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Relationship Changes of African Americans with Nontraditional Spiritual Practices

Della Sanders
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Walden University

College of Psychology and Community Services

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Della Sanders

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Walden University
2022

Abstract

Relationship Changes of African Americans with Nontraditional Spiritual Practices

by

Della Sanders

MBA, Walden University, 2008

BBA, University of Houston-Downtown, 1996

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

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Abstract

Researchers have explored the subject of belongingness for decades. However, there is limited research on how belongingness may change for African Americans who transitioned from traditional Christianity to other spiritual practices. In this study, the relationship changes (in terms of family, friends, significant others, and former church relationships) of African Americans who identify as spiritual but not religious (SBNR) after leaving traditional Christianity were explored. The theoretical framework of the social connectedness theory was used to explore the need for belongingness to avoid social isolation and loneliness within a social network. Six African American Generation Xers, four women and two men, who were once active in the traditional Christian church were interviewed. The resulting data were analyzed using Moustakas's phenomenological research approach. The findings of the study revealed all participants encountered changes and challenges in one or more interpersonal relationships. Most participants experienced disapproval from their mothers. The quantity of relationships decreased while the quality of social connections increased. Although most participants experienced mild feelings of loneliness and social isolation due to the limited number of Blacks identifying as SBNR, all participants were committed to their current spiritual practices with no regrets. The participant with the most support in all relationship categories experienced the greatest sense of social connectedness. Positive social change implications include increased knowledge of shared experiences among other Black Americans leaving Christianity that may be used to help mental health professionals support their clients in similar situations.

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Dedication

I dedicate this dissertation to all inspirational African American women who are striving for and delivering excellence with style and grace. Next, I would like to dedicate this dissertation to my mother, Ms. Shirley Henry, and my two daughters, Tia Jade, and Amy Reese, for their unconditional love, support, sacrifice, and grace as I worked to achieve my life-long educational dream. Finally, I want to dedicate this dissertation to my beloved family I lost during this journey: Uncle Gregory Sanders and Cousin Kennitra Stamps.

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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

Most humans have a deep necessity to connect with other as social beings.

According to Maslow's hierarchy of needs, belonging comes right after physiological and safety needs as the most important needs to be met (McLeod, 2020). Belongingness has benefits to physical and mental health because it combats loneliness that can be detrimental (Silva, 2015).

Many researchers have examined the nature of religion in society and its role in belongingness. Durkheim (1915), Allen (2019), Shelton and Cobb (2017), and Saroglou (2016) are a few who educated the world on African Americans' relationship with religion, particularly Christianity. Perry (2016) and Collins (2015) studied the role of religion in social relationships, such as parents, spouses, and friendships. Several scholarly studies have also categorized individuals who leave organized religion and still maintain a spiritual life. Paine and Sandage (2017) generalized some known social challenges that the general population may experience. Although there is considerable research on religion and religious conversion, limited research exists on how African Americans resolve social relationship changes when no longer participating in organized religion.

This chapter contains the background of the study, including a discussion of literature noting the prominence of Christianity in the African American community, reasons why some individuals leave the religion, categories of spiritual identities, and potential social challenges with the transition from organized religion. Next, I present the problem statement, the purpose of the study, and the phenomenon of interest. I then pose

the central research question guiding this study, which is followed by a description of the nature of the study, theoretical framework, and potential social significance.

Background

Christianity is the prominent religion for African Americans in the United States (Rivers, 2019). Enslavers introduced Christianity to African Americans during slavery, and it continued to serve a significant role in building community through current times (Rivers, 2019). Although religion may play a significant role in establishing a cohesive society for many ethnicities, it is an integral part of the historical fabric of African American culture. Participation in the Christian religion often unified African Americans to enhance political power and social change (Rivers, 2019). Additionally, from a social perspective, religious participation helped build camaraderie among individuals with common cultural experiences, such as food, music styles, communication styles, and the shared historical experience of racism (Nguyen et al., 2016). The fellowship among church members created an extended family allowing African Americans to pool together their resources to support each other financially, raise children, and celebrate life milestones (Allen, 2019).

African Americans are more religious than the general U.S. population, with 87% of African Americans being associated with religion compared to 56% of the general U.S. population (Pew Research Center, 2021). Since Christianity is so prominent in the African American culture, it may be difficult to separate religious practices or references from an individual's daily experience in the Black community (Allen, 2019). For many African Americans, even ones who do not identify as Christian, there is an assumption

that all accept or take part in the predominant religion (Saroglou, 2016). It is common for prayer, gospel music, or other Christian activities to be socialized into daily practices, such as recreational sporting events and social organizations (Allen, 2019; Daniel, 2016).

An increasing number of the general population is leaving organized religion, including African Americans. Americans identifying with no religious affiliation increased from 12% in 2013 to 23% in 2018 (Masci et al., 2018). A significant reason for the decrease in religious participation is a shift in personal values (Zhang et al., 2018). In addition, with the considerable amount of unfiltered information available on the internet, particularly social media, it is easier than ever before to encounter varying religious, spiritual, and cultural perspectives.

There are many classifications for individuals who do not follow organized religious practices, such as atheists and agnostics (Johnson et al., 2018; Krok, 2018). A lesser known yet growing group of individuals are spiritual but nonreligious, frequently referred to by researchers as spiritual but not religious (SBNRs). SBNRs usually have metaphysical beliefs and deploy religious replacement practices, such as yoga, meditation, or crystals, or practice elements of multiple religions (Johnson et al., 2018). Most research regarding religious preferences may insert the SBNR group into the “other,” “unaffiliated,” or “religious nones’ categories, which lack a distinction from other nonreligious groups (Marshall & Olsen, 2019).

Although research has increased on SBNRs, there is an absence of data related to African American SBNRs and what happens in their relationships with those who are still traditional Christians. Since religion is an integral part of the African American

community, the transition to becoming SBNRs may affect the relationships of significant others still practicing Christianity. In this study, I defined significant relationships to include church connections, parental and extended family, friendships, marriages, and dating.

According to Gilligan et al. (2015), it is common for individuals to experience a shift in relationships with their parents or extended family members after a religious conversion. Some parents view the transition as a deviation from values or behaviors instilled during childhood (Gilligan et al., 2015). For example, African American parents frequently encourage their children to be equally yoked with their significant other, as referenced in scriptural readings. The term “equally yoked” commonly translates to sharing the same religious beliefs and values with a mate (Williams, 2021). Likewise, since African Americans often treat fellow church members as extended family and sources of support (Nguyen et al., 2016), the assumption is that the nature of these relationships may change if an individual’s belief system changes and if they are no longer a member of the church.

Problem Statement

Durkheim (1917) suggested that being part of a religious group that gathers frequently has significant social benefits, including developing and maintaining interpersonal relationships. There is an increased number of individuals disaffiliating from traditional organized religion to identify as SBNR (Wixwat & Saucier, 2021). The religious transition may leave fewer social connections if individuals do not replace their church relationships (Lee & Robbins, 1995).

Religious conversions often cause rifts in relationships, and some may become estranged after the shift in beliefs and practices (Gilligan et al., 2015). Additionally, the conversion could signal changes in other relationships, such as dating, marriages, extended family relationships, and friendships (Gilligan et al., 2015).

Although researchers have investigated various aspects of African American spirituality and religious conversions, the general problem addressed in this study was the relationship changes of African Americans who transitioned from traditional Christianity to become SBNR. The specific problem explored in this study was that little is known about how the relationships of African Americans are impacted by converting to become SBNR.

Purpose

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the relationship changes of African Americans who transitioned from traditional Christianity to become SBNRs. The primary focus of this study was to investigate the lived experiences of African Americans who left Christianity and now identify as SBNR. Specifically, I explored the relationship changes they experienced due to leaving Christianity. Additionally, I focused on how individuals resolve relationship changes after leaving the church.

Research Question

RQ: What are the relationship changes of African Americans who transitioned from traditional Christianity to other spiritual practices?

Theoretical Framework

I drew the theoretical concepts that grounded this study from Lee and Robbins's (1995) social connectedness theory in which they explained the familiarity of fitting into a social network. The theory involves the degree of feeling loved, valued, and included within a group. I applied the social connectedness theory as a lens through which to view the quantity and quality of social relationships after an individual's spiritual transition to SBNR. Additionally, the theory helped me explore the effects of change of connectedness to the Black community for Black SBNRs.

Nature of the Study

To address the research question in this qualitative study, I employed the phenomenological research design (see Patton, 2015). The qualitative method was consistent with developing a complex, detailed understanding of the lived experiences in the social relationships of spiritual African Americans who changed from traditional Christian practices, which was the focus of this dissertation. I selected this approach because there was a gap in the literature related to the lived experiences of African Americans after converting from Christianity. The key concepts explored in this study include changes in friendships, parental relationships, significant other relationships, and church-related relationships for African Americans who do not follow traditional organized religious practices standard in their communities. Other concepts include spirituality, religiosity, social connectedness, social impact, and nonconformity.

Definitions

African Americans: Black Americans who are descendants of enslaved Africans (Rivers, 2019).

Church relationships: Relationships with ministerial staff, committee members, and support systems (Allen, 2019).

Family: Parents, siblings, children, cousins, aunts, uncles, and grandparents (Nguyen et al., 2016).

Friendship: This is the relationship of platonic affection, including close, interpersonal bonds and acquaintances (Gutierrez et al., 2017).

Metaphysical spirituality: A belief system based on the combination of spiritual, philosophical, and scientific perspectives of mind, body, and spirit (Johnson et al., 2018).

Religion: This is an institutionalized set of organized beliefs, practices, and attitudes, often shared by a group of individuals regarding a higher power. Morality rules, laws, and doctrines govern the behavior of the members of the institution (Best et al., 2016).

Religious pluralism: Mixing elements of multiple organized religions, such as Christian prayer, Buddhist meditation, and Hindu Mantras or Mudras (Johnson et al., 2018).

Religious practices: These practices include attending a house of worship, Bible or scripture readings as a single source of truth, institutionalized rituals, and observances (Nguyen et al., 2016).

SBNR: A spirituality classification for individuals who believe in a higher power participating in spiritual rituals, such as yoga, meditation, new age practices, metaphysical practices, or religious pluralism (Johnson et al., 2018; Krok, 2018).

Spirituality: This is an individual practice related to a connection to something larger than the individual (Jastrzębski, 2020).

Traditional Christianity: An organized religion with a belief in Jesus Christ as the savior. The Bible is the core source of truth (Jastrzębski, 2020). This contrasts with nontraditional Christianity, such as the Church of Christian Science, that does not believe in Jesus as the savior (Wolff, 2020).

Significant others: Individuals joined in legal marriages, common-law marriages, domestic partnerships, and long-term relationships (Immanuel et al., 2017).

Single and dating: An individual not in a committed relationship or actively seeking a partner for long-term companionship (Henderson et al., 2018).

Assumptions

Phenomenological researchers have postulated that discernment can be obtained from interviews with participants who express the lived experience of the phenomena in question (Moustakas, 1994; Patton, 2015). For this study, I assumed that there was a change in relationships with family, friendships, significant others, and church relationships after leaving Christianity. I based this hypothesis on the substantial presence of Christianity in the African American community, specifically that changes to another form of spirituality may mean an individual goes from a religious majority to a religious minority, thus impacting relationships. The specific distinction of being SBNR may

create a unique set of benefits or challenges that may differ from other spiritual identities, such as atheists, agnostics, or other categories. I also assumed that Generation X would be the ideal group to study since older generations are engrained in their behavior, and younger generations are freer to exercise freedom of religious choice. Furthermore, using the phenomenological research design necessitates that participants share their experiences honestly (Patton, 2015). Therefore, I established trust and rapport with the participants to ensure they were comfortable and able to report their experiences accurately. As the researcher, I set aside presumptions and potential biases regarding the research question. The risk of researcher bias is further addressed in Chapter 3.

Scope and Delimitations

The lived experiences associated with the changes in relationships of African Americans who identify as SBNR was the focus of this study. This study only included individuals who identified as native African Americans. The study did not include individuals who solely practiced a single organized religion but did include individuals who practiced multiple religions because they constitute a significant number of people who identify as SBNR (see Valentino, 2017). The study did not include atheists, agnostics, and religious but not spiritual categories. Religious but not spiritual individuals contrast with SBNRs because they engage in religious practices due to social norms and family dynamics but may not believe all the teachings of the religion (Marshall & Olson, 2018). Additionally, this study only included African Americans who formally attended online or in-person traditional Christian church services often and were active in church groups or activities, such as the choir or community missions. These African Americans

identified as SBNR. Finally, I drew the research participants from a criterion sample of adult men and women living across the United States identified as Generation X, being born between 1965 and 1976.

Limitations

Qualitative studies are evaluated using specific criteria. One element of the criteria used for reviewing qualitative studies is transferability (Patton, 2015).

Transferability is the purview through which the results of a study can be interpreted as suitable and beneficial (Patton, 2015). In contrast to quantitative studies, the results of qualitative studies cannot be considered representative of a larger population and, therefore, only apply to each situation in small samples (Patton, 2015). The addition of supplemental evaluations of the participants as required, detailed explanations to better understand the reader, and attaining a surplus of the themes and codes assisted me with enhancing transferability. Moustakas (1994) theorized that between six and 10 participants are imperative to accomplish saturation. A basis for determining saturation was provided by the data analysis at the point when no additional themes or perspectives were discovered.

Another fundamental element of the criteria used for evaluating qualitative studies is trustworthiness. Trustworthiness is evaluated using four elements of criteria: transferability, credibility, confirmability, and dependability (Patton, 2015). I confirmed that the results from the evaluated cases affirm credibility by using Shenton's (2004) techniques as a method to effectuate credibility. I reviewed the extant literature to gain an understanding of the ideas and culture of African American religion and the SBNR

group. Next, I requested consent and informed participants that they had the liberty and right to refuse or cease participation in the study at any given time. It was assumed that each participant genuinely and accurately reported their experiences, given the clear freedom and choice they were provided with. In interviews, I reinforced the precision and uniformity of the participants' responses by paraphrasing them and reiterating the question. Finally, the member checking process was carried out with participants to validate the narratives of their experiences (see Shenton, 2004).

I formulated an exhaustive and thorough interpretation of the processes used in this study. This information was crucial to solving dependability issues. Providing this intricate and detailed description of the steps taken in the study will equip other scholars with a way to reproduce the study and fully understand the analysis. In addition, Shenton (2004) encouraged researchers to use meditative journals to record their feelings about the research process and results to guarantee confirmability. I meticulously specified the design of the research prototype, its implementation, and how to collect and analyze the data to ensure confirmability.

The ability of participants to remember and accurately explain their experiences is a major limitation of qualitative research (Moustakas, 1994; Patton, 2015). Failure to address bias can also adversely affect studies. I used bracketing to discuss personal prejudices and preconceived ideas, as recommended by Creswell and Creswell (2017). If a participant's experience changes over time, there may be a limit on the time between data collection and member validation (Gelling, 2015). Therefore, as recommended by

Gelling (2015), I allowed participants to review the narrative reviews to ensure that what they responded was presented correctly in the study results to avoid misunderstandings.

Significance of Study

A unique contribution of this study is that it draws attention to social connectedness among African American SBNRs when they leave Christianity. Additionally, the study brings to light the lived experiences when a significantly influential figure in an African American's life agrees or disagrees with the individual's conversion out of traditional Christianity.

The study may make contributions to positive social change by promoting awareness of shared or differing experiences in relationships after transitioning out of traditional Christianity. In addition, the results of this study include ideas for navigating through relationship changes for African Americans and other individuals who transition to other spiritual practices. Moreover, the research may provide mental health professionals with a better understanding of the changes in relationships that may occur from a religious transformation and may serve to help them take new approaches to supporting their clients and their relationships before, during, or after a religious transformation.

Summary

In Chapter 1, I introduced this phenomenological study exploring relationship changes for African Americans who transitioned from traditional Christianity to other spiritual practices. Many researchers have studied the social role of religion in society as well as discussed the significant presence of the Christian faith in the African American

community and the unique dynamics of African American families and church relationships. There is also an increasing amount of scholarly research on the SBNR category of spiritual identity.

However, there is a paucity of literature that examines the phenomenology of relationship shifts for African Americans who are still spiritual but outside the traditional Christian religion. Consequently, an exploration of the lived experiences of African American SBNR was an ideal method to understand the impact spiritual transition had on their social connections. In Chapter 2, I will provide a review of the related literature, while Chapter 3 will contain a discussion of the study's research design and methodology. In Chapter 4, I will report the data, and in Chapter 5, I will offer my interpretations of the results, implications of the study, and conclusions.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore and understand the lived experiences of African Americans who experienced relationship changes after transitioning from traditional Christianity to other spiritual practices. For this study, I considered spirituality and religion as distinctive terms. Religion means an institutionalized set of organized beliefs, practices, and attitudes, often shared by a group of individuals regarding a higher power (Rivers, 2019). Religious practices include attending a house of worship, Bible or scripture readings as a single source of truth, institutionalized rituals, and observances (Rivers, 2019). Spirituality, on the other hand, means an individual practice related to a connection to something larger than the individual (Murphy, 2015). Spiritual practices may not match any singular organized religious rituals (Murphy, 2015; Valentino, 2017).

In the following literature review, I analyze current research and conceptualizations of African American Christianity, SBNR spiritual identity, relationship changes with loved ones, and the role the changes in a social relationship play in life satisfaction. The review begins with a discussion of the differences between religion and spirituality and a review of traditional African American Christianity. Next, the SBNR group is explored. Finally, I describe the benefits and barriers to different religious and spiritual beliefs within social relationships, such as parents, friendships, significant others, and church relationships.

Literature Search Strategy

To locate literature for this review, I searched the PsychINFO, PsycARTICLES, and SocINDEX databases as well as conducted general internet searches. I used the following keywords during the searches: *Black, spiritual, convert, organized religion, religious conversion, quality of life, spiritual but non-religious (SBNR), religiosity, social impact, social connectedness, nonconformity, African American friendships, African American parental relationships, African American marital relationships, and African American spirituality.*

Social Connectedness Theory

I drew the theoretical concepts that grounded this study from Lee and Robbins's (1995) social connectedness theory in which they explained the familiarity of fitting into a social network. The theory involves the sense of belongingness and the degree of feeling loved, valued, and included within a group. I applied the social connectedness theory as a lens through which to view the quantity and quality of social relationships after an individual's spiritual transition to SBNR. Additionally, this theory was applicable to the current study because it addresses the effects of changes in connectedness to the Black community for Black SBNRs.

Humans have a fundamental need to connect with others; therefore, social connection affects various aspects of life, including mental and physical well-being (Dias et al., 2018). The social connectedness theory was developed to explore an individual's interpersonal closeness and belongingness to society (Lee & Robbins, 1995). Social connectedness is subjective and derived from an individual's distinctive social needs and

having those needs met through affiliation, companionship, and belongingness within a social network (Holt-Lunstad, 2018). Maslow's hierarchy of needs indicates that belongingness is one of the fundamental needs as humans, which explains why loneliness and lack of belonging could lead to detrimental physical and mental health consequences (McLeod, 2020; Silva et al., 2015). Having unmet belonging needs along with the inability to make viable social engagements with others could lead to suicidal behaviors and ideations (Silva et al., 2015).

Durkheim (1917) posited that religion, among many things, created social cohesion for members of society. Hastings (2016) suggested that earlier research, similar to Durkheim's findings, indicated a decline in social connectedness for the nonreligious; however, there was minimal differences between religious church attenders and the SBNRs related to social connectedness. Though SBNRs are practiced differently by each person who identifies with this group, scholars have found that SBNRs engage in other nonreligious group activities for spiritual practices (Hastings, 2016). Additionally, Reynolds et al. (2020) found that intrinsic spiritual beliefs alone may be adequate for many individuals to combat social isolation. Although, Pospíšil and Macháčková (2021) argued that the need for belongingness precedes religious beliefs as the reason for participation with religious institutions.

I focused on four types of social connection in this study: unconnected, minimal connection, high family connection, and well connected (see Rose et al., 2019). Social connectedness does not focus on the volume of relationships alone but also on the quality

of social interactions (Dias et al., 2018). An individual's perception of connection may vary from the actual size of their social network (Holt-Lunstad, 2018).

Religion and Spirituality

There are historical and present-day challenges with defining spirituality because it means many things to different people (Jastrzębski, 2020). Many people do not separate the meaning of spirituality and religion, which may cause confusion and make discussing spirituality complicated in any setting (Best et al., 2016). For example, the social science community frequently makes religion and spirituality synonymous, which may undermine the validity of certain studies (Bennett, 2015). It is prevalent for religious people, such as Christians, to believe that religion and spirituality have the same meaning and may become defensive with the idea of separating the terms (Saroglou, 2016).

U.S. Christians are known to speak openly about their faith with the assumption that others share the same belief system or lack concern about the varying beliefs of others due to their dominant position (Holt et al., 2014). Furthermore, Christians are commonly critical towards individuals who do not share their same beliefs and morals, thus potentially causing intergroup conflict (Saroglou, 2016). Therefore, individuals who leave Christianity, the predominant religion in the United States, may face several social challenges, misunderstandings, and adjustments.

African American Religion

For African Americans, Christianity continues to be prominent in the community to the current day (Rivers, 2019). Seventy-nine percent of Black Americans identify as Christian, while 70% of Whites are Christian (Masci et al., 2018). Over time, various

denominations of Christianity increased in popularity among African Americans. Seventy-one percent of Black Christians are Protestant, with 53% identifying as Historically Black Protestant, including Baptist, Methodist, and Pentecostal (Masci et al., 2018). African Methodist Episcopal was formed out of the experience of segregation (Shelton & Cobb, 2017). Church of God in Christ, also known as Sanctified, Holiness Pentecostal, has a significant presence with Black Americans (Shelton & Cobb, 2017). Baptists have the largest population with Blacks, followed by Catholicism at 5% (Masci et al., 2018). Other well-known denominations include Jehovah's Witness and Nation of Islam, with the most notable member of Nation of Islam being Malcolm X (Shelton & Cobb, 2017).

Church worship is still highly segregated due to some worship styles, political views, and cultural differences (Nguyen et al., 2016). Some significant differences with African American Christianity are the open emotional expression, the high influence of Christian/gospel music, and the foundation of community life (Nguyen et al., 2016). In addition, the development of Black liberation theology by James Cone in 1970 highlighted the differences between with how Blacks and Whites practice Christianity. In Black liberation theology, it is asserted that Jesus was Black and Black liberation and Black power are interwoven throughout the tenets of Christianity (Rivers, 2019). Although church attendance is still highly segregated, many African Americans attend more diverse churches as personal preferences change (Rivers, 2019).

Black Americans from southern states attend church more frequently than nonsoutherners (Perry, 2016). Black women are the most religious, regardless of

education levels, and they tend to take their religion into other aspects of life, such as the workplace. (Conway-Phillips & Janusek, 2016; Schnabel, 2020). The religiosity of a household is usually determined by the Black woman's degree of involvement in her religious practices (Stearns & McKinney, 2020). Black Americans are more likely to rely on God as their primary social support than Whites (Williams et al., 2015).

Church attendance creates a sense of belonging for members of a congregation and builds camaraderie with others from similar cultural backgrounds (Nguyen et al., 2016). Close connections influence life choices for Blacks, such as healthy lifestyles (Miller, 2016). In addition, the fellowship among church members creates an extended family allowing African Americans to pool together their resources to support each other financially, raise children, and celebrate life milestones (Allen, 2019).

Why People Leave Christianity

Individuals may explore multiple churches to find a place of worship that includes people with similar lifestyles and beliefs (Zhang et al., 2018). When there is a disagreement on topics, such as LGBTQ+ matters, individuals may leave a church and encounter difficulties finding another church that fits their current values and beliefs. This disparity may lead people to become SBNR (Zhang et al., 2018). Others may leave organized religion due to the countless political, financial, and sexual abuse scandals causing significant mistrust with churches and their leaders (Thiessen & Wilkins-Laflamme, 2017).

Lipka (2016) found that 49% of individuals leave religion due to a change in beliefs, while 20% dislike institutionalized religion that focuses too much on power and

causes conflicts. Some individuals may have a negative experience in the church or a negative family-related experience that may lead to a desire to seek another spiritual path, especially in religious families (Nguyen et al., 2016).

SBNR

There are many classifications for individuals who do not follow organized religious practices, such as atheists and agnostics (Johnson et al., 2018; Krok, 2018). A lesser known yet growing group of individuals are SBNR. SBNRs usually have metaphysical beliefs and deploy religious replacement practices, such as yoga, meditation, crystals, or religious pluralism (Johnson et al., 2018). The beliefs and practices of some SBNRs are often referred to as immanentist spirituality that includes New Age and African Traditional practices (Chinedu Nweke, 2018). Most research regarding religious preferences may insert the SBNR group into the “other,” “Unaffiliated,” or “Religious Nones” categories, which lacks a distinction from other nonreligious groups (Marshall & Olsen, 2019). The percentages of people leaving organized religion provided in multiple studies may include those of the SBNR spiritual identity; however, it is possible that breaking this group out may supply a different or more detailed exploration regarding spirituality, especially for African Americans (Ajibade et al., 2015).

Many SBNRs have a clear sense of the spiritual identity and are committed to it (Miller, 2016). One of the biggest reasons for being SBNR is no organized religion groups fit their unique belief system (Johnson et al., 2018). Their nonmonotheistic beliefs allow them to see God as a cosmic force and not a spirit with human characteristics.

SBNRs tend to follow personal ethics and less Bible-driven ethics (Mercadante, 2017). They are more open to believing in a supernatural phenomenon that science has not proven, and in some instances, the openness to supernatural beliefs may lead to a psychological disorder diagnosis (Wixwat & Saucier, 2021).

According to Wixwat and Saucier (2021), most SBNR Americans are more educated, live in the northern states, have open sexuality, and are not religious in childhood. On the other hand, racial minorities living in the southern states or married with children are less likely to be SBNRs than their counterparts.

SBNRs usually believe in universal oneness and focus on the meaning of life (Mercadante, 2019; Tong & Yang, 2018; Willard & Norenzayan, 2017). Their beliefs may align closer to Dharmic faith traditions, such as Buddhist, Hindu, Jain, or Sikh, more than Abrahamic religious traditions, such as Christianity, Islam, and Judaism (Mercadante, 2017). SBNRs rarely attend religious services but pray and frequently meditate (Tong & Yang, 2018). Many SBNRs do not entirely dismiss religious practices but make them secondary (Bennett, 2015). Some may classify as multiple religious belongings, religion mixers, or religion syncretism (Valentino, 2017).

SBNR usually includes scientific beliefs, such as quantum physics, with less scientific philosophies, such as astrology, numerology, energy healing, homeopathy, crystals, feng shui, and psychics. The lack of scientific evidence and nontraditional mainstream beliefs leads to skepticism and ostracization from the general public (Diebels & Leary, 2019; Morris, 2016). Though SBNRs have their own unique views, they are generally respectful of others' rights to have different beliefs (Fatima et al., 2018).

SBNR Mental Health

Henderson (2016) posited that family relationships predict life satisfaction among African Americans, especially women. However, SBNRs may find it difficult to relate to family and friends who are still members of traditional organized religion, raising the risk of depression, anxiety, and other mental health concerns (Mercadante, 2020). Therefore, African American SBNRs may feel a lack of social connectedness leading to life dissatisfaction and mental health challenges (Henderson, 2016; Mercadante, 2020; Rose et al., 2019)

While religious individuals may receive emotional support from their religious practices and connections, SBNRs may not have the same resources to cope with life struggles (Bosco-Ruggiero, 2020; Mercadante, 2020). As a result, SBNRs may experience more isolation and loneliness, leading to mental health challenges (Vittengl, 2018).

Social Relationships

Family

For African Americans, peaceful relationships with parents are essential to their overall happiness (Henderson, 2016). In a religious family, the household family members tend to follow the spiritual direction of the mother, and drifting away from the family's values and social norms may disrupt the family bond, particularly with the mother (Henderson, 2016). Religious similarity predicts closeness with mother and child, regardless of age, especially in Black families (Gilligan et al., 2015).

Friendships

When individuals in friendships share the same religious beliefs, it is known to increase the quality of the relationship with high social support and lower conflict (Gutierrez et al., 2017). Conversely, individuals with religious differences may experience fewer sources of help, advice, or both (Burley & Thurman, 2019).

Significant Other

Religion may play a significant role in Black men and women's decision to marry instead of indefinite dating (Collins & Perry, 2015). Religious parents frequently encourage them to date or marry an equally yoked individual, meaning an individual with similar religious beliefs (Williams, 2021). Several studies supported this suggestion, finding that a solid spiritual connection predicts marital harmony (Immanuel et al., 2017; Vazquez et al., 2019). Religious hierogamy improves marital harmony and parental involvement (Young & Swan, 2019). Disagreements about religiosity can cause conflict in marriages and even affect parenting (Millett et al., 2018)

Mutual understanding and acceptance of spiritual and religious differences is the key to intimacy in marriage (David & Stafford, 2015). Mixed-faith couples are less satisfied in marriage, but spiritual-related communication is critical to their intimacy (David & Stafford, 2015). Communications are usually led by the most spiritual partner, which is generally the woman (David & Stafford, 2015)

In dating relationships, individuals look for a partner with similar spiritual beliefs, especially among Blacks (Henderson et al., 2018). Additionally, living in the South while

growing up in a religious home may reduce the chances of interracial dating, which potentially limits the dating options for African American SBNRs (Perry, 2016).

Church Relationships

The fellowship among church members created an extended family allowing African Americans to pool together their resources to support each other financially, raise children, and celebrate life milestones (Allen, 2019). Since African Americans often treat fellow church members as extended family and sources of support and friendships are strongest when aligned spiritually, there is potential for a shift in these relationships for African American SBNRs (Allen, 2019; Burley & Thurman, 2019; Nguyen et al., 2016).

Generation X

Generation X is the group of individuals born between 1965 and 1976 (Twenge et al., 2015). The ages before 1965 are generally less likely to change spiritually, while the ages after 1976 are generally more flexible in their spirituality (Twenge et al., 2015). Like the baby boomers born before them, they are more likely to express spirituality and religion than millennials and younger generations (Sharma et al., 2020). Though Generation X may be known for questioning authority, they have a high degree of loyalty to their religious practices (Sharma et al., 2020).

Summary

In Chapter 2, The information provided an exhaustive review of the current literature regarding social connectedness, belongingness, religion, spirituality, African American religion, and SBNR identity. I explored the role of religion and spirituality in various social relationships, including parents, friendships, significant others, and former

church relationships. Furthermore, the potential role the changes in social relationships play in life satisfaction were examined.

The degree of social connectedness an individual experiences may not be derived from the number of relationships but the quality instead (Dias et al., 2018). Social connectedness for SBNRs may shift after leaving traditional organized religion but may not decrease as prior research has suggested (Hastings, 2016). Social connectedness and belongingness are critical to an individual's physical and mental health to ward off potentially detrimental loneliness (Silva et al., 2015).

The literature lacks research relating to African Americans who identify as SBNR. This study concentrated on a gap in the literature concerning the social relationship changes of African American SBNRs after transitioning from traditional Christianity. In this study, I examined the lived experiences of Black Americans regarding their levels of social connectedness after the transition to other spiritual practices. The phenomenological approach allowed me to collect thorough descriptions of the participants' experiences.

In Chapter 3, I will provide a comprehensive outline of the methodological approach of the study and the instruments used to measure the quantifiable aspects of the study variables. In Chapter 4, I will present the study results. Finally, Chapter 5 will include a discussion of the findings and my recommendations for future research.

Chapter 3: Research Method

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore and understand the lived experiences of African Americans who experienced relationship changes after transitioning from traditional Christianity to other spiritual practices. For this study, I considered spirituality and religion as distinctive terms. Religion means a standardized set of organized beliefs, practices, and attitudes, often shared by a group of individuals regarding a higher power (Rivers, 2019). Religious practices include attending a place of worship, Bible or scripture readings as a single source of truth, institutionalized rituals, and practices (Rivers, 2019). Spirituality, on the other hand, means an individual practice related to a connection to something larger than the individual (Murphy, 2015). Spiritual practices may not match any singular organized religious rituals (Murphy, 2015; Valentino, 2017).

This chapter includes a discussion of the research question, research design, and the rationale for the design choice. In this chapter, I also describe my role as the qualitative researcher; the methodology used for the study; how objectivity, integrity, fidelity, and transferability were fostered; and potential ethical issues.

Research Design and Rationale

The research question that guided this study was: What are the relationship changes of African Americans who transitioned from traditional Christianity to other spiritual practices? The primary phenomenon under study was the relationship changes of African Americans who transitioned from traditional Christianity to other spiritual practices. Objectively, I defined relationship changes as the degree of changes related to

social connectedness in relationships, such as family, friendships, significant other partnerships, and former church relationships. Moustakas (1994) recommended taking a holistic approach when exploring the phenomenon of interest and considering the data of direct contact vital to comprehending human behavior. In addition, Moustakas acknowledged that research questions are frequently conceptualized from the researcher's personal interest and commitment. This allows the researcher to adopt a role of self-reflection in addition to the role of the researcher as well as an analyst into others' experiences (Patton, 2015). Using first-person interviews allows the data to expose the participant's authentic experience and the meaning of the phenomenon in question.

I also considered using alternative qualitative approaches in this study. The narrative design focuses on individuals' stories but minimizes focus on the meaning and experience (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). Ethnography includes observations of a specific culture and how it works; however, a specific culture and how it works was not the focus of this study (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). A case study design was not appropriate for this study due to its focus on examining a specific event or a more restricted phenomenon (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). Consequently, phenomenological study and the exploration of the phenomenon of related experiences was the most appropriate approach to answer the research question (Creswell & Creswell, 2017).

Role of Researcher

My role as the researcher was to select and interview participants as well as to gather, categorize, and analyze data. I had no former managerial, instructor, or authoritative role over the selected participants. As the researcher, I controlled my

personal biases by first acknowledging and then bracketing my own presumptions and concentrating exclusively on the participants' experiences. I served as a transcriber of the participants' lived experiences pertaining to relationship changes of African Americans who transitioned from traditional Christianity to other spiritual practices.

It is necessary to disclose that I have personal experience with relationship changes after transitioning from traditional Christianity to other spiritual practices as the daughter of a Baptist minister. In my experience, changes in relationships occurred related to the degree of social connectedness after transitioning to become SBNR. I experienced positive and negative changes in relationships as well as a decreased sense of social connectedness before settling into a healthy sense of belonging. My experience with the changes in relationships, particularly parental relationships, led me to consider that the lived experiences of other Black SBNRs experiencing the relationship shift phenomenon could provide valuable information to the research community. I do not conclude that I fully understand the experiences of other Black SBNRs; however, I deduce that some form of changes occurred in their relationships related to the degree of social connectedness.

I provided an informed consent form to guarantee the participants' understanding of the study and my experience pertaining to their participation, research purpose, and procedures. In the consent form, the potential risks and benefits associated with participation were reviewed and participants were apprised that their participation was entirely voluntary should they wish to remove themselves from the study at any time. I protected the participants' confidentiality during and after the conclusion of the study.

The files will be stored in a cloud folder, secured with password protection for 5 years after completion of the study.

Methodology

Selection Logic

Population

The target population was adult African American men and women who transitioned from traditional Christianity.

Sampling Strategy

I used both criterion and snowball sampling to solicit participants. Criterion sampling is used to select individuals who meet some specified criteria (Patton, 2015). Participants in the study were Black men and women who identified as SBNR. I used snowball sampling by asking recruited participants whether they were aware of any other Black SBNRs who were formally traditional Christians. Even though the intended sample was not considered a vulnerable population, I took caution when recruiting participants.

Criteria for Selection

Participants in the study were U.S. African Americans, identifying as Generation X, who formally attended online or in-person traditional Christian church services often, and were active in church groups or activities such as the choir or community missions. The participants had to consider themselves SBNR. The invitation provided a clear statement regarding who was most suitable to participate (see Appendix B).

Sample Size

In phenomenological research, the sample size needs to be large enough to guarantee that phenomenon is thoroughly covered (Patton, 2015). An indication the sample size was sufficient was when all relevant aspects of the African American SBNRs' lived experiences had been revealed. Patton (2015) referred to this as saturation. Saturation is achieved when the themes in the data become repetitive, and relevant new data are no longer being uncovered (Patton, 2015). In the beginning stages of data collection, all data require equal consideration; during the initial analysis phase, the degree of recurrence of a specific data point is inconsequential. Saturation occurs when the rich, comprehensive depiction is achieved as opposed to when a specified quantity of repetitions has occurred. Morse (2015) found it could take as few as six to 10 participants to reach saturation. The number of participants that represent the saturation point is determined through adequate analysis during the research process. To ensure research quality, I continued the research process until I obtained saturation.

Procedures for Recruitment

The avenues used for recruitment were social media, the Walden University Participant Pool, and Researchandme.com. Interested individuals were asked to contact me by phone or email. After the potential participants contacted me via email or by phone to express their interest in the study, I reviewed the criteria, sent them a letter of informed consent, and scheduled an interview when appropriate. I began retrieving data in the research study through 60- to 90-minute, virtual, audio interview sessions once the participant sent me a signed informed consent form. I made audio recordings for each

session while also taking notes. At the conclusion of each interview, I debriefed the participants, explained how the data would be stored and used, and asked each participant whether they knew anyone else who met the criteria for the study they would like to refer. After each interview, I sent a summary of the session to the participant by email to ensure the meaning of their lived experience was accurately represented.

Instrumentation

I used Moustakas's (1994) long interview protocol as a guide to creating a semistructured interview to collect detailed, thorough descriptions of participants' past and current spiritual practices as well as their lived experiences of the phenomenon of relationship changes (see Appendix C). The interview questions were influenced by the research question and derived from the peer-reviewed theoretical framework of Lee and Robbins's (1995) social connectedness theory. I protected participant confidentiality by using pseudonyms during interviews and on all data field notes. A trial of the interview questions was conducted with a colleague who identifies as SBNR. The purpose of the trial was to ensure the questions were comprehensible and confirm the estimated interview length (i.e., 60 to 90 minutes) was accurate.

Data Analysis Plan

To increase objectivity, I practiced epoché. I began this process by purposefully identifying and casting aside my preconceived notions regarding the relationship changes of Black SBNR. Moustakas (1994) defined epoché as a process that methodically identifies, acknowledges, and casts away any preconceived opinions. I bracketed the research question to safeguard its attention (see Patton, 2015) and recorded every

important account from participants that was applicable to the research question, assigning equal value to each statement (i.e., horizontalization). The process of horizontalization required my unbiased receptiveness of participants' accounts while equally valuing all the participants' statements. I recorded the participant's important statements or quotes that revealed how they experienced the phenomenon. In the next step, reduction and elimination, I removed irrelevant statements not pertaining to the topic, including overlapping or repetitive statements. This left horizons or textural meanings of the experienced phenomenon. The remaining remarks were categorized into themes, around which textural descriptions were assimilated. I then analyzed these remarks from the viewpoints of personal experience and the literature and interpreted underlying themes characteristic of the participants' shared or common experiences. In the last step of phenomenological reduction, I organized the consequent themes into a clear textural depiction of the phenomenon (see Moustakas, 1994). After phenomenological reduction was accomplished, I used imaginative variation to reveal the potential meanings of the phenomenon (see Moustakas, 1994). Imaginative variation required considering potentially divergent analyses to justify the textural meanings and underlying themes in the phenomenon. To guarantee the data accurately supported a developing phenomenon, I reviewed the data for inconsistent cases that may have contradicted the phenomenon.

I used Nvivo software (QSR International, 2020) for the management and analysis of the qualitative data collected from the participants. The software tools aided in

organizing and sorting recorded data. The resulting themes were interpreted in the context of the central research question (see Patton, 2015).

Issues of Trustworthiness

Qualitative methodologists have discovered a variety of strategies to increase the trustworthiness of qualitative research (Guba, 1981; Shenton, 2004). Trustworthiness is the key concept for quality quantitative research. Guba (1981) defined the concept of trustworthiness as having four criteria: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.

Credibility

In phenomenological research, credibility is essential to trustworthiness. Measures were taken to ensure credibility and confirm the findings are an accurate representation of the phenomenon by implementing the following strategies (see Shenton, 2004). I wrote interview questions grounded in peer-reviewed theoretical frameworks, literature, and input from the content area and methodological experts, which established content validity to the instrument. I also familiarized myself with the culture of African American SBNR and was able to reword questions and reassess previously addressed data to guarantee accuracy and inclusive analysis of the phenomenon. Participants were asked to partake in a member checking process to allow them an opportunity to assess and authenticate the results and confirm that their experiences have been accurately captured, which enhanced the credibility of the data (see Guba, 1981; Shenton, 2004).

Transferability

Transferability means the extent to which the data results relate to alternative situations and require that readers are capable of connecting and interpreting results as significant and pertinent to them (Patton, 2015; Shenton, 2004). Detailed contextual description, in addition to a variety of participants, enhanced transferability in this study. The explicit accounts will permit the reader to relate to the authenticity of experience and foster transferability of the results (see Shenton, 2004).

Dependability

I addressed the issue of dependability through providing a thorough, rich, detailed report of the research methods that can aid as a comprehensive account of the research process (see Patton, 2015; Shenton, 2004). Providing an exhaustive explanation of the research methods permitted an independent review by the doctoral committee and will afford the reader a complete understanding of the research process and the potential for future study replication. I detailed the research design plan and execution for the purpose of dependability and kept a reflective journal to record self-evaluation.

Confirmability

Like dependability, confirmability was used to achieve objectivity (see Shenton, 2004). To meet this criterion, I provided a comprehensive account of the research design plan so that the results can be validated and potentially replicated. I meticulously recorded how the data were collected, analyzed, and rechecked throughout the duration of the study (see Patton, 2015). In addition, I kept a reflective journal to document the research process and considerations pertaining to research decisions.

Ethical Procedures

Clinical research is overseen and regulated by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (2022) Office for Human Research Protections through institutional review boards (IRBs). The IRBs are assigned to protect all research participants' rights, especially potentially vulnerable populations, such as children, abuse victims, and the older population. This study did not include vulnerable populations. I obtained Walden University IRB approval prior to collecting data, and the IRB approval number is 07-19-22-0029802.

All study participants were given the specifics of the research both verbally and in writing. Signing the informed consent document certified that the participants understood the processes, risks, and benefits pertaining to their participation. I included a statement regarding the participants' right to withdraw from the study at any time in the informed consent form.

I ensured participant confidentiality using the following protocols. Participants were assigned pseudonyms that were used in the storage of the data and in the reporting of results. I protected all print records and documents behind a minimum of two secure locks. All electronic files were password protected. All documents related to the study will be destroyed 5 years after the study's completion. Once the research is complete, I will share the results via a link to Walden University's ScholarWorks website where the study will be published.

Summary

In this phenomenological study, I explored relationship changes for African Americans who transitioned from traditional Christianity to other spiritual practices. Phenomenological research is the way by which lived experiences of individuals can be learned and understood (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). I recruited participants for this study by sending letters and emails to associates, social media, the Walden University Participant Pool, and researchandme.com. I reviewed the inclusion criteria and informed consent form with participants before scheduling an interview session with them. The interview sessions were 60 to 90 minutes in length and were audio recorded. After completion of the interviews, I summarized the sessions and sent drafts to each participant asking for their verification of the accuracy of my summary. I hope that the results of this study become an asset in providing essential information to Black SBNRs, mental health professionals, and the scholarly community.

Chapter 4: Results

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore the relationship changes of African Americans who identify as SBNR after leaving traditional Christianity. The types of relationships explored were family, friends, significant others, and former church relationships. The results from this study could help draw attention to what happens related to social connectedness within this group of African American SBNRs. Additionally, the results of this study bring to light the lived experiences when a significantly influential figure in an African American's life agrees or disagrees with their conversion from traditional Christianity. The research question guiding this study was: What are the relationship changes of African Americans who transitioned from traditional Christianity to other spiritual practices?

In Chapter 4, I describe participant recruitment, the data collection process, data analysis, and verification procedures before presenting the findings of the study. The chapter also contains a discussion of the setting, demographics, evidence of trustworthiness, and detailed results. The chapter concludes with a final summary.

Setting

Participants for this study were recruited by posting digital flyers on social media (see Appendix A) and Walden University Participant Pool. I conducted five audio-recorded, semistructured interviews using the Zoom Web Conferencing platform, and they averaged 60 minutes in length. One interview was completed as a questionnaire due to time constraints. The participants confirmed their consent by replying, "I give consent," to the email containing the informed consent form. Upon agreeing to participate

in the study, I asked participants were asked to meet over a web conference call for the interview.

Demographics

Six, adult, U.S. African Americans participated (four females and two males) in this study. Four participants resided in Texas, one in North Carolina, and one in Illinois. All participants spent their childhood in the southern region of the United States. All six participants formally attended traditional Christian church services often and were active in church groups or activities. One participant was a former Apostle. All six participants were Generation X, with ages ranging from 47–53 years old (see Table 1).

Table 1

Participant Demographics

Pseudonym	Age	Gender	State
F1	52	Female	TX
F2	53	Female	NC
F3	49	Female	TX
F4	53	Female	TX
M1	47	Male	TX
M2	51	Male	IL

Data Collection

Participant Recruitment

The intended avenues for recruitment were social media, Walden University Participant Pool, snowball sampling, and Researchandme.com; however, only social media and snowball sampling were successful with acquiring participants. Interested individuals contacted me via email, and I responded with an email that included the criteria for participation and the informed consent form. I asked the participant to review

the consent form, and if they agreed, to reply to the email with the phrase “I consent.” I also asked for their availability, so I could schedule their interview. The participants replied to the email and confirmed the scheduled time for their interview. The Zoom interviews were audio recorded only, with the average time being 60 minutes. At the time of consent, I assigned a pseudonym to the participant and added to a secured digital note that was created to match the identities of the participants to the pseudonyms.

The interviews were audio recorded by Zoom and transcribed using Microsoft Word during the Zoom call. All identifiable information was removed, and pseudonyms, including numerical coding, were substituted for the participants’ names. I took digital notes during and after each interview that contained any personal reactions, perceptions, and reflections pertaining to the participants’ responses. Additionally, I kept a separate document that contained the assigned identities of the participants. Upon completion of each transcript, member checking was performed, and I sent each participant a summary of their interviews to review their responses for accuracy.

All recordings, transcriptions, and notes are stored in a cloud document folder that is password protected. I uploaded the interview transcriptions into NVivo on my password-protected cloud folder for data management and analysis. The collected data will be stored securely for a 5-year period and then will be destroyed.

Data Analysis

In this phenomenological study, I followed Moustakas’s (1994) processes for phenomenological reduction, imaginative variation, and synthesis of meanings and essences. Moustakas’s procedures provided an opportunity for me to obtain meaning

from the six semistructured interviews by labeling and classifying the collected data into categories of significant statements that were relevant to relationship changes after transitioning from Christianity. Using NVivo 12 software, the procedure concluded in the organization of themes grouped by likeness that were compiled in categorical explanations. I identified saturation during the data analysis process when I discovered no new themes or concepts after the sixth interview.

In the first step of data analysis, I confirmed the correct transcription of the audio-recorded interviews that were automatically transcribed in Microsoft Word as I simultaneously conducted the interviews via Zoom. As I confirmed the transcribed audio material in Word, I stopped the recordings often and replayed them to guarantee precision in transcribing the participants' experiences. I read and reread each individual story and familiarized myself with the totality of the participants' experiences. At the completion of transcribing the interviews, I conducted member checking by emailing their interview summary to each of the participants with requests that they verify that I had accurately captured their experience (see Patton, 2015; Shenton, 2004).

I used NVivo 12 software to organize the data. The NVivo 12 software is designed to support analysis for qualitative studies. NVivo helped me to code and facilitated data analysis to address the research question. Recording memos during the analysis of each interview helped to simplify the selection of my nodes. I also used the node classification in NVivo.

Transcribed interview data were loaded into NVivo 12 to begin the organization and sorting of data. I generated nodes in Level 1 coding, and secondary coding led to the

identification of patterns from which the themes emerged. Using the NVivo software, I was able to sort the data into words that were common among the participants as well as common phrases, which assisted me in developing the themes used for data reporting. For example, NVivo 12 software was used to search for trends in the interviews. From there, nodes were generated that eventually resulted in the identification of essential themes, which allowed me to see the similarities between the participants and their responses.

Evidence of Trustworthiness

Credibility

Credibility is defined as showing confidence in the accuracy and truthfulness of the findings from the study (Shenton, 2004). For the credibility of this study, I ensured the findings accurately reflected the phenomenon through a member checking process in which the participants confirmed that their experiences had been accurately captured (see Guba, 1981; Shenton, 2004). Member checking also helped to ensure that pertinent information was included during the analysis.

Transferability

Transferability refers to how much study results relate to other situations and demands that readers can interpret and relate to research results as relevant and meaningful to them (Patton, 2015; Shenton, 2004). Rich contextual accounts were provided by an array of participants. Their accounts should help the reader associate to the reality of the participants' experiences and encourage transferability of the results (Shenton, 2004).

Dependability

I provided a clear, thorough account of my research methods through typed transcriptions, field notes itemizing my coding efforts, and reflective self-evaluative journal, which function as an audit trail of the research process I followed (see Patton, 2015; Shenton, 2004). The audit trail includes a list of codes evaluated by NVivo software, audio recordings, and my digital notes. This thorough explanation permits for an independent review and provides the reader full comprehension of the research process and the possibility of future study replication.

Confirmability

Confirmability is closely associated with dependability and addresses objectivity (Shenton, 2004). To address confirmability, I provided an audit trail so that results can be confirmed in which I meticulously documented how the data were collected, analyzed, and rechecked throughout the duration of the study. In addition, I maintained a reflective journal over the course of the study to record the research process along with my reflections regarding research decisions.

Results

Using a phenomenological design helped me explore and discover the lived experiences related to relationship changes of African Americans who transitioned from traditional Christianity to other spiritual practices. Conducting this study also helped to address the gap in the literature about the experiences of African Americans who left traditional Christianity for other spiritual practices.

I developed the interview questions to address the research question and to obtain full, rich, and thick descriptions of the relationship changes of African Americans who transitioned from traditional Christianity to other spiritual practices. The thick, rich descriptions of the lived experiences provided by the participants produced several themes: religious background (childhood and adulthood), transition reasons, current practices, family (mother, father, and sibling) responses, friend changes, romantic changes, former church relationship changes, and social connectedness (see Table 2). These themes represented the frequency of shared word patterns drawn from narratives. From these nodes, I further analyzed the data for common trends and patterns in the data.

Table 2*Themes and Subthemes*

Theme	Details
Religious background: Subtheme: Childhood	Most grew up in Black Southern Baptist church Several had ministers for fathers At church frequently every Sunday and several days a week. Church had strict attire and behavior rules
Religious background: Subtheme: Adulthood	Most attended Black megachurches Several held leadership positions including pastor Several changed churches more than three times
Transition reasons	Church hurt and mental and emotional abuse Severe burnout Christian teachings did not resonate Stumbled upon something new that resonated
Current practices	Varied but all include mindfulness meditation
Family responses	Mother: Generally, not supportive at all Father: Most deceased but generally supportive Sibling: Most not supportive
Friendship changes	Fewer friendships Remaining and new friendships had deeper connections
Romantic relationship changes	Increased challenges with Black dating Marriage significantly improved
Former church relationship changes	Most were hurtfully ignored, unfriended on social media, and ridiculed from people once considered family and close friends Most kept a few connections
Social connectedness	A little more loneliness and socially isolated Many desired a Black church replacement Confident in current spirituality with no regrets

Theme 1: Religious Backgrounds***Subtheme 1a: Childhood Religion***

The subtheme of childhood religion” represented the childhood religious experience of the participants. All participants grew up in the South with a heavy Christian presence in their communities. All participants grew up in a small, strict, traditional, Black Southern Baptist denomination. They either attended church every Sunday or multiple times a week for youth activities. Two participants were at church for several reasons, as many as 6 days a week. For example, Participant F3 stated, “We were in church frequently during the week and the entire day most Sundays.” Two participants had fathers who were ministers. None of the participants were given a choice regarding attendance. They were required to “Do as you were told and ask no questions,” as Participant M1 explained. Though several had a few negative experiences, it did not appear to be an overall negative experience. Three participants expressed that they began to question some Christian teachings, but there were no answers provided, and they were advised to just have faith.

Subtheme 1b: Adulthood Religion

Five participants continued to attend church as young adults because it felt like that was the right thing to do. Four participants started attending megachurches in their 20s after taking a break from the church during their college years. Participant M2 embarked upon a 25-year career in the military at 18, so he did not attend church regularly as an adult though he still “read the Bible and prayed.” Three participants had significant leadership roles in their ministries, while one participant became a pastor and

a top leader in the Pentecostal denomination. Two participants worked on auxiliaries at their churches but did not have leadership positions. Three participants switched churches at least three times before finally leaving the church for reasons, including looking for the right fit and problems with lies and judgment. Participant F1 shared, “I saw jealousy, I saw hypocrisy, I saw just nastiness. Started lies about me and everything.”

Theme 2: Transition Reasons

Although most participants started to question Christian teachings during childhood, they did not leave immediately. However, they resonated with Christianity less over time. Three participants experienced repeated conflicts with members or leaders at their churches. For example, Participant M1 stated “There was a lot of dishonesty and inauthenticity at my former churches, so I just had enough.” The increased questioning and conflicts led them to leave Christianity. Participant F2 experienced severe burnout and health problems due to experiences from church. After 14 years of pastoring, she closed the church and left the religion. She mentioned “For 3 months, I just boasted on being an atheist. But that didn't feel natural to me. So I began to look at my ancestors and indigenous people and I wanted to know what it was they practiced.” Three participants did not have serious conflicts at church but were exposed to other views of spirituality that they felt aligned with more strongly than strict Christian doctrine.

Theme 3: Current Practices

The participants’ current practices are varied. The common practice for participants was meditation. Three participants practice a mix of African and New Age Spirituality, including Ifa, connecting with ancestors, yoga, meditation, burning sage,

energy healing, and crystals. Two participants consider their spirituality to be more moderate with a focus on meditation and manifesting. One participant also meditates but is open to reading the Bible, Quran, and other texts that interests him.

Although all participants left traditional Christianity, they did not fully abandon some ideas, practices, and terminology. Two participants, including F4, still identifies as “nontraditional Christian” but are open to other ideas not found in traditional Christianity. At least three still reference the Bible and listen to Christian music.

Participant F2 who is a former pastor is very vocal on social media about her transition and coaches others through their transition after Christianity. She explained, “I first started coming out on Facebook talking about the Power of the Mind. My presence is really big online.”

Theme 4: Changes in Family Relationships

Subtheme 4a: Mothers' Responses

Though three participants have fathers who were ministers, five participants felt strongly that the most challenging relationship to navigate regarding their spirituality was their mothers. Even the participants with deceased mothers did not feel that they could be as free and open with their spirituality if they had to address their mothers. Participant F1 stated that her supportive mother said “I already knew. I was waiting for that day.” Participant F1 was the most overall content in all areas of life. Both male participants had a discussion with their mothers that resulted in distance for a year or 2. Two female participants have not directly talked about their spirituality with their religious mothers.

The participants are still willing to attend church with their mothers at their mother's request.

Experiencing the lack of support from mothers carried some emotion from both male and female participants. Even the thought of disappointing their deceased mothers made the participants a little emotional. Participant M1 stated, "There's still a feeling of rejection. There's still a feeling of disapproval, even though according to the demands, I did everything right."

Subtheme 4b: Fathers' Responses

Most participants fathers passed away before they transitioned. However, they felt that they would be supported or not hindered by their fathers' perspectives. Participant F4, whose mother is deceased, felt some discomfort from her father about her transition. She mentioned,

"I literally heard my dad one day in another room, when I was talking my spiritual stuff, and I heard him say to my stepmom "What the F is she talking about". I just remember feeling like "note to self", everyone is not ready."

Subtheme 4c: Siblings' Responses

The two male participants have, as M1 stated, "agreed to disagree" with their religious brothers. One participant had support from her sister who also left Christianity. Another participant felt some judgment from her sisters before they began to accept her again.

Theme 5: Changes in Friendships

Five of six participants stated that they have less friendships than before their transition. Many of their religious friends left but some reported new friendships that think more like them. Four participants said that some of the current friendships that remained became richer in connection. For example, Participant M1 shared, “Now I can have real life, vulnerable conversations now. I can be totally open.” Other friendships with religious friends avoid spiritual conversations or only speak about spiritual common ground. Participant F2 indicated, “I never had time to make a friend. I mean, did I have ministry colleagues, pastors? Yeah. They're not friends.” She was redefining what it means to have lasting friendships since most of the people she considered to be a friend was from church that deserted her. Overall, most stated that there was a lesser quantity, but the quality has increased.

Theme 6: Changes in Romantic Relationships

For four of the single participants, dating within the African American community has presented some challenges. Two female participants would prefer a mate with similar spirituality and will gladly wait until he arrives. One female participant wants a mate who supports her spirituality, but her mate is not required to match hers. However, she found that religious men want religious women, so her dating options were reduced but she still has success with finding possible mates. Participant M1 is open to dating religious women but does not want “religious or new age extremes”. One male has been in a long-term dating relationship. Participant F2 stated that her marriage has significantly improved after transition. She felt that religion put “caused limitations” in her marriage.

Theme 7: Changes in Former Church Relationships

Three participants who were in various leadership positions at their church reported a sharp decrease in church connections. They were unfriended on social media, ignored, and heavily criticized by people who they once supported like friends and family. Though all three participants have moved on from the severed relationships, it remained hurtful for some. Participant F3 is still in communication with former church colleagues but does not “discuss details of differing spiritual beliefs with them.” Participant F1 had several church friends transition with them into African Spirituality. She mentioned “I have built bonds with my soul tribe who were former church members that have come out of the church.”

Theme 8: Changes in Social Connectedness

Four participants said that they have experienced some degree of loneliness or isolation because there are so few African Americans who are SBNR. The loneliness or isolation comes from a lack of other blacks with similar beliefs. Participant F1 had a distinct perspective about loneliness. She expressed, “Even when I'm by myself, I'm not alone. God is with me. My ancestors are with me and my spirit guides. They're all with me. So, I'm never alone.” Additionally, the loneliness stems from the avoidance of quality spiritual conversation with friends or family. Several participants said that it would be beneficial to have a black SBNR church alternative for social and spiritual growth purposes. Participant F2 shared, “We need something to fill that gap. Because the church has something that the spiritual community doesn't have as far as I'm concerned and that is community.”

Generally, most participants emphatically had no regrets about their transition, even with the slight feelings of loneliness. There is a high confidence in being away from traditional Christianity and some feel they are still growing in their spiritual journey. However, Participant F3 said her only regret is that her child did not have a chance to have “quality social relationships with other Black children from church” the way she did.

Summary

In summary, this study explored the relationship changes of African Americans who transitioned from traditional Christianity to other spiritual practices. Chapter 4 provided a detailed review of the main themes and subthemes that developed from the data analysis using NVivo 12 Software.

The eight common themes that emerged from the study included religious background (childhood & adulthood), transition reasons, current practices, family (mother, father & sibling) responses, friends changes, romantic changes, former church relationship changes, and social connectedness (loneliness and social isolation, desire for connection with other Black SBNRs, quantity vs. quality).

The theme of childhood religion represents the childhood religious experience of the participants. All participants grew up in a Black Southern Baptist denomination with frequent daily or weekly attendance. Two participants had Minister fathers. Though some had some challenges, there did not appear to be an overall negative experience.

For the theme of adulthood religion, most participants attended megachurches. Several participants had significant leadership roles, including a Pentecostal pastor.

Several participants switched churches at least three times before finally leaving the church. Reasons for leaving included looking for the right fit and problems with lies and judgment.

Regarding the theme of transition reasons, most participants did not leave immediately after a change in beliefs. The increased questioning and conflicts led them to leave Christianity. The pastor closed the church and left the religion after experiencing severe burnout and health problems. She thought she was an atheist before finding spirituality again. Several participants had exposure to other spiritual views that resonated more than traditional Christianity.

For the theme of current practices, the participants' expressions of spirituality varied. The practices include a combination of African and New Age Spirituality, including Ifa, connecting with ancestors, yoga, meditation, burning sage, energy healing, and crystals. However, several participants felt more moderate with a focus on meditation and manifesting. In addition, two participants identify as nontraditional Christian, while most participants still use some Christian terminology and practices, including Bible reading and Christian music. Nevertheless, the standard practice for all participants was meditation.

For the theme of changes in family relationships, there are three subthemes, including mother responses, father responses, and sibling responses. For the subtheme of mother responses, most participants felt that the most challenging relationship to navigate regarding spirituality was their mothers. Even the participants with deceased mothers were unsure if they could be as free and open with their spirituality if they had to address

their mothers. Both male participants experienced a temporary disconnect or distance from their mothers. Several participants settled into avoidance of the topic of spirituality while still attending church with their mothers at their request. The participant with a supportive mother was the most overall content in all areas of life. The idea or experience of disappointing their mothers stirred emotions for both male and female participants.

For the subtheme father responses, most participants felt supported or not hindered by their fathers. However, one participant whose mother is deceased felt some emotional discomfort from her father's negative response to her transition. The subtheme sibling responses highlighted the male participants agreed to disagree with their religious brothers. One participant's sister left Christianity with her, while another participant initially experienced some judgment from her sisters before receiving acceptance.

For the theme of changes in friendships, most participants stated that they have fewer friendships as several religious friends left, while several reported new friendships. Most participants indicated their current became richer in connection, while one participant is starting over to build quality friendships. Some participants avoid spiritual conversations or only speak about spiritual common ground.

The theme of changes in romantic relationships revealed that most single participants experienced increased challenges with dating within the African American community. However, all are positive that they will be able to find a suitable mate. One participant has been in a long-term dating relationship, while the married participant's marriage has significantly improved after transitioning.

For the theme of changes in former church relationships, several participants reported a sharp decrease in church connections and being treated poorly after their transition, which was hurtful for some. Many participants still communicate with some former church colleagues but do not discuss spiritual beliefs. One participant had several church friends transition with them into African Spirituality.

The theme of social connectedness had three subthemes, including loneliness and social isolation, desire for connection with other Black SBNRs, and quantity vs. quality. *Five* participants experienced some degree of loneliness or isolation due to the low number of African Americans identifying as SBNR. Several participants said it would be beneficial to have a Black SBNR church alternative for social connection and spiritual growth. However, most participants categorically expressed no regrets about their transition, even with slight feelings of loneliness.

Chapter 5 will provide conclusions drawn and interpretation of data presented in this chapter. Additionally, Chapter 5 will include implications for social change, limitations of the study, and recommendations for future research.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

In this phenomenological study, I explored the relationship changes of African Americans who transitioned from traditional Christianity to other spiritual practices. The findings presented in Chapter 4 are discussed in this chapter as are my recommendations for future research and the implications for social change. The literature review showed that there has been a prominence of traditional Christianity in the African American community since slavery (Rivers, 2019). Previous researchers also indicated that because Christianity is so prominent in the African American culture, it may be difficult to separate religious practices or references from an individual's daily experience in the Black community (Allen, 2019). The findings of this study support the social complications related to leaving the predominant religion in the Black community. Although all participants expressed high satisfaction with their current spiritual practices with no regrets for leaving traditional Christianity, most experienced some adverse effects with interpersonal relationships and belongingness in the Black society after transitioning. The more support a person experiences from their relationships, the greater their sense of social connectedness.

The research question guiding this study was: What are the relationship changes of African Americans who transitioned from traditional Christianity to other spiritual practices? All the participants in this study reported experiencing a change in one or more categories of their interpersonal relationships. The categories included in the study were family, friends, romantic partners, and former church relationships. The participants

provided in-depth descriptions of challenges and enhancements due to levels of acceptance received from their close relationships and the collective Black community.

The participant experiences reported in this study include challenges with acceptance from their mothers as adults. Several tried to make traditional Christianity work even when their beliefs started to change. Many experienced a sharp disconnection with former church members and other religious people who were once viewed as friends and extended family. There was more difficulty dating as a single SBNR, but most were confident about prospective future mates. Participants also reported having a desire for connection with other Black SBNRs. All but one participant experienced a degree of increased loneliness and social isolation after leaving Christianity. The loneliness and social isolation were due to the limited number of Black SBNRs and discrepancies with their family of origin; however, most felt that the quality of their connections with their remaining friendships and long-term romantic relationships significantly increased. The participant who received support from her mother, sibling, friends, and some former church friends did not report feeling lonely. The participant who expanded relationship connections to include non-Blacks also experienced less loneliness.

In this chapter, I provide an interpretation of the findings, the limitations of the study, my recommendations for future research, implications for social change, and my conclusions.

Interpretation of Findings

Black Family Dynamics

It is common for parents to want their offspring to continue the beliefs taught to them; therefore, it is not unusual across races and ethnicities for there to be conflict after religious conversions (Gilligan et al., 2015). However, in the case of Black Americans, the history of the adoption of Christianity in the Black community from the time of slavery may add to the complexity. In many situations, enslaved people were required to believe in Christianity, suffering dire consequences if they chose a different path (Rivers, 2019). During slavery, church was a time away from forced labor duties and a time to bond and plan survival strategies with other enslaved people (Rivers, 2019). The church and dependence on Jesus became a matter of life, death, and survival (Rivers, 2019). It is possible that this trauma has been passed along through generations and causes an innate fear of safety for the family through social learning or Epigenetics (Pishva et al., 2014). Epigenetics is emotional or physical trauma that leaves a mark on human genes that can be passed down to succeeding generations (Dubois et al., 2020). From a baby boomer parent's perspective, leaving the religion is not just about how it makes them appear to their community but potentially includes an inherent fear of harm to their adult children passed down from the time of slavery.

Regardless of the reasons for the disconnect, the trend of the mothers hindering or disrupting the spiritual choices of their Generation X adult children warrants concern. Most participants settled into relationships with their families where the topic of spirituality is avoided, especially with the mothers. Two male participants directly shared

their new spirituality with their mothers, and both experienced temporarily limited contact for up to 2 years after doing so. One female participant has never had a direct conversation about her spiritual changes with her mother, partially due to fear of rejection. Two female participants whose mothers are deceased doubted they would be able to be as open about their spirituality if their moms were present. However, all participants felt loved and accepted by their mothers in all areas of life except for religion.

Empirical research showed that acceptance from families for African Americans is critical (Henderson, 2016). However, an adult child from any background should not be required to satisfy their parents' desires, particularly if it causes a person to have limitations. These circumstances leave an opportunity to create healthier conditions for the African American Generation X adult.

Black Community Dynamics

Social psychology experts have described an ingroup as a set of people with commonalities, such as race, education, ideals, religion, etc. (Fulton-Babicke, 2018). For many African Americans, feeling accepted by their racial ingroup is incredibly important (Rivers, 2019). Within the African American culture, Christianity is a large ingroup within the larger race ingroup. To step outside of Christianity can be complicated and can add a sense of loneliness to an individual. Most participants felt shunned by other Black Christians after leaving the religion. Four participants experienced a sharp decrease in relationships with former religious associates. The loss of religious friendships included people from their former churches and other Black social organizations. The inherited

fear from slavery mentioned previously could be the reason former church relationships abandoned the individual with different beliefs. Not only could being faced with foreign ideas cause discomfort, but it may also be an inherited fear of adverse consequences by association dating back to slavery.

Several participants tried to join other predominantly White SBNR organizations. One participant felt accepted in this environment, resulting in a reduced feeling of loneliness; however, most participants still felt lonely in those organizations due to the lack of Black presence.

One participant, who is well supported by her family and friends, does not feel lonely because she also feels supported by God and her ancestors. Chan and Ybarra (2019) found that the relationship with a higher power is a sufficient replacement for reduced social interactions for some individuals.

Black Spirituality

Since Christianity is a significant part of Black culture, it may not be surprising that many participants still incorporate some elements of Christianity as part of their spirituality. Two participants still identified as nontraditional Christian, while one wore crystals and sages frequently. One participant says they have retired from Christianity but occasionally reads the Bible, listens to Christian music, and listens to sermons. One participant blended elements from several religions. Additionally, one participant did not identify with Christianity at all but will use common Christian language when communicating with others. All participants feel like they believe in the same God but

without religious restrictions. Though core beliefs may have changed for some, some Christian behaviors remain.

One participant engages in a form of African spirituality, which is a specific movement among some African American women. Though she indicated that she follows most principles, she has pulled back a little because it felt too much like organized religion.

Mental Health Implications

An individual's spirituality is a significant part of life. It is easy for some to think that transitioning from one form of spirituality to another does not require mental health support; however, the findings of this study signal varying degrees of emotional pain suffered from changing interpersonal relationships as a result of transitioning to a new form of spirituality. Humans are social beings, and most humans desire to be loved. It is possible that emotional challenges could occur if an individual loses love solely due to a personal spiritual choice. In some cases, the mere thought of hurting their baby boomer mothers caused otherwise strong, confident participants to feel troubled.

Though some behaviors are common in relationships, they may not be healthy from an emotional or mental perspective. In this study, I found what appears to be codependency in some family relationships, friendships, and even former church relationships. Codependency describes an imbalance of concern for others over oneself (Dias et al., 2021). Being in a codependent relationship and recovering from one can result in a need for mental health care.

As Generation X members, with ages ranging from 41–56 years old as of 2022, putting the desires of parents over or near their own needs could be an opportunity for participants to create a healthier situation in their lives. Moreover, former religious SBNRs who spent much of their free time in church may need to adjust emotionally or mentally to life without church. In addition, the tendency of some African Americans to restrict their social interactions with only other African Americans in a spiritual setting could also be worth exploring. Hence, all the above might indicate a degree of codependency or recovery from codependency.

One participant referred to her transition as “coming out of the closet.” Transitioning to a way of life that is not traditional and conservative, especially in the Black community, can present social challenges. In future research, it may be worth exploring the similarities and differences of coming out of the closet with sexuality and spirituality for African Americans.

It is common for SBNRs to experience anxiety, depression, and other mental health concerns related to their spiritual path (Vittengl, 2018). Spirituality and religion encompass an individual, not just on the spiritual level, but on biological, social, and psychological levels (Braghetta et al., 2021). Mental health professionals must discern the origin of the mental health concerns with strong consideration for the role interpersonal relationships play in an individual’s challenges regardless of age, gender, and satisfaction with their spirituality.

Theoretical Framework Applied

The theoretical framework of this study was based on Lee and Robbins's (1995) social connectedness theory and Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of needs. The social connectedness theory provided the foundation for understanding the importance of belongingness for an individual. The social connectedness theory contains an explanation of the sense of belonging and the degree of feeling loved that an individual experiences within a social network. I used the social connectedness theory as a lens through which to view the quantity and quality of social relationships after an individual's spiritual transition to SBNR. Additionally, this theory applied to this study because it addressed the effects of changes in Black SBNRs' connectedness to the Black community.

Social connectedness is subjective and derived from an individual's distinctive social needs and having those needs met through affiliation, companionship, and belongingness within a social network (Holt-Lunstad, 2018). Based on the responses from most participants, they feel that the quality of their friendships improved, but most experienced some challenges with family relationships, particularly with their mothers. One participant said that her friendship-related social life is starting over at ground zero; however, her marriage is much stronger than before.

In Maslow's hierarchy of needs, belongingness is the third most fundamental human need, which explains why loneliness and lack of belonging can lead to detrimental physical and mental health consequences (McLeod, 2020; Silva et al., 2015). If the need to be loved and belong is not met, resolving higher-level needs such as esteem and self-actualization can be challenging. The results of this study indicate that though most

participants feel a greater sense of loneliness due to the lack of support in the Black community, the quality of fewer friendships and marriage fills a critical belonging need. Furthermore, all participants reported an increased quality in at least one essential relationship category. Therefore, if the relationships deemed crucial to an individual have improved quality or are at least functional, then social connectedness is satisfactory and the Maslow belonging need is met.

It is important to recognize that all participants with mothers who are not deceased still maintained a functional relationship with their mothers. Therefore, considering the closeness of Black adult children with their families, I recommend further research be conducted to determine what happens if a Black SBNR experiences a permanently severed relationship with their mothers due to religiosity. The researcher could explore if the severed relationship would cause dissatisfaction with social connectedness and Maslow's belonging need.

Limitations

The limitations of this study include that all participants were born in the Southern region of the United States, though one participant currently lives in the Midwest. This geographic sampling may prevent the study from being generalized to other African Americans raised in the northern United States. In addition, the study included primarily single participants. There was one married participant, but there may be more rich information not covered in this study regarding marriages of other Black SBNRs. Additionally, the study did not include Black atheists and the differences between this group and SBNRs. Finally, this research study only focused on the lived

experiences of the Generation X population and did not include individuals from other generations.

Recommendations

Recommendations for further research include exploring the lived experiences of African American SBNR from northern regions of the United States compared to the southern region. Additionally, studying changes in married SBNR may be a quality research opportunity. Another recommendation for further research is to explore Black SBNRs with the appearance of being a traditional Christian for social purposes. Additionally, further research could include a detailed analysis dedicated to Black SBNR and their relationships with their mothers. Finally, the last recommendation is to explore the similarities between coming out as a Black LGBTQ+ and a Black SBNR.

Implications

The information obtained from this research study can provide insight for mental health professionals to support their clients in overcoming emotional traumas associated with changes in interpersonal relationships. As a result, this study promotes positive social change that strengthens Black SBNRs with direction to improve their relationships.

Conclusion

Based on the results of this study, many African American SBNRs have experienced social challenges with leaving traditional Christianity for several reasons. Some reasons include complications with their mothers' acceptance and fitting into the Black community. Additionally, challenges occurred with leaving church members and church-related service activities.

Some of these are experiences and relationship changes that resemble codependence when priorities are out of balance. There is a difference between omission and discretion. There is a delicate balance between being too open and too closed. It is important to know what and when to share information with others about spirituality and beliefs because it is a deeply personal thing.

Religious trauma is a widely known phenomenon that may require mental health support. However, the depth of the pain sustained in the Black community from the rejection from religious people who were once considered dependable family or friends could be easily overlooked or minimized. This pain could hurt an individual as much as rejection from immediate family. Moreover, this pain of rejection does not just come from former church relationships. Since traditional Christianity is intertwined into the overall Black experience in the US, particularly in the south, the rejection from religious people can come from other Black organizations and other social settings.

Humans are social beings and wanting camaraderie with others is natural. Connection is even more critical for some Black SBNR to meet with others like them to satisfy their social-spiritual needs. This requirement is not as great for the general population of SBNRs as many are willing to careen this highly personalized path individually (Wixwat & Saucier, 2021).

Black spirituality is not a simple concept to understand. The SBNR category of people adds a complex perspective to spirituality and Black culture. Most participants continued to have some form of religious habits. However, all participants felt that moving away from organized religion was essential. Therefore, the category of SBNR

may not be the best fit for this study's participants. Agnostic theists believe in one or more deities but do not have a specific spiritual practice (Fodor, 2019). The idea of practicing multiple organized religions does not fit either, as that signals that a person practices doctrine from more than one organized religion, such as Catholicism and Hinduism. This study seems to have uncovered a new category I have labeled Personal Jurisdiction Spirituality (PJS). Within this category, an individual has the freedom to partake in organized religion behaviors while practicing other forms of spirituality. PJS is a fusion of religion and spirituality as the individual considers appropriate. Though this category can be generalized to any racial background, I believe it is highly present with African Americans since religiosity is woven into the fabric of the Black experience. Therefore, it is difficult to fully separate from it, especially for those who were once greatly involved in religion.

Overall, Black PJSs are happy with their decision to transition from traditional Christianity. However, there is an opportunity for mental health support from the rejection, and other negativity experienced related to the transition. All participants recommend that other Black PJSs be true to themselves regardless of the social changes. It takes bravery to stand up for an individual's beliefs and seek answers to questions that may result in some social dilemmas. However, every human being must decide what is most vital to reach their highest life satisfaction.

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Appendix: Interview Questions

Beginning Interview

1. How would you describe yourself? e.g., age, marital status, race, etc.

Childhood Religious

2. Tell me about your childhood religious practices.

Adulthood Religious

3. Tell me about your adulthood religious practices.

Transition Decision

4. What led you to decide to transition to a different spiritual practice?
5. What was the most complicated part of the transition?
6. Who was involved in your decision to transition?
7. Was there a time when you stayed in your childhood religion out of fear?

Current Practice

8. Tell me a story about your current spiritual practices.
9. Tell me about any social challenges or enhancements you have experienced related to your current practices.

Relationship Changes

10. What changes in relationships with your family have you experienced since you transitioned to your current practices.
11. Describe any changes in friendships since you transitioned to your current practices.

12. Describe any changes in your romantic life since you transitioned to your current practices.
13. Describe any changes in your relationships with members of your former church since you transitioned to your current practices.
14. Describe the changes in the quantity of social relationships after your transition.
15. To what extent was social isolation or loneliness present after changes in any of your relationships?
16. How did you maintain or create a new sense of belongingness after your relationship changes?
17. Whose support mattered the most to you during and after your transition?
18. Describe how it made you feel for that person to offer or decline support you?

End of Interview

19. Before the end the interview, please share anything you would like to add to your story.
20. How has participating in today's interview been for you? e.g., thoughts and feelings that have come up.