Spirituality among African Nova Scotians: A key to survival in Canadian society

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Abstract

This article describes the role that spirituality plays in the lives of African Nova Scotians. Utilizing the results of two studies involving members of this group, "The Strong Black Woman Project" and the "Racism, Violence, and Health Study," three major themes emerge. These include spirituality as a source of strength, spirituality as a coping strategy in a society where African Nova Scotians continue to experience racism and discrimination in all spheres of life, and spiritual health and well being as an important aspect of health. The article concludes with a discussion of the results and implications for social work practice.

Introduction

Several writers of African Canadian history (Hill, 1981; Pachai, 1997; Walker, 1979, 1995) have contended that the most important institution in African Canadian communities is the church. Walker (1995) stated that:

[b]eyond the family itself, for the Black pioneers and for generations of their descendants, the core of the community was the church. Church membership defined community, provided opportunities to participate in community affairs, and created networks for cooperative endeavours. (p. 146)

Gillard (2004) reiterated Walker in her review of the role of the Black church: "Ultimately, … the history of the Black Church shows that it had to separate from the mainstream in order to afford its members … full participation, lay empowerment, leadership development, and spiritual dignity" (p.1). The sentiments of Walker and Gillard are echoed by Shreve (1988) who maintained that the Black church is an important institution in that it is a major source of materials on the culture, mores, music, songs and lifestyle of AfricCanadian people (pp. 13-14).
Aside from these few authors, there is limited literature dealing with the role of spirituality in the daily lives of African Canadians. This article examines the influence and role of spirituality on African Nova Scotian men and women. A brief history on the centrality of spirituality to this community as evidenced by the importance of the Black church is provided first, followed by a discussion on the meaning of spirituality. A detailed description of the Africentric meaning of spirituality is also presented. The balance of the paper examines spirituality as experienced by adult African Nova Scotians in studies conducted by the authors, and concludes with a discussion on the implications of these experiences for social work practitioners.

Conceptions of Spirituality

Spirituality is an individual’s connection with a sense of a higher power or supreme being, whereas involvement in a church refers to one’s commitment to an organized religious institution. The literature describing Africentrism as a worldview or a perspective clearly emphasizes that perhaps the most fundamental aspect of Africentrism is its conceptualization of the spiritual nature of human beings. In this context, spirituality refers to the non-material or invisible substance that connects all elements in the universe (Schiele, 2000). We agree with the assertion made by Wheeler, Ampadu & Wangari (2002) that “[s]pirituality is deeply embedded in the healthy life-span development of people of Africa and the African Diaspora” (p. 77). Not only is spirituality integral to a healthy life-span, Bernard (1996) defined spirituality as “the essence of our survival, our being,” and that which keeps us committed to working through the struggle and pain of race oppression. Spirituality also helps to connect us; as Richards (1990) said, our strength as Africans in the Diaspora and our survival is enhanced through our collective, communal experiences, as evidenced in our expressions of spirituality. Furthermore, “when we place spirituality at the centre of human development, we gain a better appreciation for the enormous influence it has on our cognitive, social and emotional development.” (Schiele, 2000, p.77). We posit that African centered spirituality serves as a form of resistance (hooks, 2003), a tool for coping and healing (Bernard, 2002; Wheeler, Ampadu & Wangari, 2002), and a strategy for promoting health and well being (Bowen-Reid & Harrell, 2002; Chase, 2001).

Church, Religion, and Spirituality in African Nova Scotian Communities

The first major influx of Blacks into Nova Scotia occurred at the end of the American Revolution in 1783. Led to believe they would receive large land grants, justice, education and equal status to the White Loyalists, approximately 3500 free Black Loyalists migrated to Canada, the majority of whom migrated to the Maritimes. Nevertheless, the British reneged (Pachai, 1997; Walker, 1980, 1995) and, although the majority received no land, those who did were placed in rural and isolated communities on barren lots. The failure of the British to fulfill their promises served as the catalyst for two related African Nova Scotian experiences. First, the pushing of the Black Loyalists to the periphery socially and economically was the beginning of over two centuries of racism, exploitation and oppression by the White Loyalists. Pachai (1997) remarked that
Throughout the history of black settlements in the Maritimes, blacks have occupied the lowest social and economic positions in the vertical mosaic (excluding Canadian Indians in this instance because of the special status accorded to them). In urban areas, black women have worked for more than a century as domestic cleaners, while black males have been employed, mainly in the service industry as freelance gardeners, handymen, heavy cleaners, and railway porters – even losing out in some of these positions once salary scales and other benefits became more attractive to white applicants. (p. 31)

Second, the racist and discriminatory practices inflicted on the early members of the community forced the emergence of a distinctive Black culture, which was essential to sustain the strength and tenacity of the African Nova Scotian community and to ensure survival in a hostile and demeaning environment.

Grant (1980) and Pachai (1990) have maintained that the most important institution in African Nova Scotian communities was the Church. In 1785, David George arrived in Halifax and contributed to the mass conversion of Black residents to the Baptist denomination. During the first half of the 19th century, a Black Baptist revival resulted in the establishment of churches that offered a sanctuary to escape their daily existence and have a place to worship. In 1832, Richard Preston, who came to Halifax in 1815 with a group of African Americans called the Black Refugees, was ordained as a minister in London, England. He returned to Halifax and assumed leadership of the African Baptist Church on Cornwallis Street. Over the next 20 years, Preston established several churches throughout the province. In 1854, he convened a meeting of all Black Baptist churches to form the parent organization African United Baptist Association (AUBA). From 1854 to 1918, the African United Baptist Association was the most significant institution in the community. Throughout the 20th century, AUBA stressed the need for strong, effective leadership and unity in the community, and advocated for pragmatic solutions to social and economic challenges (Pachai, 1990).

The importance of this organization is described by Pachai (1997): “the AUBA has weathered many storms, has introduced committees and programmes to respond to all needs and sectors of the black community. It has served, and continues to serve, as a provincial forum of considerable merit and potential” (p. 36). Still in existence today, the mandate of the AUBA is to deal with issues of racism and exclusion in all spheres of Nova Scotian society (Grant, 1980; Pachai, 1997), and to lobby for equitable educational opportunities for African Nova Scotians. As a whole, Black Baptist churches, in their capacity as a venue for social, educational and spiritual purposes, have served as a vehicle for social cohesion within African Nova Scotian communities since the majority of African Scotians are Baptists, attending African Baptist Churches and participating in the AUBA.

As previously noted, the AUBA was initially formed as a vehicle to connect the province’s 40 plus Black communities, and became an empowering medium that helped the people in their fight for social justice and more equal opportunities. While other secular organizations joined the struggle in later years, more recently, researchers have advocated for the AUBA to return to a more active role in the economic, social, educational and political development of African Nova Scotian communities.
Educational and political development of African Nova Scotians (Bernard, 1996; Black Learners Advisory Committee, 1994). Similar claims have been made elsewhere; for example, Poole (1990), speaking about the African American experience, wrote:

If the church has indeed been transformed by the events of the 1960s – the civil rights movement, Black Power, and black theology – the resulting perspective will focus family ministry on the issues that are pertinent to African-Americans. (p. 46)

Similar themes are found elsewhere in the literature, where the role of the Black Church has been identified as a significant institution in the lives of African Americans. Blake and Darling (2000) have described the African American church as a centre of social life, communication and a strength for African American families. Likewise, Jansen, Plaza, & James (1999) have reported that respondents in their study of the employment experiences and mobility of second-generation Caribbean men and women in Toronto identified the church as an important institution that provides mental strength for the day to day disappointments in Canada. Still others have documented the activist role that the Black Church has played in the lives of it citizens and its significance in mobilizing political action during the civil rights movement (Arp & Boeckleman, 1997; D’Apolito, 2000).

While the role of the Black Church in social and political activism has been well documented in Nova Scotia and elsewhere, there has been little discussion of spirituality and the African Nova Scotian experience. This became very evident in Bernard’s (1996) research with Black men in Halifax, Nova Scotia and Sheffield, England, where she found that, while church involvement was identified as a survival strategy for the Halifax participants, Sheffield participants named spirituality as the more salient feature that guided their experience of survival and overcoming racism. There is, however, a solid body of work that explores the experience of spirituality in the African Diaspora.

According to Richards (1990) and Ani (1980), our strength and our survival as Africans in the Diaspora, through slavery and its aftermath, have been enhanced through our collective communal experiences, which is most evident in our expressions of spirituality. Similarly, Paris (1993) suggested that African people are united by their (our) common spiritual strivings, and the lamentations and longings of African souls have been expressed in word, song, music, dance and story, with our spirituality reflected in each (p. 5). Or, as hooks (2003) asserts, “to keep hope alive, enslaved Africans created a spirituality of resistance” (p. 108). That spirituality of resistance continues today, as many writers claim that spirituality is a buffer from the everyday racism that African people experience (Merritt, Marcellus & Monte, 1998).

Spirituality is also identified as a major force in the attainment and maintenance of health and well-being among Africans in the Diaspora (Bowen-Reid & Harrell, 2002; Chase, 2001; Lawson, 2000; Meadows, Thurston, & Melton, 2001; Wheeler, Ampadu, & Wangari, 2002). Wheeler, Ampadu & Wangari (2002) argue that spirituality is deeply embedded in the healthy lifespan development of people of Africa and the African Diaspora, and serves as a life source to aid in healthy cognitive, social and emotional development. Similarly, Chase (2001) found that, in a selected sample of Black teenage youth, spirituality is...
selected sample of Black teenage youth, spirituality is positively associated with prosocial behaviour, while academic achievement and regular church attendance are predictive of salutogenic health practices. Chase concluded that spirituality is positively associated with attitudes and behaviours of healthy living, emotional and physiological well being, and a subjective sense of life satisfaction. Finally, spirituality is also seen as a tool for healing African people who continue to be affected by racism and oppression (Bernard, 2002; Eugene, 1995; Miller, 2001; Thomas, 2001; Wheeler, Ampadu & Wangari, 2002). Eugene (1995) found that Black churches offer healing responses to problems that are occasioned primarily by the oppressive social infrastructures of racism, sexism, and classism. For many, remedy is embedded in the raised consciousness or heightened spirituality and movement toward social change. Bernard (2002) noted that spirituality was a source of help and healing for substance abusing women who were working on recovery.

This discussion highlighted the value of African spirituality as resistance and a tool for healthy development, coping with racism and healing. The following section provides a brief summary of Africentrism and, in particular, the Africentric conceptualization of spirituality.

The Africentric Worldview

Within the social work literature regarding practice with diverse populations, one of the prevailing themes since the early 1990s has been the need for social work practitioners to acquire an understanding of the worldview of different client groups (Jeff, 1994; Moore, 1994). The literature maintains that this understanding enables human service practitioners to become more effective in their practice with their clients. English (1991) defined “worldviews” as “the way in which people perceive their relationship to nature, other people, and objects. They determine how people behave, think, and define events...[and] are significantly influenced by culture. Thus, worldviews are said to vary by racial/ethnic group.” (p. 1). Commenting on the value of understanding worldviews, English (1991) has stated that

Worldviews of African Americans and other ethnic minorities are useful as a source of knowledge for achieving four distinct goals: assessing the client’s cultural background and fundamental orientation towards life, diagnosing problems and planning treatment, empowering African American and ethnic minority families and individuals, and designing innovative child welfare programs and interventions. (p. 22)

During the past 15 years, scholarship on Africentrism has flourished. Mazama (2001) stated that “[t]oday, Afrocentricity is widely discussed in the United States, of course, but also in Africa, Europe, South and Central America, and the Caribbean” (p. 387). Asante (quoted in Mazama, 2003) defines Africentricity as “a frame of reference wherein phenomena are viewed from the perspective of the African person...it centres on placing people of African origin in control of their lives and attitudes about the world” (p.5). Mazama (2003) also maintained that the

Afrocentric idea rests on the assertion of the primacy of the African experience for African people. Its aim is to give us our African, victorious, consciousness back. In the process, it also means viewing the European voice as just one among
Although the majority of writing on Africentric perspective is focused on African Americans, the basic principles are applicable to African Canadians. Within the Canadian context, African Nova Scotians represent one of the most exploited and oppressed groups. For over two centuries, this community has consistently experienced severe forms of racism, discrimination, and exclusion at the hands of the dominant group.

Schiele (2000) defined Africentric human service as “methods of human service practice that arise from the socio-cultural and philosophical concepts, traditions, and experiences of African Americans” (p. 11). Significantly, there is general consensus that some of the traditional beliefs and practices of African cultures have survived among African Americans (Jeff, 1994; Turner, 1991). One of the primary reasons for the development of Africentric human service is the growing realization that the majority of theoretical approaches and practice models in social work are Eurocentric in nature and thus negate the unique cultural aspects and experiences of people of African descent. In describing the Eurocentric model, Akbar (1984) stated that

the Euro-American model or paradigm of social science views the characteristics of the Caucasian, middle-class male of European descent to be the paradigmatic norm for human beings. Individualism, rationalism, and materialism are other characteristics of this model that direct the perception and methodologies of Euro-American science. (p. 403)

Recently, Eurocentric theories and models attempted to acknowledge and recognize the existence of the unique values of people of colour as evidenced by the use of terms such as “cross-cultural” and “ethnic minority”; however, writers such as Schiele (2000) and Mazama (2003) have contended that European values continue to serve as the foundation for these models. As Schiele asserted,

[These human service paradigms usually underscore the following: (1) how racial discrimination and minority status have blocked opportunities and caused disproportionate psychosocial pain for people of colour, (2) how the human service practitioner should be aware of the cultural values and nuances of a consumer of a different racial/ethnic group, and (3) how the human service practitioner should be cognizant of his or her biases and preconceptions when working with someone of another racial/ethnic group. (p. 16)

Schiele (1994) also maintained that the values of people of African descent have not been used to develop social work practice models and asserted that the following four beliefs have consequently emerged: 1. Only White people are capable of developing theories; 2. People of colour lack the ability to develop theories; 3. Euro-American cultures are the only precepts from which solutions can be found; and 4. Theorizing is objective.

The proponents of the Africentric paradigm contend that there is a need for a theoretical approach and practices that are liberating in nature and that deal with the racism, oppression, and exploitation experienced by people of African descent: “Our liberation, Africentricity contends, rests upon our ability to systematically displace European
Rests upon our ability to systematically displace European ways of thinking, being, feelings, etc., and replace them with ways that are germane to our own African cultural experience” (Mazama, 2003, p. 5). Swignoski (1999) echoed this sentiment:

Social work practice from an Afrocentric perspective challenges the social work profession to work with clients to develop alternative social structures that are empowering and that confront the hegemony of existing systems and structures of oppression and domination. (p. 16)

A second related factor contributing to the emergence of Africentrism as a guide for practice stems from the perceived limited effectiveness of traditional mainstream programs and services to deal with the social and economic issues confronting people of African descent. Jeff (1994), in discussing what is required to help enhance the self-image and increase the capacity of young urban-based African American men, stressed that programs need to incorporate Afrocentric models:

Afrocentrism, as applied to social programs for young African-American males, is not merely an intellectual exercise or a reactionary protest to the Eurocentric worldview. It is a practical, positive philosophy that strengthens the individual…. Afrocentric-based programs allow social agencies to use a culture-based model that is effective in transforming troubled African-American youths into productive citizens because it gives them a foundation on which to grow and develop as principled, disciplined, strong, confident, compassionate, and responsible individuals. (p. 113)

Another reason for the emergence of Africentrism as a human service perspective stems from the strong desire of people of African descent to have a greater voice and indeed control in conceptualizing, developing, implementing and monitoring programs. The next section describes the major principles of Africentrism, including the conceptualization of spirituality.

**Major Principles of Africentrism**

The Africentric perspective is based on a number of principles, the most important of which are the interconnection of all things, the importance of collective identity, recognition of the affective dimension, and the spiritual nature of human beings. The discussion that follows highlights the major aspects of the first four principles.

**Interconnection of All Things**

The principle that stresses that all things are interconnected represents the cornerstone of the Africentric perspective. Writers such as King (1994), Turner (1991), and Graham (1999) have contended that, in African philosophy, human beings are perceived as being connected to everything in their environment, including all other human beings. More specifically, all living things are considered to be dependent upon each other for survival and for optimal physical, social and spiritual growth. A critical aspect of this principle is one’s relationship with others. The maintenance of relationships provides individuals with a sense of purpose in life and with connections to both family and community. Harris (2003)
Connections to self, family, and community. Harris (2003) articulated the importance of relationship: “Individuals find their worth and their most sublime expression of existence in relationship to a community, to nature, and in relationship to some supreme idea or being” (quoted in Mazama, 2003, p. 115). For children and youth, social relationships help them develop a strong sense of self-esteem, social competence, and a sense of hope and optimism (King, 1994).

Collective Identity

In contrast to the Eurocentric focus on individualism and materialism, Africentrism stresses the importance of the collective identity. The essence of this principle is captured in the words, “I am, because we are; and since we are, therefore I am” (Mbiti, 1970, p. 141, quoted in Graham, 1999, p. 114). Graham maintained that the emphasis is on human similarities or commonalities rather than on individual differences. In turn, the emphasis on the collective nature of human beings translates into collective responsibility for individuals (Turner, 1991; Schiele, 2000). This sentiment is captured by the expression, “whatever happens to the individual happens to the collective” (quoted in Turner, 1991, p. 47). Collective identity is also directly related to the principle of interconnectedness. It is important to note, however, that although Africentric scholars do not reject that individuals are indeed unique, they do assert that an individual cannot be understood separately from others in his or her social group (Akbar, 1984; Schiele, 2003). Turner (1991) provided examples of how the collective identity is manifested in daily African and African American life. The reverence towards African elders by others in the community represents one of the strongest impressions of the collective identity. In African cultures, children are taught at a very young age to respect elders within the family and, by extension, the clan and community. African elders are treated with respect (p. 50) and are highly valued in the community for their collective wisdom and their contributions. An important sub-theme related to this respect is the belief that elders will be provided for by members of their family. Adherence to this belief reflects the recognition by younger generations of the contributions made by elders to family and community, thus reinforcing the importance of communal responsibility. The consanguineous family structure that prevails in African communities represents another expression of collective identity. The basic premise of this structure is that the family is an institution that includes all individuals related through the bloodline as well as those related by marriage. The term “extended family” is used to describe this particular family structure.

In virtually every society, parents are responsible for raising and caring for their children. Within African communities, however, parenting is a collective responsibility: “everyone assumed responsibility for discipline. If neighbours saw someone’s child misbehaving, they admonished the child and informed the parents later” (Turner, 1991, p. 48). Graham (1999) uses the African proverb “It takes a village to raise a child” to capture the essence of this perspective. The collective responsibility for children brings to the forefront the value of children within African and African-American communities.

Affective Dimension
Another distinctive attribute of the Africentric worldview is recognition of the affective dimension of human beings. Advocates of Africentrism have maintained that a person’s emotions are a vital aspect of the process of self-exploration and knowledge generation. Schiele (2000) asserted that “emotions are the most direct experience of self.” Emphasis on this dimension does not negate or deny the rational aspect of individuals but stresses, rather, the interrelationship between the affective and rational dimensions. To describe the relationship, Schiele stated: “thoughts do not occur independently of feelings, nor do feelings occur independently of thoughts. Thoughts are no more supreme to emotions than emotions are to thoughts” (p. 28). In focusing on the relationship between feelings and thoughts, it is argued that this Africentric perspective provides social workers with a more holistic understanding of the experiences of client systems.

**Spirituality and Africentrism**

The literature describes Africentrism as a worldview or perspective that clearly emphasizes its most fundamental aspect as the conceptualization of the spiritual nature of human beings. In this context, spirituality refers to the non-material or invisible substance that connects all elements in the universe (Schiele, 2000). Akbar (2003), a leading Africentric scholar, wrote:

> The concept of humanity’s essential spirituality merely suggests that when men and women are reduced to their lowest terms, they are invisible and of a universal substance. Such an assumption implies that, ultimately, people are harmoniously alike and not dissimilar to the essence of all that is nature. (p. 139)

In contrast to Eurocentrism, which stresses the materialistic aspect of life, Africentrism maintains that the non-material aspects of human beings are important. Proponents of the perspective stress the importance of the holistic view that mind, body, and spirit are one (Graham, 1999). Hence, this belief is directly tied to the principle of interconnection. An important concept embedded within the Africentric conceptualization of spirituality is morality. Akbar states that “the African social scientist does not shy away from articulating that that which is normal is also good” (p. 133). Akbar (2003) and Schiele (2000) have contended that from an African humanistic viewpoint, there is no separation between spirituality and morality. Schiele (2000) remarked:

> The African concept of humanism does not sever the relationship between God and humans. Humans’ ability to be moral and caring is viewed as the core of the human being in African philosophy; it is the invisible, spiritual nexus between God and humans that generates the potential of human beings to behave morally. (p. 26)

Africentric writers such as Akbar (2003), Mazama (2003), and Harris (2003), stressed the strong connection between religion and spirituality. Schiele (2000) argued that there is a strong need in Western society to have religion and spirituality integrated.

An analysis of the issues confronting people of African descent in the United States reveals that social problems such as violence and substance abuse can be traced back to the spiritual alienation experienced by African Americans.
to the spiritual alienation experienced by African Americans (Schiele, 2000). Schiele (2000) further contended that this was the result of the influence of the Eurocentric worldview, that is, a lack of emphasis on values such as spirituality, collectivity, mutual aid and cooperation:

Within this alienation, one’s self-worth becomes superficial and restricted because one primarily, if not exclusively, associates human worth with materialism. Thus one is at risk of perpetually experiencing anxiety because one fears failure of not accumulating material things within the boundaries of limited time. So people feel lost, defeated, and devalued when they are unable to satisfy their inordinate material cravings and because of their internalization of a materialistic human experience, they are less oblivious to, or less concerned with, the status of their spiritual selves and existence. (p. 82)

Because of the spiritual alienation encountered by people of African descent, Akbar (2003) maintained the need to enhance spiritual development in all institutions, particularly educational. Drawing on the work of Nobles (1980), Schiele (2000) likewise asserted that social workers engaged in practice with people of African descent need to focus on the spiritual development of individuals. More specifically, they need to facilitate the process described as “the spiritualization of human beings”: “The spiritualization of human beings is the belief that at the core of the human being is a spiritual essence that releases vast capabilities for interconnectedness or what Nobles (1980) calls spiritual oneness” (Schiele, 2000, p. 86). The following section explores the role that spirituality plays in the lives of African Nova Scotians.

Spirituality: A Coping and Survival Strategy

We present findings here of two studies with African Nova Scotians that involved exploration of their experiences of health and well-being. This section speaks specifically to the findings about the role of spirituality in the lives of African Nova Scotians as a mechanism to help them cope with the impact of racism on their health and well being.

The Research Studies

The Strong Black Woman (SBW) research project was a study that investigated the experiences of health and well-being among midlife African Nova Scotian women, with particular attention to how they are affected by menopause and a dominant ideological construct, “the strong Black woman.” The sample size for this study was 50 women between the ages of 40 and 65. A purposive sampling technique was used to recruit interview participants from each of the 10 African Nova Scotian communities in the Halifax Regional Municipality (HRM). Qualitative data was gathered for this research through interviews, focus groups and community workshops. Quantitative data was collected through the administering of structured instruments, including the SF-12 Health Survey, Menopause Symptom List, CES-D (Depression) Scale, Racism-Related Coping Styles, IRRS-B (Racism) Questionnaire and the Health-Promoting Lifestyle Profile (HPLP). Analyses of the quantitative measures were largely descriptive using frequencies and measures of association.

The second study, the Racism, Violence and Health Project,...
The second study, the Racism, Violence and Health Project (RVH), is a multi-year, multi-site research project investigating the perceptions of both global and race-related stress in the indigenous and immigrant populations in African Canadian communities in Halifax, Toronto and Calgary. It examines the impact of witnessing and surviving violence, including the violence of racism, on the health and well-being of Black men, their families and communities in the three sites. By triangulating the research populations, researchers and methods during the five-year research process, the RVH project will amass a rich combination of quantitative and qualitative data, community action, health services program and policy development, and cross-disciplinary analysis of the differential impact on the health and well being of Black men, their families, and communities of witnessing and surviving individual and systemic violence. To begin to draw comparisons between African Nova Scotian women and men and their engagement with spirituality, we report here on a small subset of findings from the Halifax site. We present the responses of the male and female participants who completed the quantitative survey in 2002/03, and those who attended the two community forums in 2002 and 2003 to explore the role of spirituality in their lives. We begin with a discussion of the data from the SBW project.

Black women’s views on the role of spirituality on their lives
As Table 1 below illustrates, spirituality, religion, and the presence of God is significant in the lives of the 50 women who participated in the Strong Black Woman study. Approximately 71% of the women strongly agreed that “God is in control of their lives”, with another 16.3% indicating some agreement with the statement. In response to the statement “being a member of a church is important” only 36.7% strongly agreed with another 34.7% expressing some agreement. According to the respondents, the ability to survive in Canadian society where racism exits, appears to be strongly dependent on the women’s reliance on God as a source of support. Approximately 82% of the women strongly agreed that they could not make it in society “without God”. The centrality of the importance of “god” was reinforced with a similar response rates to the statements “God as a source of strength” and secondly the women who reported that they have a “strong relationship with God.” The results that reflect the importance of God in the lives of these African Nova Scotian women is consistent with what the literature suggests about the importance of spirituality in the lives of African people (Wheeler, Ampadu & Wangar; 2002; Bernard, 1996; Bowen-Reid & Harrell, 2002; Chase, 2001)

Table 1
Spirituality and Religion in the Lives of African Nova Scotian Women

<table>
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<th></th>
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<th>Somewhat agree</th>
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<td>Being a member of a church</td>
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<td>36.7</td>
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<td>Never make</td>
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Table 1
God is in control of my life
Being an outstanding member of your church is very important
I could never make it in this world without God
While I looked up to God for strength, it’s up to me to do what I need to do
I have a personal relationship with God

N=50
Note: Numbers in the table are in %. Variables C, D and E have the same frequencies. This is not an error.

Drawing from a preliminary analysis of some of the survey data and data from the community forums held as part of the Racism, Violence and Health project, we explore the influence of spirituality in the lives of African Nova Scotian men and women. The table below presents information regarding the influence of spirituality amongst 300 survey respondents in Halifax, of which 244 were Canadian Black or African Nova Scotian. The balance of the sample includes individuals whose origins are from continental Africa or the Caribbean.

Table 2
Racism, Violence and Health Project Survey Results
“Spirituality is the Strongest Influence in My Life”

Halifax Sample (N= 300)

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<th></th>
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<td>Female (N=161)</td>
<td>97 (60%)</td>
<td>48 (30%)</td>
<td>15 (9%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>192 (64%)</td>
<td>74 (26.7%)</td>
<td>28 (9.3%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

When responding to the statement “spirituality is the strongest influence in my life” 64% of the respondents (N=300) indicated that this statement was “strongly or mostly true”. From a gender perspective, 68% of the men (N=139) and 60% of the women (N=161) indicated strong agreement with the statement. These results are not surprising given the historical importance has played in the lives of African Nova Scotians. Like other African Canadians, spirituality served as a buffer in a society where people of African descent encountered this “colour line”.

Figure I
Racism, Violence & Health Project Survey Results
Spirituality is the Strongest Influence in My Life
In analyzing the results by gender and age grouping, except in the age categories, 18-24 and 35-44, more men than women indicated the centrality of spirituality in their lives. In the age categories 45-54 and 55-66, the proportion of men who chose true was 17% and 16%, respectively, more than the proportion of women. These findings challenge the widely held stereotype that Black men are not spiritual beings.

This importance of spirituality is reinforced in our analysis of the qualitative data.

Three major themes emerge in the qualitative data regarding the role of spirituality in the lives of Black women and men: spirituality is a source of strength and resistance; spirituality is a coping strategy; and spiritual health and well being is an important aspect of health. Each of these themes is explored below drawing on data from the two research studies. We note that while there is some overlap between the first two themes, strength and coping, we present them separately here to highlight the significance of each. Spirituality as a source of strength refers more to the notion of spirituality helping one to prepare for the inevitability and reality of racism, whereas coping refers more to a response to acts of racism and oppression.

**Spirituality Is A Source Of Strength and Resistance**

When describing what it means to be a “strong Black woman,” participants in the SBW study offered portrayals of incredible strength, rooted in their profound sense of spirituality, which serves as an act of resistance (hooks, 2003). That powerful protective mechanism which they call “spirituality” was defined as the key to their survival, and their ability to be strong in the face of adversity. Caught at the intersection of race, gender and class oppression (Bernard, Lucas-White & Moore, 1993), Black women have had to be strong to survive, and participants identified spirituality as a major force in that journey of survival. The following words of SBW participants are illuminating:

A strong Black woman has learned how to survive racism. She has learned how to survive abuse. She has learned the struggles in life, but she’s also learned how to appreciate the good things. She has a lot of faith in God. God gives her a lot of direction. She has been able to raise [X] children . . . . She’s learned how to do a lot with a little. for a woman that
She's learned how to do a lot with a little, for a woman that didn't have the opportunity to educate herself. She learned how to . . . love and give love even though she didn't get a lot. . . . She's learned how to appreciate love and to show that appreciation and teach that appreciation to the rest of her family.

I don't think the strong Black woman is a myth. . . . I think it's such a reality – I think Black women have been strong. Their spirituality is their key. I think that's the key to their strength. . . . There's so many Black women in our communities that are going through abuse, that are enduring abuse from their husbands. Whether we feel that's right or not, but through their spirituality . . . . I'm just going to pray this thing down. And pray this thing out. And you know, that goes against what we learn now but it still shows strength on their behalf.

Similar stories emerge from the RVH project, where the utility of spirituality as a source of strength and act of resistance is illuminated. For many male and female participants in the community forums, the essence of their strength was identified as being rooted in “their Christian faith and spiritual practice.” One woman told us, “My whole world fell apart a year ago. I felt alone, hurt. God gave me strength when I found myself in the fetal position on the floor in my kitchen.” A male participant said, “Faith in God helps me survive,” while another said, “I think we have to go to God in prayer because He knows all about it. If anyone can stop it [racism], he can.” An illustration of the strong influence of spirituality as a source of strength and resistance comes from a participant who talks about the everyday reality of living with racism in Nova Scotia:

Living with racism every day, when tears are falling, and I'm suffering with headaches and migraines, I know God has a plan and that's why am I am here. When you think about the pain and live with it every day, God is the only One who's ever been there. I have friends who don't share that. But I deal with racism by trying to get enough sleep and praying a lot because I know God is there.

**Spirituality is a Coping Strategy**

The second theme is the experience of spirituality as a coping strategy for Black women and men in the two studies. Many women talked about the importance of their faith and spirituality in helping them cope with the stressors in their lives. Dealing with issues such as violence in their homes or communities, or individual or systemic racism, spirituality was identified as a coping strategy that helped them to get through the struggles in their lives. One woman in the Strong Black Woman study described the struggles as being a route to unidentified blessings:

I've been fortunate in my life because, through every step, I think for every challenge that you have, God gives you a blessing. And I realize that he was with me every step of the way because there was always this small voice within me that said, you need to go to church. So there was always that spirit – that sense of spirituality within me. And I think that's what really pulled me through this.

Others talked about the power of spirituality in helping them to regain their confidence and self-worth when they went through difficult periods in their lives. Women found comfort in being able to talk with the Lord at times of mental anguish.
in being able to talk with the Lord at times of mental anguish or depression. Prayer appeared to be significant partly because of the process involved in being able to retreat from the world and by taking a “spiritual walk” to “go off and pray” with the Lord. Meditation, likewise, was seen as helpful in coping with depression. One woman said that her spirituality allowed her to “gain back self-worth”:

What helped me was turning to the Lord and being spiritually uplifted and realizing that my life was important – that I was worth something, regaining my self-worth.

Another woman identified the significance of accepting help from a higher power and claiming spirituality:

God helped me. Because I got away from my husband. I was working and I knew I was a good mother, but then it was just like I had a goal, just to be free. . . . I was out there searching and searching and then one day God touched me. And I received God in my heart. It was just like I found a whole new life.

For some women, spirituality is a tool of rejuvenation. As one woman voiced:

My relationship with the Lord . . . is very important to me and that's where I go for refreshing, to feel rejuvenated. . . . I usually depend on my spiritual walk, you know, scriptures, songs to refresh me, bring me out of that state of mind.

Men and women participants from the RVH Community Forums talked about their faith and its role in helping them to cope and develop a sense of inner peace and strength. As one male participant stated:

I truly believe in the spiritual aspect. . . . it helps individuals cope with loneliness, isolation, frustration, not feeling respected, hopelessness, depression, not being heard, not trusting, feeling constantly judged, self-doubt, and always having to prove oneself.

Despite the power of spirituality to help people cope, a number of participants talked about the need to go beyond coping to healing, and called on the role of spirituality to help facilitate that process as well. Some participants told us “coping is not enough. Change has to happen and healing has to happen.” Increased communication, humour, spirituality, and community-based action were all mentioned as part of the process of moving forward (Lloyd, 2003, p. 9).

Spiritual Health and Well Being is an Important Aspect of Health
Several women in the SBW claimed that their spiritual health was as important and significant as their physical and mental health. Typically, the strong Black woman has been described as taking care of others to the detriment of her own health and well being (Bernard, Lucas-White & Moore, 1993), placing the care of others ahead of her own needs. A different picture emerged in this study, however, as Black women spoke of the need to take care of themselves first, identifying the need for self-care as a prerequisite to the care for others, and claiming that spiritual health is a fundamental aspect of self-care. One participant commented that [w]e help one another. Most of it is emotional support. And being supportive, and encouragement and whatever. That's what we do. And spiritual. Spiritual is a big part of it...
healthy means to me, being happy – being contented with one's self. Because I think of, when I think of health, I think of the physical, the spiritual, and the emotional health. And so when I'm thinking health, I'm looking into all of those things. How your body is functioning, and your mind. Are you at peace with yourself? Are you happy to be in the environment in which you are, or your surroundings, or with your significant others in your life that you have? And the spiritual part, because I know when you're unhappy, all of those things suffer. So that's what being healthy means – being sound, being fulfilled, or reasonably so. I don't know if we're always fulfilled. Being contented. But at least we're thriving, we're alert, we're aware of ourselves and our relationship with others, with God and with others, so . . . that's what . . . being healthy means to me.

We heard similar stories from participants in the RVH research. One participant discussed the pain and distress caused from racism in his community and the impact on individuals' spiritual health. He stated, “Racism invades the soul . . . affects the whole body system. We need to learn not to let racism get the best of our spirit.” One participant claimed that, “[I]f you are mentally unstable, then the physical and spiritual are affected. If the spiritual is affected, then the mental and physical are affected, so I believe they are all intertwined.” Similarly, another participant talked about health from a holistic perspective and stressed that the mental, physical and spiritual health and well being of individuals are all interconnected.

Discussion

The role of spirituality in the lives of African Nova Scotians was explored in this paper. Based on the results of the two studies discussed, the Strong Black Woman and the Racism, Violence, and Health Study, it appears that spirituality serves as a source of strength, is used as a coping strategy in a society where African Nova Scotians continue to experience racism and discrimination and, finally, is an important aspect of the health and well being of this group.

During the past decade, spirituality has emerged as an important component of practitioners' work with clients. Increasingly, there is literature that deals with spirituality and social work (Csiernik & Adams, 2002; Graham & Bradshaw, 2000). Coholic (2002) has provided a series of practice principles for social work and spirituality that are applicable for practitioners who work with African Nova Scotians. First, it is essential that social workers understand spirituality. An important aspect of this learning process is recognizing one's own spirituality and being in touch with those feelings. Ideally, these processes should help the practitioner recognize the importance spirituality may play in the lives of African Nova Scotians. Part of this assessment process would entail an understanding of the client's definition of spirituality and involvement in organized religion, given the significant historical and contemporary role of the Black Church in Nova Scotia. Although the Africentric conceptualization of spirituality may provide the social worker with some initial ideas about its meaning to clients, it is incumbent upon the practitioner to explore it with the client system with which the practitioner is working. The degree to which spiritual alienation is experienced by African Nova Scotians on a daily basis is another important component of the assessment process. Spiritual alienation
refers to the disconnection of non-material and morally
affirming values from concepts of human self-worth and from
the character of social relationships (Schiele, 1996, p. 289).
Asante (1987) and Schiele (2000) asserted that spiritual
alienation can be viewed as a direct consequence of
oppression. In the case of African Nova Scotians, it is highly
likely that this alienation is the result of living in a society
where racism and discrimination are encountered on a daily
basis. It is imperative that social work practitioners
understand the various effects these forms of oppression
have on the health and well being of African Nova Scotians,
including their spiritual health. Social workers must
appreciate how African Nova Scotians use spirituality as a
coping mechanism, therefore recognizing that any
intervention should include a spiritual dimension or embrace
the client's use of spirituality as a source of strength. To this
end, Hodge and Williams (2002) have provided a series of
questions that social workers may use in exploring the
spiritual strengths of clients. The questions are clustered
under four main topics: God, rituals, faith community, and
transpersonal encounters. These questions may be useful
for practitioners who work with African Nova Scotians.
Another tool that may assist in facilitating the spiritual
dimension of the assessment process are spiritual ecomaps
(Hodge, 2000; Hodge & Williams, 2002), which are used to
assess client's existential relationships to various spiritual
dimensions in their ecological environment.
As illustrated in this paper, spirituality does play an important
role in the lives of African Nova Scotians. It is indeed a
source of strength, a tool of resistance, a coping strategy,
and is utilized as a buffer against the everyday realities of
racism to help promote health and well being. In other
words, spirituality is a key to survival for African Nova
Scotians. It is imperative that social work practitioners begin
to receive training in spirituality in the areas of assessment
and as potential intervention strategies. Failure to do so may
limit the effectiveness of their work with African Nova
Scotians.

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Android. Category: Travel & Local. ANSD offers visitors the ability to search for and/or contribute to a comprehensive public database of African Nova Scotian points of interest including, but not limited to, culture, food, business, spirituality, education, and music. By offering an expansive public database of businesses, events, and cultural information, the African Nova Scotian Directory is an integral part of Nova Scotia’s virtual landscape. In today’s fast-paced, technologically advanced, information-driven society, an online directory will draw positive attention to business, arts, Purpose: To assess, using qualitative methods, the knowledge African Canadians living in Nova Scotia have regarding their options for palliative and end-of-life (EOL) care. Design: This project engaged caregivers in a Black community in Nova Scotia, Canada, in an exploration of palliative and EOL care. A group of six caregivers who cared for someone who had died were recruited through purposive sampling. Family-centered care may be a reason why “system” is generally not aware of the EOL experiences of African Nova Scotians. Discussion: Information about palliative care services is not filtering down to the community in a way that is meaningful to families. Families tend to self-select services that assist them in providing care in the home setting.