provide the continuity necessary to promote unity in the face of ever-changing historical conditions.” In short, church mothers may serve not only as symbolic heads of churches, and of families within those churches, but they play crucial roles in maintaining family and communal integrity. Brown (1994) asserts that the roles played by women in the church allow them to avoid competing with male leadership, and thus help men to attain elevated status in broader society. Men, on the other hand, support women’s prestige in the home and church. Brown believes this to be consistent with African-derived male–female complimentary relations.

Through their outreach programs churches play both direct and indirect roles in African American family life. Billingsley and Caldwell (1991) found that 51% of the churches involved in their national survey of churches have ongoing family outreach programs, and 31% provide services to children and youth. These churches provide financial assistance, food, shelter, clothing, medical care, child care, counseling, and other forms of instrumental support to families (Billingsley, 1992; Billingsley & Caldwell, 1991; Caldwell, Chatters, Billingsley, & Taylor, 1995). It is clear that churches both replicate key aspects of African American family structure and take on roles that directly and indirectly influence the well-being of families.

No discussion of the role of religion and spirituality in family life would be complete without an exploration of religion and spiritual socialization. Given the lack of empirical attention to spiritual socialization, we confine our discussion largely to religious socialization. Jagers has found that preadolescent youth who perceive their families to be spiritual, and those who attend church, tend to score higher on measures of spiritual orientation than children from less spiritual families. It appears that mothers play a particularly crucial role in the religious socialization of children. For example, Taylor and Chatters (1991) have found maternal religious affiliation to be a uniquely important predictor of the religious affiliation of African American adults. No systematic attention has been given to the role of fathers, siblings or extended “family” members (e.g., grandparents and godparents) in the religious and spiritual development of African American children. However, Mattis (1997) has found that socializing agents outside of the family (e.g., pastors, teachers, and church-involved
adults) play crucial roles in the early religious and spiritual development of African Americans. Taken together these findings clearly suggest that religious and spiritual socialization happens in a broad relational context. However, research is silent about the process through which children and youth come to embrace religious and spiritual values, and/or patterns of religious affiliation. Research is also silent about the ways in which religious socialization proceeds across the various stages of development.

As we attend to the religious and spiritual socialization of African Americans, we must consider putative gender differences in religiosity and spirituality. Gender differences in religious involvement are ubiquitous in empirical research (Taylor & Chatters, 1991). Mattis (1997) has identified gender differences in the early religious socialization of African American college students. African-American women are more likely than men to have participated in religious services and activities early in life. The age of onset of these gender differences, and the reasons for such early differences in formal religious involvement, have yet to be explored. However, it is possible that, as their children move into adolescence, African American parents, families, and communities may be particularly insistent that girls and young women be involved in the church. It is equally plausible that churches provide activities that are more appealing to and more fulfilling for young women than for young men.

It is reasonable to raise questions about the long-term implications of such differences in early religious involvement. It might be speculated that these uneven patterns of involvement contribute to gender differences in religious salience and commitment in adulthood. The ubiquity of empirical findings that African American women score higher than their male counterparts on such conventional measures of religion and spirituality as religious salience, commitment, and involvement can be seen to support this notion (see Caldwell et al., 1995; Taylor & Chatters, 1991). However, Mattis (1997) found that, despite differences in early religious involvement, African American men and women did not differ in their reports of the importance of religion in their early lives, nor did they differ in reports of the importance of religion in their current lives.

While the process of religious and spiritual socialization remains unclear, these forms of socialization have clear significance for positive psychological development. Youth who perceive their families to be communal, spiritual, and affective tend to be more empathic, engage in greater levels of perspective-taking, and participate in fewer acts of aggression than their counterparts (Jagers, 1997). It is possible that parents who are religiously and/or spiritually oriented may focus particular attention on teaching their children the qualities associated with good character. These parents may also focus on teaching their children how to read and respond effectively to internal and external affective and social cues. As such, these children may be particularly effective at affective self-monitoring and peer selection. Further, parents who are religious, or who are involved in church-related activities, and those who involve their children in such activities, may avail themselves of social support networks composed of people who share and perhaps reinforce crucial values, beliefs, and commitments. These relationships may provide the contexts, the tools, and the opportunities needed to actualize and reinforce religiously and spiritually consistent values and behaviors.

COMMUNITY AND SOCIETAL-LEVEL RELATIONAL FUNCTIONS

Sociologists traditionally have asserted that the principal functions of religion are to organize people into cohesive social groups and to maintain the order necessary to
preserve group life (Durkheim, 1915; Geertz, 1989). Consistent with this approach is the notion that religion and spirituality create community by generating a cohesive, persuasive, and unifying worldview. Here Geertz (1973) is worth citing at length: “In religious belief and practice a group’s ethos is rendered intellectually reasonable by being shown to represent a way of life ideally adapted to the state of affairs the world-view describes, while the world-view is rendered emotionally convincing by being presented as an image of an actual state of affairs peculiarly well-arranged to accommodate such a way of life” (pp. 89–90). In short, religion creates a sense of unity by cognitively and affectively validating individual, group, and cultural beliefs about the nature of the religious as well as secular worlds.

Although this perspective seems cogent, its tenets have not been systematically examined in empirical research. A number of individuals have theorized the retention of Africanisms in African American cultural and spiritual world views (Jules-Rosette, 1980), and others have argued that spirituality remains a core domain of African American cultural life (Jagers & Mock, 1993). These theories have received some empirical support; however, the enculturative and acculturative processes by which these worldviews might be transmitted within the African American community remain unclear. Further, little is known about the mechanisms by which such worldviews might come to be experienced as affectively or cognitively persuasive.

The value of religion and spirituality extends beyond their role(s) in the transmission of persuasive, community-cohering worldviews. Anecdotal and limited empirical evidence suggests that religion and spirituality also help to shape people’s ideas about who comprises their community. As children mature, they gain an expanded understanding of the meaning of intimacy and come to define community in increasingly abstract and global ways. They extend their sense of intimacy to other adults, peers, acquaintances, and to strangers within the proximal and global community with whom they may never have direct contact. Many African Americans come to experience God, Satan, ancestors (i.e., deceased relatives), and other spirits (e.g., religious saints) as a part of the extended community (Nelson, 1997). These nonmaterial spirits are believed to be actively involved in the day-to-day, lived experience of individuals (Nelson, 1997). That is, they are seen as having protective as well as destructive intentions and powers, and are believed to share knowledge with those who are living.

Religion and spirituality have been associated with the cultivation and maintenance of a “sense of community” (see Sarason, 1974 for a discussion of sense of community). Jagers (1997) found a strong positive correlation between spiritual orientation and communal orientation in samples of fifth-, sixth-, and seventh-grade African American students, and among college-age African Americans (Jagers & Smith, 1996). These findings suggest that spirituality is associated with a sense of connectedness to others including extended family, neighbors, and peers. This real or perceived connection to others, particularly to church-involved others, has been shown to enhance the well-being of adolescents (Maton & Wells, 1995).

Within the African American community religious institutions use religious and spiritual values to promote this sense of connectedness, and to shape individuals’ understanding of their moral obligation to the community (and to society at large). For African American believers, participation in socially responsible actions historically has been an important marker of authentic religious commitment. In addition, African American churches historically have acted on their own sense of moral obligation by providing for the social, educational, medical, and economic needs of communities (Billingsley & Caldwell, 1991; Dodson & Townsend-Gilkes, 1986; Moore, 1991).
In fact, Chaves and Higgins (1992) found that African American churches tend to be more involved in social service and social justice activities than their White counterparts.

“Church work” (i.e., visiting the sick and shut-in, feeding the poor and/or elderly) traditionally has provided African Americans with crucial opportunities to understand and experience the realities of interdependence and to engage in activities that promote community well-being (Ward, 1995). Individuals involved in “church work” are encouraged to identify with biblical models of unselfishness and care. In that vein, they are impelled to consider the plight of the disadvantaged and dispossessed, to think critically about the uneven distribution of social and material resources, and to play an active role in the fight for social justice. Ward asserts that children who do not participate in such prosocial activities, and who exist in social contexts that value independence over interdependence, and personal well-being over social responsibility, are at increased risk for engaging in aggressive and otherwise antisocial behaviors.

Private devotional activities (e.g., prayer) may also play a part in the cultivation of a sense of community. Among African Americans intercessory prayers—prayers offered on behalf of others—play particularly important roles in achieving and maintaining a sense of community. However, those familiar with African American religious life are aware that, through prayer, individuals frequently ask for God’s intercession into family affairs, friendships, relationships with co-workers and acquaintances, and all aspects of community life. Asking for and/or offering intercessory prayer is an act of intimacy and relational commitment. Such prayers are considered important in securing community and individual well-being. Intercessory prayers have been shown to have health promotive effects for the subjects of such prayers (McCullough, 1995). However, to date, research has not adequately explored the role of prayer, including intercessory prayer, in such relational ends as the cultivation of trust and commitment, or in perceived support.

The role of the religion in African American community empowerment and social action must be considered here. Maton and Pargament (1987) identify several pathways by which religion can influence communities and society at large. These pathways include conservation of the social order, social service, social conversion, social avoidance, social sanctuary, and deliberate outreach, prevention, and promotion efforts. Maton and Pargament asserted that religious institutions and religious individuals generally have been seen as socially conservative. These institutions and individuals, they argued, tend to resist social change and tend to work to preserve the status quo. Scholars following in this tradition have accused African American religious institutions and religious leaders of encouraging avoidance and escapism rather than activism among African Americans (Frazier, 1962; Myrdal, 1944). However, a more careful analysis of empirical as well as archival data reveals a more complex picture.

A range of political and religious ideologies have always existed and operated within African American religious and secular communities. As such, African American political history has been a synthesis of acquiescence and radicalism. Through radical rereadings of biblical text and biblical history, African American religious leaders have inspired the community to reject and subvert oppressive social, political, and economic conditions (Cone, 1986; McKay, 1989). In addition, the tenets of religion have been used to distinguish between the nominal “Christianity” practiced by slaveholders and oppressors, and the “true Christianity” practiced by those who genuinely internalize the substantive values professed by the church, and represented in the life of Christ. This strategy is clearly evident in a critique offered by Frederick Douglass (1985) in an address delivered in 1845:
What I have said respecting and against religion, I mean strictly to apply to the slave-holding religion of this land, and with no possible reference to Christianity proper? We have men-stealers for ministers, women-whippers for missionaries, and cradle-plunderers for church members. The man who wields the blood-clotted cowskin during the week fills the pulpit on Sunday, and claims to be a minister of the meek and lowly Jesus.

They attend with Pharisaical strictness to the outward form of religion, and at the same time neglect the weightier matters of the law, judgement, mercy and faith. (pp. 104–106)

Douglass' critique anticipates Allport's distinction between extrinsic (e.g., public) and intrinsic (e.g., internal) religious orientation. However, it also uses religion both to highlight the immorality of race, class and gender hegemony, and to problematize America's professed identity as a free and Christian nation.

Religious leaders, cognizant of their moral responsibilities, have often used moral suasion to advance peaceful struggles for liberation (Clayton, 1995). However, among African Americans religion also has been used to inspire militant revolutionary action. In his exploration of the link between antebellum religion and insurgency, Harding (1997) notes that enslaved men and women employed religious symbols and texts to inspire armed resistance. Calling on the iconography of Old Testament religion, these men and women imagined themselves as New Israelites who were living in exile in a strange land where they were subject to pervasive injustice and brutal oppression. These New Israelites lived with the conviction that they were soldiers, and that their God would ultimately grant them victory in their (literal) wars for justice and equality.

Religious African Americans hold a complex set of beliefs about the relationship between religion and rebellion. Religious faith was not, and is not, seen as necessarily inconsistent with the rejection of unjust laws, or with the use of armed struggle (Wilmore, 1986). Although violence generally is eschewed by religious African Americans, violent resistance often is seen as justifiable when used in the service of righteousness, justice, and liberation. This notion is underscored by liberation theologian James Cone. In his 1986 essay, “Violence and Vengeance,” Cone notes: “The critical issue for the Christians is not violence or non-violence but rather whose side we are on in the struggle for freedom. I firmly believe the gospel demands that we take sides with the victims and not with the oppressors. There is no third way, no neutral position for the Christian” (p. 74). Here, Cone underscores the point that the relationship between God, Christians, and humans is a relationship that carries real obligations and accountability. Christians have an obligation to acknowledge and fight against injustice. From this perspective, social action and resistance are envisioned as divine imperatives.

Religion and churches also play roles in less militant forms of African American political empowerment. Although, early empirical research suggested that religiosity impedes political participation among African Americans (see Marx, 1967), more recent evidence complicates those early findings. This more recent body of work suggests that in order to understand the link between religion, church experience and African American political participation scholars must first distinguish between the myriad kinds of African American churches. African American churches espouse a broad range of messages. Some churches are adamant in their insistence that justice is to be found in Heaven rather than here on earth. Other churches espouse deliberately
liberationist messages. There is ample empirical evidence that men and women who attend churches that stress liberationist themes and/or the importance of civic responsibility, are more likely to engage in activities that contribute to community empowerment (Calhoun-Brown, 1996; Reese & Brown, 1995). Calhoun-Brown refers to such churches as “political churches.” Individuals in political churches are more likely to vote, attend rallies, participate in boycotts, contact public officials, and engage in other political activities.

Although some would assert that it is primarily the church’s moral arguments that sway congregations to act, Calhoun-Brown (1996) and Harris (1994) advance a resource mobilization approach to the church’s role in social action, see Mattis (2001a). African American churches that mobilize tangible resources (e.g., money to support political candidates and activities), as well as psychological resources (e.g., political consciousness and motivation), tend to produce politically active members. Although men and women in political churches often report that they do not necessarily trust the government, they are more likely to believe in the utility of political action, and more likely to believe that political officials are concerned about what they think (Calhoun-Brown, 1996). African American men and women who attend these kinds of churches are more likely to have politicized identities (Calhoun-Brown). They have a strong sense of racial identification (Calhoun-Brown; Reese & Brown, 1995; Wilcox & Gomez, 1990), are more sensitive to power imbalances between African Americans and Whites, and tend to assign blame for the low status of African Americans to systemic forces (e.g., government and institutional forces) rather than to individual factors (Reese & Brown, 1995). Political churches provide mechanisms through which individuals may demonstrate their communal commitments, acquire knowledge, develop skills, and gain a sense of efficacy with regard to their efforts. Taken together, these studies point to a pathway by which religion and political churches may affect the development of what Zimmerman (1995) describes as “empowered outcomes.” Liberationist churches appear to affect political participation, in part, by promoting a sense of community among African Americans, and by facilitating the intrapersonal, interactional, and behavioral components of psychological empowerment.

Although many argue that African American churches are declining in their significance, examinations of the political behavior of African Americans clearly demonstrate that religion or African American churches continue to serve as the center of social justice or political movements in the African American community (Wilmore, 1986). African American religious leaders continue to use the pulpit to educate and inform African Americans about social, political, and economic issues affecting their lives. These churches continue to play central roles in mobilizing voters and in providing tangible support for candidates. These findings provide a cogent testament of the inseparability of religion, activism, and political participation for African American people.

We would be remiss if we did not pay some attention to methodological concerns. Most empirical studies of religious and spiritual experience have relied upon cross-sectional data and on small convenience samples. The National Survey on Black Americans and the Monitoring the Future data sets are notable exceptions. Although survey research can and does provide important information on religious attitudes and behaviors, they, like all other research methods, are limited. Survey techniques, if augmented with rigorous interview, observational, and ethnographic data collection and data analysis techniques, can significantly advance the study of African American religious and spiritual life. Further, there is a dire need for longitudinal studies of
religious and spiritual development. Multimethod and longitudinal strategies will be useful to the extent that they permit us to examine the process by which religion and spirituality shape multiple dimensions of relational life over the developmental span.

SUMMARY AND IMPLICATIONS

We begin our summary with an important question: Why has psychology done such a poor job in studying the role of religion and spirituality in the lives of African Americans? This question is crucial because it provides us with an opportunity to think clearly about psychology’s treatment of African American people and its treatment of religious and spiritual life. The question also allows us to examine the ways in which the field must reposition itself if it is to do an effective job of examining African American life. The answer to our question requires that we attend to four important points.

First, in its efforts to establish itself as a “legitimate” science, psychology has reified the tendency to associate science with logic, and religion and spirituality with irrationality. The rise of logical positivism and psychology’s narrow pursuit of empiricism have led many scholars to conclude that religion and spirituality are neither appropriate nor important fodder for scientific study (see West, 1993, for a discussion). Second, empirical research demonstrates that psychologists do not tend to be particularly religious people, and in many cases tend to be antagonistic toward religion (see Wulff, 1991). As such many psychologists neither understand nor value the profound ways in which religion and spirituality shape the lives of those millions of Americans who do define themselves as religious and/or spiritual. Third, psychology has become increasingly and almost exclusively concerned with the study of human pathology. Normative human development receives relatively little attention in contemporary psychology research, and psychology is particularly silent about the normative development of African Americans. As a consequence, the constructs that are central to religion in general, and to African American religious life specifically (e.g., forgiveness, liberation, hope, love), have little currency in psychology. Finally, the social sciences—and American society as a whole—historically have seen African American people in highly essentialized and grossly simplistic ways. There is very little appreciation that the African American community comprises people of myriad cultures, ideologies, attitudes, and experiences. These various factors have collectively contributed to an ambivalent and simplistic approach to the study of African American religiosity and spirituality.

The reemergence of scholarly attention to religion and spirituality represents an exciting and important shift in psychology. This reemergence occurs at a time when crucial questions are being raised about the complex roles of culture, class, and other social positionings in human experience, and when efforts are being made to both explicate and ameliorate the effects of mainstream hegemonic dominance over the content and direction of scholarship. This represents, then, a particularly exhilarating time in which to rigorously study religious and spiritual life, particularly African American religious and spiritual life. Given this unique opportunity, we must be careful to avoid the pitfalls of previous efforts to study African American religiosity and spirituality. In particular, we must not define religiosity solely in terms of patterns of involvement in formal and informal religious activities. We also must be careful not to reduce the study of religion and spirituality to examinations of individual quests for comfort.
and meaning, personal piety, and/or private mysticism. Finally, we must take care to avoid simplistic ideas about the identity, beliefs, and values of African American believers.

The relational framework articulated in this paper highlights two overarching areas of concern. First, it emphasizes the importance of identifying the role of religion and spirituality in relationships within and across multiple domains of human ecology (e.g., individual, family, community, and society). The framework focuses attention on the agents (e.g., family members, peers) involved in the transmission and maintenance of religious values within and across generations. The framework also accentuates the need to identify the mechanisms by which this transmission occurs, and the extent to which the roles and influence of socializing agents may change at various points in the developmental span. Equally important, it attends to the role of religion and spirituality in the quest for social justice.

Second, this framework accentuates the need for attention to the affective, cognitive, and behavioral correlates of religious and spiritual experience. Research on religion and spirituality has attended to only a circumscribed range of affective, cognitive, and behavioral variables. Absent from empirical discourse on the religious and spiritual lives of African Americans is an examination of the broad range of emotions, cognitions, and behaviors that are associated with religiosity and spirituality. This framework will permit us to explore the ways in which the various correlates of religion and spirituality affect such outcomes as relational quality, commitment, and resilience.

This relational framework has implications for programs of intervention and prevention. Implicit in many preventive and interventive efforts is the notion that religious values can be used to transform the behavior of individuals (e.g., gang members) whose actions endanger the well-being of their families and/or community. However, little is known about the process by which religious and spiritual values are transmitted and internalized, or the specific process by which religious and spiritual values can be used to transform behavior. In addition, little is known about the role of religion and spirituality at various stages in the developmental span. It is reasonable to believe that, at different points in development, key socializing agents and different beliefs may lose or gain influence. Prevention and intervention programs that adapt a relational focus must consider the ways in which religious and spiritual values are reinforced, advanced, and/or challenged by relationships between family members, siblings, peers, and significant others at different points in the developmental process. Only when we understand the use of religion and spirituality within normal social relationships and within normal development can we effectively strategize about their uses for preventing or intervening in antisocial behaviors, and/or for promoting prosocial attitudes and actions. Because this framework is broadly concerned with the role of religion and spirituality in relationships, it promises to have a powerful role in advancing our knowledge of the ways in which churches and religious individuals may serve as resources for addressing key social issues (e.g., interpersonal violence, antisocial behavior, and the maintenance of family integrity).

We must be attentive to a bias in research on the religious and spiritual lives of African Americans. Existing research focuses largely on the religious and spiritual experiences of African American Christians. As such, we know little about the religious and spiritual lives of African Americans who are Muslim or Buddhist or belong to other faith communities. By attending to other religious traditions we will be able to document the religious and spiritual heterogeneity that exists in the African American community. Equally important, we will be poised to examine the ways in which various
religious and spiritual traditions, beliefs, and values influence relationships across the various cultures that comprise the African American community.

At present, African American churches (and church-involved individuals) are being asked to play increasingly expansive roles in resolving social problems that threaten the well-being of the African American community. The demands being placed on churches, clergy, and church involved individuals often exceed the knowledge and skill base of these individuals. Psychologists have a base of knowledge (e.g., about stress and trauma) and skills (e.g., counseling and psychotherapeutic skills) that could be of great use to churches. Likewise, churches and religious individuals have a vast body of knowledge about the cultivation of morality, the promotion of prosocial behaviors, and effective strategies for creating and sustaining community relationships. The absence of a framework that synthesizes these two bodies of knowledge unnecessarily limits psychology’s effectiveness in examining the lives and experiences of African American believers, and the ability of religious institutions and religious individuals to meet the needs of the community. Both outcomes are unacceptable.

REFERENCES


