

“We Shall Overcome”: A Grounded Theory Analysis of Psychological Coping in African-
American Spirituals

Tamyra Crossley

A Dissertation Submitted to the Faculty of
The Chicago School of Professional Psychology
In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
For the Degree of Doctor of Psychology

June 20, 2017

ProQuest Number: 10682597

All rights reserved

INFORMATION TO ALL USERS

The quality of this reproduction is dependent upon the quality of the copy submitted.

In the unlikely event that the author did not send a complete manuscript and there are missing pages, these will be noted. Also, if material had to be removed, a note will indicate the deletion.



ProQuest 10682597

Published by ProQuest LLC (2017). Copyright of the Dissertation is held by the Author.

All rights reserved.

This work is protected against unauthorized copying under Title 17, United States Code
Microform Edition © ProQuest LLC.

ProQuest LLC.
789 East Eisenhower Parkway
P.O. Box 1346
Ann Arbor, MI 48106 – 1346

Unpublished Work

Copyright 2017 by Tamyra Crossley

All Rights Reserved

PREVIEW

“We Shall Overcome”: A Grounded Theory Analysis of Psychological Coping in African-
American Spirituals

A Dissertation Submitted to the Faculty of
The Chicago School of Professional Psychology
In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
For the Degree of Doctor of Psychology

Tamyra S. Crossley

2017

Approved By:

Cynthia Lubin Langtiw, PsyD, Associate Professor, Dissertation Chairperson

Claude Barbre, M.S., M.Div., Ph.D., L.P., Full Professor, Dissertation Reader

Acknowledgements

Giving the utmost honor to the Most High for his continued guidance and wisdom throughout my life and this dissertation process. Many thanks to my chair, Dr. Cynthia Langtiw, for pushing me toward greatness at every step of this process, even when I was frustrated that she would not just give me the answers. Much gratitude to my reader, Dr. Claude Barbre, for his awesome knowledge of so many different topics and helping to add depth to my own thoughts and findings about Spirituals. Without the both of you, I would not have fully been able to do justice to this topic nor to the ancestors who endured to create such an art form.

I cannot express how grateful I am to have such supportive family and friends, my Uncle Red and Aunt Gwen, best friend Shakari, and extended and “adopted” family members who have opened their homes and hearts to me, supporting me over the last four years. You all will hold a special place in my legacy, in my thoughts, prayers, and heart. To all others I met along the way, thank you for your words, your wisdoms, your contributions, and your support.

To my mother, there are not enough words to describe how big a role you have played in where I am today and the different successes I have accomplished. This dissertation is done in your honor; this research is for you.

Abstract

Surviving the oppressive circumstances of slavery prompted Africans in America to create an outlet for their pain and suffering in the form of African American Spirituals, which allowed a glimpse into the existential world of those enslaved and their efforts to seek freedom and peace. The current study aimed to understand the psychological function of African American Spirituals by examining the lyrics of twenty-five Spirituals from a variety of archetypal, thematic, and functional categories. A Constructivist Grounded Theory methodology was used to develop a model that explains the process of psychological coping evident within Spirituals. Data analysis revealed concepts involved in the process of coping such as Oppression, Shifts in Affect, Hopelessness, Powerlessness, Endurance, Physical Freedom/Escape, Freedom through Death, Spirituality, Social Network, Relief, and Descriptive Language; concepts that support and illustrate domains of Africultural coping. Results contribute to the development of a psychological and cultural understanding of African American Spirituals that adds to current literature about culture specific coping practices for African Americans.

Table of Contents

Chapter 1: Introduction.....	1
Chapter 2: Literature Review.....	9
African-Centered Philosophy	9
African Spirituality.....	12
African American Spirituals.....	13
Slavery.....	16
Religious Teachings of the Slave Master	18
New Representations of Black Christianity.....	20
African Influences on Spirituals.....	21
Ring Shouts	22
Spirit Possession in the Spirituals.....	23
Prominent Elements in African Music	24
Call and Response Singing.....	25
The Spirituals as Religious Songs.....	26
The Spirituals as Social Songs	27
The Spirituals as History	28
The Spirituals as Rebellion	29
Resistance	30
Secret Messages.....	32
The Legacy of Negro Spirituals	33
The Civil Rights Movement	33
The Evolution of Negro Spirituals	35

Blues	35
Gospel & Jazz	36
R&B, Soul, & Funk Music	36
Rap Music & Hip Hop	37
The African American Musical Culture	38
Psychology & Negro Spirituals	38
Statement of Purpose	40
Chapter 3: Methodology	42
Sampling	43
Data Collection	45
Data Analysis	47
Maintaining Integrity	49
Chapter 4: Results	50
Oppression	51
Implicit & Explicit Victimization	51
Separation & Loss	51
Shifts in Affect	52
Hopelessness	53
Powerlessness	54
Endurance	56
Physical Freedom/Escape	57
Freedom through Death	58
Spirituality	60

Spiritual Guidance & Support from God.....	60
Communicating with the Divine.....	62
Social Network.....	63
Elements of Kinship	63
Connectivity & Harmony	64
Collective Strength	64
Relief	65
Descriptive Language.....	67
Secondary Meanings.....	67
Literary Devices	67
Model of Psychological Coping in African American Spirituals	71
Chapter 5: Discussion	74
Introduction	74
Stress & Coping	76
Acculturative Stress.....	77
African American Coping	78
Cognitive Appraisal and Emotional Debriefing	80
Collective Coping.....	81
Spiritual-Centered Coping.....	83
Ritual-Centered Coping.....	85
The TRIOS Model.....	86
Culture-Specific Coping & Stress	88
Conclusion.....	90

Limitations.....	91
Clinical Implications.....	91
Directions for Future Research.....	93
Concluding Remarks	93
References.....	95

PREVIEW

List of Tables

Table 1. Table of African American Spirituals and Descriptions of Their Purpose.....	46
--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------	----

PREVIEW

List of Figures

Figure 1. Model of Psychological Coping from Grounded Theory Analysis.....	71
----------------------------------------------------------------------------	----

PREVIEW

Chapter 1: Introduction

The existence of slavery in America has been a taint on the psyche and soul of the United States since its inception, resulting in a sense of shame that saturates the transmission of history. Many individuals refuse to acknowledge the impact that the history of slavery has had on the lives of people of African descent, a history that began over 350 years ago when Africans were brought to American shores against their will (Cone, 1991). But, there is reason to believe, to hope, that the struggle and suffering that occurred was not in vain; inherent in the history of slavery, a resilient people endured who were set on reaching physical, psychological, and spiritual freedom from their oppressors. Africans brought with them a rich history of singing and dancing that involved a profound sense of communion and tradition (Costen, 2001). This history contributed and evolved into a musical influence that gives insight into the minds of a people in bondage; this musical influence has inspired many cultural genres today, especially in regard to African American (Negro) Spirituals (Jones, 1993). Examining the influences of slavery and spirituality in the creation of Negro Spirituals increases the likelihood of understanding how their conception created such a strong race of people. In doing so, issues of resilience and psychological coping can be examined through scholarly analysis.

The American institution of slavery was, in many ways, atypical of the New World overall. In the rest of the Americas, there was a stark divide between slaves and slave owners. This was partly due to the nature of slavery in places such as the Caribbean and South America, where slave owners relied on economics of scale to produce a profit in sugar production. Because it was such a complex and labor-intensive industry, most slave owners in these regions had to import more slaves to handle the work demand (Nielson, 2011). This resulted in massive plantations of hundreds of slaves, where blacks outnumbered whites almost ten to one.

However, in America, the demographics between slaves and slave owners were very different. Because crops like tobacco and cotton could be produced on a significantly smaller scale, plantations were considerably smaller as was the ratio of the slave population relative to the White population. Even at their peak numbers, blacks constituted a minority of the population overall, even in the Deep South, until the invention of the cotton gin (Nielson, 2011). The developments following Whitney's invention revolutionized the situation. Results of the new cotton industry, and of the cessation of African imports, became strikingly manifest. The world's increasing need for cotton resulted in an enormous demand for slaves in the cotton belt, thereby increasing the slave population (Phillips, 1905).

North American slaves had relatively frequent and regular contact with the White population, and slave owners inserted themselves into virtually every aspect of their slaves' existence (Kolchin, 1993). The effect of the slave owner's interference into the everyday lives of their slaves provides a very important glimpse into what made North American slavery so unique and, likewise, so alarming. Rules governing slave life were oppressive, dictating everything from when slaves went to sleep at night to what language they were allowed to speak. The concrete presence of the slave master or his overseers meant that the rules were strictly enforced on a consistent basis, often by means of brutal physical abuse especially if the rules were broken (Blount, 1995). The slave who broke the rules would be made an example of and ultimately used as a cautionary tale to keep others more cooperative. Punishment on the plantation was often unpredictable in nature and a slave might find himself breaking a rule without intent (Blount, 1995; Neilson, 2011). The randomness of punishment forced slaves to adopt the mentality that they were always being watched and their behavior could be judged unfavorably at any given moment. This dynamic is a kind of psychological and physiological terrorism, a

dehumanization. Through these forms of dehumanization, the slaveholders could multiply their presence, even in their absence, in the minds and on the bodies of those they attempted to control (Nielson, 2011). Along with these effects, slaves were forced to watch as their families were separated and sold to different parts of the southern United States while they were shackled, helpless and powerless to stop what was happening. This was the harsh reality of their new lives (Kolchin, 1993).

To endure in the face of such torture and dehumanization, the African slaves fused the spirit of Christianity, among other things, with their ancestral soul and created the New Black Christianity. They brought to the Christian service not only religious traditions from Africa but also established methods of treating musical and invocalational ideas. Music was integrated into every phase of African life from birth to death, with African slaves using it to influence and create African American (Negro) Spirituals (Alexander, 2014). This thesis examines the nature of Spirituals to understand their foundational psychological function within the slave community.

In order to survive the harsh conditions of slavery, slaves needed an outlet for their pain, frustration, and burgeoning sense of hopelessness. The Spirituals allow a glimpse into their struggle because these songs, better than anything else, reveal the spirituality of the slaves, their self-understanding, their understanding of God, their belief in Jesus, and their hope in the action of the Holy Spirit to help them stay in the race until freedom came (Hayes, 2012). For example, DuBois (1903) discussed both the spiritual and liberative aspects of the songs. He believed that through all the sorrow of the Spirituals, there breathes a hope, a faith in the ultimate justice of things. The minor cadences of despair change often to triumph and calm confidence. Exploring the critical role of Spirituals in the development of African American spirituality shows that these songs are truly an extension of the very being of those enslaved (DuBois, 1903).

The songs speak to the hearts and souls of listeners because they came from the hearts and souls of a people who, with no foreseeable viable future, should have given in to despair and defeat. They instead rallied around Jesus Christ and the God of Creation and poured out their hopes and dreams, their fears and sorrows, because slavery contradicted God. Africans contended that God willed their freedom and not their slavery, which is why many Spirituals focus on biblical passages that stress God's involvement in the liberation of oppressed people such as with Moses leading the Israelites from bondage (Cone, 1991). In doing so, they created a body of music that continues to bring solace to many today while simultaneously building a new community, using these songs as brick and mortar as pathways on their journey to freedom (Hayes, 2012).

Negro Spirituals are songs that were composed and transmitted spontaneously among communities of Black slaves in the American South from about the mid-seventeenth century to the latter portion of the nineteenth century. Their historical setting and exigency characterize them as unique, sacred, profound, and priceless (Costen, 2001). Spirituals are known by their poetic content, simplistically expressed, and often reiterated so that the community would hear the intended message. The poetic message was informed by the existential slave environment through an oral process that allowed changes in the environment and feelings of the singers to dictate the manner of performance. Thus, both the poetic content and the performance style remained open-ended, so that by definition Spirituals are songs that allowed for variations according to the manner of human spirits and the empowerment of the Holy Spirit (Costen, 2001; Jones, 1993). For example, one of the most familiar of the Spirituals captures and expresses the deeply personal experience of God and its effects on the affected individual. "Ev'ry Time I Feel the Spirit" offers the individual and the witnessing community a personally meaningful religious

experience in which participants consistently felt the presence, support, and direction of the divine spirit (Jones, 1993).

The Spirituals provided a momentary and sometimes lasting psychological distraction from dealing with the enormity of the work to be done. This helped them keep their minds sane and occupied while they sang songs with great imagination of one day making it to freedom land (Omo-Osagie, 2007). They became their source of strength to endure and their method of appealing to God directly. According to Fredrick Douglass, the musical tones “told a tale of woe,” were “loud, long, and deep,” and “breathed the prayer and complaint of souls boiling over with the bitterest anguish” (Stuckey, 2006, p. 452).

Not only was every tone a testament against slavery but a prayer to God for deliverance from chains, and therein lay the sacred quality of the music. For example, the Spiritual “Ride on King Jesus!” highlights the resolve of generations of African Americans who intended for the power behind the song to further strengthen the mounting resistance to centuries of slavery. In singing and dancing this song, each participant felt, with complete determination, “No man can-a hinder me” (Jones, 1993). It hails a music that is strongly at odds with slaveholder notions of the contented slave and responsible master. The Spirituals convey to its listeners the same feeling of rootlessness and misery and are religious but also provide a worldly view and tends to be more generalized in its expression rather than specific, more figurative in its language than direct, and more expressive of group feelings than individual ones (Stuckey, 2006).

In portraying the lives of southern Black characters in stark terms, Alice Walker indicated that even people whose lives have been filled with violence and despair are able to transform themselves in positive and creative ways (Jenkins, 2005). Jenkins proposed that the creative and resilient use of imagination in conceiving alternative possibilities has fueled the kind of action

necessary to help African Americans endure and change their circumstances. The concept of alternate possibilities that makes the Spirituals so unique to people of African descent showed slaves' refusal to give up hope in imagining a better world than the one they occupied. Mays (1933) asserted that Spirituals fit a compensatory pattern because they were ideas that enabled Negroes to endure hardship, suffer pain, and withstand maladjustment. However, Spirituals were also revolutionary in nature.

Cone (1991) affirmed that, rather than passive songs of tortured souls acquiescing in their hopeless fate while longing for their heavenly reward, the Spirituals were theological texts that laid the groundwork for escape plans, rebellions, and other forms of resistance to their enslavement. Spirituals reveal more than just simple religious faith and go far beyond ordinary religious boundaries. They are songs of longing and aspiration as well as chronicles of the Black slave experience in America. They are documents of impeccable truth and reliability, for they record the transition of the slave from African to African American, from slave to freedman, and the experiences that the Africans underwent in the transition (Hayes, 2012).

In 2004, Arthur C. Jones noticed the relatively little research that focused on Spirituals from a comprehensively psychological and cultural perspective. He believed that the issue of how Spirituals functioned psychologically in the culture, both during North American slavery and in the times that slavery officially ended, had received some attention from several different realms but was usually in a piecemeal fashion (Cone, 1991; Epstein, 1977; Johnson, 1931; Lovell, 1972; Raboteau, 1980). Jones conducted an analysis that focused more centrally on the origins of the Spirituals and their foundational psychological and cultural functions in the slave community. His primary task was to review the published work on Spirituals with the aim of constructing the beginnings of a new, primarily psychological framework. This dissertation will

be an extension of Jones's analysis, highlighting different elements of the music, specifically lyrical features, within Negro Spirituals that provided a means of psychological release from anguish and misfortune and pain and suffering, as well as telling tales of spiritual happiness. The Spirituals also give readers a commentary into the daily lives of the oppressed (Stuckey, 2006). There has mostly been speculation about how to understand Spirituals psychologically, thereby leaving room for unfounded assumptions about their psychological elements, functions, and outcomes.

Research supports the role of music in enabling people to overcome a traumatic occurrence in their lives (Csikszentmihalyi & Rochberg-Halton, 1981; Maslow, 1970; Saarikallio, 2011). People are able to use music to maintain a resilient response over time, underscoring the role of music in enabling people to adapt to a new normal as they continue to lead happy and productive lives (Hodges, 2013). This role extends to Spirituals as well and includes aspects of psychological healing embedded in the tradition of the Spirituals. In exploring the musical elements that comprise Negro Spirituals, this dissertation explores how those enslaved developed and strengthened common traits that are associated with resilience. By viewing Spirituals through a cultural lens, this research will provide a valuable understanding of how African Americans have created a coping approach to hardship through music, not to mention coping behaviors that have survived through generations, simultaneously adding to the already large body of literature that implicates music itself as a therapeutic tool.

Examining the nature and meaning of Spirituals helps understand the psychology of slavery and the mindset of those who created a lyrical and musical expression that helped to preserve sanity in the midst of evil. In an act of transcendence, song can record the terrible price of slavery while sustaining a spirit that might otherwise, and sometimes does, break (Stuckey,

2006). Exploring these songs increases the overall understanding of how important music and lyrical songs of rebellion and freedom are as outlets for insidious, cumulative phenomena of psychic pain.

The labeling of African people in the United States is a long-standing debate that is not within the scope of this research; however, it is important to note that throughout this dissertation, the terms *African*, *African-American*, *Negro*, *Black*, *Slaves*, and *'those enslaved'* are used interchangeably to represent people of African descent who were brought to North America and put into slavery. The following chapter explores the historical, musical, and traditionally African elements that impacted the creation of Negro Spirituals from a variety of perspectives.

Negro Spirituals recreated the experience of African slaves during chattel slavery, allowing readers and listeners to examine the existential existence of a people in bondage. Their creation appeared to provide psychological liberation through musical and poetic expression, which may provide therapeutic significance.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

When reading through all that has been published about Negro Spirituals, it can be difficult to separate facts from opinions, leaving the readers to form their own opinion about what a Spiritual is or is not. When gaining an understanding of the importance of Negro Spirituals, it is important to examine what they actually are, what they mean, why they are so valuable, and why they are important to understand. The literature review's purpose is to give a thorough comprehension of Spirituals from multiple perspectives while highlighting the questions that arise when we explore the nature of Spirituals. As previously mentioned in the introduction, it is vital to begin examining how an Afrocentric worldview influenced the formation of Spirituals and their utilization.

African-Centered Philosophy

The Afrocentric worldview finds its base and foundation in the worldview of African people (Belgrave & Allison, 2014). It is described as a set of philosophical assumptions and principles that are reflected in the values, attitudes, and customs of Africans and people of African descent. Since worldview is culturally based, it is important to understand how one culture views the world over another because it ultimately influences their experience (Jackson & Sears, 1992). Although there are many particular cultures in the African continent, overall an African-centered philosophy holds that everything in the universe is functionally connected, and individuals are viewed as an extension of the environment. The collective consciousness emphasizes cooperation and group orientation, whereby the group serves as a natural support system. The African worldview believes that all things are connected and all events have purpose and meaning (Utsey, Adams, & Bolden, 2000). Utsey, Adams, and Bolden (2000)

noted, “In the African worldview, man is a force within a universal order than has potential to harmonize with nature” (p. 196).

It is important to keep in mind that people on the African continent are diverse and, thus, likely do not hold universal beliefs and values. While African scholars caution against making general statements regarding Africans, they believe that there are some broad generalities among people across the continent (Belgrave & Allison, 2014). Teffo and Roux (2003) wrote that although there is a clear diversity regarding metaphysical thinking throughout Africa, the views are alike in a fairly large part of the continent. They identified religious beliefs related to the African conceptions of God, the universe, and their interrelations as central to Africans.

Central to Afrocentric thinking is the concept of Holism. Holism provides an overarching framework for Afrocentric beliefs. All aspects of one’s being are integrated, in harmony and in balance (Belgrave & Allison, 2014; Myers, 1993; Teffo & Roux, 2003). Balance and harmony are necessary for one’s well-being and it is necessary to have balance between one’s mental, physical, and spiritual states. Within the African tradition, this assumes that the various aspects of one’s self are intricately connected so that spiritual imbalance is reflected by a physical and mental imbalance and vice versa (Belgrave & Allison, 2014).

Yet, the concept of Holism and this collectivistic perspective fail to convey the role of the individual within this system. Teffo and Roux (2003) seemingly disregard individual differences and personalities, preferring to place emphasis on the collective, as though there can be no “individual” within a group. Myers (1993) helped to understand that the Afrocentric worldview was developed from ancient African philosophies that view the concept of self as multidimensional. People are unified with all of creation, sharing its essence. Inside each person

is their worth, because no one is a separate, finite, limited being, but an extension of, and one with, all that is (Myers, 1993).

In this regard, a holistic worldview seeks to include the past and the spiritual existence of life in the understanding of what it means to be individuals and a community. The individual cannot and does not exist alone, but owes his/her very existence to other members of the “tribe,” including ancestors and those not yet born. The holistic concept can be described as follows: “*I* am because we are; and because we are, therefore, *I* am” (Myers, 1993, p. 20). *I* is the individual and the infinite whole. *We* is the individual and collective manifestation of all that is. *Self* includes all ancestors, the yet unborn, the entire community, and all of nature. *I* cannot exist without *We*.

Some have questioned the utility of an African normative base, given the enormous tribal and geographical variability among African people (White & Parham, 1990). However, White, and Parham (1990) believed that to discount the presence of an African norm because of differences is analogous to missing the forest for the trees. Certainly, there are individual differences between different schools of thought within Africa, but there are more commonalities than differences. Those common themes provide the foundation for the African worldview. The basic human unit is the tribe, not the individual, with the tribe operating under a set of rules geared toward collective survival. Cooperation is therefore valued above competition and individualism, which may be hard to accept from a more Westernized view of living (Belgrave & Allison, 2014).

In the Afrocentric worldview, maintaining concert with the elements of nature is the key to harmony. Harmony with nature, group orientation, and interpersonal relationships are of prime importance and highly valued (Jackson & Sears, 1992). Coping behaviors from an

Afrocentric perspective requires the ability to harmonize with life's events, which are spiritual manifestations that occur in a physical form. As a result, coping is viewed as an effort to maintain or restore harmony and balance within the physical, metaphysical, collective, and spiritual/psychological realms of existence. When this balance is upset, stress and disease are the result. This notion of harmony is central to the African worldview and breathes life into their collective or group-centered approaches to establishing and maintaining balance (Utsey, Adams, & Bolden, 2000).

African Spirituality

The role of Spirituality within the African American community can be traced back to African's understanding of Spirituality and the part it played in their daily lives. Because Africa was spiritually diverse, there is no singular way of understanding or one word that can encapsulate the totality of their spiritual worldview (Hayes, 2012). In the United States, spirituality is seen in religious worship and rituals such as attending Church, praying, and celebrating religious holidays. Within Western culture, spirituality is reflected in religiosity and is kept separate from other aspects of one's life. However, spirituality is not separated from other aspects of one's life in African culture. One's spirituality is woven into one's daily activities (Belgrave & Allison, 2014).

There is an unmistakable belief in a Supreme Being, transcendent yet open to the needs of the people, and lesser entities that are seen as intermediaries between the Supreme God and the people. The lesser deities, who included ancestors, served as the immanent manifestation of God. It is a holistic spirituality in which the Divine is not separated from but intertwined with the daily life of human beings, resulting in an ongoing relationship between them and God before birth, throughout life, and continuing after death (Hayes, 2012). From this perspective, African