

RELIGION, SPIRITUALITY AND THE FAMILY IN THE LIVES OF  
AFRICAN AMERICAN ELDERLY MEN

by

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This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Psychology in satisfaction of the dissertation requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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## Abstract

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The purpose of this study was to provide information about the ways in which African American elderly men raised in the South in Mississippi, during the height of Segregation, managed to survive and live successful lives. The study seeks to illustrate how these men incorporated religion, spirituality and their families as sources of strength and psychological buffers against the many adversarial circumstances that they faced.

Qualitative data were drawn from the interviews of eleven subjects, representative of stellar examples of success within their communities. The method of analysis was grounded theory developed by Glaser and Straus. Patterns that emerged from the data were sorted, categorized and identified as codes. An analysis of the codes revealed the following major findings regarding these men. For these men life in Mississippi was limited and difficult because of Segregation. As a result their options about how they would live their lives were gravely influenced and they were under threat of danger on a daily basis. The findings also suggest that these men used religious affiliation, which in

many instances is culturally inherent, as a means to cope with the psychological pressures as well as seeking support from their family, and community.

Despite the circumstances these men went through, there is much to learn from black males who do thrive. In my sample of now elderly black men, I suggest that these men were able to negotiate and withstand horrific trials, similar to the present day challenges being faced because of a belief in a higher power and deep faith in religion. The study seeks to highlight the ways that these men have used their belief in God to lead successful lives.

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### **Introduction**

My research seeks to highlight the ways in which Black men who were raised during a particular time in history, under the oppressive and government sanctioned tyranny of Jim Crow, still managed to survive, make meaning of their lives and demonstrate resilience. I used their narratives, which have been collected through in depth interviewing and supported by relevant literature, to generate a theoretical dialogue about the stressors that black males have faced and the impact of those stressors, their coping strategies, and the ways in which black males demonstrate resilience in the face of adversity. Religion defined as organized belief in God and Spirituality, defined as a belief in a higher power, has always been a staple of the African American community. The study seeks to highlight the ways that spirituality, religion and their families have buffered these men from these adversarial circumstances.

Unfortunately, there is a glaring omission in this body of literature on black males in general. Most of the literature simply highlights the many deficits and deficiencies that begin to seem inherent in the black male population, because there is so little focus on those that are successful in spite of difficult circumstances. The question becomes “What tools or strategies or even-policies might have made a positive impact?” They simply do not take into account the percentage of males that have negotiated and escaped those potential land mines. There is a paucity of research that highlights any tools that black males use to navigate through negative life circumstances. While black males have had and continue to face far greater explicit societal challenges there are those that manage to overcome many if not all, of these obstacles.

Presently, African American men are in a state of perilous crisis, according to the Urban League's State of Black America(Carnethon 2007). While it would seem that Black Americans are making great progress within our nation, yet, progress has been severely lacking regarding most black males. In more recent times, this country has also made history with the selection of its first Black male president. However, Black males, on the whole, continue to lag behind their counterparts in every major arena (Muwakkil 2006) and these disproportionate numbers of black males are underperforming for a variety of reasons. The current state of affairs is quite dismal, as one details the litany of challenges that are being faced by black males, (Muwakkil 2006). Scholars cite many reasons for this deterioration. Primary among them are inferior schools, absentee parents, racism and structural changes in the economy (Muwakkil 2006).

Early in development many black children are reared in poverty stricken households and presently almost two thirds grow up in a home without both parents. About 60% of Black mothers who give birth are unmarried compared with 20% of non-Hispanic white mothers who give birth. Roughly, 30% of Black households were maintained by a woman with no husband present, compared with 9% of non-Hispanic white households. (US Department of Health and Human Services 2004)

In many cities throughout the United States, less than half of all black males graduate from High School (in Chicago 35% and in New York City only 26% according to the Schott Foundation) Almost six in ten of those that drop out would have spent time in prison. Of the black males that do go to college only 22% of them finish college (US Department of Health and Human Services 2004).

This trend is not only apparent within the educational system but carries over to the overall psychological and physical well being of black males, who are more likely to succumb to illness, premature death and violence. (Carnethon 2007) We no longer live in a separatist nation and there seems to be wealth, economic stability and opportunity for all but the majority of black males do not seem to be reaping any of the benefits or advancements. One is left to speculate on the apparent downhill trend that is occurring and the gross impact that it's having on this population.

Yet despite these dire statistics there is much to learn from black males who do thrive. In my sample of now elderly black men, I suggest that these men were able to negotiate and withstand horrific life circumstances, similar to the present day challenges being faced because of a belief in a higher power and a deep faith in religion. The study seeks to highlight the ways that African American men have used their belief in God to lead successful lives.

### **Literature Review**

African American men are described as being born into a social environment that is rich with opportunity but ultimately can impose severe risk and danger for them. Although they have positive, rich and varied cultural experiences, Black men continue to experience a number of hardships in vast arenas of their lives. Historically, African American men have been particularly susceptible to the harmful effect of racism (Elligen & Utsey 1999) The black male in current society continues to be at risk for a variety of important socio-cultural and health issues, which negatively impact on his life, friends, family and community. Recent studies have gone as far as to classify the black man as an endangered species (White 1999) a term used to signify the severity of the social conditions and plight putting black males at risk.

#### ***Life Expectancy for African American Males***

The implications for the lifespan of black males, given their adverse conditions are great. The average life span for Black males is 7.4 years shorter compared with their white counterparts. (U S Department of Health and Human Services, 1990) Overwhelmingly, Blacks are more likely than whites to die as a result of homicide. Among minority youth, particularly African Americans, violence has struck with a unique force in recent years. Homicide has been the leading cause of death among young black men ages 15-24 for more than 10 years. (Vilshick 2001). In 2005, Blacks were disproportionately represented among homicide victims and offended at a rate six times higher than their white counterparts. (Vilshick 2001) According to the 2007 State of Black America report, black men under 25 years of age are 15 times more likely to die as a result of homicide than their white counterparts. (Carnethon 2007) The murder rate for

black males over 25 is nearly seven times that of white males. In addition to the lives lost through violence there are many challenges in the health arena to be contended with by black males.

### ***Health Care and Health Related Issues***

In the United States billions are spent on healthcare annually. In 2004, 55% of African Americans in comparison to 78% of non-Hispanic whites used employer-sponsored health insurance. Also in 2004, 24.6% of African American in comparison to 7.9% of whites relied on public health insurance . Lastly, as of 2006, 24.6% of African Americans in comparison to 6.9% were uninsured. (US Department of Labor 2006). In addition to inadequate healthcare, black males have higher incidences of developing chronic illnesses such as cancer, high blood pressure and heart failure. Most researchers tend to agree that the majority of cancers are related directly to environmental exposures. (Pearson 1994) Even under conditions of equal employment, social/epidemiologic research, where available, has attributed that higher exposure to certain pathogenic agents. There are a disproportionate number of blacks working in the mixing and compounding areas of rubber production plants, and those workers have elevated rates of stomach, lung, blood, bladder, and lymphatic cancer (Pearson 1994).

African American men have a 19% chance of being diagnosed with prostate cancer and a five percent chance of dying from prostate cancer. In 2004, African American men were almost twice as likely to have new cases of stomach cancer as non-Hispanic white men. African American men had lower five-year cancer survival rates for lung and pancreatic cancer compared to non-Hispanic white men

An estimated 60 million people in the United States have some form of elevated blood pressure. In 1980, Black males had one and one third the prevalence rate of White males (Harlan et al 1983) it has been suggested that Blacks, both male and female, are at a one-third greater risk of elevated blood pressure than are all Whites. High blood pressure leads to such health complications as kidney failure, stroke and heart disease. In 2004, African American men ages 20-29 were 10 times more likely to develop kidney failure due to high blood pressure than Caucasian men in the same age group and were 1.4 times as likely as non-Hispanic whites to have high blood pressure. Cardiovascular disease is twice as high among African American men (53.1 per 100,000) as among white men (26.3 per 100,000).

According to Rich (2000) indicators of psychological and emotional well-being are reflected in the incidences of substance abuse among the black male population. The use of marijuana among young African American males is increasing exponentially. Research also suggests that black men are at a greater risk for developing drinking problems and alcoholism.

### ***Employment and Incarceration Rates in African American Males***

Black Males are in a particularly difficult predicament regarding garnering employment status and wages. Evidence of racial differences in employment search behavior and access exists between black and white workers. Black and White workers will engage in employed job searches based on these differences. Since the ability to secure competitive earnings is based on educational achievements, black men are in a particularly precarious position.

In a study done by Wolpin (1992) findings suggested that blacks were more likely to receive job offers while both employed and unemployed and slightly more likely to be

laid off than whites. Also, whites were more likely to receive relatively higher wage offers. Blacks also received a lower return for their experience than did whites and faced a lower wage-offer distribution. These observed differences suggest that, on average, blacks had reduced chances of upward mobility relative to whites. The implication is that the structure of the job environment and the effect on that environment of turnover experience is different for the two races.

When one looks at employment rates, it is evident not only that Black men experience higher rates of unemployment but even when they are employed, their incomes are significantly less than their white counterparts (Pieterse & Carter 2007). According to the State of Black America Equality Index, African American men are more than twice as likely to be unemployed as white men. The economic status of blacks compared to whites increased slightly to 57% in 2007 from 56 percent in 2006. In terms of the annual median income black men earned less (34,443 versus 46,807) roughly a 35% difference. Unemployment was highest among black men at 9.5 percent compared to 4 percent for white men, a 5.5-point percentage gap. Among males under the age of 25 years, a higher percentage of whites between the ages of 20 to 24, (76.5%) are in the workforce compared to 68.8 % of blacks. However, even with increasing age and educational levels African Americans are less likely than whites to be employed.

Employment opportunities are extremely curtailed and severely limited by participation within the penal system. For black males residing in urban areas, the chances of being locked up during one's lifetime are greater than one in four. (Kaufman, 1998) Mauer (2003) reported that almost one in three young black men ages 20-29 were under some form of criminal justice supervision. Researchers have noted that African

Americans commit crimes at roughly three times the rates of whites nationwide but African Americans are locked up at roughly seven times the rate of whites (Bureau of Justice Statistics 1997) Moreover, half of all prison inmates are Black, a statistic that is significantly disproportionate to the percentage (6%) of Black males in the general population. Higher participation in the criminal justice system leads to a permanent criminal record, loss of employment viability and time with one's family. (Locke 1998)

Some researchers have argued that these alarming statistics reflect the impact of societal and structural racism and also represent a significant amount of stress given the oppositional forces working against blacks in this country. As evidenced by the disadvantaged state that black males are in there is inevitable psychological stress that often is experienced by black men.

Franklin (1997, 2007) posits that the internal strife experienced by black men leads to the "Invisibility Syndrome", the intra-psychic struggle for personal identity experienced by African American men as the individual confronts specific encounters with racism, particularly in cross-racial circumstances, and how these experiences serve to obscure genuine identity and promote inherent stress related to their management. According to Franklin, Black men tend to be assessed and interacted with on the basis of stereotypes and inaccurate assumptions, as opposed to their individual achievements or characteristics. In one clinical case example, a man of color with an upper class job and generous earnings will still have difficulty hailing a cab based on the negative stereotypes that all black men are dangerous. These incidences are also known as "micro-aggressions" defined as subtle acts or attitudes experienced as hostile, which fit a personal history and pattern of racial slights and disregard (Franklin 1997, Sue 2007)

Micro-aggressions can come in the form of verbal, non-verbal interactions. The resulting sense of degradation, lowered self-image and self-confidence which can potentially occur because of the psychic violence leveled by race-related micro-aggressions has a cumulative psychological impact across the developmental life span of African American men. These occurrences have similar implication for black men across the lifespan into adulthood and advanced aging.

### ***The Black Elderly***

Black Male elderly are facing similar challenges. The status of the black elderly has been described by many as “double jeopardy”, as associated with their now being aged as well as black. The black elderly in general have been faced with a host of negative attitudes towards old people. However, the black elderly also experience the economic and social difficulties associated with their status as members of a minority group, including poverty and illness. The lack of opportunities and resources for example (good jobs, housing and financial resources) at earlier periods in their lives is a source of many of the more problematic aspects of aging later in life. (Jackson, Taylor and Chatters 1993)

There is some controversy regarding the “double jeopardy” by some researchers who hail that it is not the additive effect of being black as a low status position and having poor resources that lead to negative outcomes in older age, it is the presence of systemic forces and poor opportunity structure circumstances that lead to negative outcome.

The purpose of studying black American elderly is to examine how various roles and statuses within the population impact upon life circumstances and situations of black Americans in old age. There was an attempt to look at the continuities and

discontinuities in status and roles across the life span. The status and roles that black Americans demonstrate in older age are for the most part continuous with the status and roles available to them at younger ages (Jackson 1993) Thus poor jobs and low income during post-adolescence and young adulthood will be reflected in poor job histories across the life span, which is reflected in lowered retirement opportunities and resources in old age. (Taylor and Chatters 1993)

Elderly blacks tend to work past the age for retirement. The Black elderly are sometimes called the “unretired-retired”. Elderly white men had higher income in 1992 than other population subgroups of the elderly. Nearly 40% of nonworking Blacks aged 55 and over can be categorized as ‘unretired-retired’ individuals who appear and behave as if retired but do not call themselves retired. Due to declining physical limitations of this group and the labor market and employment policies, this particular group gradually withdraws from the labor force.

Another factor influencing the Black Elder’s employment life cycle lies with their over-representation in the secondary labor market. (Jackson, Taylor and Chatters 1993) Secondary labor market occupations are characterized by low wages, lack of health and retirement benefits, and the need for the sheer physical strength and endurance. Unfortunately blacks aged 50-64 years old are twice as likely as whites to suffer a major physical disability, preventing them from working.

Black Elderly suffer from more illnesses and die earlier than their white counterparts. Blacks tend to spend less on health; see a doctor less often and receive less preventative care and are more dependent on self-diagnosis and self-treatment. They were more likely to have heart disease, strokes or diabetes and high blood pressure. They also

tend to feel more sustained un-happiness that makes them more prone to mental breakdowns (Jackson 1998).

For many reasons black elderly are more likely to put off being seen for medical attention and are less likely to have access to regular medical care. There are proportionately fewer doctors, clinic and hospitals in black neighborhoods.

Many Black elderly are not limited by the fact that they have health problems. In a study by the National Survey of Black Americans (NBSA) (Taylor, Mattis & Chatters 1999, Mcfloyd 2003), a sample of 2,107 respondents were asked to fill out a survey about their health and the majority of the respondents had a variety of medical ailments. However, since they were survivors of a myriad of experiences over their life span despite their medical ailments and functional inequalities a majority of the respondents rated their health as satisfactory. One third of the sample felt that their medical needs were not being met and at least 25% of the sample responded that their physical health bothered them a great deal and 11% believed that the health care system was a problem.

Many studies suggest that given all of these economic, medical and social conditions that the black elderly may be at a greater risk for diminished quality of life and lowered subjective well being (SWB). Studies regarding the relationship between income, educational status, and SWB among older Blacks offer equivocal findings. For example, among elderly sample, there was reported a positive effect for income on Subjective Well Being, whereas other researchers found no significant relationship between the two (Jackson, Chatters et al 1993) They also reported a positive relationship between education and SWB, in contrast to other studies that indicate no significant relationship. Finally, investigations of marital status differences in SWB among older blacks indicate

that people who are married tend to report higher levels of SWB than people who are not married (Erllich and Jackson 1993) However, elderly blacks who have experienced a greater number of chronic health conditions are more likely to express greater dissatisfaction with their health status. Elderly blacks that experienced a larger number of stressful life events tended to be dissatisfied with their health status and had lower levels of self-esteem and SWB. (Tran, Wright et al 1991) Education and income had direct effects on the SWB of older blacks; the findings suggest that elderly blacks with more education and income tended to have fewer chronic health problems and elevated levels of self-esteem. The women in the sample tended to experience more illness conditions than their male counterparts.

In a similar study, (Utsey, Payne & el 2002) examined the relationship among race related stress, quality of life indicators and life satisfaction among elderly African Americans. Their sample of 127 elderly men and women were given the Index of Race Related Stress, The Satisfaction with Life Scale and a 36-item Short Form Health Survey. The participants were largely women representing 78.5% of the sample and 26 were men representing 21.5% of the sample. The findings of this study indicate that because of the impact of institutional and collective racism, elderly African American men had significantly higher levels of race related stress than elderly African American women. Researchers were not surprised given that African American men have traditionally more adverse impact experiences with racism and oppression. The study's result also indicated that institutional racism independent of age, income and education was a significant predictor of the Mental Component Summary (MCS) for the African American elderly sampled. The MCS is a composite summary measure of one's vitality, social

functioning, emotional well-being and mental health. One plausible explanation offered by the researchers involved the fact that many of the elderly in the sample were originally from the southern part of the United States and have first hand experience of historic discriminatory and segregation policies of their generation.

### ***Black Male Elderly and Research***

Older Black males represent a minority within a minority, since research on the black aged tends to focus on black women or blacks in general and never on black men specifically. The role that black males play in their family has only received marginal attention. There has been more attention paid to their absence rather than as an active presence in the family. Many researchers recognize this blatant absence and wonder if this exists on a continuum regarding research done on the black elderly. In other words it would appear that black males continue to be an absent figure in gerontological research. The “young old” were classified as being between the ages of 60-69 years of age. Almost 11% of these elderly Black males were 80 years of age or older. Elderly Black males cannot be viewed as a monolithic group of individuals, since there is vast disparity in ages as well as experiences. Each cohort of black males in the United States has been exposed to different cultural practices and social and political conditions. Wilson (1978) makes a substantial claim that historically there have been three major stages that blacks have experienced historically. The first includes slavery and post-civil war. The second involves the industrial expansion in the last quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and continuing through World War II. The third stage consisted of the period following the end of World War II.

During the first two stages Blacks were denied access to economic, political and social resources. Subsequently, up until World War II black labor was restricted largely to agricultural work and domestic service. Technological advancements made in the agricultural world severely limited black employment, making farm labor antiquated. Blacks experienced particular economic hardships during the Great Depression.

Many in the younger cohorts of Black aged have benefited from the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Many in the younger cohorts have seen both social and economic advancements and the gains particularly greater in the younger-old cohort than in the old-old cohort, For those black men that have survived and been able to transition through many phases of life, there are two protective factors that are especially highlighted within the black community: religion and spirituality, and family.

### ***Religion and Spirituality in the Black Community***

Researchers make it known that religion has been an important fixture in the lives of Black Americans from the first days of slavery. The import of Religious and spiritual connections in the lives of African Americans can be traced back to the Pre Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade experiences within Africa. There were gods associated with the agrarian culture of West Africa, and these gods were linked with the various natural forces and events that occurred in nature. Quarles (1987) noted that West Africans had numerous lesser gods and deities who represented ancestors. Music and dance were also employed in the service of religion.

During the era of slavery in America there were all-slave churches with slaves serving as pastors. However, there were always white overseers in the midst to make certain that nothing else was going on beside worship. In fact during slavery religion had

been used as a way to inculcate in slaves the belief that it was God's will that all whites should rule and that slaves should be slaves.

The hymns and services in the churches that enslaved Africans attended could not address issues regarding social justice and the unfair system of slavery. Instead the services tended to focus on topics of the hereafter, like the beauty of heaven. Quarles (1987) argued that because of such confinement slaves did not have an outlet for their frustrations. Some of the spirituals served the purpose of having double meaning or codes. For example one spiritual "O Canaan, Sweet Canaan" the land of Canaan was a reference for the North, to which slaves yearned to escape and be free. The spirituals sung by the slaves did provide somewhat of a vehicle for protest, although in a disguised form. Spirituals were also used as a form of direction for slaves that were seeking to escape using the Underground Railroad.

The Church was important among free blacks in the North during the antebellum period. Most blacks in the North were members of all Negro congregations. Many all black churches formed because of the discrimination that free blacks experienced while trying to join other churches. Blacks in white churches were typically required to sit in designated pews and were asked to wait to take communion until all of the whites had finished.

Richard Allen established the first independent black church in 1794 in Philadelphia, after an incident in which he had been angered when he was asked to sit in the galley of another Episcopal church. The church was initially affiliated with the Methodist organization of the United States but as the number of Black Churches grew

the black Methodists severed their ties to the white establishment and established their own national organization.

These all-black churches that were established across denomination did not develop out of any difference with religious doctrine, but because of social and political reasons. Free blacks wanted to be in control of their own church and free from discrimination. The church existed in towns for political and social activities. Black churches served many purposes, when black children were banned from attending public schools; the church hall was used as a school. Black churches also served as political meeting places for abolitionists groups and were often stops on the Underground Railroad.

By the twentieth century the black church had evolved into a powerful institution. The church served as a center for community activity and social change. Billingsley (1992) noted that the black church is at the leading edge of the African American community's push to influence the future of its families. Billingsley posits several reasons for the importance of the Black Church; the most significant is "the fact that religious orientation is one of the greatest historic strengths of black families".

Billingsley et al (1992) have estimated that there are nearly 76,000 black churches in the United States, and with a membership of nearly 24 million members. Nearly half of these church members were affiliated with one of three major black Methodist denominations, the African Methodist Episcopal, the African Methodist Episcopal Zion, and the Christian Methodist Episcopal church. He emphasized the role of the Black Church as a preserver. Data on African American religious affiliations drawn from the American Religion Identity survey (2001) indicate that approximately 48% of African

Americans self-identify as Baptists, 8% identify as Christian, 8% identify as Catholic and approximately 23% of African Americans worship in other denominations. Also 11% of African Americans have no religious affiliation (Taylor & Chatters 2004)

Church members are equally concerned about religion as they are about matters of politics and society. The results of a secondary analysis of the data from the National Survey of Black Americans clearly indicates the value that Black American's place on religious faith. The survey found that at least 80% of adults surveyed from the National Survey of Black Americans consider themselves to be religious individuals. 80% of black adults surveyed felt that it is important to send one's children to church. 76% of the sample indicated that religion is very important in their lives currently. Within the same survey, 78% of the sample reported that they pray daily and 71% indicated that they attend church regularly, regularly meaning at least once a month (Johnson et al 2004).

There are several models of the black church and religious involvement that have been proposed to characterize the form and function of black religious expression. During the 1940's and 1950's there were social scientists who questioned the role of the black church within black culture, with two very specific questions: Why did religion play such a pivotal role in the lives of African Americans? Also how could the Negro church improve the social, economic and political conditions of blacks? (Evans 2007) Religion was an outstanding social value of the total cultural pattern of blacks in America. Religion was an explanation for the dearth of black opportunities in other phases of broader society. The emotional release offered by the black churches averted aggression against a white racist society into relatively safer channels. More recent work suggests that religion and religious institutions may also be associated with a heightened

sense of optimism and a decreased sense of pessimism among African Americans (McFloyd, Hill & Dodge 2005)

Noted scholars Lincoln and Mimaya (1990) refer to the black church as the “womb” of the community because it gave life to important social, economic and cultural institutions of African American life in the Nineteenth and Twentieth centuries. Lincoln and Mimaya’s (1990) critique of traditional models notes their tendency to view the Black church as a product of lower status black culture. Prominent in the view is that the black religious traditions have isolated black communities from broader society, promoted other worldly religious orientations and functioned to compensate for deprivation experienced within American society.

There are many theories surrounding the role of the church in the black aged population. Among those theories are the “Family Surrogate Theory”, and the “Deprivation-Compensation Theory” which explain the role of the church in the lives of the black aging population. Some believe view these theories of church involvement offer possible explanations of the role of the church.

The Family Surrogate theory of Glock and Stark (1965) suggested that groups of people that typically experience deprivation of family relationships, or are somehow psychologically deprived because they are not integrated into primary groups have higher levels of church involvement. These models do not provide a strength-based perspective for involvement in the church on behalf of people of color, women or the elderly.

The Deprivation-Compensation Theory (Glock and Stark 1965) is one theoretical framework that attempts to account for the levels of church involvement of black people, the aged and low status groups and persons by focusing on structural isolation or

deprivation. From this perspective some theorists argue that having marginal structural position and low-status, groups and persons are not only deprived of material wealth and access but also exposed to psychological alienation and /or separation from social relationships. According to these theorists the socially deprived escape to the comforts of the church as a formal organization and use religion as a means of compensation for that deprivation. Thus there are theorists who argue the relatively high degree of church involvement of blacks, women and the aged population, is compensatory behavior and attitudes caused by high levels of psychological deprivation and low levels of social integration. (Taylor et al 2005)

Lincoln and Mimaya (1990) propose a Dialectical Model of the Black Church, the principal elements of which include an appreciation for the 1) historical origins of the institutional structures that form Black religion, 2) a dynamic orientation emphasizing change and adaptation to both immediate circumstances and larger societal forces, and 3) a conceptualization of the Black church that reflects its position along a number of dimensions. It moves beyond the simplistic positive or negative assessments of personal observation and places black churches along a dynamic continuum allowing for change in response to changing social conditions

The Dialectical Model provides a comprehensive treatment of the black church incorporating notions of the dynamic interaction with historical forces, ongoing change and adaptation in response to contemporaneous factors and inherent multidimensional character. The perspective provides a useful conceptual framework for understanding the many features of the Black churches and religious involvement. This framework also serves to look at participation in church from a strengths based perspective. Durkeim

(1956) suggested that involvement in organizations like the church enhances the probability of being involved in other facets of society. Thus the more one is involved the more one gets involved. Durkheim's work brings to bear the possibility that the church rather than being a source of isolation, functions to integrate and attach individuals to society.

### ***Religion Among Elderly Blacks***

The continuing personal significance of religion and religious involvement is particularly salient among the older black population. Several researchers have argued that religion assumes a more prominent place within the aging population due to the onset of chronic health problems and the realization of one's own mortality (Hunter & Maurice, 1953) Religion plays a pivotal role in the lives of blacks in general and the black elderly in particular. In general older adults express a higher degree of religiosity than their younger counterparts (Greeley, 1989). Research from surveys indicate that almost half of elderly adults attend church on a weekly basis, one out of four reads the bible daily, and one out of five is involved in a prayer group, and a comparable percentage of older adults participate in a Bible study group. However, aged black Americans especially older Black adults participate in religious activities more frequently than aged whites and are more likely to attend religious services, pray regularly, listen to religious programs, and read their bible (Hirsh, Kent, and Silverman 1972)

Research gathered on religious involvement, based on the National Survey of Black Americans (NSBA) data reinforces the perception of a high degree of religious commitment among elderly black adults (Chatters & Taylor 2004) The survey concluded that elderly black adults, in comparison to their younger counterparts have a higher probability of being a religious affiliate, of having attended religious services as an adult

and engaged in non-organizational religious behaviors on a more frequent basis. These religious behaviors included reading religious materials, watching and listening to religious broadcasts, engaging in prayer, requesting prayers from others and expressing a higher degree of subjective religious involvement than did younger adults.

In the same study it was expected that elderly adults who possessed lower levels of education would exhibit a higher degree of religious participation than their counterparts. This viewpoint is supportive of the deprivation-compensation model of religious participation, in which there is a prediction that extensive involvement in religious activities compensates persons of lower socioeconomic status for blocked or restricted access to other social institutions. This theory seemed to provide relevancy for black elderly who have suffered with a life of racism and denied access to resources. The results of the study do not substantiate the theory of deprivation and in fact income and educators are not always predictors of religious participation.

Geography plays a significant role in the frequency of church attendance religious services and church membership. Respondents who were residents of the South read religious materials more frequently, and felt that attending religious services was more important than persons who resided in the Northeast Region. This lends support to the idea that the South is the “Bible Belt,” playing an important regional factor in religious practice.

Coke (1995) presented empirical data relevant to the religious practices of elderly blacks in New York City. Her survey is based on responses from 166 elderly blacks on church related activities. She reported that 62% of her sample attended church on a weekly basis, including 48 percent of the males and 77 percent of the females. In

response to the statement “I am a religious individual”. The data indicates that 86.1 percent of the female respondents and 42.6% of the male respondents indicated agreement with this statement.

There is evidence that a belief in religion is a predictor of life satisfaction among both the general population of older individuals and the black elderly. Several researchers have demonstrated the positive correlations between measures of church attendance and self-rated religiosity and measures of life satisfaction. (Blazer et al 1980).

A similar survey interviewed elderly African American respondents about the perception of the role of the church in the elderly community. The study asked respondents if the church helped, hurt, or made no difference in the conditions of blacks in the United States. Of the sample surveyed 92.4% supported the idea that the role of the church did help in changing the lives of blacks in this country. Whereas 2.3 reported that the church had been detrimental and 5.3% reported that the church made no difference.

For the individuals who responded that the church helped in the conditions of blacks in this country, continued follow up found that there were two explicit ways that the church helped: 1) 16% of the respondents felt that the church’s influence had been in a spiritual manner 2) 52.7% of the respondents reported that the church helped in areas of personal and social advancement. The respondents who reported stated that the church helped by being spiritually uplifting, felt it did so either through increased religious activity (6.1%) or through meeting spiritual and religious goals and needs. The respondents also reported that the church helped personally and socially in the following manner: a) 2% stated the church elicited positive feelings, b) 17.8% stated the church

sustains and strengthens them, c) 5.7% stated the church provides personal assistance, d) 29% said it provides guidelines for moral behavior and personal conduct, d) 12.7% experience it as a source of unity and community gathering place, and e) 5.1% felt that the church was active in advocating social purposes for blacks.

### ***Black Elderly in Mississippi***

A 2000 census reported that over half, 52.7 percent, of Mississippi's total population of 2,844,658 persons resided in rural areas. It is significant that slightly more than one third (35.5%) of Mississippi's population was black, compared to 11.7 percent figure of total blacks represented in the country. A total of 40% of the population reside in poverty stricken circumstances according to the census categorization.

Mississippi is a state with a growing number of older adults. Currently there are over 391,901 persons 60 years of age or older in Mississippi representing 15.5% of the states population. There is the prediction that this figure is expected to increase to 18% of the state's population. This increase is expected to take place during the 50-year period between 1970 and 2020. Finally it has been predicted that by the turn of the century, among Mississippians that will be over 60 years of age and one of every 22 will reached by age 75. (Census 2000)

Mississippi's black elderly population represented a greater proportion of the state's population. In the United States, the black elderly population makes up 8.2% of the elderly population while 10.61 percent of blacks in Mississippi were over age 65. Also, the black elderly population in rural areas age 65 and over comprised 53.50% of the rural elderly population of Mississippi. Also, within rural areas the Black elderly have 9.3 more males per women as available partners than for their white counterparts.

In Mississippi, rural black elderly were not likely to reside in nursing homes. Whites age 60 were almost three times more likely to live in a home for the aged as were blacks. For blacks those living in urban areas were more likely to live in a nursing home in contrast to rural dwellers.

In rural areas, elderly blacks had an unemployment rate of 10.1 percent compared to 4.5 percent of elderly whites. Elderly black males living on farms had an unemployment rate of 13.2 percent, compared with 1.1 % for whites. The median income for rural blacks, which were the heads of household and over 65 years of age, was \$6,029 that was 76.3% of the median income for white rural elderly. Typically, there is a wide income gap between blacks and whites; the typical black household made 50% less than white household. (Census 2000)

In the following section the strength of the African American family is explored and the value of the extended family as a protective factor is especially highlighted.

### ***Family as a Protective Factor in the African American Community***

There are many factors involved in the survival of the black elders and religion is one of the most salient. However, the support of the family is another one of those factors. The family was an important structure within the enslaved African community, if for no other reason than the lack of other institutions to which enslaved Africans could openly be committed. Slaves could withstand the abuses and cruelty of slavery with the support of the family. (Clark & McAdoo 2007) Slavery has been described as a crucible that defined the black family and affected a blend of African and American households. Thus, the Black family form should be understood as a viable resource continuation of the African heritage. After emancipation many freed Africans sought out their families and were reconnected.

The strong family tradition among blacks survived the slave system, the legal separation, discrimination and enforced poverty. The survival of the Black family was accomplished despite the many challenges and brutalities of slavery. The Black family emerged from slavery with a stable foundation, even though the peculiar institution conspired against the families' stability and intactness. For example, marriage between two slaves was not legally recognized or in most cases permitted. Husbands, wives and children were first and foremost slaves, and as such property. There was no concern or regard for the stability of the familial institution among enslaved Africans.

The heterogeneity of Black family life, with regard to value systems, lifestyles, and social class structure, makes it impossible to characterize a single type of African American family (Murray 2000). While there is not a single monolithic structure that is the "Black Family", the African American family is a term used to characterize a group of people who are biologically and spiritually bonded or connected and whose members' reactions to one another and the outside world are governed by a particular set of beliefs, historical experiences and behavioral practices (Murray 2000). However, there are sources that define the family in specific ways that can be congruent with the composition of most black families. Structurally the African American family can be "comprised of several individual households, with the channels of authorities reaching beyond the households that compose it.

When researchers set out to study the black family there were three competing theoretical perspectives on African American family life that existed during this era in areas such as sociology and family studies.

The Cultural Deviant perspectives of African American family life framed the African American family from a deficit perspective. For researchers that favored this perspective the tendency was to focus on the qualities of the African American families that deviated from those of European American middle class families as evidence of dysfunction and pathology.

Secondly, there were also researchers that endorsed the ecologically oriented cultural variant perspective that viewed differences between the African Americans and White families as an “outgrowth of their respective sociocultural contexts, acknowledging that family functions are more or less universal constraints that vary and dictate the adoption of culturally distinct styles of organization and interaction. (Smith 1993)

The third perspective is the cultural equivalent perspective which is characterized as the tendency to deemphasize distinctive qualities of African American families and highlight qualities shared in common with European American families.

Staples (1976) suggests that the African American family has been a sanctuary which protects individuals from the pervasiveness of white racism and provides the needed support systems that are unavailable in other majority group institutions.

Consequently, the process in the African American family is to promote and maintain emotional wellbeing of its individual members in spite of the wider society.

There are five distinct elements of the African American family that emphasize their strengths:

1. Legitimation of beingness-is a characteristic that states, through the parent-child, sibling and other familial relationships, that the family provides its members with

a source of connection, attachment, validation, worth recognition and legitimacy.

If one is secure in one's own personal meaning and responding to complex, vague and unfamiliar experiences.

2. Provision of a family code-the family through interpersonal relations and its members interpreting, managing and responding to both known and undefined situations.
3. Elasticity of Boundaries-legitimation of being ness and the provision of a family code produce an elasticity in the African American family in interpersonal relationships. These give African American family members the latitude and opportunity they need to develop a sense of specialness without fear of violating the family boundaries that stretch to accommodate an emerging uniqueness and expression.
4. Provision of concrete conditions-the families' ability to mediate the conflicts and other concrete conditions affecting its members provides a strength or support so obvious that it barely warrants explication. These abilities provide family members with concrete and pragmatic help to engage in interpersonal relations around problem solving and decision-making, while constantly briefing and repairing the damage resulting from racism and oppression directed at family members constitute a critical strength of African American families.

The strength of the black family has been identified as a) having a strong kinship bond as manifested in the capacity to absorb other individuals into the family structure and informal adaptation b) strong work orientation c) flexibility of family members roles d) high achievement orientation and e) religious orientation.

A noted scholar Sudarska (1988) generated principles that function as values that underlie the African American family life that have been retained in the lives of African Americans over time. Sudarska proposes that there are seven cardinal values that provide an understanding of why the extended family structure has been sustained in Africa, America and other parts of the African Diaspora.

These percepts have been maintained through an oral tradition and have been demonstrated in the family dynamic and interactions. Focusing on these values helps to provide a strength based perspective to understand the black family. The following are a list of those values that guided behavior within the African American family and enabled them to persevere throughout periods of seemingly insurmountable difficulty.

There are seven principles. the values are generally referenced as the four R's and are the staple of African American families and kinship, they are as follows: Respect, Responsibility, Restraint and Reciprocity. Respect is the first of the cardinal values that guides all behavior within the African American community and family. Respect is the value that governs the behavior of children not only toward their parents but all other elders in the community that they came into contact with. An elder in the African American community was owed deference and respect of their position. Respect is demonstrated by kinship terms such as Uncle or Aunt or by titles such as Mister or Miss. Responsibility is the value that required members of African extended families to be responsible for other members of their family. Studies done on African American families show that they also accept responsibility for a wide range of relatives and extended kin, for no other reason than they feel obligated to do so,

The importance of kin relationships among blacks of all ages has been well documented within the research. Tate (1983) suggests that many values associated with Afro-American life found their roots in West African cultures that displayed a cultural predisposition towards mutual cooperation, interdependence and collective rather than individual good. Staples (1978) further supports the strong black kinship bond notion when she indicates that another important function of the kinship group is to enhance the emotional relationships within the kinship group network. This function is performed by a high frequency of social interactions that the other members have with one another.

Reciprocity is the principle that compelled Africans and African Americans to give back to their families and communities in return for what they had given them. Many civic organizations, and historically black colleges place a strong emphasis on the notion of giving back to the community. It is a principle that will have to be reinforced within the family if self-help is to become the primary instrument of African American survival and success.

Restraint is one of the values that is explained as being the most difficult to teach or accept in a highly materialistic and individualistic society. Within African families, personal decisions that have implications for the group as a whole have to be considered. Many such decisions are at times made in conjunction with the elders in the family. Restraint is also demonstrated in a number of ways; parents will sacrifice so that their children can have or adult children might sacrifice so that their elderly parent's needs are met ahead of their own.

Reverence is the value manifested in the strong religious orientations of Africans and people of African Diaspora. It is well researched and established that among African

Americans, after the family, the church has been the strongest institution and continues to be one of the anchors of African American communities.

In a study conducted on the elderly in the rural Mississippi, (Parks 1980), the majority of the sample 82 % surveyed expressed the feeling that moving close to a relative was important to them in their decision to move out of the state. Conversely, only 17.1% of the persons answered that close proximity to a relative would not be important to them in making a move. Less than one-fifth of both male and female rural black elderly indicated that moving close to a relative was not important at all. Therefore according to this particular study the tight kinship bonds of black families and the importance of black network is reinforced.

In a similar study done on a sample in Mississippi, 103 black elderly individuals that resided in rural areas were sampled and asked similar questions. Of the sample of 103 elderly they all indicated that moving close to a relative was “very important”. Just over one-fourth of the respondents indicated, however, that moving next to a relative was not “very important.” Thirteen percent of the sample indicated that moving next to a relative was “somewhat” important. The assistance that elderly black persons received from families was noted as one of the strengths of black families. Daney (1977) notes that because blacks have had limited access to support services elderly blacks have relied a great deal on the supportive resources of their families and families in turn on elderly relatives. The extended kin structure in the black community manages to buttress the psychological isolation and poverty of the blacked aged.

Horel, Mckinney and Williams (1991) states that the family is the source of strength among blacks, and firmly apply this philosophy to Black males, According to a

census done in 1985, approximately 60% of Black males aged 65 and over are married and living with their spouses. Watson's (1980) study of aged rural blacks shows that males have a primary need for in home services, such as help with meal preparation and household chores. These needs are greatest among 21.9% of aged blacks that are widowed and 5.6% that are divorced and not remarried.

Elderly blacks also play an important role in the extended kin network that characterizes the family life of many urban blacks. For example, 15% of all aged blacks couples have a child 18 years of age or under residing with them. About 45% of these cases involve the couple's own children's children and the rest involve taking in of grandchildren of other extended family members into their homes. Researchers have established a link between patterns of religious involvement and family configuration.

Barnes (2001) found that although the overwhelming majority of African American families are heavily religious and involved in religious activity, single parents are less likely than parents from nuclear or augmented families to pray, attend religious services, read the bible and make financial contributions to religious institutions. These findings are consistent with the results from the NBSA that in comparison to single counterparts, married African Americans tend to be more involved in organizational religious life, pray more frequently assign a greater level of importance to religion and they are more subjectively religious.

McAdoo and Crawford 1990 examines the variable of religion and the subjective quality of family life by a) positive evaluations of performance in family roles (provider, spouse, parent) b) perceptions of family closeness and c) satisfaction with family life among other African Americans for three reasons 1) many black church communities

promote informal and formal mechanisms of family support. In addition to all of these informal practices, various African American congregations sponsor a wide range of initiatives aimed at a) reducing sources of stress for potential families b) dealing with family problems effectively, youth and pregnancy prevention programs, mental health information programs and programs for the elderly.

### ***Summary of Literature Review and Research Questions***

There needs to be a close secondary analysis of Elderly African American men's narrative's of their lives and the experiences in Mississippi during racial segregation. The reviewed literature suggest that African American males in general are more likely to be exposed to greater environmental stressors, in poverty due to denied employment access and to face greater health care challenges over the long term because of a number of societal, psychological and environmental challenges in their lifetime. Much of the research calls for additional research to develop unique ways to explore ways in which African American male elderly copes with such challenges and manage to not just cope but successfully live and cultivate their lives.

This study has sought to partly answer this call by using the data gathered from the narratives of African American elderly men that have survived sanctioned racism in southern Mississippi during the height of the Jim Crow Era, to generate theory about the experiences of such men, thereby enhancing resilience theory and making its application more appropriate for Black men.

The literature above has led me to address the follow questions:

1. What were the social, political, economic and physical conditions that put elderly Blacks at risk?
2. What were the strategies that resilient Black elderly males use to cope with?

3. What were the factors that contribute to their resiliency?

I have used these questions to guide the development of an in-depth secondary analysis of the qualitative interviews already conducted and will discuss further in the methods section.

### **Methodology**

This study is a secondary data analysis of existing interview data. The initial study investigated the experiences of resilient African American male elders who were born and raised in Mississippi in the early to mid part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and have spent the majority of their adult lives there. The purpose of the study was to identify patterns of resilient behavior within their life span as reflected in experiences across childhood, family, community, and work history. In this study the initial concept of resiliency determining selection was based upon longevity and survival of these men to senior citizen elder status while living through the historic inequities and racism practiced in their home state during their lifetime. This study is relatively unique because elderly African American men are often less studied in research. Therefore this study will be beneficial in providing positive insights into an often neglected and understudied population.

### **Sample**

Participants were a convenience sample generated from recommendations by a key informant; a local resident psychologist and professor at Jackson State University. Some participants were also obtained by the Senior Principal investigator's family network in Mississippi as well as recommendations from participants consistent with the "snow balling" technique in the acquisition of subjects.

The local key informant as a person that was noteworthy to be interviewed about his or her life experiences recommended each participant. Some criteria in this process

was that these elder men were known community members, seen by many as “survivors” and had interesting life accomplishments.

There were eleven participants in this study. The participants ranged in age from 72 to 92 all of whom were born and raised in Mississippi and have spent the majority of their adult life in Mississippi. All of the participants were African American men.

### ***Interview Procedure***

The Senior Principal Investigator conducted all of the interviews. Each participant was interviewed in a private room in their homes or at a local community agency.

The interview lasted for approximately 90 minutes with an additional 30 minutes at the beginning given to introductions, providing an orientation to the study, general instructions about the procedures and obtaining informed consent. There was no financial compensation for the interviews.

### **Materials**

Questions in the interview were open-ended focused on six general areas: childhood, school, family life, friendships and community experiences, (see **appendix A**). The initial interview guide consisted of six major sections: 1) at the beginning of each interview elders were asked to provide a brief biographical narrative of their life. (5 questions) 2) Information about their school experiences were asked (5 questions) 3) Family life was asked about (5 questions) 4) Questions about their community was asked (5 questions) The final question in the interview asked elders to represent their philosophy of life or guiding belief that helped them to survive throughout their lifetime. (2 questions).

After informed consent each interview was taped recorded by the principal investigator. Subsequently, research assistants transcribed each interview followed by

another verification review of the tape and transcript for accuracy by another independent research assistant. To ensure confidentiality each participant's tape and transcript was assigned a number and that number was placed on the audiotape and transcript. All identifying information about the elders was also removed from transcripts. Patton (1990) recommends that the researcher transcribe all or some of interviews in order to immerse oneself in the data and consequently generate emergent insights. The researcher performed a secondary analysis of the data.

Individual stories provide an excellent opportunity to understand the interaction of ethnicity, culture and one's place within society. My study attempts to capture the interaction effects as clearly as possible, I will chose to analyze the data qualitatively. Moreover, the ability to explore the similarities as well as heterogeneity among the life experiences of African American males is most desirable. Black men are often studied as if they are one monolithic group, which leads to generalizations and assumptions within the psychological literature. Since qualitative research has its roots in ethnography and anthropological study, it offers a good paradigm for investigating the life experiences of Black men.

### ***Qualitative Data Analysis Plan***

Qualitative data analysis was used to identify emerging themes and theory. Patton recommends that in new fields of research where little work has been done, and few definitive hypotheses exist, or little is known about the nature of the phenomenon, qualitative inquiry is a reasonable beginning point for research. Focus on the life story, or subjectively construed account of adversity and its management, may provide important new understanding of the origins and maintenance of resilience across the course of life

(Cohler 1991). Because my study aims to capture themes of religion and spirituality, family and resilience I chose to focus my data analysis with these areas in mind.

Furthermore, these individual men's stories provide an excellent opportunity to understand the context of the times that these men lived through as well as protective factors that enabled their survival.

A life story is a plausible, chronological and coherent narrative that reconstructs the development of the present state of affairs. It starts at a certain time in the person's life and draws together particular information about him into a linear perspective that puts any life distress in context to outcomes in his past. Guided by the conceptual framework of grounded theory the qualitative research software package Atlas-ti (Thomas, Muir, Berlin 1997) was used to organize, manage, and analyze the interview transcripts. Each transcript was uploaded separately into the software package and given numerical designation and coded within the software system. The software system stores the primary document, selected quotations or data units within the primary documents with given codes, and the frequency or groupings of such quotations by their codes as well as coder memos made up one storage unit. The software system keeps a running list of quotation units and their codes given by the researcher, thereby allowing the researcher to select codes from her list representing recurrent themes within the primary document.

### **Qualitative Research**

Data analysis requires the researcher to capture the complexity of the phenomena and make convincing sense of it (Straus, 1989). In the case of this qualitative study, grounded theory was the guiding principal used to interpret the interview data. Grounded theory is a discovery oriented methodology that allows for the development of theory that

is not only “grounded” in the interviews and field memos of the researcher, but also guides the researcher’s focus on the ways in which people make sense of and locate themselves in their own experiences (Henwood & Pidgeon 2003). Moreover, the grounded theory method is unique as it permits themes and concepts to emerge from the narrative material without the imposition of a pre-constructed framework (Patton, 2002).

The analysis of data first involved partitioning of the transcripts into units to make meaning out of them. Coding techniques that have proved most useful in organizing the data involve the process of analysis of the data from the abstract to the concrete. Straus and Corbin (2007) emphasize two main points a) the foundational role in any qualitative research participants’ own understanding of their own social environment and b) the importance of flexibility. The variety of coding categories include axial coding, open coding and selective coding. Quotations that generate and become a part of specific codes by the researcher are called “in vivo” categories. In vivo codes are codes that are generated from the actual words and expressions of the participants used in the interviews. Open coding refers to the process of generating initial concepts from the data; axial coding to the development and linking of concepts into conceptual families and selective coding to the formalizing of these concepts into theoretical frameworks. (Corbin and Straus 2007)

The next step involved partitioning the codes into further sub codes or categories by extracting pertinent information from the transcribed interviews.

Categorizing the codes enabled the researcher to compare and contrast the findings of the data. This method further familiarizes the researcher with the complexity of the data, and consequently yields categories, which can be sorted and grouped in

meaningful ways. After the initial process of extracting information from each interview and comparing them with units in other units in other interviews, the units of data will be compared for similarities and like-minded categories and further analysis.

Throughout the process of categorizing the codes, constructing core ideas, and doing analyses the researcher will record impressions and emerging ideas about the meaning of the data. This allowed the researcher to record any insights that emerged as the data was being analyzed as well as serve to keep biases at a minimum.

The eleven participants who were interviewed for this study spoke openly about their life experiences and philosophies about survivorship. Three selective categories were determined, based on the research questions that were outlined in previous chapters.

These categories will serve as the foundation for the generating theory about the healing processes of resilient African American male Elders who are survivors of the Jim Crow South.

The research questions, which constructed the selective codes, included:

- 1) What were the social, political, and economic conditions that put them at risk during this time period?
- 2) What were the strategies that these Black male elderly used to cope with these adversarial life circumstances?
- 3) What were the characteristics that contributed to their resiliency?

In addition to these selective categories, axial categories, which represent overarching recurrent themes and open categories that represent more specific recurrent themes will be presented.

### **Methodological Soundness**

All the transcriptions were double checked to avoid inaccuracy. The researcher transcribed several of the interviews along with other research assistants.

## Results

### ***Selective Category: Living in the Segregated South***

The semi structured interview that was designed for this study, asked the participants open ended questions about their experiences and lives in Mississippi growing up as children and also as adults raising their families. Many of these men were children during the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. As adults, they sought employment during the 1940's and 1950's in Mississippi, when the social and political climate of the time, were still dictated by the laws of Jim Crow. There was a general consensus among all of the participants that life was restricting and oppressive for blacks.

The recurrence of this theme was evident throughout the narratives. Racism against being black males posed serious barriers and limitations regarding their safety, employment opportunities and overall ability to live a life free of societal constraints. All facets of their lives have been negatively affected, including their livelihood, their dignity, their pride and ability to live like human beings.

### **Negative Experiences in the South (Axial)**

A common perspective that was stressed in every interview was the belief that blacks were under considerable oppression and limitations in Mississippi. One participant explained that the segregated system required many to live under the constant climate of degradation and disrespect. There never seemed to be a time when race did not play a significant role in how they were treated, thus causing them to experience a tremendous amount of adversity in their lives. The categories of these negative life experiences in the South have been broken down into the four most frequently mentioned

experiences: 1) Employment 2) Threat of violence 3) political barriers and 4) social and psychological impact of barriers.

### **Employment (Open)**

The overall consensus among the participants was the fact that gaining employment was a difficult task during this time. Their ability to secure a job and fair wages were all negatively impacted by their race. Many of them explained the limitations of employment opportunities for the Black male during that time as either being pigeon holed, or steered into certain professions because of one's color or being given unequal wages because of their race. As one participant explained,

“Uh being from the South, if I start telling about the situations that was hard to handle, most of it because being a black man in the South, you know, they just you know they just hated to see a black person advance. You know to a certain point. And uhh it was overcome by um being honest with folks. And uhh I had a lot of whites that would come by my shop and would just sit down and talk with me because I guess they were trying to figure me out.”

Several of the participants shared similar sentiments about garnering viable employment and encountering incredible obstacles because they were black and were viewed as inferior or as competition for jobs. As a number of the participants described it:

“When I was coming up that wasn't the case. You couldn't be what you wanted to be. So when I was coming up and I say if I wanted to be a milkman, I couldn't be a milkman. I wanna be a policeman, I wanna be a fireman, I couldn't because I was black. But it's not like that today”

“ It wasn’t my education that held me back, it was my color. If I had been a white man in the police department I would have made a whole lot more money than what I did.”

“ Well with the black male, I, I think that uh as far as I can see it naturally you don’t it’s always been customary that eh the black female pursues educational endeavors with more diligence and went further than the black male simply because of the economical situation. And that is usually so much now the black male had to stop and work.”

In some cases there was also the belief that having an education could be viewed as a hindrance since he would be viewed as competition for the already scarce jobs that were available.

“ It wasn’t why I said it. It’s what they say. He’s too educated for this job. You’re too educated. In other words they didn’t want the black man because he had an education. They scared of him they didn’t want the competition.”

For one participant who migrated to Chicago for better opportunity, he encountered similar obstacles,

“ Being a black man in Chicago, if he had an education he couldn’t get a job unless he went into teaching. That was the only thing that a black man professionally could get a job in back then.”

Of note is the fact that limitations in employment did not cease the political activism of one of the participants who actually gave up employment opportunities and wages, to make a point about equality and the unfairness of the Jim Crow System:

“ I did have the opportunity to go to officers training school but I did not accept the opportunity because I could not see myself ordering black man or leading black men into battle. I mean from the way black people are treated in the state of Mississippi, and the army as you know at the time there was a segregated army, If I accepted to go the officers training school, and had become an officer then I would have to order my men into battle and I just can't see ordering black men to go up to the front line when they couldn't vote uh couldn't go into a restaurant and have a meal, or couldn't get on a bus and sit down where he pleased. You either stood up or sat on the back seat of the bus. And not that I was a conscientious objector; I could not say that I wouldn't fight but to order somebody else, black soldiers was a different thing.”

### **Fear of Violence (Open)**

Among many of the participants, there was consensus that as a black male you were constantly under the threat of violence from white people. They also believed that they were never in the position to defend themselves or retaliate against unfair treatment. Defensive behavior usually resulted in imprisonment, fines or even death. During this time miscegenation was prohibited under Jim Crow laws and, again breaking these laws was met with imprisonment or death. For many of the participants, the belief that their lives were in mortal danger overshadowed the limited access to opportunity faced by blacks during the period.

“You can't talk, couldn't talk to no white man. White man had privilege to fight you and unless you fight back it was hit you and got away with it .I didn't know how to take anything if you promised to hit, I'd hit.”

“ If you got in trouble with the white man you were either beaten, or you went to jail and paid a big fine, or went to prison, or you leave. Many of my friends got in trouble they whipped that man and got that train and left. And some of them haven’t been back since. That was the trend if you fight and beat up the man you had to leave.”

“ You talking to somebody who, uh when I grew up the white man was the real enemy.”

As another participant explained, interracial relationships were not only legally prohibited but could cost one his life,

“ Yeah and that’s my opinion the way they could get by. Even the relationship a black man could take a black woman, but a black man could not take a white woman. You would die. The price of that is death.”

“ They’ve always had a little more respect for the black woman, than the black man.”

### **Psychological/ Social impact of Segregation (open)**

The pervasiveness and psychological impact of segregation is explained on a political and historical level. Too often, there is the telling of the restrictions as it applies to the law while the emotional havoc it unleashed upon Southern blacks is often downplayed or not as carefully examined. Many of the participants spoke candidly not just about the societal restrictions in general but in some instances, how difficult and painful it was to accept for these men. The loss of their manhood and the stripping away of their pride were psychologically painful.

“We couldn’t vote. You know it was very obvious you had to sit in the back of the bus. So we knew who the enemy was, we knew who to target you know what I’m talking

about. Our responsibility is to meet the enemy. When we looking in the mirror we looking at the enemy.”

“That was not as hard as the days of segregation that was the hardest thing for me to swallow in anything that takes your pride. You never had any pride. You walk by a place and you are not able to sit there and eat, or sleep here. But because you were something that you are its like “a boy” and when you get too old for being a boy then you uncle you never was Mr. Robinson or Mrs. Robinson that’s the hardest thing I face in life, and what I know.”

One participant viewed discrimination as being worse than poverty. As the head of his household, it was difficult for him to see his family subjected to this horrendous caste system.

“Again the worst thing in the world the I’ve had in my life not being poor but discrimination, that I faced in my life, my pride my invasion of my family, my children. We couldn’t have what we wanted to have, we couldn’t go where we wanted”

An immense amount of pressure was exerted on blacks during these times. This pressure was evidenced by the blatant inequities. Some blacks realized that in order to survive, as one participant sums it up, they had to be better than all other groups. One participant put it thusly,

“But for most Black people uh especially the male which you are focusing the ability and capability to be resilient has been based and encroached upon most of the time inequities have been present. And well they everywhere, and they maybe more subtle in New York than they are here (in Mississippi) and now but it’s gotten to the point where most inequities are subtly spoken as they have been in the past. But when knowing that things existed inequities in economics, education, housing and so forth it made any black who had any kind of common sense at all understand that if you wanted to move ahead you had not only be good as but you had to be better, and for those who are able to meet the challenge they were able to regroup and recover from ill fortunes and other things that they were confronted with over the years and it is a tremendous task.”

### ***Tools for Survival (Selective)***

#### **Religion and Spirituality Codes (Axial)**

The use of religion and spirituality was commonly cited during the interviews with these men. Most of the participants were active members of churches within their communities. These men attended church regularly and served in various capacities, including the offices of deacons and pastors. Many of the participants mentioned finding purpose and comfort in their Christian (mostly Baptist denomination) religion.

Their religious practices were based on a firm belief in incorporating God into every facet of one’s life including one’s marriage, and parenting. The overall decisions that were made on a daily basis should be grounded they felt in a firm faith in God. When assessing the survival of these men, or the African American community for that matter, no single theme stands out more prominently than spiritual faith as the foundation of a resilient person. The following codes/quotes exemplify how the men infused religion

and spirituality within their day-to-day occurrences and how much of a lifestyle and survival tool it was for them in many regards.

1) Dedicating one's life to God 2) Religion as a lifestyle in one's life 3) Belief in God/Religion as a protective measure 4) The importance of attending Church

As one participant recalls being so thankful to God for surviving his experiences of war that he dedicated the rest of his life to Church service.

### **Dedicating One's Life to God (open)**

“When I was in the army and I had some narrow escapes as far as uhh life was concerned and so I made the Lord a promise saying that if I got out the army that I was gonna put him first in everything. So that's what I did and I've been the Deacon of the church for 41 years and the Sunday School Superintendent for 42 years and the Director of Baptist Training when I dealt with a lot of young folks they respected me.”

Another participant echoed this very sentiment about making God the center of your life and even sought formal educational training in theology:

“I did all of my studies in religious education and theology. I went to seminary and got a Bachelor of Science in theology and did some studies in systematic theology. A life without God is just as vain as vanity could be, just like Adam when God made Adam and breathed into him the breath of life. A man without God in his life is just another pile of dirt not fit for nothing. Not good for himself and certainly not good for a family.”

### **Religion as a Lifestyle (open)**

The majority of the participants described religion and spirituality as an overarching philosophy that was used to frame all of their experiences and provided a guiding principle for their lives. These men credits God's presence in their lives for their success in marriage, family and in their work life. Two of the participants echo similar

sentiments about a shared faith being important to maintain a strong marriage and successful parenting.

“Your spiritual life has a lot to do with your marriage. And that you should be members of the same faith and that’s important.”

“Your spiritual life has a whole lot to do (with your success). Confess that you are mature members of the same faith, his wife or another, or they both may have been Baptists but they were going to different churches”

### **Religion as a Protective Measure/Coping with negative circumstances (Open)**

One participant explained that his firm faith in God allowed him to stay within his community when things were becoming increasingly negative and dangerous. His faith assured him that staying firmly planted was the right thing to do:

“ Well I think that contributed to my faith in God. And uh number two you got to be dedicated to uh live in this community. If you don’t have a strong religious background and faith in what you are doing. I could have left Joyce Town (my home town) years ago. My wife wanted to leave but we were all put into this world for something and why run from it.”

Another participant described the way in which his belief in God fortified his ability to be dedicated while he struggled toward being successful, He explained that service to others has to be divinely ordered, “You can’t do (serve others) that unless you seek divine guidance from he who made you. Unless you seek some divine guidance you’re not willing to make that sacrifice but without a struggle there is no success. The sacrifice comes in the struggle, you got to sacrifice whatever part of you takes to win that struggle into success.”

These men credit a belief in God and a firm faith, in surviving negative life circumstances. Above all else a positive belief in yourself and God allows for an individual to overcome any difficult life circumstance. One participant eloquently stated his view on faith as a means for survival. “That’s what faith is all about something to cling to when the wire gets tight and small but if you have something to hold to you can balance yourself across. Uhm as I said a minute ago, it’s my faith in God. Uhm, Uhm that’s the strength that I get. And, and in my life I have worked hard and I have tried to preserve personally for the days ahead. “

Lastly, one participant credits his faith and belief in God as primary for life in general and advises that the most important thing for a man to do is to:

“The number one thing I would advise to anyone to have faith in God, and then in yourself” A nation, a community or a family without God is a hubbub.

There is a strong correlation between success and attending church and worshipping God.

### **Importance of attending the Church (open)**

The importance of being active church attendees was strongly stressed, We had a good church life and that helped strengthen us.

“Some of us have been fortunate. I’ll say this as a plug, though to the coming up. I think my parents having been church people and having been good toward church people, respectable toward church life, directed me into church life and that has been a major part of my success. Church life has a lot to do with how good children are going to be.”

“You can start off being an obedient child. Obey your parents and go to church”

***Family Codes (Axial)***

The following codes exemplify the importance of the family within the Black community and within these men's lives specifically. The family during their generation was highly regarded and respected. The institution of the family held a protective feature for these men and for African Americans in general.

Marriage was also was a highly regarded institution and greatly influenced the ability to build a home, and forge ahead through difficult circumstances. Due to the relative non-existence of outside aid and the devastating impact that previous generations of slavery had on the black family, the ability to have a family as a secure base was of utmost importance. Mutual respect for one's partner is emphasized and viewed in a positive light.

Moreover, there is also the consensus that while the family is an endeared institution, these men were a part of families that provided love, guidance and support so that they could complete their education and have careers.

Most of the participants also echo the sentiment that the family is no longer what it used to be in the Black community and presently there is a lot of strife and lack of unity among families for a myriad of reasons. The following codes ranged from:

1) The importance of protecting your family, 2) The Family support for education 3) negative influences affecting the family and lastly to the 4) Community as an extended family.

**Protecting your marriage and family (open code)**

A couple of the participants spoke candidly about their marriages. Both of these men were married for many years and greatly credit their spouses for their success and stability.

“I married in 42, I joined the service in 41, here again I’d like to also include in this interview that my wife was a stabilizing force, and a very influential force in the progress that I was able to make, and that she also made because when I married her she had only gone to college for a year. You know what was the driving force; um pride not selfish pride but pride. Um respect, determination to support my family, so that our lifestyle could be, it has never really been comfortable, so to speak but we had togetherness. Where I feel that a lot of black males could let down the girl they courting to marry”

One participant even has a ceremony every anniversary to commemorate their relationship:

“I married my wife 52 years ago and every year that was has been significant enough event for me to always let her know we better get married again today, the 19<sup>th</sup> of October. She accepts it we’re not running away we’re running together.”

Another participant believed in being very open with his family when making important decisions about the family finances. He would only make major decisions after consulting his wife, whose opinion he greatly respected:

“ I give my wife credit because she was a smart lady. And I never felt that she couldn’t tell me something. Decisions that have been made, that were made she instigated them and it turned out to be good decisions. So we always worked together whatever we had to do, we sit down and talk about it. What do you think about it? And that was the best ideas. Life with us has been a give and take proposition, I told her when we first got

married that “Now I want you to know that I never been married before.” It was a new experience then for the both of us. We go up the ropes together share the blunders and we must share the heartaches we must share the pleasures the joy and the pain. Can’t do that if your going to abuse your wife and put her aside and decide that you’re going to have another woman. You got to think, “Will that hurt my family?”

### **Negative influences on the Family and Parenting (open)**

These codes exemplified all of the negative factors that have affected the family. The men are very clear that in their long lives they can attest to seeing the institution of the family deteriorate because of various negative societal influences and pressures. The problems as they see it range from drug use, to families under tremendous pressure to provide material possessions to their loved ones at the expense of spending quality time with the children, who are truly missing an adult role model within their homes and the community.

“I have seen too many families destroyed in the 76 years that I have been living, too many families destroyed through vices like alcohol, drugs etc. Okay too many families destroyed by the man walking off.”

Two participants concurred that the adults within the family are so busy trying to gain material wealth that the children are not spending as much time with them. Also, the extended family is not always present to stand in for those hardworking and often absent adults. As a result of the lack of supervision and involvement with the parents and extended family members the children are not being given proper instruction and

guidance to “honor their parents” or become self-sufficient individuals. For these men training begins at home.

“The family unit is not what it used to be and because those who are trying to raise children are gonna have to think the situation changed. You have to make sacrifices and set goals as to where, of course part of it, the problem I see it now everybody is working trying to make enough money to buy two cars and a radio, and a deep freezer, they don’t spend time with the children you see. I had the benefit of being in an extended family and I had the benefit of having a grandmother that I spent a lot of time with.”

Along similar lines, another participant shared that as a young child there was always supervision available for him, however, present day circumstances dictate otherwise for children:

“There was a part of my family always there with me but these people, now everybody is trying to do better for the kid but at the same time, the children are being left alone while they leave in the morning and some of these children are latch key children some of them are left, they leave them, tell them to go to school until they come back but they are not there long enough.”

As a result of the lack of supervision and oversight, children are at a severe loss and are not earning their “honor”.

“Kids are not earning their honor. When they grow up in a family they ought to be taught after a certain size or put on their own clothes, brush their own teeth and look at this obey their mother, their one mother in this life. Honor that, honor her own child and train him.”

**Missing Male Influence (Open)**

The idea that the male influence is missing within present day black families is a particularly strong feeling among some of the men. Males as positive and influential role models for these men were mentioned. Two participants spoke about their granddads and father's being self-sufficient men that were able to support themselves and their families through the Great Depression. As a result of seeing these men in their lives succeed they followed their examples when they became men.

"I never heard my granddad complain about what he couldn't do or what he didn't have or what he needed or whatever he needed he managed to get it. He owned his own plantation and he survived on the little bit of money he had when the depression came and the banks took every penny of it but he survived."

"One of the things that made my family a little different was that my father was able to buy land when he first married. He brought 20 acres of land and he kept buying land we worked at home. We worked for him so we did not have any problems to find jobs, a lot of black parents put up with their jobs. My daddy was kind of self-supporting. I picked up from my parents to be self-supporting"

"The home has gone to pieces. The home although you got most of this, is made of one-parent families. That parent does not have the time or take the time to teach or say things to me like my daddy said to me, like your daddy to you. That a period of time you had the male influence was much more pronounced and in evidence you had patriarchal forms of family life, uh within the family you know you had large numbers of parents in

that area that were not educated to any great degree, ah always had desires of their children, ah succeeding more in what they did, but I think the family influence the community influence back then contributed a lot.”

There was consensus among the participants regarding children. They believed that children should know their respective place and position within the household, and never violate the rules that they were taught by family members, “Don’t do things that would violate your home training. Kids are not bad they ought to know from size and age they are kids and this is an adult. There should be some difference.”

**Family as positive influence (open)**

The organization of the family allowed for many successful interventions, among them were the nuclear and the extended family as an influential force in the men’s lives.

“When I would ask my mother and grandmother to wake me up they would say let your business wake you up.”

“I had the support of my family not in terms of preaching to me about being a teacher or anything like that because I am the only one out of 11 that graduated college and high school.”

The extended family is greatly respected and seen as a unit of support, as one participant explained:

“ You had these large families and these families stuck together and helped to see brothers and sisters through school and started like that. But the parents eventually had to end up in the homes one of these kids unless they were in good shape to take care of themselves when they got really old.”

“The three things that helped as I see it and I have to go back to it again, would be the home, the church, and the community. Those three organizations were strong during the period of my youth and in my days coming up. I learned to respect those organizations and they made a great contribution to my life because of the fact that we didn’t know what you meant by role models, because that terminology hadn’t been developed then but we knew were certain people that we figure we would like to be like. I think that what in the beginning, in the outset whatever you’re going to be or do one of the greatest influences you had is in the home.”

### **Responsibility to family (open)**

An open code described having family honor and hence taking care of one’s family is viewed as a serious obligation and a necessary part of being in a family. Also, supporting one’s family was a privilege and one not to be taken lightly. For some of these men they had parental role models and grandparents to set good examples for them.

“I retired in 1982 after 20 years. My father was sick and my brother was sick and my father made me promise that I would never put him in nursing home so I retired so that I could keep that promise”

I had to go that extra mile it takes parental support to get a child to identify with what it's going to do. Being a farmer you're not guaranteed a good crop, but you plant every year just like everybody'll plant. All right being a family doesn't guarantee you're gonna have all good luck, but nobody takes pity on you. You got to keep struggling with little help. People gave us used things"

" We couldn't do anything to violate or anything that would hurt our parent's reputation. And that kept everything straight. Problems were solved before you left the house."

### **Familial Support for Education (open)**

The codes in the family support for education all demonstrate just how important attaining an education was for these men and their families. Among all of the members there is a consensus that family or extended family provided support and encouragement for them so they could attain their educational goals. This includes financially supporting these men as youngsters, by providing food, clothing and money.

There is a general reference to the women in their lives who reared them, mothers, stepmothers, aunts and grandmothers who were instrumental in helping these men. Some of these participants talked about the strength and involvement of these women. Even though many of their parents were not educated themselves, they knew the value of what an education could do for their children so they greatly encouraged them to pursue their academics with great diligence.

“I got a chance to experience it first hand from a stepmother who raised me, who was another individual who believed in education. She believed that you know you could do and she taught us that you could read and you could learn and you could perceive with the best of them. You can think with the best of ‘em.”

The family’s support was contingent upon completing one’s education

“They encouraged me of course my mother encouraged me, my sister that I referred to encouraged me. I said they encouraged me in the sense that they provided a place for me to live and something for me to eat you know. They were motivated by the fact that I was intent on being a teacher in the first place. In all of this, I you know they supported me in the sense that ok as long as you’re going to school then that’s alright, we will feed you, you know and help you get to some clothes, and so on as long as you are going to school, but if you stop your are going to have to go out and do it on your own. But as long as you stay with it we will do these things that are necessary for basic living.”

Another participant speaks fondly of his aunt’s support,

“My aunt worked for him and that did a whole lot like providing clothes that got too small for their children and that assistance. But the idea of trying to get out of that environment where I lived and where others lived uh at that time I guess was a motivational factor. Uh, You wanted to try to do a little bit better if I could. And of course the thing that also contributed to where I am now and probably was a very strong factor is that my mother even though she was not highly educated she was determined that I get an education. And she provided me with a home environment myself by working. But her being there, giving her leadership that helped. The next step in my life I

went into WWII when I was drafted and did not know that would influence my life. Staying in the army three years when I came out I accumulated a small amount of money by sending it to my mother and the GI bill I was able to go to college get my bachelors and masters degree”

“No well one thing about it, my parents, my parents was especially my mother, they were interested in me going to school. Never missed a day. We had nine months of school in Caton County. Be decent have my books and no loaning books out. See that’s one thing my mother taught me.”

### **Support from Male Family Members (Open)**

Support also included verbal encouragement from fathers and grandfathers and other males in the family, lecturing on the importance of acquiring an education in order to be financially independent “When I did get the chance to go to school, my granddad he put me into a school and said “Boy ah you know you need to learn something see, you need to learn to read and write where you can manage your own business where you don’t have to depend on other people to do your figuring or your writing or your reading. And learn something for yourself.”

One of the participants recalled how important it was to have the support of their parents to continue going to school, particularly during the time when children had to stop school to farm the lands.

“Well we had support from our parents we had support from our we had to play balls in the overalls like that. Then we had to stop school some time in February go to farming May we had to stop school and go to the school and go to the farm all children had to go and we had to finish harvest the corn and stuff like that. It was down for six months”

“Well, you know that’s a good question because uh wasn’t important then it is become to be over the last year. Because really were you was from you just didn’t need a good education but our parents always told us need to school.”

“ Cause I remember an incident, I got in some trouble at school one day and my daddy said this to me the next day and I never will forget that sermon, the best instructions that daddy ever gave me. And daddy said, he told me “William I heard what happened at your school yesterday. But I wanna tell you what you need to do is try to get an education and you have all your life for love. I was running behind a girl you know what it was about. But I never will forget because I thought that was good information.

#### **Supporting their own children’s education (open)**

The participants also took note of the impact this support had on their own children when they attended school as they witnessed many of their own children complete graduate

school and advanced degrees. These men mention how the guidance that they received to continue their education, was then passed on to their children, and how proud they are of their own children's accomplishments:

“I had a rich life, I had a nice family connection with my children didn't have no trouble with my church didn't have no trouble making them study nothing like that and all of them finished degrees even down from PhD and doctors and down to getting their masters and two masters.”

Another states that he stresses education as important to one's livelihood,

“Very Very important very important. I told my children at one time when they was little and they asked me, uh we, they wanna know Daddy, why we have to go to school.” I said “well you have to get you good education so you can get a good job, so you can make a good living and then it will take you the rest of your life to make that living.

“Get your education while you can and have all your life for the rest. I will never forget my daddy didn't get an education daddy probably got to the third grade.”

### ***Community as a source of support and factor in Resilience***

Working together both as a family and as a community was a common theme among the participants. They felt this was one of the major reasons they as individuals and the African American community at large survived some of the harsh and brutal conditions of segregation in Mississippi. Segregation forced hard limitations upon the community and people had to work together in order to survive. Communication and relationships between people was important in establishing and maintaining a community.

The Black community offers a look into the African American experience. During this time frame, outside resources and assistance were not available, Blacks had to rely on one another as a great means of support. The community was held in a place of great esteem and maintained a significant role of support in the individual lives of black people. Moreover, the participants actually credit their own success and achievement to the collective people in their neighborhoods who were willing to act as counselors and surrogate parents by embracing and encouraging them. There was an overwhelming consensus on this sentiment. One participant so eloquently expressed this notion by explaining “The three things that helped us as I see it I have to go back again to the home, the church, and the community. The three organizations were strong during my youth and in the days coming up. I learned to respect those organizations and they made a great contribution in my life.”

The parents and the community had a symbiotic, equal relationship. It was implicitly understood that if your neighbors saw you behaving inappropriately then they were within their rights to correct you as if they were your parents. This was viewed as a positive intervention, because the community was like an extended family, as explained by one participant:

**The Importance of Community (Open)**

“Black folks..it was good. We had a good relationship. We were much closer than what we are today. Yeah the blacks were much closer than what we were today. Because even on the farm when we got through working on the farm you help the other person that’s the way it were. One child. We’s all, we’s all a family we had different parents could

chastise, whip that child. We's all a family we had different names but we're all a family."

"I mean back there in those days, people in the community had a great deal of influence upon all of the children. It didn't matter whether you were my kid or you were the person's next-door kid. If you were not done what you were told to do I spoke to you and admonished you about it and chastised you and told your parents."

### **Community Influence on Family (open)**

"Everybody in that community could tell you what not to do, uh, how not to get involved and they meant it because they were going to go and tell your parents. My parents were not short stepping. If they said it they meant it for your own good and then you did have a second choice. If you didn't do what they said you could always get out. And you could carry your clothes in a small pillowcase."

Even for members of the community that were not as well off or "upstanding" they were still invested in the youth doing well and trying to make something of themselves. There was a certain level of pride that almost seemed to be inherited from seeing others doing well, even if you were not.

"That's what they expected and then the other thing, about it, uhm people on the street in that day and time looked with favor on anybody who was trying to go to school. Now he might have been anybody who was trying to go to school. Now he might have been as drunk as he can be but you know I'm glad to see you, keep on going, do well". Even though he might not have been able to stand up. In my effort to go to school they felt some satisfaction in that."

One participant even stated that there was a contagion factor that occurred within the community and positively filtered into the rest of the neighborhood

“In other words it was a ripple effect in the community, where people looked after each other. So you always had that type of influence to your neighbors influence on you.”

### **Success in life because of Community Influence (Open)**

Success was readily attributed to being apart of the larger community as four of the participants stated:

“Well how do we account for this kind of success? First of all we had community, What I account for a great deal of my success, if I say I had any, has to do with the community, people I could see, and who would tell on me and would teach me, and who believed that in spite of the poverty they saw in front of them, that there was potential. And who said “listen you can do anything and I’ll show you”.

“When I was a young man a family man too, the community people the older people, struggling succeeding if they thought you had a problem they would talk to you about it and maybe they didn’t have anything to give you but if they gave you some good advice that would just give inner strength. You go on and build your own defense if you strong enough.”

There were a few participants who stated that the community has somewhat lost its strong hold and is not what it used to be, the collectivist spirit and positive influence has steadily

dissipated. Hence since there has been a breakdown in certain regards within the black community, this had a direct effect on the youth

### ***Personality Traits of Resilience and Survival (Selective Codes)***

#### **Honesty (Open Code)**

The characteristic of being an honest person, described as the trait of being sincere and trustworthy, was very prominent within the narratives. The participants overwhelmingly stated that being reared in households that emphasized honesty, and integrity were key in their ability to survive and lead successful full lives. These men were young during the Depression and did not have a lot of resources available to them, however, being honest and truthful enabled them to experience life in a meaningful way.

Poverty was not an excuse to be dishonest and steal. These were values that were firmly impressed upon them by their families. Also, a man's word was all that he had and if he did not have anything else, he could be counted upon to be true to his word.

Sometimes one's own livelihood depended on it, as in the case for one of the participants who opened a car mechanic business. He stressed the importance of always fixing things the correct way and being honest with customers because in the black community, word would get around if you did not do what you said and perform a good job. This could be detrimental to one's business and livelihood.

“One thing I learned was to be honest, that played a big part in my success, the little success I made being honest. And of course that went a long way. So set a pattern for your self and if you don't have a role model, that male somebody on the family or somebody you could follow, just set a pattern based on honesty and trusting folks.”

The advice for a successful life was very easily stated:

“Stay out of trouble, be honest get a good job and have a good family.”

Spirituality and Religion was infused in one’s ability to be honest and lead a life of integrity as a few of the participants noted:

“Honesty comes from a dedicated life to Christ. That’s number one that’s number one”

“My family was poor but they were honest people. The number one thing that I would advise anyone is to have faith in God, then yourself. Then if you want to make it through life, uhm what ever you do be honest, work hard and set goals for your life.”

One participant described how his granddad extolled corporal punishment as a way to firmly impress upon him that even though they were poor stealing was not ever an option to get what you want.

“One of the worst whuppings I got was stopping by the “Five and Dime” store and stealing some balloons and stuff like that. So uhm daddy immediately impressed upon me in more ways than one you’re not gonna be a thief in this family and he taught us a work ethic by letting us see him do the work that he was called to do and he was a Baptist minister too.”

“ My grandparents always taught us to be truthful and honest about everything you say or do, if you don’t mean it then don’t say it. If you don’t have it then don’t promise it and if it’s someone else’s don’t get it in your mind that it’s yours.”

### **Perseverance (open codes)**

The ability to persevere through negative circumstances is a recurrent theme within the narratives regarding resilience within the Black community. Since these men were confronted with many obstacles, the ability to keep moving and remain optimistic was often mentioned. Setting goals and having something to work toward was constantly cited and noted as one participant stated, “Set a goal for your life and whatever you want to reach try and pursue it.”

Another participant briefly stated that survival depends on the ability to not give up “The key to survival is to move the word can’t out of your vocabulary, I don’t even entertain the word that you can’t”

“Do the best you can with what you have and you learn to do the best you can on a competitive basis.”

“If you believe in what you are doing, you see belief leads to action and action leads to deeds, but you’ve got to believe in something. I believed that I wanted to be a teacher and I worked toward that goal. If you believe that this is what you ought to do, you just have to keep it working.”

One respondent states that it is not only one's intellect or I.Q that allows for success but one's ability to persevere or have a "Perseverance Quotient" that's most desirable

"You see you don't need all that high IQ you need, what you need is PQ perseverance quotient. If you persevere and keep trying and trying then you'll emerge at the top"

Lastly, another participant summed up the need to keep going in life, even when odds are against you and things are difficult,

"It's been tough but you can't stop".

"Never give up"

### **Self-Esteem (open codes)**

The ability to still feel good about oneself and deserving of positive, decent treatment was not lost on these men, even during these times. They were even clear that living their lives and surviving the experience of being black and maintaining one's sanity in some regards was predicated upon loving one's self even though everything around them made them feel less than equal. These men managed to keep a positive frame of mind about themselves and their community. As one respondent so eloquently stated:

"The only way you can survive then is just know who you are. And make sure you never lose a love for your folk. And go on and just do what you can."

"We are human beings and of the same quality and nature of any other human person and whatever you were going to be or achieve in life it was in your self-esteem"

One participant even stated that “racism” as a social ill was not his problem but the problem of those that chose to be racist,

“If you got a problem with me being black, you’re looking at me I’m not looking at a mirror. It’s your problem; it’s not mine because I’m a man. This is the way that I’ve been all my life and everywhere I go. Some people call that arrogance. I don’t call that arrogance.”

“Don’t worry about whether you measure up to what other folks think you ought to be or where you ought to be. But just stick with who you are and what you’re trying to get to do and to hell with all the opinions. That’s always been my understanding.”

Lastly, the implementation of the Civil Rights Movement allowed one participant to finally feel like a complete man, he stated that the opportunity to finally be treated like a human being greatly impacted him, not only politically but also psychologically.

“No it was only during the Civil Rights Struggle when we had to work hard to bring the races together. That was when we worked hard to bring the races together. I think that’s what I enjoyed the most to see us coming together and the wall of segregation began to come down, it began to crumble. And then we could we would talk to each other and walk and talk to each other and ride together, that’s what made me feel like a real man and when they come to visit me and I could go visit them. I didn’t have to say yes sir or no sir and they looked up to me as a real man. We were still in the late sixties, that’s when the laws started changing at the eating facilities and all kind of stuff and you could

walk into any hotel in the city of Jackson, Mississippi. You know it was one of the first places the freedom fighters came to.”

## Discussion

### ***Framing the Research Findings***

The present study was done to analyze the role of religion, spirituality and family in the lives of elderly African American men raised in Mississippi during the Jim Crow Era. The purpose of the study was to analyze the life story narratives of these men, thereby extracting the information about the tools they used for survival, specifically examining the role of religious worship, spirituality and the importance of family.

My findings suggest that for the majority of these men there was indeed the consensus that life in the south during the early to mid 20<sup>th</sup> century was very difficult. Many were children during the Depression and adults during the 1940's when Jim Crow was brutally enforced in the south. Among all of the participants there is a belief that there were severe conditions and limited opportunities that were sanctioned by the government. Their quality of life was negatively impacted by the restrictions placed on accessibility and mobility of black people during this time. For black men in particular the threat of danger was always imminent and they were constantly walking a fine line grasping for normalcy while avoiding mortal danger.

All of these men in the sample believed that their lives would have been different or less fulfilling if not for their belief in God, their families, community and education. Perhaps these factors acted as psychological buffers from the stress, and depression they could have easily fallen victim to. Consequently, this study explored the nuances of the strategies and factors that kept them, psychologically intact, resilient and alive.

These incredible men made major contributions to the research by sharing their life stories. They were open about their struggles, values and victories. Their life stories highlight the ways in which they survived life in the South during a time that was

oppressive, restrictive and dangerous for black men. Despite this they managed to live through these times, at least 10 of the men were married and had children, and had led successful lives. These men took many different career paths ranging from military service, principals, teachers, factory workers, deacons, farmers and superintendent of their churches and various other forms of political involvement. At the very least these men were subjected to terrible societal constrictions and stress but did not succumb to those limitations and still worked, toiled for their livelihood, supported their families, and thrived.

Many of these men credit their success and longevity to their faith in God and their belief in their respective religions. One must take note that these men lived well into their old age during which they must have learned some lessons of sustainability. Literature suggests that the black church has always been the womb of the black community, and religion has always been a primary means of support, and comfort. Religion was also a common theme that sustained these men throughout their lives and in particular, through moments of hardships. The literature on religion in the black community states that religious orientation is prominent and robust compared to Whites, who report their use in response to a variety of problems and contexts including health issues, care-giving burdens, chronic poverty, poor neighborhood conditions, structural exclusion and interpersonal and structural racism (Dilworth Anderson et al, Taylor and Chatters 2008)

The involvement of the family was also a major factor in their lives. The extended family in particular was a source of strength and protection and support during these tenuous and restrictive times. The literature on African American families greatly

supports these findings regarding African American families and, emphasizing their functions and cohesiveness.

Staples (1972) suggested that the black family is a staple and sanctuary in the community. The black family provided the needed support against the fury of racism, and the pervasiveness of poverty.

### ***Discussion of Research Questions and Core Themes***

#### **Research Question #1**

What were the negative life circumstances that the participants had to cope with when living in the South?

Overwhelmingly, participants in the study cited living in the South particularly during the Great Depression and onward as very difficult and filled with a number of restrictions, risks and dangers because of Segregation. Most of the participants agree that being a black man in Mississippi was dangerous and caused them to be denied access to jobs, and educational opportunities. Segregation highly impacted their ability to live normal lives because under the law there were white only establishments, denying blacks access and “Separate but Equal” was the culture of the time.

Overwhelmingly the participants spoke about their fear of violence in the South in several ways, how it affected employment, and the psychological distress that it caused to them and their families. In order to adequately understand how racism impacted their lives it’s important to highlight the historical zeitgeist of the time.

The state of Mississippi held twenty-two Jim Crow statutes and a law restricting voting rights between 1865 and 1956 as well as six miscegenation laws). Four school and three railroad segregation acts were passed after the 1954 Brown versus the Board of

Education, ruling by the Supreme Court. The sentence for violating the state 1865 act was life imprisonment. These statues were upheld using terrorism and violence thus instilling fear into Southern Blacks. (McMillen 1990)

In addition to employment being affected by Jim Crow laws of Segregation, the Depression had a devastating impact on rural parts of the United States and it was difficult for anyone to find a job. Even service-oriented jobs held by blacks were in great demand by whites. The participants spoke about how difficult it was for them to secure employment. This is consistent with historical data about Mississippi during this time period. One participant sadly recounts, “When I was coming up you couldn’t be what you wanted to be. You couldn’t be a fireman, or a milkman or a policeman, I couldn’t be none of that because I was black.” Another participant who was employed as a porter in a police department, echoed similar statements, stated that he never made as much money as he felt he was worth because he was black, had he been a white man, he would have made much more money.

In addition to limited employment access, personal safety was another theme throughout the study. Many of the participants stated that they grew up in a time when the “white man” was an enemy and that he had privilege to hit, beat and kill you and get away with it. Blacks adhered to specific etiquette norms during Jim Crow in order to avoid recrimination. Etiquette norms included behavior that was prohibited by blacks in the south for example, talking to or looking at a white man directly in the eyes was avoided. One participant stated how painful and shameful it was that it took his pride and he could never be a man in the true sense of the word, that in the South you were always a “boy”.

The psychological havoc that Jim Crow unleashed upon the men was confirmed by the information they shared about their lives. These men were not asked specific questions, by the Principal Investigator, regarding the impact of Segregation or its effects on their lives, however, there was frequent mentioning of Jim Crow as a devastating experience for blacks in the South. One could speculate about whether the long-term effect of years of racial violence and discrimination affected the lives, wealth and psyche of African Americans in general and these men specifically. One also could make the argument that African Americans who experienced racial segregation on a daily basis were survivors of trauma and more specifically survivors of post-traumatic stress disorder, since post traumatic stress is defined as an anxiety disorder that develops as a result of experiencing a terrifying, life threatening experience.

Some of the conditions that gave rise to mental and emotional traumas that justify the diagnosis of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder include: 1) as serious threat or harm to one's life or physical integrity; 2) a threat or harm to one's spouse or children; 3) sudden destruction of one's home or community; 4) Seeing another person injured or killed as a result of an accident or physical violence; 5) Learning about a serious threat to a relative or a close friend or being kidnapped or tortured. The stressor is experienced with intense fear, terror and helplessness.

Applying the idea of post traumatic stress disorder to their experiences remains to be done, however, one could possibly make a connection between experiences of "PTSD" and African Americans who have experienced racial segregation. The idea of the "Segregation Stress Syndrome" (Thompson-Miller 2008) which encompassed the chronic and enduring stress of, as well as the extremely painful responses to, official segregation

were indicated in a study that interviewed 100 elderly African Americans about their experiences growing up in the South during Segregation. Some of the symptoms of Segregated Stress Syndrome are physical, such as crying, sweating and increased anxiety. The syndrome also has some psychological components such as sufferers avoiding situations, individuals or objects that remind him or her of the racial events. In addition the syndrome often includes some level of denial and emotional distancing of oneself from the pain. Survivors of traumatic experiences similar to the event that occurred regularly during legal segregation sometimes have problems feeling comfortable and trusting individuals who remind them of their perpetrators. Victims of such racialized violence often experience depression, anger and anxiety. (Williams and Moss-Williams 2008)

In the review of the narratives it is difficult to ascertain whether any of these men were suffering from PTSD or the “Segregation Stress Syndrome”. There were not given any psychological measures or screened for any psychological illness. But it is clear that many of their experiences in the South because of racism were psychologically painful and shameful. As one participant described being discriminated against because of his race was worse than being poor and the difficulty he felt in not being able to protect his family from the experience.

I would venture that there had to be some level of denial, even if that meant denial of one’s own aggression toward individuals that were oppressive because it could cost one their life. In order to maintain some degree of normalcy and safety; strong feelings of rage and anger were probably repressed by the participants. Minimizing or suppressing negative affect was probably very necessary for the sake of their mental sanity.

The psychological consequences of Jim Crow should be investigated further and more systemically. African Americans during that time experienced nearly insurmountable intimidation and pressure. One could make the argument that constant and chronic exposure to the traumatic, humiliating and shameful experiences of Segregation enacted a psychologically traumatizing effect on all of the men and women who lived through this time period.

Even after the Civil Rights Movement begun and there were more opportunities that became available to people of color, rural Mississippi remained a place with its fair share of economic challenges. Black elderly hold an unemployment rate of 10.1% compared with 4.5% of elderly whites. Elderly blacks living on farms had an unemployment rate of 13.2% compared with 1.1% of whites. Typically there is a 50% income gap between whites and blacks, in the rural state. (Parks 1980) Despite this the participants managed to live and remain grounded in their hometown. As recounted by one participant who felt spiritually inclined to stay in his hometown because he felt “divinely influenced”. Clearly these men still had a firm, belief in God despite the challenges and opposition they faced and felt motivated to remain in Mississippi despite all of the circumstances they were being confronted with.

### **Research Question # 2**

What are the tools or strategies that these men used to deal with these circumstances?

When these men speak about their lives and the challenges they have experienced not just due to political limitations of Jim Crow but overall in many facets of their lives, the belief in God and organized religion was most prominent and influential. Lincoln and Mamiya (1990) argue that African American theological orientations and religious

practices emerged from the unique social, political and historical contexts that characterized the positions of Blacks within society. Further, because Black religious expression occurred within the context of a frequently hostile larger society, the aims and purposes of religious belief and expression were oriented and adapted toward buffering conditions that were deleterious to the well being of African Americans.

All of the participants were very candid and open about their religious beliefs. Although they did not distinguish between religion and spiritual, overwhelmingly these men adhered to a core set of beliefs and rituals that are associated with a divine figure and have a Spiritual sensibility. (Mattis 2000) Spirituality is defined as the belief in the transcendent nature of life. Also it refers to the relationship that one builds with divine or non-corporeal forces.

Many credit God with their ability to be resilient and alive. The themes that surfaced overall were, 1) Living or Dedicating one's life to God 2) Belief in Religion as a lifestyle 3) Belief in God as a protective measure 4) the importance of attending church.

Religion as an important value is consistent with research on African Americans. An overarching ideological system, such as religion, has been positively associated with being resilient in the black community.

### **Religion as a Coping Mechanism**

The results confirm the literature on religion in the black community. At least 10 of the participants held positions in their church, ranging from deacon, to superintendent and pastors. They also substantiate Lincoln and Mamiya's (1990) analysis of the black church being the womb of the community and a source of great hope and strength in the African American community. Lincoln and Mamiya's (1990) studies of stress,

adaptation and depression in African Americans found that two out of the four most common coping strategies for African Americans involved Spirituality (religious and spiritual/ beliefs and religious/spiritual participation). One could speculate that the participants used religion and their faith in a higher power to fend off negative feelings of anger and depression that developed in response to various situations.

### **The Belief in God as a lifestyle**

This is also consistent with Taylor and Chatters (2004) findings that the elderly are likely to engage in organizational religious activity such as reading the bible, listening to Religious programs and the importance of prayer. One participant that knew the bible and scripture very intimately decided to finally pursue his Bachelors degree in Theology.

### ***Importance of Church Attendance***

The participants in the study cited the importance of church in their formative years, in their own household growing up and more presently as a value they export to their own children. Many of the participants credit having a good church life as primary to victorious happy living. This is consistent with Coke (1995) who found that 62% of the participants attended church on a weekly basis. At least 42% of the male participants in the study agree with the statement “I am a religious individual” and also reported that the black church made a difference in the lives of the people in the black community.

Religious involvement with respect to formal activities like church attendance can increase one’s social network and interaction, thereby enhancing a sense of belonging and religious identity. Religious communities are also effective in regulating a range of individual behavior so as to encourage activities that directly promote physical and mental health as well as curtailing activities or lifestyles that increase stress.

***Family***

Strong familial relationships were a consistent theme throughout this study. Participants spoke at length about their parents, mothers, grandmothers and individuals within their household who helped to support and shape who they are today. The majority of the men in this study cited their fathers and grandfathers as positive role models who were extremely influential in their lives. Several participants describe an extremely positive and nurturing relationship with their family.

It is important to note the importance of extended family systems in African American families. Their grandparents raised many of the participants and several were co-parented by aunts and other female relatives. This is consistent with the findings about the extended family and the fluidity and flexibility among African American families, numerous caregivers, including kin and non-kin are incorporated (Franklin 1997) These findings are also consistent with a study by Harel et al, (1990) stating that the family is a source of strength in the black community. In a study on extended kin, 14% of black elderly have children under the age of 18 residing within their homes.

The male presence as strong and influential was especially highlighted for these men, who spoke fondly of fathers' and grandfathers' positive influences within their lives. There was also the consensus that the family structure is not as strong as it used to be, far too many men not taking responsibility as they had in the past.

These findings lend support to research that states black children are less likely than white children and Hispanic children to live in a married couple household. In 2000, 37 percent of children under 18 lived in two-parent household and 53% lived in single parent households. In 2000 the percentage of black female-headed households was nearly

six times the rate of black two family headed families. The point has been raised about whether black children being raised in households that are overwhelmingly single and female headed, are greater risk for adverse outcomes later in life. This does not necessarily mean that there is no partner or role model present within the household. Currently, there are at least 62% of black children being raised in such families. There is considerable debate regarding the influence of two parent households versus single parent. Since considerable variation exists among single parent families regarding their social and economic resources supportive of parenting and childcare (Armato 2000).

When variations in family income are taken into account, the negative effects of single parenthood tend to be greatly attenuated. Weioff et al (2003) reported that a major portion of the increased health and behavioral risks associated with single parenthood are attributed to limited socioeconomic and household resources. Single parenthood in and of it self does not have to be viewed as a developmental hazard to children. The likelihood of adverse outcomes in children is much greater when families lack the resources to promote positive childcare and socialization. These hazards are greatly reduced or eliminated when resources are available to support positive parenting (Armato 2000).

Today there are black youth who are often in the precarious position of being raised in single parent households without the protection of economic support to buffer the ill effects of poverty. One could assume even though the sample of men did not have the benefit of economic support, social support and care was greatly in abundance. What could have been lacking in one area of financial resources may have been made up for by familial support. This is most certainly the case for this sample of men who had strong

male role models in their fathers, grandfathers and community leaders. Even though the structure of the black family has seen its share of challenges as an institution it remains an important source of protection, pride and support for the black community.

### **Education**

The importance of education was a theme that was not originally under investigation, but was prominent within the study. Education seemed to be a protective factor for these men. A large percentage of these men took great pride in either completing their academic studies or being there to support their children's academic journey. The men reference and credit their family's involvement for their success in completing whatever education they were able to receive under the circumstances. The attainment of one's education is very important in the black community, due to many formidable obstacles that often must be overcome.

For these men this point is pertinent as they have personal experience having grown up in the era of segregation and contended with segregated schools. The attainment of any sort of formal learning was not easily come by and was pursued with great tenacity and diligence. For blacks in those days, in the south, sharecropping and farming took precedence over schooling, however, many of these men decided that when they were able they would return to school, and garner their degrees.

Presently college-educated black men are struggling relative to their white counterparts. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the unemployment rate for

black male college graduates 25 and older in 2009 has been nearly twice that of white male college graduates-8.4 percent compared with 4.4 percent.

### ***The Black Community***

There was an overall consensus among the participants that the black community was an extended family. The collective strength of the people in the neighborhood was viewed in a positive light. The general consensus was that the people of the community genuinely cared for their youth and had a vested interest in protecting their own. Since Segregation forced harsh conditions upon the Black community at the time, it was imperative that people worked together for survival.

The sample of men would agree the community is certainly not as cohesive as it once used to be. They agree that many negative things have impacted the black community, drugs, and violence has become more commonplace.

### **Research Question #3**

What are the strategies or personal qualities that these men used to cope?

In the South, the values of perseverance, honesty and self-esteem were held in high regard. The idea that honesty is important takes on many different layers and contexts. One participant who owned a business, mentioned how important it was to be honest in your business dealings because the black community was tight knit during the time and any negative attention could easily destroy or compromise one's reputation and business, and by default, affecting one's livelihood and ability to support the family.

Honesty was spoken about in terms of morality and legality. One participant recalled that his grandfather firmly stated to him that although they are poor, they would never steal as a means of acquiring anything. As a child, he was caught by his grandfather

stealing balloons from the local “Five and Dime” Store and received corporal punishment as a consequence. The underlying lesson was about more than just morality, but punishment and fear. During this time, if a black person was caught stealing anything, it was a matter of mortal danger. If caught, depending on what was stolen, you could be imprisoned or put to death.

Perseverance and Self-Esteem are additional qualities of the resilient person, as described by many of the participants within the study. One of the participants explains that the ability of an individual to keep going and be persistent when everything is against you is important. Many participants spoke about the ability to keep moving through their circumstances. For the participants in this study this seemed like an active attempt to fend off negative feelings by keeping focused on positive outcomes and their futures.

Self Esteem is the judgment we make concerning our worth. It often refers to our beliefs about our values, our value to our families, our friends, community and the world around us. Healthy self-esteem is the result of accurate and honest assessment of one’s worth. (Leary 2005) Interestingly enough these men have what is traditionally viewed as high self-esteem. They were able to make contributions to their families, their communities and to themselves. Although they were affected by their circumstances they were not influenced negatively but retained their dignity and humanity. As one participant stated “We are human beings and of the same nature and quality as other human beings”.

These internalized traits of honesty, perseverance and high self-esteem allowed these men to avoid being traumatized by their oppressive and poverty stricken circumstances. Since these men were raised in households where they were taught strong

life lessons, and to value themselves despite their surroundings, depression and internalized self-hatred seemed to have been circumvented. The people of the community and their churches often acted like extended family reinforcing those same life lessons to value themselves. In conclusion these men were able to avoid symptoms like trauma, and depression because they had love and opportunity to buffer and negate any impact that could have been made.

### ***Study Limitations***

Qualitative research aims to investigate particular phenomenon in an in depth way with a relatively small sample. Qualitative studies are not designed to generalize to the larger population. The results are unique and highlight the experiences of these particular men who lived through the experiences of segregation in Mississippi. These eleven men were educated to varying degrees and all had families. The researcher wants to draw attention to the fact that there is limited research regarding black males and psychological literature. Ultimately, there is a dearth of literature on black male elderly as well.

A small sample allows for a researcher to examine carefully the thoughts and opinions and variety of perspectives of the participants involved. The Principal Investigator harvested the names of the participants by asking to interview worthy African American men in the community of Mississippi. Perhaps, the men chosen were stellar but atypical examples within the community, they were smart and service oriented gentlemen. Many of the participants were chosen through the techniques of “snowballing”, meaning that several participants who were interviewed suggested people in the community who might also be suitable as participants. Also these men managed to

be successful despite many formidable circumstances, and were referred because of their position within the community.

Furthermore the men/participants in this sample chose to become involved in this research. Additionally, the participants in the study were asked questions retrospectively. Retrospective designs rely on the participant's ability to access memories regarding particular experiences in their lives. However, qualitative research does not seek the objective truth, but focuses on ways to make meaning of their experiences.

### ***Implications for Clinical Practice***

One of the ways to engage black males in the therapeutic process would be to engage them in a dialogue around their life stories. There is literature that suggests that it is difficult to engage black men of all ages in therapy. Asking to hear about their narratives of their lives maybe a useful strategy to get around the initial resistance. Also, psychodynamic therapy might provide a helpful framework for treatment considering that many of these men in the study experienced adverse circumstances during their lifetime, and may have unconsciously repressed many strong feelings for the sake of survival. They could probably benefit from a long-term treatment that truly delves into their lives and utilizes their narratives as a vehicle for change. Black men suffer from physical symptoms of high blood pressure and various other ailments at a disproportionately higher rate than other groups. Suffering silently from racism and social inequality does cause elevated levels of stress and health hazards. Perhaps psychodynamic therapy could provide a safe space for men of color to own and be made conscious of those repressed feelings. The danger of such a therapy could be the undoing of protective factors and defense mechanisms and this could prove problematic. It would be increasingly

beneficial for men of color to learn more adaptive ways of coping with stress, anger and anxiety. This recommendation should only be made in such a case where there are presenting symptoms and/or a deep desire for a long-term therapeutic experience.

Clinicians need to understand the strength of the family system within the black community as a resource. When trying to engage African American men, in particular, in therapy, it might be useful to engage the spouse or other extended family member in the engagement process. Also, group therapy might prove beneficial for men of color. A therapeutic group could provide a sense of community in a shared experience.

Health and mental health professionals should also be aware of the importance of religious and spiritual practices within communities of color when coping with difficult life circumstances. They must understand the centrality of religion and spirituality in this population, and as something that many survivors derive strength from.

### ***Suggestions for Future Research***

The study provided information about the ways in which African American men, who are presently elderly and lived through difficult life circumstances and have incorporated religion and spirituality and family into their lives to make meaning and remain resilient. In referencing the historical literature about Mississippi and Jim Crow and the limitations in employment, education, fear of violence, psychological impact of segregation, the development of a psychological theory along the lines of the “Segregated Stress Syndrome” that combines psychological theory and historical experiences of Jim Crow would provide fertile ground for a richer understanding on the myriad of ways that individuals navigate through difficult, painful circumstances but remain psychologically healthy.

It would be interesting to expand on the present study by seeking out more individuals who lived through this time period and conducting a more robust sample. A qualitative study that captures the rich and detailed experiences of the men and women that are survivors of segregation and provides a screening protocol that explicitly queries for mental health issues such as depression, and anxiety, would provide a more nuanced approach to seeking more concrete psychological information about the mental state of the individuals that are sampled for this kind of study.

This study could possibly expand the psychological investigation on the causes and treatment of post-traumatic stress disorder. These men could have possibly been traumatized as a result of the unfair treatment they received. Again, there is a plethora of historical data that captures the legal restrictions of the time, however, there is limited information on the psychological trauma it has caused many.

The possibilities for future research could include

- 1) Looking at the lives of younger African American men who are living through current difficult life circumstances to figure out their patterns of resilience and whether they have incorporated religion and family into their lives.
- 2) Systematically investigating the belief systems and support networks that exist among any population that has endured trauma and making a link between the health and educational disparities that could serve to educate the health communities about underlying sources of stress within communities of color.
- 3) Lastly, there should not be a rigid approach in trying to incorporate various forms of religion and spirituality into the mental health arena. There should be flexibility

when trying to incorporate various faiths and forms of spirituality into clinical work, and this could be accomplished by having an open dialogue between the therapist and the patient. Mutual collaboration could serve to not only enhance the progression of the treatment but could serve to incorporate useful tools around these issues that may have otherwise been overlooked.

### Tables

Table 1

<i>Results of Analysis of Data</i>		
Selective	Axial	Open
I. Living in Mississippi	A. Negative Experiences in the South	1. Employment
		2. Fear of Violence
		3. Psychological/Social Impact of Segregation
II. Tools for Survival	A. Religion/Spirituality	1. Dedicating life to God
		2. Religion as a Life Style
		3. Importance of Attending Church
		4. Importance of Family
	B. Family Influences	1. Negative Influences on the Family
		2. Missing Male Influence
		3. Family as a Positive Influence
		4. Responsibility to Family
		5. Family Support for Education
		6. Verbal Support from Male Members
		7. Supporting their Children's Education
	C. Community Impact	1. Community/Extended Family
		2. Community influence
3. Success b/c of Community		
III. Personality Traits of Resilience		1. Honesty
		2. Perseverance
		3. Self-Esteem

Table 2

<i>Church Affiliation among Participants</i>			
Number	Ethnicity	Church	Age
1	African American male	Deacon Presbyterian Church	84
2	African American male	Deacon and Minister of Music in Hope Baptist Church	80
3	African American male	Attended seminary BS in religious education BS in theology	75
4	African American male	Attended Virginia Union University member of Baptist Church author of a book on the history of the Baptist Church	73
5	African American male	Pastor Baptist Church and State Representative for Mississippi	80
6	African American male	Long-time church member	79
7	African American male	BA/Masters Church Member	80
8	African American male	Business/ Mechanic Owner Deacon of his Church	75
9	African American male	Attends Baptist Church	80
10	African American male	Oldest living Church member	89
11	African American male	Principal and oldest church member	75

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