

# Younger African American Adults' Use of Religious Songs to Manage Stressful Life Events

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**Abstract** The aim of this study was to explore the use of religious songs in response to stressful life events among young African American adults. Fifty-five young African American adults aged 18–49 participated in a qualitative study involving criterion sampling and open-ended interviews. Data analysis included content analysis and descriptive statistics. Stressful life events were related to work or school; caregiving and death of a family member; and relationships. Religious songs represented five categories: Instructive, Communication with God, Thanksgiving and Praise, Memory of Forefathers, and Life after Death. The tradition of using religious songs in response to stressful life events continues among these young adults. Incorporating religious songs into health-promoting interventions might enhance their cultural relevance to this population.

**Keywords** Spirituality · Religious songs · Mental health · Younger African American adults · Culture

## Introduction

Religious beliefs and practices are an important buffer to stressful life events on psychological well-being (Reese et al. 2012; Walker et al. 2014). Individuals who attend religious services and engage in religious practices are less depressed and better able to

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cope with daily life stressors (Blazer 2007; Koenig 2009). Among older African Americans, religious songs are an important mental health-promoting strategy in response to stressful life events and life-threatening illness (Hamilton et al. 2012). Religious songs strengthen, comfort, and decrease psychological distress when experiencing stressful situations such as cancer, heart disease, diabetes, and bereavement among these older adults (Hamilton et al. 2012). Increasingly, researchers are recognizing that the socialization of young African American adults protects against poor mental health outcomes (Neblett et al. 2013). However, there is a limited focus on the specific components of that socialization that are protective and the role if any, of religious songs on stressful life events among this population.

In this paper, religious songs are a practice of expressing a set of beliefs but also an outward expression of faith and struggles important to African American religious culture (Cone 2008; Jones 1993; Walker 1979). On a more personal level, religious songs may also be a form of spirituality since singing or listening of this genre of song may serve as a connectedness to God, within oneself, and to others (Reed 1992). Religious songs also serve to assist the individual in making meaning of the human experience through this connectedness and to transcend an everyday lived experience to an existence that is meaningful (Hamilton et al. 2012). Attempts to distinguish the two concepts of religiosity and spirituality are a controversial one (Koenig et al. 2012). However, what is certain is the long-standing tradition among African Americans of using religious song regardless of age, gender, or faith tradition.

The use of religious songs in coping with stressful life situations is an important aspect of African American culture (Jones 1993; Saliers 2007; Walker 1979). An examination of African American spirituals permits insight into the use of religious songs to manage daily stressors (Cone 2008; Jones 1993; Raboteau 1995; Walker 1979). For example, the African slave used religious songs to communicate their struggles and fears to God and other slaves and to encourage one another (Raboteau 1978). Religious songs permitted African slaves to maintain a positive sense of self (through identity as a child of God), to cope with a life in servitude, and to express their belief in the promise of a future life free of pain and suffering (Cone 2002; Matthews 1977; Raboteau 1995).

One genre of song, the African American spirituals, is composed of songs with dominant themes of sorrow and hope for freedom in this world or the next (Walker 1979). The general consensus of scholars who have studied the content and purpose of spirituals (Cone 2008; Jones 1993; Walker 1979) is that these songs consist of Bible-based stories of God delivering oppressed or enslaved persons (Walker 1979). Hymns of Improvisation and Black Gospel Music are additional types of religious songs that permitted the continued religious expressions among African Americans. Hymns of Improvisation are existing hymns written primarily by Euro-Americans that African Americans transformed into meaningful rhythmic expressions (Walker 1979). These hymns emphasized themes of trust and confidence, praise and adoration, dependence on God, and a life after death (Walker 1979). Among African Americans, improvised hymns, such as *What a Friend we have in Jesus*, *Amazing Grace*, *God will Take Care of You*, and *Pass Me Not O Gentle Savior*, allowed for the continued expressions of messages of hope, identification with, and praises to a good and righteous God who would eventually ensure a just world for His Children (Walker 1979). Modern black gospel music, such as *Precious Lord Take my Hand*, and *Peace be Still*, consisted of lyrics emphasizing requests for divine protection and guidance, deliverance from misery, and testimonies to the goodness of God (Jackson 2004; Southern 1997).

In research with older African Americans, religious songs allowed the expression of a belief in an all-powerful Deity with the capability to take them from a place of weakness and vulnerability to that of strength and power. Among the most notable findings were identification of categories of songs used when fearful, sad, or experiencing depressed moods. *Thanksgiving and Praise* were songs thanking God for His past acts of mercy, suggesting a prevailing belief and faith in the power of God and that if He delivered previously, he would do it again (Pinn 1999; Thurman 1996). *Instructive* songs provided participants guidance through stressful situations and kept them spiritually connected to others. *Communication to God (prayers)* were a category of songs that were used as prayers. *Memory of our Ancestors* were songs that served to remind participants of the ways in which religious songs previously comforted and strengthened a close family member or friend who had died (Bohlmeijer et al. 2009) but also took them back to a time that was safe and happy (Hamilton et al. 2012). *Life after Death* songs were used mostly by the oldest old and focused on a life in heaven after dying, were likely comforting and reassuring, provided a sense of peace, and facilitated their coping with the inevitable.

Older African American participants have reported being taught to memorize religious songs during their formative years in their homes, churches, and schools. The practice of teaching future generations religious songs in their formative years suggests that their ancestors somehow anticipated that this religious expression would be needed to overcome future life stressors. However, whether the practice of using religious songs is a viable coping resource during stressful life events or even relevant to the lives of young adults is an important question for several reasons. The religious culture for young African American adults is likely different from that of older adults. National surveys suggest that younger adults are less religious, less likely to pray every day or to read the Bible, or to have religious affiliations (Pew Forum 2016). Additionally, younger adults are likely different from older adults in their experiences with the deaths of friends and family members, life-threatening illness, concern for the needs of future generations and of others, and the overall accumulation of stressful event that comes with aging. However, younger and older adults are similar in that they are equally as likely to believe that God exists, to believe in heaven, life after death, and in miracles (PewForum 2016). In this report, we seek to explore ways in which religious songs are used among younger African American adults as mental health-promoting strategies in response to stressful life events and whether categories of songs used among older African Americans are relevant to this population.

## Design and Methods

In this report, we used a qualitative descriptive design (Sandelowski 2000, 2010) including criterion sampling, open-ended semi-structured interviews, qualitative content analysis (Hsieh and Shannon 2005), and quantitative descriptive analysis (Tabachnick and Fidell 2012). Approval for this study was obtained from the Institutional Review Board of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

## Participants

The sample included 55 African American men and women residing in the southeastern USA. Inclusion criteria were: African American ethnicity by self-report; at least 18 years old but less than 50 years; and having experienced a stressful situation, the loss of a loved

one, or a life-threatening illness. Initial recruitment efforts targeted participants with known religious affiliations and therefore likely to use religious practices in their daily lives. We also recruited through word of mouth to individuals with unknown religious affiliations.

## Procedures

The first author conducted semi-structured interviews lasting 15–45 min in participants' homes or private rooms located in local churches. Participants were given a \$30 gift card for each interview. All interviews were conducted between 2013 and 2014.

During the interviews, participants were asked to talk about whether and how they used religious songs, scriptures, and prayers to help them when they had a stressful event such that they relied on their faith. The interviews consisted of three open-ended questions: "Can you recall a time in your life that was particularly stressful for you?" "Tell me about a religious song, scripture, or prayer that helped you during that time," and "Tell me how that song, scripture and/or prayer helped you during that time." Follow-up questions included: "Can you recall how you were feeling when you used that song or scripture, or prayer?" and "Tell me why you used that particular song, scripture, or prayer." The focus of this report is on the religious songs used in response to the stressful situation.

## Data Analysis

All interviews were audiotaped and then transcribed verbatim with the first author and a research assistant reviewing each transcript for accuracy. In order to content analyze the data, a table was initially constructed to organize each participant's responses by the stressful event reported (e.g., loss of a loved one, diagnosis of life-threatening illness); whether a song, scripture, or prayer was used; the personal meanings of the songs, scriptures, or prayers; and the outcomes derived from using any of these religious strategies. The first author and a School of Nursing graduate student worked together to identify key categories of songs, scriptures, and prayers using definitions of categories of songs from previous research with older African Americans (Hamilton et al. 2012) and from scholarship in religion, theology, musicology, and annotations from a New King James Version (NKJV) Study Bible (Radmacher et al. 2007). A young adult minister within the African American religious community validated the formulation of this typology of songs.

An initial content analysis of the data confirmed our ability to maintain the five categories of songs used in research among older African Americans (*Thanksgiving and Praise; Instructive; Communication (Prayers); Memory of Ancestors; and Life after Death*) (Table 1). The categories for these songs were coded yes (1), song reflected a category or no (0), and song did not reflect a category for each participant and entered into an SPSS database. Data coding and entry into SPSS permitted a more accurate quantizing of the qualitative data and intercoder reliability with Cohen's kappa.

Intercoder reliability for the songs was evaluated on two separate occasions. On the first occasion, the first author (JH) and a co-author (KT) independently read seven (>10 % of the total sample) transcripts and summary sheets randomly selected according to variations in age and gender. An initial lack of clarity in the instructions to include participant meanings assigned to songs in the analysis resulted in a relatively low Cohen's kappa (0.40–0.69). The first author (JH) and another co-author (NB) conducted a second round of intercoder reliability for the songs with an additional 10 transcripts (which had not been

**Table 1** Type of songs and definitions

Types of songs	Definitions
Songs that are <i>Instructive</i>	Lyrics of songs and personal meanings express guidance for what should be done when troubled; when sick; when feeling down. Songs contain words of encouragement and guidance in reconceptualizing difficult or stressful situations so they are less stressful. Songs encourage individual and others to persevere hardships and remind others that God has the ability to resolve stressful life events
Songs that are a form of <i>Communication (prayers) with God</i>	Lyrics of songs and personal meanings are expressions to God of some unmet need; desires for protection; need for healing; strength; help when in trouble; relief from stress and anxieties associated with stressful life events
Songs of <i>Thanksgiving and Praise</i>	Lyrics of songs and personal meanings reflect expressions of praise and thanksgiving to God for His past acts of goodness, mercy, grace. Words are testimonies of past deliverance from suffering, oppression and illness
Songs that evoke <i>Memory of Forefathers</i>	Personal meanings of songs connect individuals to a past events or person
Songs that reflect a belief in <i>Life after Death</i>	Lyrics of songs and personal meanings express belief in life after death; life is full of battles that may not be overcome in this life but will be in life after death; belief in immortality after death; hopes of going to Heaven after death (a religious consciousness of the existence of a better world after death)

previously coded) and summary sheets randomly selected again according to age and gender. Cohen's Kappa was calculated with SPSS version 23 and deemed acceptable (0.70–1.00) (Burla et al. 2008).

Descriptive statistics were used to analyze differences in song themes according to age group (young adult—18–29 and middle age—30–49) and gender with ANOVA (continuous variables) and Chi-square and Fisher's exact test (dichotomous and categorical variables). Our decision to focus our attention on age and gender groups was to explore whether a pattern existed in the use of religious songs with increasing age and male/female gender (Taylor et al. 2004). All quantitative analyses were performed with SPSS version 23.

## Results

### Participant Characteristics

The 55 participants primarily were women ( $n = 33$ , 60 %); had some college ( $n = 29$ , 52.7 %); were employed ( $n = 31$ , 56.4 %); Baptist ( $n = 22$ , 40.0 %); and living in urban areas ( $n = 35$ , 63.6 %). The 29 participants in the *young* age (18–29 group) primarily were men ( $n = 16$ , 55.2 %); had some college ( $n = 23$ , 79.3 %); were full time students ( $n = 19$ , 65.5 %); Baptist ( $n = 12$ , 41.4 %); and living in urban areas ( $n = 23$ , 79.3 %). The 26 participants in the *middle* age (30–49 group) primarily were women ( $n = 20$ , 76.9 %); completed college ( $n = 14$ , 53.8 %); were employed ( $n = 22$ , 84.6 %); were Baptist ( $n = 10$ , 38.5 %); and were living in rural areas ( $n = 14$ , 53.8 %). Chi-square

**Table 2** Demographics of sample by age group

	Young (18–29) <i>n</i> = 29	Middle (30–49) <i>n</i> = 26	Test statistic <i>F</i> or $X^2$
Age			
Mean (SD)	22 (3.2)	41 (5.3)	$F = 272.38^{**}$
Gender			
Male	16 (55.2 %)	6 (23.1 %)	$X^2 = 5.88^*$
Female	13 (44.8 %)	20 (76.9 %)	
Education			
HS graduate or GED	0 (0 %)	4 (15.4 %)	$X^2 = 18.45^{**}$
Partial college training	23 (79.3 %)	6 (23.1 %)	
Completed college			
Graduate	5 (17.2 %)	14 (53.8 %)	
Professional training	1 (3.4 %)	2 (7.7 %)	
Marital status			
Married	3 (10.3 %)	15 (57.7 %)	$X^2 = 25.41^{**}$
Divorced	0 (0 %)	5 (19.2 %)	
Never married	26 (89.7)	6 (23.1 %)	
Employment status			
Student	19 (65.5 %)	1 (3.8 %)	$X^2 = 22.56^{**}$
Quit because of health	1 (3.4 %)	3 (11.5 %)	
Employed	9 (31.0 %)	22 (84.6 %)	
Religious affiliation			
Baptist	12 (41.4 %)	10 (38.5 %)	$X^2 = 8.67$
Methodist			
AME	1 (3.4 %)	2 (7.7 %)	
AME Zion	3 (10.3 %)	2 (7.7 %)	
Holiness/Pen	6 (20.7 %)	5 (19.2 %)	
Nondenominational	1 (3.4 %)	5 (19.2 %)	
Other	1 (3.4 %)	2 (7.7 %)	
None	5 (17.2 %)	0 (0.0 %)	
Community size			
Rural	6 (20.7 %)	14 (53.8 %)	$X^2 = 6.51^{**}$
Urban	23 (79.3 %)	12 (46.2 %)	

\*  $p \leq 0.05$ ; \*\*  $p \leq 0.01$ 

analyses showed significant differences among the age groups in gender, marital status, education, employment status, and place of residence. The young adult group had higher percentages of participants who were men, never married, and living in urban geographical areas. The middle age group had higher percentages of participants who were women, married, completed college, and living in rural areas. See Table 2.

*Stressful events experienced.* As shown in Table 3, the most stressful event for both age groups included stress related to work or school; caregiving and death of a family member; and issues related to relationships. Work- and school-related stressors included seeking employment, navigating the dual roles of working and going to school, and the pressures

**Table 3** Stressful event by age group

Event	Young (18–29) <i>n</i> = 29	Middle (30–49) <i>n</i> = 26	Test statistic $\chi^2$
Work/School Stress	17	8	13.63*
Caregiving and Family Death	8	12	2.04
Relationship Stress	5	4	3.60
Illness Event	4	12	7.36

Participants could have had more than one stressful event

\*  $p \leq 0.05$ ; \*\*  $p \leq 0.01$

associated with being successful in school. Participants were beginning to experience family deaths including that of grandparents as well as caregiving and deaths of parents. Stressful situations with relationships included issues with sexuality (sexual orientation) and divorce. Although few in number, life-threatening health issues for the middle age group included cancer and other chronic, functionally limiting illnesses. The two age groups differed significantly on stressful life situations. The young adult group had higher numbers of individuals reporting work/school stressors, while the middle age group reported higher numbers of stressful situations from the caregiving and ultimate death of a family member and their own illnesses (see Table 3).

*Type of religious song.* Overall, the category of religious song used most frequently for both age groups was *Instructive* followed by *Communication with God*, *Thanksgiving and Praise/Memories of Ancestors*, and *Life after Death* (see Table 4). Among the young adult group, *Instructive* songs were used most frequently followed by *Thanksgiving and Praise*, *Communication with God*, *Memory of Ancestors*, and *Life after Death*. Young adult women had higher numbers for songs from *Instruction* and *Memory of Ancestors*, while young adult men had higher numbers on songs used from *Communication with God*. Young adult men and women used songs from the *Praise and Thanksgiving* category equally (see Table 5). Middle-aged adult women used songs from all categories more frequently than the men. For the middle-age men, only songs from *Instructive* and *Praise and Thanksgiving* were used (see Table 6). The overall type of song used in response to stressful life events was not significantly different for age or gender groups.

**Table 4** Type of song by age group

Theme	Young (18–29) <i>n</i> = 29	Middle (30–49) <i>n</i> = 26	Test statistic $\chi^2$
Instructive	11	14	1.40
Communication with God	7	7	0.06
Thanksgiving of Praise	8	3	2.21
Memory of Ancestors	5	6	0.29
Life after Death	1	2	0.48

Participants could have used more than one type of song in response to stress event

\*  $p \leq 0.05$ ; \*\*  $p \leq 0.01$

**Table 5** Type of song by gender and age (young 18–29) group

Theme	Male <i>n</i> = 16	Female <i>n</i> = 13	Test statistic $\chi^2$
Instructive	5	6	0.33
Communication with God	4	3	0.63
Thanksgiving of Praise	4	4	0.53
Memory of Ancestors	1	4	0.11
Life after Death	0	1	0.45

Participants could have used more than one type of song in response to stress event

\*  $p \leq 0.05$ ; \*\*  $p \leq 0.01$

**Table 6** Type of song by gender and age (middle 30–49) group

Theme	Male <i>n</i> = 6	Female <i>n</i> = 20	Test statistic $\chi^2$
Instructive	4	10	0.40
Communication with God	0	7	0.12
Thanksgiving of Praise	1	2	0.56
Memory of Ancestors	0	6	0.17
Life after Death	0	2	0.59

Participants could have used more than one type of song in response to stress event

\*  $p \leq 0.05$ ; \*\*  $p \leq 0.01$

In the section that follows, we depict the type of song used in response to a stressful event and the personal meaning of the particular song with brief quotations from participants. Song titles and their lyrics as provided by participants and featured in this section are italicized.

*Songs of Instruction.* This most frequently used category of religious song was used by men and women of both age groups (see Table 5, 6). Songs that were *Instructive* served as reminders of what to do when troubled, sick, or feeling down. For these young and middle-age adults, *Songs of Instruction* were inspirational, encouraging them to think optimistically during stressful situations, to view these situations as temporary, and to be confident in their ability to persevere stressful situations. *Songs of Instruction* may have also allowed these participants to reflect back on strategies family members used to manage stressful situations. Family members from previous generations likely role modeled this specific behavior for younger family members. Exemplar songs in this category included *Go Get It*, *Smile*, *Break Every Chain*, *Stand*, *Jesus will Work It Out*, and *I'll Make It*. Occasionally, an older, more traditional hymn was mentioned as an *Instructive Song* (i.e., *I Need Thee*, *The Old Rugged Cross*). One 24-year-old graduate student shared his thought about hymns, “*I think hymns are songs that really tell a story and although the story may change the struggles haven't changed and so I think they are still relevant.*” A 38-year-old man from the middle-age adult group described the way in which a gospel favorite among older African Americans, *One More Sunny Day*, helped him through the time when he was fired from his job. This song has an overall message to think positive even in difficult situations. He explained the meaning of *One More Sunny Day* to his stressful life situation:

I lost my job right before the holidays... It was stressful for me because it was the first time I had ever been fired from a job before...All of a sudden, you're used to working every day, you're used to helping financially and all of a sudden that's completely gone. One song that really clicked in my head was this song a lady at my church used to sing, *One More Sunny Day*. That song just says no matter what you're going through there's still one more sunny day to come . . . And it kind of teaches you



that what you thought was a bad day was actually a sunny day. You can kind of make any situation a better situation when you really think about what you could be going through.

*Songs of Thanksgiving and Praise.* Songs in this category were the second most frequently used among the young adult men and women but among those least frequently used among the middle-age men and women (see Table 5, 6). This category of songs has previously been used as testimonies to others of how God was a deliverer from suffering, burden, and illness (Walker 1979). In addition, these songs were expressions of gratitude to God for bringing them through previous stressful situations (Hamilton et al. 2012). *Songs of Thanksgiving and Praise* were used in a similar way among these young adults; they were a way to recognize and acknowledge God as a powerful being and as a way to express gratitude for help during current stressful situations. Traditional African American gospel songs (*By and By; Because He Lives; He Touched Me*) as well as other contemporary religious songs (*Never Would Have Made It, I'm Looking for a Miracle, There is a Praise on the Inside*) were used. A 33-year-old woman from the middle-age adult group remembered the songs she used following her mothers' death. As she explained:

My mom was diagnosed with leukemia suddenly. She had a few complaints that she had headaches, she was tired, nothing that would make you suspect that she had cancer. One day she was just tired the next day she had leukemia...There were a lot of songs that really ministered to me and got my mind ready that even if it's the end it's still going to be okay. *You are going to be fine.* There was this song I do not remember the name of the song but the man was saying his daddy was passing away and he was expected to be the one to take care of the rest of the family. And that really hit home for me because I am the oldest. So I listened to all of that and that was kind of my way of letting a little thought in that even if these are my mom's last days it's going to be fine. And then she [her Mom] would listen to a song *Cooling Waters...sleepless night, and so much pain, could'nt see no sunshine, nothing but rain but God said weeping may, endure for a night but in the morning, it will be alright...*I remember that *Cooling Waters*.

*Songs that evoke Memory of Ancestors.* When stressed, participants recalled using songs that connected them to a past time with a loved one. This category of songs was used more frequently among women of both age groups and not at all among the middle-aged men (see Tables 5, 6). A 20-year-old woman from the young adult age group recalled a previous time with her great-grandmother, from whom she learned old hymns such as *Jesus Keep Me Near the Cross*. This song was comforting and psychologically protective during stressful times she was experiencing at college. *Memory of Ancestors* songs appeared to help these young adults recall a more comfortable time and place in their youth when they were protected and nurtured by family and loved ones. Her comment that follows is an example of perceived protection from the use of this song: She sang the lyrics:

*Jesus, keep me near the cross, There a precious fountain, Free to all, a healing stream, Flows from Calv'ry's mountain; In the cross, in the cross, Be my glory ever; Till my raptured soul shall find, Rest beyond the river.* She explained the benefit derived from this song:

Surrounded by the craziness and the violence it's like I feel like I can crawl into that little space where it's just me and God and I'm just like "Lord, please keep me." That's how I feel every time I sing that song...it takes me back to really being in my

great grandmother's kitchen where I sat and I used to watch her cook all the time. She'd hum hymns while she was cooking. And even then some of the hymns would just touch me in a certain way and it was—I just remember feeling warm and feeling like the world was okay. So whenever I feel down now I think back to then; that's what gets me through.

*Songs used for Communication (Prayers) to God.* This category of song was used in nearly equal amounts among the young adult men and women and not at all among the middle adult men (see Tables 5, 6). *Communication (Prayers) to God* songs were likened to a prayer and emphasized a direct conversation with God to request protection, healing, strength, and relief from a stressful situation. Frequently mentioned songs among these young adults were *Jesus be a Fence all Around Me*, *I need Thee, Pray for Me*, *Jesus is on the Mainline*, *Smile*, and *Father I Stretch my Hands to Thee*. A 24-year-old married man from the young adult group described his stressful life of attending college, working full time, and the experience of losing his mother and best friend. As he recalled:

When I had graduated and went off to school [college] my mom had gotten sick...she has been battling cancer the entire time...She just recently passed. . that whole situation was very stressful especially trying to work full time, go to school full time and be a caretaker for your parent. A lot of people don't understand the stress behind that at a young age. As a 19, 20 year-old young male you want to get out there and explore the world and see what the world has to offer, see what different things are out there. But my choice was to stay at home and help out my parents and help out around the house...And also my freshman year my best friend passed to and so just dealing with those two [life events]....

He talked about the song that helped and continues to help with the death of his best friend:

...the only song that really stuck out to me the most and I keep re- playing to this day. . it's called *For Your Glory*. Every time I hear [*For Your Glory*] it's kind of like I question God but at the same time God gave me the answer and God showed me where He was taking me through but he brought me out. And when I hear that song, it's a partner song it says *I want to be where you are and I long to be where you are* and I kind of switched it a little bit because I thought about my friend and I was thinking I want to be where my friend is. It's not lonely where he is but at the same time I give God all the glory because through any situation God always gets the glory out of it.

*Songs that reflect a Belief in Life after Death.* This category of religious song was used least frequently among the young and middle age groups and only among the women (see Tables 5, 6). The focus of *Life after Death* songs was the belief in a heavenly home free of pain and suffering and where loved ones would be seen again. Favorite songs listed were primarily from the genre of the Negro spirituals including *Swing Low Sweet Chariot*, *Old Ship of Zion*, *By and By*, and *Climbing up the Rough Side of the Mountain*. Collectively, these songs attest to God's ability to bring one through life's storms and burdens and to carry one to a future place (Heaven) free of troubles and heartaches. Also embedded in these songs is the belief that troubles in this life are to be expected but those who remain faithful will endure and be rewarded in this life and in Heaven (Jones 1993; Raboteau 2001; Walker 1979).

A 20-year-old woman and unmarried college student from the young adult age group described her stressful life event as that of clinical depression associated with poor performance at school and a miscarriage. She described her stressful experience:

...I was on academic— I had just messed up in school so I was on academic probation. So I was trying to get back on my feet, and then all of a sudden this [clinical depression] came out of nowhere. I was already pregnant. I didn't know. I was a month when I found out I was pregnant...And they said I was going to have a miscarriage. And so I was like, okay. And I thought it was going to fine or whatever. And they said that I would— within a week I would be back to normal, and then I wasn't.... I had dreams about the baby. And I'd be sad, and I wouldn't talk to nobody and eat, and he [MD] was like, "Oh, you're going through clinical depression."

She described one of the religious songs that brought her through that time:

...I remember this one song because my best friend she use lead it [sing in the choir] because she had this beautiful voice, and it was Heaven. *I gotta get myself together cause I got someplace to go, And I'm praying when I get there, I'll see everyone I know, I wanna go to Heaven, I wanna go to Heaven, do you wanna go?*

## Discussion

Our primary aim of this study was to explore whether religious songs were useful and relevant to younger adults in their experience with stressful life events. Historians and theological scholars have suggested several functions of religious songs. Religious songs are informative of an individual's beliefs and values and transformative in changing the mood of the user from negative to a more positive, hopeful one (Jones 1993; Reagon 2001). Among older African Americans, religious songs have permitted the expression of a belief in an all-powerful Deity capable of transporting individuals from a place of weakness and vulnerability to that of strength and power in this world; from an earthly world of pain, suffering, and oppression to a future world of peace, serenity, and equality; and to a heavenly place where wrongs are righted and the old becomes new (Herald-Sun, November 28, 2011).

In previous research with older African American adults, songs of *Thanksgiving and Praise* were used most frequently in response to stressful events of the death of a close family member and their own experience with life-threatening illness (Hamilton et al. 2012). However, among these young and middle-aged men and women, the most frequently used songs were *Instructive*. *Instructive* songs provided participants guidance of *how to think* about or *how to reframe* a stressful situation. More importantly, the words expressed in this type of song encouraged and reminded participants that they were not alone during a stressful situation, that God was there with them, that they were loved, and there would be a positive outcome. Survivors of major catastrophic events have also reported a reliance on God and a faith in His ability to help them endure tragic life events (Lawson and Thomas 2007). Also notable in this study was that participants never indicated that God would take away the emotional pain experienced but rather would be there with them through the event. Perhaps the perspective of support through the event was related to the temporary nature of the stressful life events in the lives of these younger adults in contrast to those experiences with life-threatening, chronic illness more frequently associated with aging.

*Communication to God* (prayers) songs were the second most frequent category of religious song used overall, ranking second among the young adult group, and third among the middle age group. Prayers as a form of religious expression are of importance to individuals regardless of ethnicity or religious background (Gillum and Griffith 2010; Mitchell and Weatherly 2000). The formal instruction of younger populations on religious songs in their formative years suggests that this type of song was likely passed down from older generations for the purpose of preparing future generations for life stressors they would encounter (Fingerman et al. 2011). The findings of this study suggest that even in the absence of formal instruction and a current religious affiliation, these young adults still selected a religious song to cope with a stressful life situation. The teaching of religious practices that occurred among older and younger generations is likely a form of cultural socialization and also a protective factor against mood disorders among young African American adults (Liu and Lau 2013). Although religious songs recalled from their formative years and time spent with parents and grandparents were often used during stressful situations, participants also selected religious songs from various genres heard on gospel radio stations.

As with older African Americans, songs from the *Memory of Ancestors* and *Life after Death* categories were the least frequently used among these young adults. *Memory of our Ancestors* songs appeared to serve a positive mental health function as these songs were focused on past-lived experiences and on memories of family members who have died (Bohlmeijer et al. 2009). However, the infrequent use of songs from these categories could be related to issues with recall of lyrics to the songs and the inability to locate the words or the lack of relevance to stressful situations experienced among this population. *Life after Death* songs generally emphasize a future life in *Heaven* after death and with the exception of the participant who was grieving over her unborn child might not be relevant to this younger populations by virtue of their age. *Life after Death* songs, generally composed to help African Americans cope with slavery (Cone 2008; Walker 1979), also might not have been as relevant to these African Americans who came of age during the post-civil rights era, were better educated, and were more economically prosperous.

## Limitations and Future Directions

This study had a few limitations. Participants were specifically asked to discuss the use of religious songs in response to stressful life situations, and we did not inquire about the use of other genres of songs. A future area of research would be an exploration of other genres of song in the management of stressful life situations. It is possible for other genres of songs to be equally effective in the encouragement of positive thinking, alleviation of depressed moods, and as a source of comfort during a stressful situation.

Secondly, the participants in this study largely identified themselves as affiliated with historically Black Protestant churches and the religious songs and meanings associated with those songs may not be relevant to young adults with no or non-Christian affiliations. However, the findings from this study may represent the majority of young African American adults since these participants were religiously affiliated, aged 18–29 and 30–49; mostly women; with low levels of divorce; and some college (Pew Forum 2016).

Although these participants resemble the majority of other religiously affiliated young adults, we recognize that they were generally recruited from urban geographical areas and within close proximity to Community Colleges and Universities. As a result, these participants may have been less likely to interpret the lyrics of religious songs in a literal sense and instead use these songs to navigate stressful situations in a way that was meaningful. We expect that meanings derived from religious songs among young African American adults

with less education and from rural areas might be different from that reported here. An exploration of the use of religious songs among diverse young adult population is warranted.

Despite these limitations, the findings reported here have important implications for research and practice. Researchers and mental health practitioners are increasingly recognizing the need to address mental health issues among African Americans in general (Conner et al. 2010; Fortuna et al. 2010; Himelhoch et al. 2011; Siegel et al. 2011) and younger African American adults in particular. Interventions that incorporate spirituality into mindfulness-based psychotherapy have resulted in significant decreases in stress and depression among homeless young African American adults (Mastropieri et al. 2015). Perhaps the incorporation of culturally relevant religious songs into mindfulness-based interventions would enhance acceptability and participation in these and other similarly constructed mental health interventions delivered to this population.

Another potential use for these findings could be in music therapy interventions. Research on interventions using music therapy has shown that listening to music has health benefits (Roll et al. 2013; Street et al. 2014). Listening to music at bedtime might increase sleep quality (Street et al. 2014) and decrease psychological distress among oncology patients (Roll et al. 2013). Interventions delivering music therapy could possibly be more culturally competent if they were to incorporate religious music considered important to religiously affiliated African American younger adult populations (Werner et al. 2009).

Finally, another likely relevant use of religious songs for younger African Americans is as a weapon in the fight against persistent racism, discrimination, inequities in employment opportunities, and violence. During the Civil Rights era, the lyrics of religious songs were recast and then used among younger and older adults in nonviolent protest of oppression and racial segregation (Darden 2014). Although these freedom songs were but one strategy, the lyrics of these songs communicated hopes for freedom from a social environment of hatred and violence. Rather than retaliate with violence, lyrics of songs recast from hymns and African American spirituals influenced singer and listener to embrace their existence as children of God, to be patient, and to embrace a love for one's self and fellow man (Darden 2014). Perhaps community-based programs designed to address social issues of younger African American adults might benefit from the findings in this study that illustrate how lyrics from religious songs could promote an optimistic perspective to stressful situations (Jeste et al. 2015; Koenig et al. 2014). Using the model from the Civil Rights Era, religious songs can be retooled for a specific setting and situation to promote a love and respect for one's self and fellow man to encourage non-violent protest. Religious songs might also serve as a foundation to aid in the encouragement of a sense of confidence in stressful situations, the strength to persevere, and the belief that change can come about through nonviolent means. More importantly, religious songs can serve as a reminder of the powers through associations with an all-powerful Deity, a recognized source of strength that African American families have relied on for generations. Perhaps messages using meanings derived from songs grounded in the religious traditions of African Americans might be inspirational to and promote well-being among today's young African American adults in their encounters with stressful life situations (Jeste et al. 2015; Turk 2009).

## Conclusion

Religious practices are increasingly being accepted as beneficial to mental health and well-being. Given the strong relationship found between religious practices and well-being among African American populations in general (Koenig et al. 2012), future research is

warranted on the benefit of religious songs to younger and older adult populations. Previous research has determined that the use of religious songs is an important mental health-promoting strategy during the encounter of stressful life situations. The integration of religious songs or messages they communicate, into mental health interventions and programs, might be an acceptable and culturally competent approach to addressing stressful situations in this and other young adult populations.

### Compliance with Ethical Standards

**Conflict of Interest** The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

**Human and Animal Rights** This article does not contain any studies with animals performed by any of the authors.

**Informed Consent** Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

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