

## **Subjective Religiosity Among African Americans: A Synthesis of Findings From Five National Samples**

**Robert Joseph Taylor**  
**Jacqueline Mattis**  
**Linda M. Chatters**  
*University of Michigan*

*Demographic correlates of subjective religiosity are examined using data from five large national probability samples (i.e., Americans Changing Lives, n = 3,617; General Social Survey, n = 26,265; Monitoring the Future, n = 16,843; National Black Election Survey, n = 1,151; and National Survey of Black Americans, n = 2,107). In analyses of data involving both Black and White respondents, race emerges as a strong and consistent predictor of various indicators of subjective religiosity with Black Americans, indicating that they had significantly higher levels of subjective religiosity than Whites. Analyses using African American respondents only indicate that subjective religious involvement varies systematically by gender, age, region, and marital status. The findings are discussed in relation to research on religious participation among African Americans and future research and theory concerning the meaning of religion within discrete subgroups of this population.*

Religion and religious institutions have been instrumental in the development and maintenance of political resistance and activism, social, emotional, and economic support, as well as the intellectual, educational, and artistic development of African Americans (Lincoln & Mamiya, 1990). Churches serve as arenas in which Black men and women can develop and assert personal and organizational leadership skills that are discouraged elsewhere.

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Black churches are particularly important for African American women (Grant, 1989; Levin & Taylor, 1993) for whom the multiple concerns of racism and sexism are negotiated through religious and spiritual convictions and beliefs (McKay, 1989).

In addition to linking individuals to a higher power and providing moral and personal guidance, religious beliefs serve as a foundation from which to critique practices of power (e.g., based on race, class, or gender status) as they operate within American society (Lincoln & Mamiya, 1990). McKay's (1989) analysis of the spiritual narratives written by Black women in the 19th century suggests that women during this era used spiritual narratives to present "a radical revision of prevailing White myths and ideals of Black life" (p. 141). For these women, biblical texts and/or their personal spiritual convictions provided the framework for deconstructing the societies in which they lived and reinterpreting their roles and identities within those societies. In a society that envisioned Black men and women as subhuman, spiritual narratives served as venues through which Black women could effectively critique White supremacist ideologies and patriarchy while they articulated "their full claims to humanity." The work of feminist theologian Jacquelyn Grant (1989) suggests that contemporary Black women continue the use of spirituality and religion for purposes of personal and group liberation.

#### **THE CONSTRUCT OF RELIGIOSITY**

Both within and across disciplines, the literature reveals a variety of ways to conceptualize and study the construct of religiosity. Ellison (1993) suggests that psychologists envision religion primarily as a mechanism for reducing human anxiety. In contrast, sociological approaches assert that religion developed out of the effort of individuals to construct shared meanings and, by extension, a sense of themselves as a part of integrated cultures (Geertz, 1973). From a sociological perspective, religion serves a role in helping individuals to manage the negative consequences of social existence (e.g., alienation, demoralization, hopelessness). Anthropological approaches to the study of religion combine both the psychological and sociological approaches but add the importance of history, meaning, and interpretation (Lehmann & Myers, 1985).

A similar diversity of approaches is found in attempts to operationalize and systematically examine the nature and function(s) of religiosity. McAdoo (1995) asserts that "religious orientation is a belief in a supreme being, and religiosity may not mean church attendance or membership . . . Religiosity refers to the importance of religion" (p. 428). McAdoo's definition is consistent with a view of religion as the beliefs, practices, and traditions that derive

out of what Collins (1974) refers to as a "systematized body of knowledge" about a god of gods. Batson and Ventis (1982), in what they refer to as a social psychological definition of religion, avoid any specific references to a deity or deities. Their definition asserts that religion is "whatever we as individuals do to come to grips personally with the questions that confront us because we are aware that we and others like us are alive and that we will die. Such questions we shall call existential questions" (p. 7). Potts (1991), by contrast, defines spirituality as "the acceptance of or belief in the sacred force that resides in all things."

As these examples attest, there is both divergence of opinion and definitional ambiguity as to the nature of religiosity, particularly as it is distinct from spirituality. Empirical and anecdotal evidence suggest that religiosity and spirituality are distinct, though overlapping, experiences (Moberg, 1990). Certainly, whereas some individuals express their spiritual sensibilities via what might be defined as explicitly religious activity (e.g., involving specific doctrines, rituals, and sacred texts), others may not. Individuals may, for example, hold beliefs about the viability of the spirit world even in the absence of adherence to the tenets of any particular religion or belief in the existence of deities. Cultural anthropological explorations of spirituality among the indigenous peoples of the Caribbean (McCarthy Brown, 1991) and Africa (Barber, 1981) distinguish engagements with the metaphysical (i.e., with nature, ancestors, and spirits) from religiosity. Notwithstanding these distinctions in the conceptual distinctions, a body of research has attempted to provide greater precision and coherence to our understanding of these complex phenomena.

#### **CONCEPTUALIZATION AND MEASUREMENT OF RELIGIOUS INVOLVEMENT**

Early social science research addressing the construct of religiosity relied upon single indices or unidimensional measures, the most common being religious attendance or religious affiliation. Numerous critiques have noted that unidimensional indices, by their reliance on behaviors that occur within structured institutional settings, fail to capture the content and essence of the religious or emotional experience (i.e., subjective experience) (Moberg, 1990). Information about the different forms of private devotional practices (e.g., devotional reading, private prayer) and their significance and meaning to the individual are similarly obscured (Chatters & Taylor, 1990). Furthermore, a full appreciation of the nature and functions of religious involvement would require an understanding of the complexities of the social interactions

(e.g., social support) that occur within religious institutions and settings (Levin & Vanderpool, 1987; Moberg, 1990).

Methodologically, the use of unidimensional indices and single indicators of religiosity generates inconsistencies concerning the importance of religion in the lives of individuals (Levin, Taylor, & Chatters, 1995; Williams, 1994). As an example, age-related declines in church attendance rates have been suggested as indicating that older persons withdraw from religious concerns and pursuits. However, a number of studies indicate that other aspects of religious involvement (e.g., prayer, devotional reading, subjective experience) remain unchanged or increase among older age groups (Chatters & Taylor, 1989). The reliance on measures of institutional behaviors (i.e., church attendance, membership, and participation) illustrates the more general caution regarding the importance of applying statistical controls for health status when examining age differences in these and other religious behaviors (Levin & Markides, 1986; Markides, Levin, & Ray, 1987).

Over the past 30 years, a considerable amount of research has concerned itself with the development of valid measures of religiosity that reflect multiple dimensions of religious experience. Glock and Stark (1965) suggested the need to examine religiosity along 5 dimensions: religious ideology/beliefs, religious rituals, experiential (feelings), consequential (generalized effects of religion in a person's life), and intellectual (religious knowledge). Other researchers proposed 4 (Lenski, 1966), 9 (King, 1967), 10 (King & Hunt, 1972), and 11 (King & Hunt, 1969) dimensions of religiosity. These dimensions covered constructs such as affiliation, devotion, doctrine, experience, ideology, affect, and ethics. One criticism of this approach, however, is that religious involvement is confounded with knowledge of specific religious doctrines (Himmelfarb, 1975). Finally, the field of psychology contributed a useful definition of religion as comprising both intrinsic and extrinsic components (Donahue, 1985; Kahoe, 1985).

The complexities of measuring religious involvement, coupled with distinctive disciplinary biases and approaches, has led to the development of large and disparate literatures across several fields and disciplines (i.e., religious studies, psychology, sociology, anthropology, and gerontology). There is general agreement, however, that religion is an extremely complex human phenomenon and that religiosity includes behaviors, attitudes, values, beliefs, feelings, and experiences. Attempts to measure religious involvement with a single indicator or a unidimensional index result in misspecification of the construct. Religiosity is composed of separate dimensions that necessarily require a variety of conceptual approaches and measurement strategies. These dimensions are likely related to relevant outcome factors (e.g., well-being, depression) in distinctive ways (Levin, Chatters, & Taylor,

1995). Recently, progress has been made in the development of reliable and content-valid measures of religious involvement. Unfortunately, they have not been universally adopted by researchers in other fields (e.g., epidemiology, medicine, political science) whose studies require collecting data on religion (Williams, 1994).

#### **RELIGIOUS INVOLVEMENT AMONG AFRICAN AMERICANS**

Religious and spiritual beliefs and practices provide a meaningful context within which African Americans interpret and respond to both life's hardships and joys. These particular roles for religion and spirituality have been especially significant for investing meaning in the individual (e.g., personal, spiritual) and collective (e.g., cultural) experiences of African Americans (Lincoln & Mamiya, 1990). African American religious traditions reflect a rich and diverse cultural and historical background. Religion and spirituality have garnered significant attention from Afrocentric theorists who are interested in the philosophical foundations, ritual practices, and psychotherapeutic treatment implications of Black religiosity and spirituality (Jules-Rosette, 1980; Myers, 1987; Nobles, 1991; Potts, 1991). These and other efforts (Lincoln & Mamiya, 1990) indicate a growing recognition of the importance and centrality of religion and spirituality in the lives of African and African American people.

Unfortunately, available theory and research has not always reflected the complexity and richness of African American faith traditions. Chatters and Taylor's (1994) critique of concepts, methods, and analysis approaches of extant theory and research voices concerns about (a) the adequacy of prominent theories and models (e.g., deprivation/compensation models, denominational switching, and disaffiliation) regarding Black religious involvement and the procedures used for verification, (b) the representativeness and size of study samples, (c) the absence of statistical controls for factors that are known to be consequential for religious involvement (e.g., region, socioeconomic status), and (d) issues regarding the conceptualization of religious involvement as a unitary construct. As evident in a number of recent studies (Ellison & Gay, 1990; Sherkat & Ellison, 1991), emerging research on religious involvement among African Americans demonstrates increasing conceptual, methodological, and analytic sophistication.

Krause's (1991) examination of the impact of church attendance and subjective religiosity on abstinence from alcohol demonstrated the importance of using a multidimensional conceptualization of religious involvement. He found that although church attendance was unrelated to abstinence from alcohol, subjective religiosity was positively related to abstinence. Furthermore, a

significant portion of the effects of race and gender on abstinence was linked to the influence of subjective religiosity. In essence, women and Blacks had higher levels of subjective religiosity than their respective counterparts, and persons with relatively high levels of subjective religiosity were more likely to abstain from alcohol.

Our own research on religious involvement among African Americans has led us to conceptualize a three-dimensional model of religious involvement (i.e., organizational, nonorganizational, and subjective religiosity). Organizational religious participation refers to behaviors that occur within the context of a church, mosque, or other religious setting (e.g., church attendance, membership, participation in auxiliary groups). Nonorganizational religious participation refers to behaviors that may occur outside of a religious setting (e.g., private prayer, reading religious materials, watching or listening to religious television and radio programs). Subjective religiosity refers to perceptions and attitudes regarding religion. This dimension is measured by questions such as perceived importance of religion, the role of religious beliefs in daily life, and individual perceptions of being religious (Chatters, Levin, & Taylor, 1992). The focus of this article is to investigate the demographic correlates of various measures of subjective religiosity in an analysis of five national probability data sets.

The three dimensions of religious involvement were tested in a measurement model using structural equation modeling procedures among a general sample of African American adults (Levin, Taylor, et al., 1995), as well as among older adults (Chatters et al., 1992). Levin, Chatters, et al. (1995) extended this work on the measurement model of religious involvement to investigate the influence of religion on health status and life satisfaction. The findings demonstrated that the use of a three- as opposed to two-dimensional factor structure for religious involvement was both theoretically preferable and empirically pragmatic. That is, the differentiation of nonorganizational (i.e., devotional behaviors) and subjective religiosity (i.e., religious perceptions and attitudes) facilitated the emergence of significant causal linkages between religious involvement, health, and subjective well-being that previously had been obscured. The findings indicated that measures of both organizational and subjective religiosity were positively associated with life satisfaction, and the effect of organizational religiosity persisted despite controls for health status and sociodemographic factors.

Finally, systematic study of subjective religiosity among African Americans is practically nonexistent (Levin, 1994). As a form of religious expression, subjective religiosity and spirituality have long been acknowledged as important and central aspects of religious experience. Despite this, there remains a paucity of rigorous empirical scholarship on the subjective

religious experiences of African Americans, particularly with respect to research based on large-scale national probability surveys. The lack of research on these topics results from the generally small numbers of Black respondents in most national surveys, coupled with the relatively few questionnaire items that address religious concerns. In fact, many surveys fail to include any measures of religious involvement, whereas others may, at best, include measures of religious affiliation (e.g., faith/denomination) or church attendance. Only a handful of surveys incorporate diverse measures of religious involvement (e.g., spirituality, subjectively religiosity) in addition to having significant numbers of Black respondents.

The extant literature supports a broad distinction between behavioral aspects of religion (both public and private) and what might be variously termed as personal or subjective religious sentiment, perceptions, and experiences. The development and refinement of these distinctions suggests that behavioral and subjective forms of religious expression, though related, are not synonymous. These differences are potentially important for understanding (a) the range of religious expression and the interrelationships among various religious dimensions, (b) the ways in which individuals construct a personal religious identity, and (c) whether that identity involves explicitly religious (e.g., public behaviors) activities or subjective (e.g., sentiments, experiences) concerns and pursuits.

#### **FOCUS OF THE PRESENT ANALYSIS**

This analysis will examine sociodemographic differences in various indicators of subjective religiosity (e.g., importance of religion, self-rated religiosity, felt closeness to God) among African Americans using data from five national probability samples. This analysis will be conducted in two stages. First, Black-White differences in subjective religiosity are examined, controlling for variables such as education, income, urbanicity, and region which are differentially distributed by race. Next, sociodemographic differences in subjective religiosity are examined among African Americans. This part of the analysis will investigate gender, age, education, income, marital status, region, and urbanicity differences in subjective religiosity among African Americans.

The use of five different national samples is an important innovation in quantitative research on religious participation among Black Americans, in which approximately 90% of this research is based exclusively on data from the National Survey of Black Americans. Each of the samples is substantially large enough to include an adequate number of African American respondents and has, at a minimum, one measure of subjective religiosity. The use of

national probability samples provides two distinct advantages: (a) this methodological feature imparts wider generalizability to the findings, and (b) the availability of national data on Black adults allows for a fuller appreciation of the heterogeneity that exists in the extent and types of subjective religious involvement. This investigation addresses an important yet underdeveloped area of research and will provide important baseline information on subjective religious involvement among African Americans.

## METHODS

### DATA SOURCES AND SAMPLES

The data for this study come from five national probability data sets of the American population (described below). The Americans' Changing Lives (ACL) study has a sample of 3,617 adults 25 years of age and older; 1,174 of the respondents are Black. The study was conducted by the Survey Research Center, Institute for Social Research, the University of Michigan in 1986. ACL is a personal interview and James House is the principal investigator of this study (see House, 1989 for more information on this study).

The General Social Survey (GSS) is conducted annually by the National Opinion Research Center at the University of Chicago. The GSS is not a panel study, but rather a series of cross-sectional studies providing data on a wide spectrum of social indicators. Religiosity, broadly defined, historically has been a central focus of GSS data collection efforts and in certain years numerous religion variables have been included. We are using the cumulative data file for 1972 to 1990, which has a sample size of 26,265 with 3,610 Black adults (see Davis & Smith, 1990 for more information on this study). James Davis and Tom Smith are the principal investigators of this study.

The Monitoring the Future Surveys (MTF) explore changes in attitudes and behaviors of high school seniors. This study is conducted annually by the Monitoring the Future Project, Survey Research Center, Institute for Social Research, the University of Michigan. Gerald Bachman, Lloyd Johnson, and Patrick O'Malley are the principal investigators of this study. The sample size of the 1987 survey is 16,843, with 1,760 Black respondents (see Wallace & Forman, 1998 for more information on this study).

The National Black Election Study (NBES) was conducted in 1984 by the Program for Research on Black Americans at the Institute for Social Research at the University of Michigan. This study followed the design of the National Election study in which respondents were contacted before and



after the November election. The data for the present analysis is from the preelection survey, which has a sample of 1,151 Black respondents of voting age (see Gurin, Hatchett, & Jackson, 1989 for more information on this study). The National Survey of Black Americans (NSBA) was conducted in 1979-1980 by the Program for Research on Black Americans and is the first nationally representative cross-sectional survey of the adult Black population living in the continental United States. The sample consists of 2,107 adult African Americans (see Jackson, 1991 for more information on this study). James S. Jackson is the principal investigator of both the NSBA and the NBES.

All of the samples were of adults (except for MTF) and four of the data sets were collected under the auspices of the same social science organization (the Institute for Social Research). Data from the General Social Surveys were collected by the National Opinion Research Center (the University of Chicago). All of the data sets are based on multistage national probability samples of the 48 coterminous United States. ACL, GSS, and NSBA are all personal interview studies, NBES was a telephone interview, and MTF is a self-administered study completed during a normal class period in a high school. All of the data sets are available from the data archives of the Inter-University Consortium of Political and Social Research at the Institute for Social Research, University of Michigan.

#### **DEPENDENT MEASURES**

Each of the surveys contains a measure of the construct of subjective religiosity. Measures of the importance of religion and religious comfort are found in the ACL data set. The importance of religion variable is assessed by the question, "In general, how important are religious or spiritual beliefs in your day-to-day life—would you say very important, fairly important, not too important, or not at all important?" Religious comfort is measured by the question, "When you have problems or difficulties in your work, family, or personal life, how often do you seek spiritual comfort and support—almost always, often, sometimes, rarely, or never?" An item assessing the overall importance of religion is found both in the MTF data set and the NBES (similar to the ACL question on the importance of religion in one's daily life). In both the MTF and NBES the question reads, "How important is religion in your life—very important, pretty important, a little important, or not important?" The GSS includes a variable concerning felt closeness to God that is measured by the question, "How close do you feel to God most of the time—extremely close, somewhat close, not very close, or not close at all?" Finally, a measure tapping religious self-perceptions is contained in the

NSBA data set. The question asks, “How religious would you say you are—very religious, fairly religious, not too religious, or not religious at all?” Collectively, these items measure various aspects of the construct, subjective religiosity.

#### **ANALYSIS STRATEGY**

The analysis is presented in two stages. First, regression analyses were conducted on the three samples (ACL, GSS, MTF) representing the total population to investigate Black-White differences in spirituality subjective religiosity. Next, regression analyses were conducted using only the Black respondents from these data sets and the NSBA (exclusively African American) sample. In all regressions, gender, age, income, education, region, urbanicity, and marital status differences were employed as independent variables.

### **RESULTS**

Frequency distributions for the dependent variables indicate high levels of reported subjective religiosity. Among the Black respondents in ACL, 65.1% indicate that they almost always or often seek spiritual comfort and support when confronted with problems. Eighty percent report that religious or spiritual beliefs are very important in their daily lives. Forty-five percent of Black respondents in the GSS indicate that they are extremely close to God and another 47.2% consider themselves somewhat close to God. Among Black high school seniors (MTF), 41.8% report that religion is very important in their lives, and 35.0% indicate that it is pretty important. In the NBES, however, 79% of the respondents indicate that religion is very important in their lives. Finally, 80% of NSBA respondents describe themselves as being either very or fairly religious.

Table 1 presents the regression coefficients for the effects of race on several measures of subjective religiosity (ACL, GSS, and MTF data sets). Race is represented by a dummy variable where Whites are the excluded category. For each dependent variable, two regression models are presented (i.e., gross and net effects). The gross models reflect the bivariate effects for the impact of race on various measures of subjective religiosity. The net models assess the impact of race while controlling for the effects of demographic variables (i.e., age, gender, marital status, education, income, urbanicity, and region). Models representing the gross effects of race indicate that Blacks report

**TABLE 1**  
**Bivariate (gross) and Multivariate (net) Regression**  
**Models of Race and Subjective Religious Participation**

	<i>Race</i>	<i>Beta</i>	<i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>	<i>N</i>
ACL (1986)				
Importance				
Gross	Black	.264****	.118****	3,188
Net	Black	.234****	.185****	3,188
Comfort				
Gross	Black	.189****	.035****	3,188
Net	Black	.162****	.126****	3,188
GSS (1972 to 1990)				
Closeness to God				
Gross	Black	.132****	.017****	7,666
Net	Black	.117****	.087****	7,666
MTF (1987)				
Importance				
Gross	Black	.189****	.036****	12,725
Net	Black	.171****	.074****	12,725

NOTE: ACL = Americans' Changing Lives, GSS = General Social Survey, and MTF = Monitoring the Future. Race is represented by a dummy variable (1 = Black, 0 = White). The net models in the analysis of the ACL control for the effects of gender, age, education, income, region, and marital status. The net models in the analysis of the GSS control for the effects of gender, age, education, income, region, marital status, and urbanicity. The net models in the analysis of the MTF control for the effects of gender, region, and urbanicity.

\*\*\*\* $p < .001$ .

higher levels of subjective religiosity than do Whites; all four observed race effects remain significant in each of the multivariate (net) models. Black respondents display significantly higher levels of spirituality and subjective religious involvement, and these effects are independent of socioeconomic status, region, and other sociodemographic factors. However, the effects of race on these measures of subjective religious sentiments are attenuated slightly when sociodemographic factors are controlled.

Table 2 presents the results of the regression of subjective religiosity on the demographic factors. Unlike the previous analysis, these regressions use the NBES and NSBA data sets and the African American subsamples of the ACL, GSS, and MTF data sets. The pattern of findings across the various dependent variables and separate data sets is consistent. Gender is significant in all regression models, whereas age is significant in all but one of the models. Women and older respondents report higher levels of subjective religiosity than their counterparts. Socioeconomic status measures fail to have a

**TABLE 2**  
**Regression Models of Subjective Religiosity on Selected Sociodemographic Variables (standardized coefficients)**

<i>Selected Sociodemographic Variables</i>	<i>ACL Importance</i>	<i>ACL Comfort</i>	<i>GSS Closeness</i>	<i>MTF Importance</i>	<i>NBES Importance</i>	<i>NSBA Religiosity</i>
Gender						
Male	-.183****	-.159****	-.111****	-.127****	-.131****	.132****
Age	.160	.120***	.242****	—	.126****	.308****
Education	-.004	.033	-.001	—	.011	.011
Income	-.036	-.081**	-.032	—	-.064*	-.026
Region						
Northeast	-.105****	-.063**	-.067**	-.204****	-.148****	-.117****
North Central	-.038	-.026	-.055	-.073***	-.034	-.035
West	-.037	-.004	-.014	-.081***	-.038	-.053
Marital status						
Divorced	-.019	-.062	-.033	—	-.055	-.037
Widowed	-.064	-.059	.051	—	-.029	-.014
Separated	-.072**	-.055	.004	—	-.007	-.062***
Never married	-.063	-.153****	.031	—	-.114****	-.096
Urbanicity						
Urban	—	—	.030	-.031	—	-.031
R <sup>2</sup>	.08****	.08****	.08****	.07****	.08****	.18****
N	1,079	1,079	1,158	1,501	998	1,813

NOTE: ACL = Americans' Changing Lives, GSS = General Social Survey, MTF = Monitoring the Future, NBES = National Black Election Study, and NSBA = National Survey of Black Americans. Several of the predictors in this analysis are represented by dummy variables: gender (0 = female, 1 = male), marital status (married is the excluded category), urbanicity (0 = rural, 1 = urban), region (South is the excluded category), and denomination (Baptist is the excluded category). In regression models for the ACL survey and the NBES survey, the effects of urbanicity were not controlled as this variable was unavailable in the Inter-University Consortium for Political and Social Research (ICPSR) versions of these data sets. In the regression models for the MTF data set, we did not control for the effects of education (all respondents are high school seniors), age (73.4% of the respondents were 18 and 22.5% were 19 years of age), marital status, or income. Respondents' reports of family income were considered to be of questionable reliability.

\* $p < .10$ . \*\* $p < .05$ . \*\*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\*\* $p < .001$ .

broad impact on subjective religiosity. Education is not significantly associated with any of the dependent variables, whereas income is significantly related to religious comfort only. Persons with lower levels of income are more likely to state that they seek spiritual comfort in response to personal problems. Income bordered significance with importance in the NBES data set with respondents with lower incomes indicating higher levels of importance to religion than their higher income counterparts.

Region exhibits a significant association with each of the dependent variables, with southerners reporting higher levels of subjective religious involvement than selected nonsouthern counterparts. In each of six regressions, respondents in the Northeast indicate lower levels of subjective religious involvement than persons in the South. Respondents who reside in the North Central region are less likely than southerners to state that religion is important in their life (MTF), and persons in the West report lower levels of subjective religious participation than southerners. Marital status differences for four of the models indicate that married persons have higher levels of subjective religious participation than their nonmarried counterparts. Finally, there are no significant urban-rural differences in subjective religiosity.

## DISCUSSION

As indicated by these findings, African Americans demonstrate high levels of various indicators of subjective religiosity. Black Americans overwhelmingly indicated that (a) religious comfort and support was extremely helpful in coping with life problems and difficulties, (b) religious and spiritual beliefs were important in their daily lives, (c) they felt close to God, and (d) they considered themselves to be religious. The strong emphasis placed on subjective religious experience was evident among both adults and high school seniors. These findings corroborate other research indicating that, historically and contemporaneously, religion and religious institutions play a significant role in the lives of African Americans (Jules-Rosette, 1980; Lincoln & Mamiya, 1990; Myers, 1987; Nobles, 1991; Potts, 1991; Taylor, Thornton, & Chatters, 1987).

Strong and consistent Black-White differences were demonstrated in these analyses, whereby Black respondents displayed significantly higher levels of subjective religiosity than their White counterparts. Significant race differences were evident in all four of the regressions and were maintained after controls for factors that are consequential to religious involvement. This finding is consistent with other race comparative analyses indicating higher

levels of religiosity among Black adults in general (Beeghley, Van Velsor, & Bock, 1981; Greeley, 1979; Jacobson, Heaton, & Dennis, 1990; Nelsen, Yokley, & Nelsen, 1971) and older Blacks in particular (Levin, Taylor, & Chatters, 1994).

Focusing on African Americans, respondents in these samples displayed high levels of spirituality and subjective religiosity overall. However, there was considerable demographic variation, such that gender, age, region, marital status, and income were all significant predictors. These findings are consistent with previous work demonstrating both high levels of religiosity as well as considerable heterogeneity in religious participation within this population group (Taylor, 1988b). Taken together, this body of research provides a more differentiated portrayal of the nature of religious sentiment and commitment and the ways that social status factors moderate religious involvement.

Previous research on Black Americans finds that in comparison to men, women are more likely to be church members, attend religious services, and participate in church activities. With respect to devotional activities, women pray, read religious materials, and listen/watch religious programming more frequently than do men (Levin & Taylor, 1993; Levin et al., 1994; Taylor, 1992). The present findings of consistent gender effects for subjective religious involvement corroborate the depiction that African American women are more religiously involved than are men. Furthermore, these findings are consistent with research on gender differences in religiosity within the general population (Argyle & Beit-Hallahmi, 1975; Bengtson, Kasschau, & Ragan, 1977; Blazer & Palmore, 1976; Cornwall, 1989; de Vaus & McAllister, 1987; Koenig, Kvale, & Ferrel, 1988), indicating greater religious involvement among women.

Explanations for gender differences in religious involvement focus on the ways in which gender socialization experiences are congruent with religious worldviews and behaviors, attitudes, and identities. Women, in particular, are generally viewed as undergoing a gender socialization process that emphasizes many of the qualities and traits (e.g., patience, forbearance, restraint) that are consistent with religious orientations. For instance, women's activities as caregivers to the elderly and the sick requires them to face questions of ultimate meaning (e.g., human suffering and death), and religion plays a pivotal role in handling such questions.

Age was positively associated with subjective religiosity and spirituality in these analyses. These findings corroborate other research on Black adults indicating positive age relationships for church attendance (Nelsen & Nelsen, 1975; Stump, 1987), having a religious affiliation (Taylor, 1988a; Welch, 1978), and positive assessments of the historical role of churches in

Black communities (Taylor et al., 1987). Furthermore, the present findings are consistent with work based on the NSBA data set (Chatters & Taylor, 1989; Levin & Taylor, 1993; Levin et al., 1994; Taylor & Chatters, 1991a, 1991b), indicating positive age differences for several measures of public and private religious participation (e.g., church membership, frequency of prayer, and reading religious materials). In addition to higher levels of organization and nonorganizational religious participation, the present findings indicate that older Black Americans have higher levels of subjective religiosity than do their younger counterparts.

Marital status differences indicated that married respondents had higher levels of subjective religiosity than selected nonmarried counterparts. As compared to divorced respondents, married persons were more likely to describe themselves as being religious (NSBA). Married persons were more likely than those who were separated to indicate that religious or spiritual beliefs were important in their day-to-day life (ACL). Finally, as compared to never married respondents, married persons (a) sought spiritual comfort and support on a more frequent basis (ACL), (b) indicated that religion was more important in their lives (NBES), and (c) indicated higher levels of subjective religiosity (NSBA). These findings are generally consistent with other research, indicating higher levels of church attendance and church membership among married Black adults in comparison to their unmarried counterparts (Taylor & Chatters, 1991b). Explanations for marital status effects suggest that both public and private religious involvement have socially integrative functions that contribute to marital stability and well-being. For example, religious involvement of various forms stresses ideal marital roles, encompasses distinct socialization experiences related to marriage and family life, and embodies explicit normative expectations for the institution of marriage. The present findings suggest that the marriage effect affects not only public behaviors but subjective religious sentiments and experiences as well (Cornwall, 1989).

Previous research based on the NSBA generally indicates few socioeconomic status differences in religious participation. Education and income, however, are positively associated with church membership (Taylor, 1988b) and education is positively associated with other measures of organized religious participation such as church attendance (Levin et al., 1994). In the present analysis, socioeconomic status had limited effects on indicators of subjective religiosity. Education was not significantly associated with any of the dependent variables, and income was significantly related to religious comfort only (ACL) and bordered significance with the importance of religion (NBES). Persons with lower incomes sought spiritual comfort and support for personal problems on a more frequent basis than their higher income

counterparts. These differences suggest that limited financial resources have an impact on one's help-seeking and coping behaviors. It is likely that persons with low incomes use religious coping for personal problems because these strategies can be employed by the individual (e.g., prayer, devotional practices). When clergy are formally involved as professional helpers, these services are offered without expectation of monetary remuneration. Similarly, fellow church members could offer religious comfort and support on a person's behalf, again without the expectation that they would be paid for this aid.

Region exerted significant and pervasive effects on subjective religiosity. Southerners indicated higher levels of spirituality and subjective religious participation than their nonsouthern counterparts. These findings are supportive of a large body of previous work indicating that Black adults who reside in the South have higher levels of organizational, nonorganizational, and subjective religiosity than their nonsouthern counterparts, as well as the general characterization of the South as possessing a heightened sensitivity to religious concerns and issues (i.e., the Bible Belt). Specific analyses involving Northern versus Southern African Americans suggest that the overall character and significance of religious participation differs markedly by region. In general, sociodemographic factors are more important as determinants of religious involvement in the South, whereas religious commitment factors are more salient in the North (Stump, 1987). These differences reflect the centrality of religious institutions and the communal role and quasi-voluntary nature of religious involvement in the South, as opposed to the North where religious participation is based to a greater degree on personal preference and choice (Ellison & Gay, 1990).

### LIMITATIONS

There is one limitation of this study that is worth noting. The availability of additional measures of subjective religiosity in each of the national surveys used in this analysis would have provided a broader sense of the different dimensions of this important construct. Unfortunately, national surveys only rarely contain any measures of religiosity. Even fewer of them include measures of subjective religiosity. However, the consistency of the demographic differences suggest that the present findings are both quite robust and adequately reflect the overall construct of subjective religiosity. What is needed now are new large national probability surveys similar to the NSBA that have several measures of the various constructs of religiosity and spirituality.



## CONCLUSION

Collectively, the findings were supportive of previous research on religion among African Americans. In addition to high levels of organizational and nonorganizational religious participation, respondents also demonstrated heightened levels of subjective religiosity. Analyses involving race comparisons demonstrated that Black respondents reported higher levels of subjective religiosity than did Whites, and this difference was maintained after controls for the impact of socioeconomic status and region were applied. Considerable within-group heterogeneity was demonstrated among African American respondents, with fairly strong and consistent gender, age, and regional differences in subjective religiosity. Furthermore, it is significant that race, gender, and region differences were found not only among adults, but among Black adolescents as well (MTF).

The observed demographic differences in subjective religiosity among African Americans are generally consistent with findings for other forms of religious involvement (i.e., organizational and nonorganizational religious participation). That is, women, older adults, southerners, and married respondents demonstrate higher levels of all three types of religious participation as compared to their respective counterparts. This study, along with previous work, indicates that the majority of African Americans are significantly invested in religious and spiritual activities and concerns. Furthermore, among discrete demographic groups, there is basic correspondence between different dimensions of religious involvement. That is to say, women, older persons, southerners, and persons who are married demonstrate high levels of organizational and nonorganizational religious involvement, as well as subjective religiosity.

An emerging picture of religious involvement among African Americans reveals that (a) specific subgroups within the population are differentially invested in religious concerns, and (b) there is a basic correspondence between organizational and nonorganizational participation and subjective religious experience. Although related, these different aspects of religious experience are discrete. These distinctions are underscored by the fact that there are approximately 5% to 7% of African Americans who indicate no involvement with any organized religious body, but who nonetheless pray on a frequent basis and think of themselves as religious (Taylor, 1988a). Among the general population, 7% of Americans with no current religious affiliation attend religious services at least once per month (Greeley, 1989). One of the tasks of future analyses should be to clearly identify the demographic characteristics of this group, as well as their religious practices and belief structures.

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