Assessing African American Spirituality With Spiritual Ecomaps

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Abstract

While there is increasing awareness that spirituality is a central dimension of human existence, there are few assessment instruments that operationalize spiritual strengths in a clinically useful manner. Further, instruments tailored specifically for African Americans, the population for whom spirituality may be most salient, have been almost completely lacking in the literature. Correspondingly, this paper develops a diagrammatic assessment instrument, spiritual ecomaps, for assessing African American spirituality. After delineating the theoretical components of a spiritual ecomap, practical suggestions are given for the instrument's use, including a number of possible interventions that flow from the assessment process. A case study is provided to familiarize the reader with the instrument. The paper concludes by offering suggestions for using the instrument for other populations in a culturally sensitive manner.

SPIRITUALITY IS AN IMPORTANT DIMENSION OF existence for many people and, consequently, social workers should take steps to incorporate this dimension into their practice with clients. According to Gallup data compiled by Bart (1998), some 81% of the public would like to have their spiritual beliefs and values integrated into the counseling process. Responding to consumer demand, a growing body of research, and a heightened interest in utilizing strengths, an increasing number of social workers have called for the reintegration of spirituality into the therapeutic dialogue (Bullis, 1996; Carroll, 1998; Cornett, 1992; Jacobs, 1997; Poole, 1998; Rey, 1997; Sermabeikian, 1994). Cross-sectional research has confirmed widespread interest in addressing consumers' spirituality (Bullis, 1996; Derezotes, 1995; Furman & Chandy, 1994; Sheridan, Bullis, Adcock, Berlin, & Miller, 1992; Sheridan, Wilmer, & Atcheson, 1994; Sheridan & Amato-von Hemert, 1999). For instance, Derezotes (1995, p. 5) found that 80% of respondent social workers expressed a desire to "learn more about spirituality."

Yet, these same surveys also indicate that social workers have received little training in the area of spirituality. Sheridan and Amato-von Hemert (1999) reported that 66% of students, 82% of faculty and 88% of current practitioners were "never" or "rarely" exposed to content on religion/spirituality in their graduate programs. The paucity of training in spirituality may be especially acute in the area of assessment (Bullis, 1996; Sherwood, 1998), which is an underdeveloped area in social work generally (Mattaini & Kirk, 1991).

The lack of instruction may be most pronounced in terms of assessing African American spirituality; paradoxically, the population for whom spirituality may be most salient (Gallup & Castelli, 1989). Further, the extant research indicates social workers' metaphysical beliefs and associated practices differ substantially from those of African Americans (Gallup & Castelli, 1989; Sheridan & Amato-von Hemert, 1999), suggesting an increased level of unfamiliarity with the spirituality of this population.

Accordingly, this paper addresses the gap in the literature by developing an assessment tool specifically for African Americans. After defining spirituality and religion, the research on African American spirituality is reviewed. A spiritual ecomap, specifically tailored for African American spirituality, is then delineated, along with suggestions for assessment and intervention. A case study is depicted which illustrates how the diagrammatic assessment instrument might be used in a

clinical setting. Finally, suggestions are offered for using the instrument with other populations.

Definitions

Spirituality and religion are commonly understood to be distinct but overlapping constructs (Carroll, 1998; Pellebon & Anderson, 1999). In this paper, spirituality is defined as a relationship with God (or perceived transcendence) which fosters a sense of meaning, purpose, and mission in life. In turn, this relationship produces fruit, such as altruism, love, forgiveness, etc., which has a discernible effect upon one's relationship to self, nature, others, and God (Carroll, 1998; Sermabeikian, 1994; Spero, 1990). Religion flows from spirituality and expresses the internal subjective reality in corporately held forms, rituals, beliefs, and practices (Canda, 1997; Carroll, 1998). As alluded to above, it is possible to dichotomize these two phenomena (i.e., an individual who is spiritual but not religious), but for many consumers, the two are a holistic unity (Joanides, 1997; Schiele, 2000). This is particularly the case for African Americans who tend to express their spirituality through high levels of religious participation (Chatters, Taylor, & Lincoln, 1999).

Review of African American Spirituality

While spirituality plays an important role for many populations around the globe, its salience may be most pronounced among African Americans. When respondents in 23 nations were asked to rank the importance of God in their lives on a 10-point scale, American Blacks recorded the highest score of any group: 9.04 (Gallup & Castelli, 1989). Regardless of the measure, Black Americans exhibit higher levels of religious participation than White Americans (Taylor, Chatters, Jayakody, & Levin, 1996). According to one study, approximately 70% of African Americans attend church or a place of worship at least two or three times a month (Chatters & Taylor, 1994).

In aggregate, African Americans tend to be highly orthodox Christians (Ellison, 1992; Gallup & Castelli, 1989; Smith, 1996). Although a number are Muslims, secular adherents, and liberal Protestants, the majority are Evangelical Christians (Richards & Bergin, 1997). Approximately 18.5 million African Americans, 7% of the general population, are Evangelicals (Richards & Bergin, 1997). Evangelicalism is a largely Protestant, transdenominational movement that emphasizes the following three points: (a) salvation only through existential, personal trust in Christ's finished atoning work, (b) a spiritually transformed life marked by moral conduct and personal devotion such as scripture reading and missions, and (c) the Bible as authoritative and reliable (Marsden, 1987). In terms of their religious affiliation, the majority of African Americans are

Baptists (Chatters et al., 1999), although Pentecostal denominations appear to be experiencing the fastest growth, especially among those who are poor and live in urban areas (McRoberts, 1999).

The Black Christian worldview stands in contrast to the dominant secular worldview flowing from the European enlightenment which tends to divorce the material and spiritual and privilege the former over the latter by compartmentalizing the spiritual exclusively within the realm of personal meaning (Armstrong, 2000). In contrast, African cultures have traditionally held that there is no distinction between the material and the spiritual (Mbiti, 1993; Schiele, 2000). The spiritual and the material coexist simultaneously. God is traditionally viewed as the creator and sustainer of the material world and is closely intertwined in the lives of humans (Mbiti, 1970; Parrinder, 1993).

These traditional views have fostered a spirituality that accents the affective, relational dimension of Christianity. While doctrinal issues are important, the focus tends to be placed upon the experiential aspect of faith (Martin & Martin, 1995; Schiele, 2000; Smith, 1996). Response to God's truth is lived out in joyous worship that is animated by hope for the future and serving human needs (Martin & Martin, 1995; Smith, 1996).

This Evangelical faith has been a significant source of strength to many African Americans. Various measures of spirituality/religion have been associated with a wide variety of salutary characteristics among African Americans, including civic engagement (Smidt, 1999), coping among the elderly (Johnson, 1995), empowerment (Calhoun-Brown, 1998), female leadership (Robinson, 1996), manhood development (Watts, 1993), recovery from addiction (Turner, O' Dell & Weaver, 1999), and resiliency among children (Haight, 1998), single mothers (Brodsky, 1999), and the poor (Nelson, 1997). Similarly, spirituality has been associated with increased levels of interpersonal friendliness (Ellison, 1992), life satisfaction (Levin, Chatters, & Taylor, 1995), physical and emotional health (Stolley & Koenig, 1997), positive self-perceptions (Ellison, 1993), quality of family life (Ellison, 1997), self-esteem (Maton, Teti, Corns, & Vieira-Baker, 1996), and the ability to handle the stress associated with having a child with disabilities (Rogers-Dulan, 1998). Conversely, it has been associated with lower levels of at-risk behaviors (Benson & Donahue, 1989), alcohol abuse (Hatchett, 1999), drug use (Maton & Zimmerman, 1992), and suicide ideation (Stack & Wasserman, 1995).

The above research suggests that spirituality is a vital strength among many African Americans that can be operationalized in clinical settings to ameliorate problems. Yet, while interest in using consumers' strengths in clinical settings is increasing (Cowger, 1994; Hwang & Cowger, 1998), there are few assessment instruments which identify spiritual strengths (Bullis, 1996; Mattaini & Kirk, 1991; Sherwood, 1998). As Ronnau and Poertner (1993)

have noted, this is a significant problem, for without a method of finding consumers' strengths, they tend to remain unoperationalized.

Spiritual Ecomaps

Due to the relational nature of Black Evangelical spirituality (Frame & Williams, 1996; Marsden, 1987), spiritual ecomaps may be an ideal assessment tool. Spiritual ecomaps were developed by Hodge (2000) to assess consumers' existential relationships to various spiritual dimensions in their ecological environment. In other words, the relational strengths which are central to African American spiritual life are a primary feature operationalized by spiritual ecomaps.

Spiritual ecomaps were originally developed as a pen and paper depiction of the existential relationships between the family system and discrete spiritual systems (Hodge, 2000). The immediate family system is portrayed as a circle in the center of a piece of paper, and household family members are sketched, inside the circle, as squares (for males) and circles (for females) drawn or connected as in typical genograms. Interested readers are encouraged to obtain the original article for further information (Hodge, 2000). As will be further developed below, key spiritual systems are depicted as circles on the outskirts of the paper, with the names of the respective systems written inside in the circles, in a radius around the family circle.

At the heart of the spiritual ecomap are the relationships between the family system and the spiritual systems, represented by various types of sketched lines. Thicker lines represent stronger or more powerful relationships. A dashed line represents the most tenuous relationship, while a jagged line denotes a conflicted one. An arrow is drawn on the line to indicate the flow of energy, resources, or interest. Short, descriptive encapsulations, significant dates, or other creative depictions, can also be written alongside the lines to provide more depth about the relational dynamics. Lines can be drawn to the family system as a unit when the family shares a particular relationship in common, or more frequently, connections are drawn to individual family members depicting the various unique relationships between each family member and the various spiritual systems.

In marital and family settings, the original spiritual ecomap which places a family's entire existential functioning on a single map offers certain advantages, particularly among populations in which the nuclear, as opposed to extended, family is the common ideal. For example, having a marital couple cooperate in filling out a map together with the worker may foster certain therapeutic aims, such as building a sense of togetherness, mutual accomplishment, etc. Likewise, a mother and her children working as a team filling out a single map may also facilitate similar outcomes (Hodge, 2000).

Yet, while depicting the family system on a single map may be appropriate for European American families which tend to emphasize the nuclear family, it may be less useful among other populations, such as African Americans, where extended family systems may be the norm (Frame & Williams, 1996). Depicting the unique relationships of all extended family members on a single map can result in a cluttered map that tends to obscure vital information as multiple lines are drawn on the map. Accordingly, the authors of this paper suggest that, when working with African Americans, it may be more appropriate for each individual to complete a unique spiritual ecomap. Instead of an elaborate ordering of various circles and squares inside the family system circle, the name of the individual is simply written in a circle in the center of the paper.

This approach has the advantage of providing each individual with a "cleaner" map which focuses on their individual spirituality. While the original spiritual ecomap offers the advantage of comparing the spiritualities of all family members on a single map, this potentially useful comparison can still be achieved by setting two or more maps beside each other and simultaneously examining the maps. Practitioners are, however, encouraged to become familiar with both approaches and adopt the approach that is most congruent with the needs and desires of African American consumers.

Spiritual Systems

As mentioned above, the significant spiritual systems are drawn as circles and placed in a radius around the center circle which symbolizes the consumer. Ultimately, the consumer should decide what are the most pertinent spiritual systems or dimensions in their ecological environment. There are, however, a number of common spiritual dimensions that have received wide support in the literature as strengths that can be used to guide the assessment process while leaving space on the map for additional spiritual systems consumers may wish to add. Spiritual systems that can be typically assessed include God, rituals, faith community, and transpersonal encounters (Hodge, 2000). Accordingly, workers may wish to have some maps on hand with these systems in place.

For most African Americans, God is understood as a transcendent, yet imminent, Triune creator (Richards & Bergin, 1997). As implied above, an individual is understood to enter into an existential relationship with God through personal trust in Jesus Christ or "the Lord" and his death on the cross which acts to cancel the debt of humankind's turpitude (Bardill, 1997). With this act of personal repentance and trust, one begins a new spiritual life, aided by the power of the Holy Spirit or Holy Ghost or simply "the Spirit," the third member of the Godhead, who dwells in the believer. The relationship with God is widely regarded as a key strength, facilitating coping, defeating

loneliness, instilling a sense of personal worth and value, promoting a sense of mission and purpose, providing hope for the future, etc. (Ellison, 1993; Ellison & Levin, 1998; Pargament, 1997).

Rituals refer to codified spiritual practices. Common African American rituals include devotional reading, meditation, prayer, scripture study, singing hymns, worship, "practicing the presence" of God by focusing on God's presence and active involvement in daily affairs, etc. These spiritual practices may be performed individually, in isolation with God, or corporately with others present. Rituals have been widely associated with positive outcomes and can serve to alleviate isolation, ease anxiety and dread, establish a sense of being loved and appreciated, and promote a sense of security (Ellison & Levin, 1998; Frame & Williams, 1996; Jacobs, 1992; Morris & Robinson, 1996; Pargament, 1997; Worthington, Kurusu, McCullough, & Sandage, 1996).

Faith communities refer to various church and parachurch communities that individuals may associate with on a regular basis. Church services, fellowship groups, midweek Bible studies, youth groups, singles associations, etc., are common faith-based communities in which African Americans may be regular participants. The social support participation that such forums engender has been linked to a wide number of salutary characteristics, including coping ability, empowerment, lovability, realization of personal strengths, resiliency, self-confidence, and sense of belonging. (Ellison & George, 1994; Ellison & Levin, 1998; Kark et al., 1996; Haight, 1998; Maton & Salem, 1995; Morris & Robinson, 1996).

Transpersonal encounters refer to encounters with angels, demons and other spiritual visitations. Studies suggest that perceived encounters with such beings are often life-changing, and continue to inform one's actions indefinitely (Fitchett, 1993; Lindstrom, 1995; Morse & Perry, 1994). For instance, individuals may perceive that God allows them to experience the presence of a recently departed family member to assuage their grief (Lindstrom, 1995).

Other spiritual systems which may be profitably explored include people's relationship to their parents' spiritual tradition and the individual who holds a position of significant spiritual leadership in their lives, such as a pastor, spiritual mentor or elder. Such assessments may yield informative relational dynamics in which consistent patterns become apparent (Hodge, 2000). However, as mentioned above, the central point is to delineate on the spiritual ecomap any spiritual dimension which is perceived to be particularly meaningful in the eyes of the consumer, particularly those dimensions that are perceived to be strengths.

Additionally, in some cases where individuals' spirituality may be an especially significant element of their personal ontology, it may be appropriate to divide a particular spiritual dimension into more than one system. For example, for an individual who engages in a number of rituals for which the relational dynamics for each ritual varies considerably, a number of circles could be drawn on the map, and the corresponding relationships sketched. In other words, participation in devotional Bible readings may be perceived as a positive energy-inciting relationship while participation in prayer sessions may be perceived as a neutral relationship. Similarly, participation in one type of church or parachurch activity may foster a different relational dynamic than occurs in another, equally important activity. Separate systems for each activity could be sketched or activities might be grouped according to the type of relational dynamics each fosters.

Conversely, in instances when spirituality is less salient, traditional ecomap systems (e.g., extended family, recreation, work, school, etc.), may be added to the map (Hartman, 1995). Such an approach may also be used to provide a broader assessment which incorporates a wider range of environmental systems. Workers may wish to ask consumers what they perceive to be the most pertinent environmental systems that are currently operational in their lives.

Exhibiting Spiritual Sensitivity

It is critical that workers exhibit spiritual sensitivity when conducting a spiritual assessment. Lack of sensitivity to African Americans' spiritual beliefs and values may be a factor in explaining why Blacks with a mental health diagnosis are more likely to seek help for their problems from clergy than from mental health specialists (Husaini, Moore, & Cain, 1994). Practitioners must ensure that they affirm the spiritual autonomy of Black consumers, a task that may be difficult due to lack of training and a difference in spiritual worldviews (Sheridan & Amato-von Hemert, 1999).

As mentioned above, the spiritual worldview affirmed by Black Christians differs substantially from the enlightenment-based worldview that social workers commonly hold. Because of the different value systems engendered by each worldview, the potential for value conflicts exist. Lyles' (1992) quantitative work with Black pastors suggests that devout African Americans are concerned about the ability of practitioners, who were assumed to be nonreligious, to deliver spiritually sensitive services. The consensus among respondents was that a committed Black Christian client "would be at high risk for misunderstanding, inappropriate labeling and discounting of the religious belief system" (Lyles, 1992, p. 375).

Consequently, it is imperative that practitioners be cognizant of their own metaphysical value system, how their value system may differ from those affirmed by clients, and how their value system may affect their ability to work with clients in a manner that respects clients' spiritual autonomy. For example, workers that affirm egalitarian marriage relationships should carefully examine their ability to work with African American consumers who affirm complementary

marriage roles. Similarly, workers who hold antispanking views must not abrogate the autonomy of parents who believe in the effectiveness of spanking as a disciplinary measure. Likewise, practitioners who believe that sexuality should be expressed throughout the life cycle, independent of marriage, must respect consumers who affirm sexual expression within the context of heterosexual marriage. In short, practitioners must affirm consumers' spiritual value system and work within that value system to find solutions that respect the client's understanding of the world.

Another element of spiritual sensitivity is respecting the often fuzzy line between therapy and spiritual direction. While both therapy and spiritual direction can entail exploring the intersection between spirituality and problems, the emphasis is different. In therapy, the goal is to ameliorate consumers' problems, a process that may include attempting to marshal clients' strengths to address presenting obstacles. In spiritual direction, the spiritual director, a pastor or other individual with some level of spiritual expertise, seeks to enhance an individual's spiritual intimacy with God, a process that may include exploring how the individual's spirituality intersects life's problems. Workers must be careful to remain within their area of competency. While practitioners may at times be tempted to address issues related to spiritual direction, the emphasis should remain on using consumers' spiritual strengths to address problems (Hodge, 2001; O' Rourke, 1997).

Workers interested in addressing the spiritual realm on a regular basis should consider forming collaborations with African American clergy. Although such collaborations would seem to be comparatively rare (Weaver, Kline, Lucas, Larson, & Koenig, 1997), they can assist practitioners to remain focused upon the therapeutic enterprise. When workers encounter issues outside their area of competency that are better addressed from the vantage point of a spiritual director, it is appropriate to incorporate pastors and other spiritual specialists into the dialogue. With the consumer's consent, it may be helpful to arrange separate sessions in which the client addresses spiritual issues with his or her pastor.

Collaboration with clergy can also assist workers in their understanding of beliefs and practices that reflect healthy spirituality. For instance, while spanking has been shown to be an effective disciplinary measure (Larzelere, Sather, Schneider, Larson, & Pike, 1998), as with any other

practice, abuses can occur. Pastors can function as a resource by helping workers discern appropriate and inappropriate beliefs and practices within a given worldview.

Further, clergy are often willing to help workers better understand their spiritual worldview by recommending pertinent literature. Indeed, practitioners interested in working with spirituality on a regular basis should engage in a systematic reading program designed to familiarize themselves with the worldview of the clients they are likely to encounter. It is, however, critical that workers seek out information that reflects the norms of Black Christianity and the other traditions they encounter, rather than enlightenment based spiritual worldviews that reflect workers' own value system.

As an expression of spiritual sensitivity, steps should be taken to obtain consumers' consent before administering the spiritual ecomap. It is also important to monitor reactions (of both the consumer and practitioner) during the assessment to ensure autonomy is maintained. A brief explanation of the instrument's purpose is usually helpful in acclimating consumers to the spiritual ecomap. A collateral setting arrangement in which the worker and the consumer sit beside one another collectively filling out the map may help create a more egalitarian atmosphere.

Table 1 provides a list of questions which can be adapted for use with consumers. These items are designed to help facilitate exploration of the various spiritual systems noted above. The authors suggest that workers attempt to foster a relaxed, conversational atmosphere by extensive use of tentative question phrasing (e.g., "I'm interesting in knowing …"), along with minimal prompts (e.g., "And then what happened?"), and accent responses to move the conversation along, in conjunction with empathetic and paraphrasing responses (Hepworth & Larsen, 1993). The ultimate goal is to provide a nonjudgmental atmosphere in which consumers' spiritual strengths can be freely explored in a respectful manner that dignifies their worldview.

> The concrete depiction of what are often numerous accounts of divine activity, in addition to other systems of the spiritual ecomap, serve as a powerful visual reminder that consumers do not face their problems alone.

Interventions

A spiritual ecomap's primary value lies in its ability to present a large amount of relationally based information in a visually organized fashion. The resulting visual depiction can have a profound effect on consumers as they see previously intangible spiritual strengths depicted in a concrete fashion

Table 1. *Possible Questions for Exploring Spiritual Strengths*

God

How would you describe your relationship with God?

Are there particular strengths that flow from your relationship with God, in your personal life? Your family life? Your interpersonal relationships?

Are there times when you have felt deep intimacy (distance) with God? What fosters this sense of closeness (distance)?

How does your spirituality relate to life's trials (blessings)?

How does God feel about you?

How does God describe you?

Are there areas in which you wish to see more spiritual growth?

What does your faith say is the purpose of trials? How do you apply this to your life?

Have you received warnings or intuitive insights from God concerning life events?

Rituals

Are there particular spiritual rituals that are important to you, such as prayer, daily devotionals, or Scripture reading?

What spiritual practices facilitate coping with hardship, illness, trials? Are some spiritual practices more effective in coping with certain types of trials than others? Do certain spiritual practices help alleviate particular problems?

What spiritual practices help you celebrate God? His blessing to you? Your family?

Faith Community

What is your level of involvement in church and parachurch activities?

What types of activities/services are offered by your congregation? Denomination? Other faith-based organizations in your community?

How would you describe the emotional climate (i.e., cold, warm, conflicted, open, etc.) of your church? And other groups you belong to?

Are some activities or events more supportive than others?

Are there significant friends that you can turn to during times of need?

Does participation in certain activities help you cope with the problems you face?

Transpersonal Encounters

Did you ever feel that God intervened on your behalf? Perhaps through the use of angels or visions? Especially during difficult times?

Have you had encounters with transpersonal beings such as angels, demons, or evil spirits? How would you describe these encounters?

(Hartman, 1995). Consumers may become aware of unrealized spiritual strengths and/or resources that they were previously aware of in only a tangential sense. Highlighting these spiritual strengths is, in itself, an important intervention.

Consumers can become overwhelmed with problems and obstacles. In such situations, fragile self-perceptions are frequently damaged as consumers find themselves incapable of handling problems with existing strategies, often the point at which they encounter social workers. Instances of racism and disrespectful treatment can magnify problems and further compound negative self-perceptions.

As strengths perspective practitioners note, workers can assist consumers in ameliorating their problems by providing a positive reflection of their strengths (Saleebey, 1997b). By helping consumers focus on their strengths, workers help foster an altered, therapeutically beneficial construction of reality. The perceived size of problems diminishes and consumers begin to see themselves in a different light—as capable individuals who possess a number of personal and environmental strengths. In other words, delineating spiritual strengths in a concrete, visual manner on a spiritual ecomap can play a key role in fostering altered self-perceptions as clients see the array of strengths they have available to them. The metaphors thorough which African Americans perceive their life story can be significantly transformed (Frame & Williams, 1996).

Self-perceptions may be further enhanced by techniques drawn from self-psychology (Elson, 1986). Entering into a holding environment with positive self-objects can foster increased ego cohesion, integration, and mastery (Elson, 1986). In Black Evangelical theology, God is an ideal self-object, a loving, caring, personally involving transcendent being whose children are the "apple of his eye" (Morris & Robinson, 1996).

Suggested questions such as "How does God feel about you? How does God describe you?" and other variations can be used to elicit consumers' understanding regarding how God envisions his children. Workers can address problems by encouraging consumers to enter into a nurturing, holding environment with God as the ideal self-object through increased prayer, meditation, and other devotional activities that focus on expressions of God's love, admiration, etc. Indeed, research suggests that such devotional-based interventions may be particularly efficacious in ameliorating the effects of racism on self-esteem by fostering positive perceptions of self-worth among African Americans (Ellison, 1993; Maton et al., 1996).

Highlighting the perceived role of God as a potent partner in facing problems can play an important role in facilitating coping skills. Creating awareness that one does not face problems alone, but faces them in a relational partnership with a caring, omnipotent God has been demonstrated to increase coping abilities in numerous contexts (Pargament, 1997), including facing such intractable problems as lifelong exposure to racism (Johnson, 1995).

Questions designed to profile this relational partnership, such as, "Did you ever feel that God intervened on your behalf? Perhaps through the use of angels or visions? Especially during difficult times?" serve to heighten awareness and consequently coping abilities. As implied above, in addition

to the use of arrows to denote the flow of energy or resources, brief encapsulations, symbols and word pictures can be written on the map to note instances of God's perceived intervention. The concrete depiction of what are often numerous accounts of divine activity, in addition to other systems of the spiritual ecomap, serve as a powerful visual reminder that consumers do not face their problems alone.

In addition to God's perceived partnership, spiritual ecomaps chronicle other environmental resources that may be activated on the behalf of consumers. The Black church has long played an instrumental role in the African American community (Billingsley, 1999; Calhoun-Brown, 1998; Haight, 1998; Morris & Robinson, 1996; Nelson, 1997). In addition to the social support such congregations provide, churches usually offer a number of programs, services, and special events that can often be accessed by consumers to address obstacles they face (Morris & Robinson, 1996; Thomas, Quinn, Billingsley, & Caldwell, 1994). Encouraging consumers to access the array of programs and services revealed during assessment can be an effective intervention (Sullivan, 1992). As implied in the previous section, networking with area pastors can assist workers in helping consumers make these connections. Additionally, delineating available resources and possible partnerships on the map also helps reinforce the perception that consumers do not faces their problems in isolation.

In those situations in which no suitable activities or services are provided by the faith communities the consumer is affiliated with, workers may suggest that consumers explore the idea with church leaders of serving others by initiating a program themselves. Within the parameters discussed in the preceding section, assisting consumers who desire to grow spiritually in achieving their goal can also be an effective intervention (Kisthardt, 1997). In nurturing an area of personal interest to consumers, workers facilitate personal growth and the development of new competencies, which are often naturally leveraged to address problems in other areas (Sullivan, 1997). Serving others through meeting spiritual and physical needs has a long history in the Black church and is widely held to foster spiritual growth (Frame & Williams, 1996; Morris & Robinson, 1996).

Cognitive reframing, which shifts the focus away from the present obstacle to the consumer's perceived spiritual reality, can also be effective (Frame & Williams, 1996; Propst, 1996; Saleebey, 1997a). In other words, replacing detrimental cognitions with salutary cognitions and imagery drawn from the consumer's theological belief system can be an effective intervention. Black Evangelical theology has developed substantial resources for coping with hardship (Brodsky, 1999; Nelson, 1997). Questions such as "What does your faith say is the purpose of trials?" and "How do you apply this to your life?" help generate awareness of cognitively based spiritual resources consumers may have overlooked.

Interventions drawn from solution-focused therapy such as the miracle question, scaling questions, and identifying exceptions to the problem can also be used productively (Kok & Leskela, 1996; Kuehl, 1995). For example, modified exception questions such as "Do certain spiritual practices help alleviate particular problems?" may lead to suggesting certain behavioral changes which in turn ameliorate consumers' problems.

When possible, workers may wish to outline significant cognitive and behavioral insights on the spiritual ecomap. Similarly, as touched on above, personally significant spiritual symbols and metaphors may also be graphically depicted on the map. A completed spiritual ecomap should contain a wealth of diagrammatic information on consumers' spiritual reality, which in turn highlights the spiritual strengths consumers possess.

A Case Study

Figures 1 and 2 provide a brief illustration of how a spiritual ecomap might be used to map spiritual strengths. The figures depict an African American couple who both affirm a Christian spiritual orientation. They are struggling with frequent marital conflict and have two children: a 7-year-old daughter whom they had together, and a 15-year-old son whom the wife had from a previous relationship.

As implied by the thick line in Figure 1, God is a very real presence in the daily life of the wife. She grew up in a Christian home and spent most of her childhood with a spiritual grandmother who encouraged her to rely on God. Although now married, she believes God helped sustain her as she raised a son for 6 years as a single mother and dealt with the father who was addicted to drugs. God continues to be actively and personally involved in her life, speaking to her through dreams and visions. As the direction of the arrow indicates, God is a significant personal strength in her life.

Another significant spiritual strength in the wife's life is various rituals. She spends a lot of time in prayer for her family, friends, fellow church members, coworkers, and the world in general. She finds comfort in listening to gospel music and sets time aside every morning and most weekends to read her Bible and sing along with her favorite songs. She feels this devotional time is especially helpful during trials because it reminds her to keep her focus on God and wait for deliverance.

Participation in church activities is also a personal strength for the wife. She is very active in a local nondenominational church fellowship. She is a regular attendee of the worship services, Bible studies, and prayer meetings held by the fellowship.

Other spiritual strengths are her network of spiritual friends and transpersonal beings, although as illustrated by the thickness of the line, these strengths are perceived to be
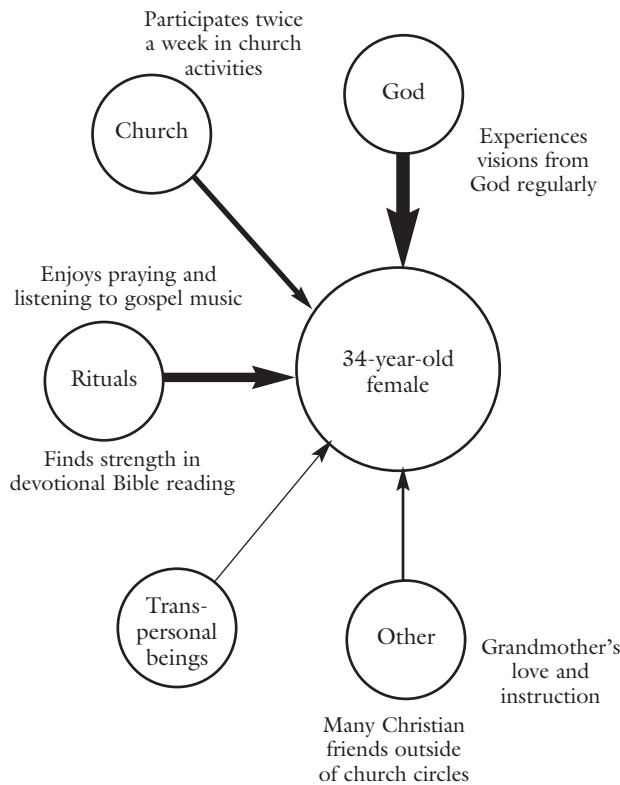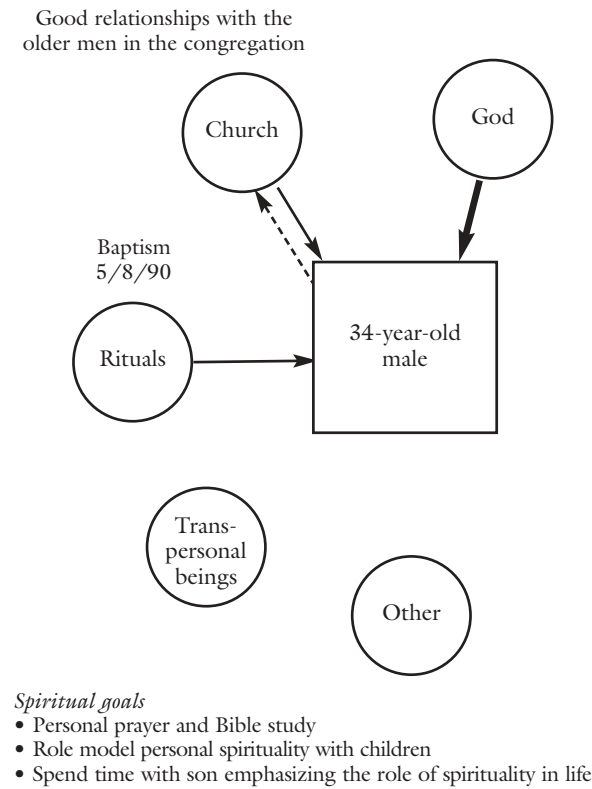
Figure 1. *Wife's Ecomap*

Figure 2. *Husband's Ecomap*

Spiritual goals
• Personal prayer and Bible study
• Role model personal spirituality with children
• Spend time with son emphasizing the role of spirituality in life

somewhat less salient. Her closest friends are Christians, most of whom worship at the local church, but she also has strong relationships with family members and old high school friends, many of whom share her religious convictions. Although she does not recall any direct encounters with transpersonal beings, she believes that guardian angels protect her as she drives on the highway or faces dangerous situations.

The husband also professes a close relationship with God, but as the thickness of the line indicates, believes it could be stronger. As a child and at the request of his mother, he attended church, but while in college did not try to sustain a spiritual commitment. After graduation, as he started dating his wife, he began to reexamine his spiritual situation, and decided to be baptized—beginning a lifelong commitment to God. He acknowledges the power and sovereignty of God, but relies little on him for daily activities, preferring to handle most situations alone.

The husband also is a regular attendee at the local nondenominational fellowship and enjoys worship services, corporate Bible studies, and prayer meetings. He has a number of close friends among members of the congregation. He also has good relationships with a number of older men in the fellowship and has received good counsel from them on a number of issues.

He is, however, somewhat discouraged by conflicts among church members and problems within the church leadership. As the dashed line and arrow indicate, these conflicts sometimes make his experience at their congregation less satisfying. Consequently, while overall his involvement in the activities of his faith community is a source of strength, there are many times when participation serves to drain his energy levels.

In contrast with his wife, other areas are not particularly important spiritual strengths. While his baptism remains an important touchstone in his life, there are no other rituals of current significance. Similarly, while he believes in the reality of angels and evil spirits, he has not encountered them in his personal life.

The husband indicated a desire to grow spiritually in a number of areas. In addition to wanting a stronger prayer life and more knowledge about the Bible, he indicated a strong interest in ministering to his children by, for example, role modeling a deeper level of personal spirituality. Particular concern was expressed about his adopted son. The husband wants to teach him spiritual coping strategies to help him avoid the trouble he sees other Black teens facing.

Possible Interventions

Even in this relatively abbreviated case, the spiritual ecomap demonstrates the importance that spirituality can play in the life of a family. Allowing couples to visualize one anther's often subjective spiritual strengths in a concrete manner highlights at least three points with important ramifications for workers.

First, the physical depiction demonstrates the spiritually related differences that can occur between spouses. Even though the above couple worships together, participates in extra-church activities together, and has similar beliefs, they have differing sets of personally meaningful practices and systems of support. Ecomaps can allow couples to gain fresh insights into their relational functioning in what may be an especially important area. Differences that were only intuitively sensed previously can be seen on an ecomap. The delineation process can aid couples in comprehending their differences in perceptions and help them better understand and solve their problems by giving them a better understanding of themselves and each other.

Second, the depiction helps the therapist understand the couple's spiritual orientation, the basis for their key relationships, and opens another dimension of communication about extant strengths that may be available to address problems. Third, as mentioned above, maps highlight the spiritual strengths and assets that may be used to address problem areas. Therapists can build upon these strengths to foster new perceptions of competency. For example, with the above couple, the practitioner might shift attention away from the conflicts the couple experiences toward the spiritual assets they share in common by focusing on feelings of shared purpose and mutual goals when participating in church activities.

To help the couple ameliorate conflict, practitioners might explore instances in which spiritual functions represent times in which exceptions to the problem of marital conflict occur. For example, less discord might be experienced after the couple has just participated in church services or prayed together. In such cases, workers may explore the possibility of increasing the amount of time spent in positive settings where conflict does not occur. If the couple's fellowship offers activities throughout the week, for example, the couple might explore the possibility of increasing their level of attendance.

Resources may also be available in their local fellowship that might be used to address the problem. For instance, the church may have a marriage enrichment seminar that incorporates conflict resolution principles or otherwise helps to support marriage relationships. If no formal programs exist, the worker could inquire about the possibility that a respected older church couple could mediate and offer insights from their own lives together in the form of a mentoring relationship.

Workers might explore the possibility of reframing the situation as an opportunity for spiritual growth. The dynamics that result in minor disagreements escalating into conflicts might be explored and individual trigger points, which foster escalation, identified. When these triggers are encountered, individuals can employ spiritual resources, such as turning to God for assistance, to deescalate the situation.

Spiritual strengths can also be incorporated in other ways. Perhaps a contract might be developed that incorporates the use of spiritual strengths. When a disagreement occurs, each person is given a chance to state his or her views, then the couple agrees to pray about the situation, seek counsel from the Bible or trusted members of the congregation. After a specified period of time, the couple reconvenes to reexplore the issue.

Developing new narratives, which are conflict free, can also help ameliorate conflict. For instance, if all members of the family endorse the idea of the husband spending more spiritually based time with his adopted son, ways to realize this spiritual goal might be explored. The husband might inquire about any father–son programs offered by the church. If none exists, he might consider approaching a few elders or men of a similar age to suggest starting one. This might provide a positive way to build relationships with other men and their families at the congregation while concurrently fulfilling his aspiration to teach and encourage his son in a spiritual manner. As mentioned above, competencies gained in one area are often leveraged to address other areas. New narratives emerge in which the family successfully achieves its goals and solves its problems.

Using the Spiritual Ecomaps With Other Populations

While the spiritual ecomap developed in this paper is specially tailored to African Americans, it can be adapted to many other populations. As implied above, the basic spiritual systems, God (or perceived transcendence), rituals, faith communities, and transpersonal encounters, have received wide empirical support as strengths across an extensive number of spiritual traditions. Similarly, many of the proposed interventions are equally applicable with various discrete spiritual traditions. For example, in the Buddhist spiritual tradition, what could be considered a modified mirroring intervention has been associated with increased coping and resiliency, self-esteem, and less impulsiveness (Emavardhana & Tori, 1997).

Accordingly, using spiritual ecomaps with other populations is essentially a matter of altering the questions and resulting interventions to reflect the spiritual and cultural sensitivities of the population in question. For instance, when exploring rituals with Hispanic Catholics, a worker might specifically explore sacramental rituals. Similarly, since Hindus may believe in multiple deities, workers should cast

questions in terms of a relationship with gods, rather than a single god as one would do when working with a Muslim. The essential point is to let the spiritual worldview of the consumer animate the key spiritual systems, as well as any other spiritual systems that may be significant in the client's understanding of reality.

Conclusion

No human endeavor, including assessment, is value-free. The areas that workers select for assessment send subtle messages to consumers regarding what domains workers deem critical to well-being. Neglecting to assess an area that many African Americans perceive to be important in overcoming the problems they encounter inadvertently implies that workers believe spirituality to be essentially irrelevant to the obstacles that Blacks confront. This paper provides workers with an instrument, spiritual ecomaps, that can help tap vital spiritual strengths that can be used to address problems.

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