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Toward Christian-Identity Response Theory: Exploring Identity, Spirituality, and Response to Adversity Among African American Males Placed at Risk

Charity Hannah Garcia

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ABSTRACT

TOWARD CHRISTIAN-IDENTITY RESPONSE THEORY: EXPLORING IDENTITY, SPIRITUALITY, AND RESPONSE TO ADVERSITY AMONG AFRICAN AMERICAN MALES PLACED AT RISK

by

Charity Hannah Garcia

Co-chairs: Sherick A. Hughes; Larry D. Burton
ABSTRACT OF GRADUATE STUDENT RESEARCH

Dissertation

Andrews University
School of Education

Title: TOWARD CHRISTIAN-IDENTITY RESPONSE THEORY: EXPLORING IDENTITY, SPIRITUALITY, AND RESPONSE TO ADVERSITY AMONG AFRICAN AMERICAN MALES PLACED AT RISK

Name of researcher: Charity H. Garcia
Name and degree of faculty co-chairs: Sherick A. Hughes, Ph.D.; Larry D. Burton, Ph.D.
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Problem
A lack of research integrating spiritual development as a central component of human development does not reflect an understanding of the whole person across multiple contexts throughout the life span. Such a limited-capacity view of African American males disproportionately disadvantaged, both historically and currently, has been detrimental. A theoretical model for how a relational journey with Christ may offer insights that lead to transformative practice in various educational settings.

Method
Constructivist grounded theory was utilized throughout this research process.
Thirty-four African American males in three age groups (13-17; 18-25; 26+) who were
placed at risk during adolescence and connected with Christian Community Development Association (CCDA) organizations at the time of data collection engaged in the research process. Focus group discussions or initial interviews were followed by in-depth interviews.

Line-by-line coding of focus group discussions and initial interviews led to the formation of tentative categories and themes. Data were compared to data. Then data were compared to codes. Incident-by-incident coding of some initial interviews and all in-depth interviews also occurred. Categories and themes were compared, refined, and further developed. Focused codes were raised to conceptual categories. Voice memos and memo writing were utilized throughout the research process. Through data collection and analysis, theory emerged. Purposeful sampling was followed by theoretical sampling as comparative analysis occurred until saturation point was reached and a substantive grounded theory was constructed. An intensive member-check process, inclusive of testing the theory against participants’ lives and artifacts, as well as reflection on the research involvement and the role of the researcher, concluded data collection.

Results

A framework of adversities, self-constructs, adversity response strategies, positive and negative influences to adversity response strategies, and spiritual development components work cyclically to form Christian-Identity Response Theory. Spiritual development overlays other components, allowing for spiritual development to be a core developmental dimension with which other theory components interact and enact influence on over the course of the life span.
Participants identified 74 individual types of adversities from which nine interdependent categories emerged: school, religiosity, spiritual development, familial adversity, sexual abuse, sex and romantic relationships, environmental context, internal struggles, and societal adversities. These adversities served as the data-rich foundation and backdrop that played a powerful role in the molding of participants’ identity constructs.

Each participant’s unique makeup of self-constructs acted as a filter through which adversities experienced are viewed. Forty-three specific identities that formed a self-construct at one or more times over the course of the life span formed categories: demographics, Christian-based identity constructs, characteristics, descriptors, roles, and cultures. When participants experienced their adversities through the filter of their identity, they responded to their adversities in corresponding ways. When one’s primary self-construct becomes that of “Christian,” it is the most significant turning point in how adversities are responded to. After conversion other constructs of the individual’s identity increasingly became ways of expressing their Christianity. This shift in participants’ primary identities rarely happened suddenly, and most often occurred over the course of months and years after first encounters with Christianity. This is reflected in pre-conversion identities, transitional identities, distinctly Christian identities, and remaining sub-identities of primary-identity Christians.

Responses to adversity moved from maladaptive avoidance and aggression toward adaptive adversity response strategies of seeking help and problem solving as participants’ faith commitment increased and developed distinctly Christian identities.
The presence of emotional responses remained consistent across the life span. However, responses to these emotions evolved on pace with participants’ spiritual development.

These responses to adversity in various educational settings were impacted by a variety of participant-identified 40 positive and 31 negative influences that were categorized by academic school life, non-academic school life, family life, religious experiences and expectations, community life, and relationship with self. These influences serve as potential contributors or destructors of individual resiliency that played an imperative role in overcoming risk factors.

Unexpected findings included: relative silence within an academic educational context, involvement in research as educative turning point, some limitations turn to strengths, finding a voice through authenticity, and reconciliation.

Conclusions

The development of Christian-Identity Response Theory (C-IRT) has added to spiritual development literature on African American males placed at risk during adolescence. The influence of Christian spiritual development and subsequent evolution of primary identity to that of “Christian” has been reflected by the participants. This evolution is demonstrated in a shift from maladaptive responses to adversity, toward adaptive responses to adversity. The same influences on responses to adversity have the power to be either positive or negative, and at times both. Implications for a wide variety of educational contexts include targeted awareness of adversities faced, intentional development of Christian identity’s influence on responses to adversity, and development of consistent relationships.
TOWARD CHRISTIAN-IDENTITY RESPONSE THEORY: EXPLORING IDENTITY, SPIRITUALITY, AND RESPONSE TO ADVERSITY AMONG AFRICAN AMERICAN MALES PLACED AT RISK

A Dissertation
Presented in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Doctor of Philosophy

by
Charity Hannah Garcia

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APPROVAL BY THE COMMITTEE:

Co-chair: Sherick A. Hughes
Dean, School of Education
James R. Jeffery

Co-chair: Larry D. Burton

Member: David Sedlacek

External: Edith Fraser
Date approved
To the miner’s canary boys and those who minister to them.

May your voices be heard and transform the future.
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Background of the Problem

Marginalized groups regularly and often disproportionately face adversity in societal and educational settings (Children’s Defense Fund, 2007). Social activist groups, multicultural curricularists and organizations, educators, researchers, and many others work tirelessly against the adversities that these groups face. And yet, for all the effort, there still remain great challenges. One can draw a comparison between these groups and a miner’s canary. When miners keep a canary with them in the mine, the canary’s lungs are more fragile and will fail more quickly than the miners’ when dangerous gases are present. If the canary goes into distress, miners must dispel the poisonous gases in order to continue mining without danger. Guinier and Torres (2003) state, “Racially marginalized are like the miners’ canary: their distress is the first sign of danger that threatens us all. . . . Racialized communities signal problems with the ways we have structured power and privilege” (pp. 11-12). Noguera (2008) argues that among the vulnerable “miner canary” groups in our nation and our schools are young Black males.

Palmer and Maramba (2010) utilize Noguera’s (2003) earlier work to contend that “in some educational settings, African American men are more likely than other racial and ethnic groups to be marginalized, stigmatized, and labeled with behavior problems” (p. 434). This young African American male demographic also experiences a greater
number of expulsions and longer, more frequent school suspensions than do their Caucasian counterparts or their African American sisters (Hale, 2001; Majors & Billson, 1992; Polite & Davis, 1999). They are overrepresented in special education classrooms (Levin, Belfield, Muenning, & Rouse, 2007; J. Moore, Henfield, & Owens, 2008; Nogueria, 2003) and underrepresented in advanced placement classes and gifted education programs (Whiting, 2009). Not surprisingly there is a high dropout rate in this population as well (Davis, 2003; Epps, 1995; Whiting, 2009). Many of those who do graduate from high school do not read and write beyond the fourth-grade level (Hooks, 2004). The systems in place have “fail[ed] to impart or inspire learning in African American males of all ages” (pp. 40-41). African American males with lower academic attainment are more likely to be underemployed, experience poor health, and be involved with the criminal justice system (Children’s Defense Fund, 2007; Harvey, 2008; Levin et al., 2007).

In order to combat these challenges, African American social theorists (Asante, 1987; West, 2001) and researchers (Banks, 2006; Ford, 1996) have joined educators and members of the African American community in advocating for an African-centered curriculum within churches and schools. During a lecture entitled “Afrocentricity: Toward a New Understanding of African Thought in This Millennium,” Asante (2000) stated, “Africa has been betrayed by international commerce, by missionaries and imams, by the structure of knowledge imposed by the Western world, by its own leaders, and by the ignorance of its own people of its past.” An African-centered curriculum helps to fulfill Asante’s (2000) aim to “plan for the recovery of African place, respectability, accountability, and leadership” in an African American context. Afrocentric schools immerse learning environments with African tradition, ritual, value, and symbols
(Asante, 1987). Rites of passage and leadership programs are utilized to teach African American youth their heritage as a way of intervention, as well as promotion of positive growth and development (Kafele, 2009). Research has found these programs are effective for many African American adolescent males. By focusing on culture and race as the major push for identity of these boys, academic standing and behavior improved (West-Olatunji & Baker, 2006; Whiting, 2009). This improvement was especially true for the most at-risk students.

Afrocentricity may help these boys take pride in their cultural history and their identity, yet by necessity its assumptions have limited its study to one level of self, race, and made it the core component of identity (Asante, 1987; West, 1990, 2001). Studies exploring African American racial and ethnic identity often generate from these Afrocentric ideas (Atkinson, Morten, & Sue, 1993; Cross, 1971, 1991, 2001; Helms, 1993, Parham, 1989, White & Parham, 1990; Yip, Seaton, & Sellers, 2006) and experience the same limitations. Current research across fields of study explores identity integration, where “different forms or facets of self (race being only one of those forms or facets) come together and impact each other in potentially transformative ways” (Stewart, 2002, p. 580). Other research has explored identity’s multiple levels of self-interactions with contextual factors (Bronfenbrenner, 1989; Lerner, 1998, 2002; Lerner, Alberts, Anderson, & Dowling, 2006). Children and adolescents are “embedded within multiple contexts or ecologies (including culture, family, school, faith community, neighborhood, community, nation . . .) that shape the young person’s developmental path” (Roehlkepartain, King, Wagener, & Benson, 2006, p. 10).
Coles’s (1990) findings challenged thinking about the role of spirituality in human development. He found spirituality to be a natural, complex, and adaptive function that had the capability of having a “positive and sometimes life-changing quality” in the life of children. Coles found that children’s religious beliefs and experiences helped them to cope with racial discrimination and transform civic culture during the civil rights era in the South (Roehlkepartain et al., 2006, p. 7). Hughes (2006) also found prayer and religious engagement of the family to be a key response strategy during the government-sanctioned integration of schools in rural North Carolina. Mattis, Ahluwalia, Cowie, and Kirkland-Harris (2006) suggest that “religious and ethnic identity and the conflicts that arise in relation to these identities can serve as foundations for crafting mature spirituality” (p. 291). Later researchers have found that both positive and negative religious coping strategies exist (Cunningham, 2005; Van Dyke, Glenwick, Cecero, & Kim, 2009) and may correlate to a more positive sense of self (Cunningham, 2005) or conversely be related to poorer adjustment, symptoms of depression, anxiety, and overall distress (Cunningham, 2005; Pargament, Ano, & Wachholtz, 2005; Pargament, Koenig, & Perez, 2000). Such development may significantly inform the trajectory of a person’s life (Benson, 2006).

This and other research suggest that religion and spirituality may not be “a universal obsession of neurosis” (Freud, 1961), a “delusion” (Jung, 1938), or a “by-product of cognitive adaptations” (Alcorta & Sosis, 2005) to be dismissed as an expression of something else. Instead, spiritual development may be “a core and universal dynamic in human development” (Roehlkepartain et al., 2006, p. 5) grounded in the deepest of human needs (Coles, 1990, p. 8). Roehlkepartain et al. (2006) state:
[Spirituality is] a developmental wellspring out of which emerges the pursuit of meaning, connectedness to others and the sacred, purpose, and contributions, each and all of which can be addressed by religion or other systems of ideas and beliefs. (p. 5)

By using this perspective of spiritual development as a starting point, one could argue that identity integration is not only consistent with faith and spirituality, but at the core of it. This enables an exploration of the influence of a Christian spiritual development, particularly that of faith commitment on responses to adversity among African American males who were placed at risk in adolescence.

**Statement of the Problem**

There has been little research integrating a participant’s spiritual development as a central component of human development, and even less on the role of faith commitment on the life trajectory of at-risk adolescents. There has been a lack of full engagement with this domain [spiritual development] in the mainstream social sciences that has omitted our capacity to fully understand the person in its entirety at all points in the lifespan and within its multiple social, cultural, and national contexts. (Roehlkepartain et al., 2006, p. 2)

There is no theoretical model for Christ (or any other higher power) to be one’s primary component of identity, while the person remains active in their spiritual development.

**Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this grounded theory study was to explore the influence of spiritual development on responses to adversity for African American males who were placed at risk as adolescents, self-identify as Christian, and are leaders of or those who directly benefit from Christian Community Development organizations in Michigan, Indiana, and Illinois. Through this exploration, the process of Christian spiritual
development, one’s primary faith commitment, and responses to adversity in academic school, nonacademic school, family, church, and community educational settings are discussed.

**Research Questions**

Central Question: How might spiritual development influence the turning points of African American males placed at risk during adolescence, specifically their faith commitment and subsequent turning points in response to adversity in various educational settings?

Further issues and procedural sub-questions were informed by and developed from focus group discussions, initial interviews, data collection, and data analysis. These are:

1. What is the influence of spiritual development on adversities identified and experienced?
2. What is the influence of identity constructs on responses to adversity in academic schooling, non-academic schooling, family life, church life, and community life?
3. What influenced the participants’ responses to adversity positively and negatively over the course of their lives?

These questions intentionally glean information about historical context and its influence on spiritual development, participant-identified adversities and ways of responding to these adversities throughout their spiritual development, and a range of educational environments and experiences. Other questions included refinement of the topics of sexuality, the role of the church and Christian community in developing a
primary identity and life direction, influential role models, and on fathers. Such questions are reflected in interview protocols in Appendix B.

**Rationale**

This study sought to discover how salient connections with Christian faith may lead to turning points and affect the trajectory of African American adolescent male lives that have been placed at risk. There has been little research on the effect of de-centering race (or other types of risk contributors, stress engagements, or reactive coping methods [Spencer, Depree, & Hartmann, 1997]) and centering Christ as one’s primary identity. The literature has established that spiritual development is a process and that adolescent identity development is an intense part of that process (Bronfenbrenner, 1989; Elder, 1998; Erikson, 1968; Marcia, 1980; Spencer et al., 1997; Swanson, Spencer, Dell’Angelo, Harpalani, & Spencer, 2002). It has also evidenced that choice, influenced by a myriad of ecological aspects, is a core component in the formation of identity (Elder, 1998; Spencer et al., 1997; Swanson et al., 2002). This study sought to discover what can happen when faith commitment fuels the change in responses to adversity through at-risk young men’s stories. Grounded theory research has provided tools from which to view the interrelatedness of faith commitment and spiritual development on potential turning points.

Underlying this study are philosophical and theoretical assumptions. The philosophical assumptions are couched in a Christian, theistic worldview. The theoretical propositions draw heavily from life course theory.

**Philosophical Assumptions**

The philosophical assumptions are:
1. When someone becomes a Christian, the central component of self-concept/identity becomes being a follower of Christ. This construct encompasses all other identity constructs—gender, race, class, occupation—and surpasses inherited influences—socioeconomic conditions, socio-cultural expectations, and socio-historical processes. In Christ there is no Greek nor Jew, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus (Gal 3:28; Col 3:1-12).

2. Identifying oneself as Christian informs one’s understanding of individual and collective identity. Individual identity is derived from being a son/daughter and ambassador of God (2 Cor 5:20). Collective identity is found among other Christians, specifically one’s local church family. From these self-appraisal is drawn.

3. Humans possess the freedom of choice (Gen 2-4; Deut 30:19; Rom 6:16).

Theoretical Propositions

The theoretical assumptions are:

1. “Adolescent ‘spiritual’ and ‘religious’ values and ideologies are embedded in and inextricable from their relationships, academic life, psychological well-being, and health practices” (Mattis et al., 2006, p. 293).

2. There are multiple constructs that contribute to any human’s existence. Individual constructs are made more or less relevant by given situations or contexts. Therefore, we cannot assume that individuals within minority groups, specifically African Americans, define themselves primarily by race. Other defining characteristics could include: gender, religious affiliation, occupation, etc. (Harper & Tuckman, 2006; Penn, Gaines, & Phillips, 1993). Irrespective of individual views on the central component of a person’s self-concept, there are important implications for the meaning
one attaches to their given race and subsequent identity (Harper & Tuckman, 2006; Sellers, Smith, Shelton, Rowley, & Chavous, 1998).

3. Individual identity is continuously defined and redefined during a person’s life course (Elder, 1998; Kurtines et al., 2008).

4. During one’s life course individuals make choices that are heavily influenced by prior experience and social interactions within one’s community (Root, 1998). When looking back on one’s life course, significant turning points can be identified (Elder, 1998; Kurtines et al., 2008).

5. Each turning point can be likened to a roundabout. There are multiple directions a person may decide to pursue. While the decision is being made he/she circles the roundabout, not committing to any one direction. During that internal decision-making time, external influences may change the societal/ecological landscape and therefore the exit point options available. At the moment of choice one either progresses to one of the exit points that move forward, or selects the exit point that takes them back along a road similar to the one previously travelled.

6. Five basic components of identity integrate social, historical, and cultural contexts within normative maturational and developmental processes of youth—vulnerability level, net stress, reactive coping mechanisms, emergent identities: stable coping responses, coping outcomes (Swanson et al., 2002). These form the building blocks of each individual’s life course.

**Conceptual Framework/Theoretical Sensitivity**

Identity formation has been an area of growing interest across fields of study since Erikson’s (1968) influential work on the psychosocial levels of development. He
identified identity formation within an ego-analytic theory (Marcia, 1980), proposing that while identity is distinctive to adolescence, it is not exclusive to it. Marcia significantly advanced Erikson’s work by building on the concept that identity is a dynamic, ongoing process driven by decisions and commitments in an individual’s life. He further attested that physical development, cognitive growth, social expectations, and spiritual maturation “coincide to enable young persons to sort through and synthesize their childhood identifications in order to construct a viable pathway toward their adulthood” (p. 160). It is this pathway concept, further extended, that is presented in Life Course Theory.

Life Course Theory (2009), also known as life course perspective, provides a multidisciplinary paradigm from which to study people’s lives, structural contexts, and social change. First developed alongside foundational identity formation research in the 1960s, it had secured its place as an “emerging paradigm” by the early 1990s (Rodgers & White, 1993). Elder (1998) defined it as the “path” of a person’s life as he or she navigates his or her culture and time period’s rituals and expectations. Multiple possible trajectories are possible depending on transitions that occur along a person’s life course. Through the groundbreaking research of Glen Elder, Life Course Theory’s core principles have been championed. Refinement and testing of life course theory models across various disciplines and multiple levels of analysis are now occurring.

A specific life course theory, Phenomenological Variant of Ecological Systems Theory (PVEST), was developed by M. B. Spencer in 1995. He integrated Bronfenbrenner’s (1989) ecological systems theory with a phenomenological approach. This fusion depicts a self-appraisal process in which one evaluates one’s self through bidirectional experiences in multiple contexts. This is an “identity-focused cultural-
ecological perspective, integrating issues of social, historical, and cultural context with normative maturation and developmental processes that youth undergo” (Swanson et al., 2002, p. 76). Five basic components—net vulnerability, net stress, reactive coping strategies, emergent identities: stable coping responses, life-stage coping outcomes—are linked by bidirectional, recursive processes. Together they form a dynamic, cyclic model (see Figure 1).

The vulnerability level represents the balance between risk and protective factors. It is the net difference in the effects of protective and risk factors. In this balance, risk factors can either offset each other or outweigh each other. Risk factors include: poverty, membership in a disfavored racial or ethnic group, gender, and community or school violence. Protective factors may include, but are not limited to parental monitoring and high academic performance. Protective factors contributing to individual resiliency may overcome potential risk factors. The net stress (engagement) level represents the balance of perceived challenges and social supports. Net stress variables focus on individual perception of risk and protection. The next level is a balance between maladaptive (i.e., avoidance or aggression) and adaptive solutions (i.e., problem solving or seeking help) to perceived problems or challenges. These can be described as reactive coping strategies. “Reactive” indicates that coping strategies used are in response to a specific problem or challenge experienced “in the moment.” The fourth level of the PVEST theory is emergent identities: stable coping strategies. Coping strategies are consistently employed whether they are appropriate to a given problem or challenge or not. They, therefore, become coping tendencies that present themselves as internalized emergent identities. These may not necessarily be reactive or problem specific; they may be either positive or

Negative. In life-stage coping outcomes, final level component of this theory, diverse positive and negative outcomes can be experienced. These outcomes are based on coping behaviors and emergent identities that influence coping behaviors. Because of the recursive, cyclic nature of the PVEST framework, life-stage coping outcomes at one developmental period become the risk or protective factors at the next stage of development.

This literature has established that adolescent identity development is an intense process. It has also evidenced that choice, influenced by a myriad of ecological aspects, is a core component in the formation of identity. Spirituality may also play an important foundational role.
Significance

The emergent nature of the spiritual development field has led to a call for theorizing, especially in adolescent and minority populations. Benson (2006) attests that “the first step in advancing the field is to trigger an explosion in theory building, with an eye to constructing frameworks and hypotheses that position spiritual development as a core, central, and universal dimension of human development” (p. 493).

This study begins to fill the gap in spiritual development and education literature and adds credibility and academic research to spiritual development as influential to life path, turning points, and trajectories of at-risk male youth. Seeking to add to the literature base, this research explored some of the complexity and fluidity inherent in the study of spiritual development and its influence on responses to adversity among African American males. By contributing to a growing amount of literature in the field, it provides a venue for African American male voices to be heard.

Definition of Terms

Identity: A dynamic, ongoing process driven by decisions and commitments in an individual’s life. Physical development, cognitive growth, social expectations, and spiritual maturation “coincide to enable young persons to sort through and synthesize their childhood identifications in order to construct a viable pathway toward their adulthood” (Marcia, 1980, p. 160).

Spiritual development: A developmental wellspring out of which emerges the pursuit of meaning, connectedness to others and the sacred, purpose, and contributions, each and all of which can be addressed by religion or other systems of ideas and beliefs (Roehlkepartain et al., 2006, p. 5).
At risk youth: Youth who are exposed to factors that may increase their tendency to engage in problem or delinquent behaviors. Often these adolescents demonstrate “poor academic and social skills that promote a general disconnection with the school culture” (McDonald, 2002).

Adolescence: A developmental period where one forms a sense of “who one is” and “what one means to others” (Erikson, 1968).

Risk factors: Factors that can lead to adolescent problem behaviors. These are typically classified within four realms: community, family, school, and individual/peer.

Life course: The “path” of a person’s life as he or she navigates his or her culture and time period’s rituals and expectations (Elder, 1998). There are multiple possible trajectories depending on choices made along a person’s life course.

Phenomenological Variant of Ecological Systems Theory (PVEST): A self-appraisal process in which one evaluates one’s self through bidirectional experiences in multiple contexts. This is an “identity-focused cultural-ecological perspective, integrating issues of social, historical, and cultural context with normative maturation and developmental processes that youth undergo” (Swanson et al., 2002, p. 76). Five basic components—net vulnerability, net stress, reactive coping strategies, emergent identities: stable coping responses, life-stage coping outcomes—are linked by bidirectional, recursive processes. Together they form a dynamic, cyclic model.

Net vulnerability level: This level represents the balance between risk and protective factors. It is the net difference in the effects of protective and risk factors. In this balance risk factors can either offset each other or outweigh each other. Risk factors
include: poverty, membership in a disfavored racial or ethnic group, gender, and community or school violence. Protective factors may include, but are not limited to parental monitoring and high academic performance. Protective factors contributing to individual resiliency may overcome potential risk factors.

*Net stress (engagement) level:* This level represents the balance of perceived challenges and social supports. Net stress variables focus on individual *perception* of risk and protection.

*Reactive coping strategies:* A balance between maladaptive (i.e., avoidance or aggression) and adaptive solutions (i.e., problem solving or seeking help) to perceived problems or challenges. “Reactive” indicates that coping strategies used are in response to a specific problem or challenge experienced “in the moment.”

*Emerging identities: stable coping strategies:* Coping strategies that are consistently employed whether they are appropriate to a given problem or challenge, therefore becoming coping tendencies that present themselves as internalized emergent identities. These may not necessarily be reactive or problem specific; they may be either positive or negative.

*Life-stage coping outcomes:* The diverse positive and negative outcomes that can be experienced. These outcomes are based on coping behaviors and emergent identities that influence coping behaviors. Because of the recursive, cyclic nature of the PVEST framework, life-stage coping outcomes at one developmental period become the risk or protective factors at the next stage of development.
General Methodology

This is a grounded theory study. Interviews were conducted and artifacts collected from three age groups of African American males who were placed at risk during adolescence and were connected with the Christian Community Development Association (CCDA) organizations during data collection. Data were collected first from a purposeful sample and then from a theoretical sample. Data collection and comparative analysis occurred until saturation point was reached and a substantive grounded theory was constructed. Line-by-line coding of focus group discussions and initial interviews led to the formation of tentative categories and themes. Data were compared to data. Then data were compared to codes. Incident-by-incident coding of some initial interviews also occurred. Categories and themes were compared, refined, and further developed. Theoretical coding helped me to conceptualize how the codes were related, form an analytic story that had coherence, and moved the analytic in a theoretical direction (Charmaz, 2006, p. 63). Digital voice memos and memo writing were engaged in throughout the research process. These helped me to dialogue with myself about the data and served as “the pivotal intermediate step between data collection and writing drafts of papers” (p. 73) as I engaged in the analytic work necessary to raise focused codes to conceptual categories. Through data collection and analysis, theory emerged.

Positionality: Limiting, Delimiting, and Reconciling

Limiting

Limitations of this study included issues of continued access, an extended timeline of data collection and analysis, along with researcher bias. In previous interviews African American males have questioned a White researcher’s motive, as well
as the researcher’s ability to truly understand and represent them. As a Christian Seventh-
day Adventist, bi-racial (Hispanic and White) woman who was raised the majority of my
life in a White, middle-class environment and worked primarily in minority education, I
perceive society through this lens.

An expected limitation at the beginning of this study was for participants to react
hesitantly or negatively to my race, class, or gender. Negativity was limited to one
potential site coordinator who chose not to participate in the study. The Michigan
research site coordinator did not convey any hesitancy or negativity and readily
volunteered her site to participate in the research, was easily contactable by phone and
e-mail, and together with a co-leader arranged for all necessary focus groups, interviews,
and member checks. New Life Community Center research site coordinator expressed
interest in participating in the study as well as a desire to protect his site participants from
a potentially negative and stereotyped experience. These concerns were addressed during
the initial phone conversations and emails, as well as after a tour of the facilities and
before engaging in any focus group discussions or initial interviews.

After sharing about myself and the study, I acknowledged the lack of similarities
between myself and the participant(s) and invited them to have their questions answered
honestly and authentically. All but one participant indicated a desire to continue to
participate in the study. There was some discomfort communicated subtly by the New
Hope CCD site coordinator after the head of the organization had agreed to participation
in the study. This was never discussed, therefore there is no way of knowing whether this
was a reaction to my race, class, or gender, a desire to protect his community from an
outsider such as myself, or whether there was resistance to involvement in this research
study because of internal administrative issues. Initial access to adult participants for the purpose of the focus group was granted, with the understanding that further steps in the research process would be left up to whether the individual participants wanted to continue. Issues of race, gender, age, and background were addressed through open question and answer time with participants prior to beginning the focus group discussion and as it came up during the focus group. At the completion of the focus group all participants expressed a desire to move forward in the research process.

The site coordinator expressed willingness to set these interviews up. However, calls and emails were infrequently returned and coordination of interview times was difficult to schedule due to an apparent resistance to move forward. Eventually, data collection and analysis conditions were weakened with the withdrawal of the New Hope CCD research site by the site coordinator after in-depth interviews of participants were completed. Although, he did approve contacting participants who had exited the program and were now solely members of the community, site withdrawal resulted in significant limitations for member check by participants still engaged in their program or those with whom contact was not available.

Across all cross-sections of participants I was met with curiosity, openness, vulnerability, and a strong desire to participate in this research. Recognizing the complexity of this particular limitation, every effort was made for continued researcher reflexivity throughout the research and writing process, so that readers have open access to researcher bias.
Delimiting

The field of spiritual development is emerging. The study of spiritual development in childhood and adolescence has only recently begun to move to the scientific mainstream. Rather than delimiting my study primarily from what is known, I delimited my study primarily by the multitude of gaps in the literature. Therefore, a central delimitation of this study is the decision to focus this study on those who self-identify as Christian, rather than including the study of a variety of faith communities, within Roehlkepartain et al.’s (2006) definition of spiritual development: “A developmental wellspring out of which emerges the pursuit of meaning, connectedness to others and the sacred, purpose, and contributions, each and all of which can be addressed by religion or other systems of ideas and beliefs” (p. 5).

I further narrowed the scope of my research study by focusing on the influence that Christian spiritual development has on responses to adversity. Population was also considered to be a delimitation. This study focused on African American males placed at risk during adolescence who were serving at or being served by Christian Community Development Association (CCDA) organizations in Michigan, Indiana, and Illinois at the time of data collection.

Reconciling

The study of at-risk African American males—many raised in what has been described as the culture of poverty (Payne, 2005), conducted by a 30-something, bi-racial female, raised in middle-class America—at first glance offers only an etic perspective. However, when faith in Jesus Christ and a belief in the key components of Christian Community Development were shared between researcher and researched, an unusual
emic perspective of Christian solidarity was cultivated. The faith commitment and
primary identities of these African American Christian males reflect the influence of
spiritual development on responses to adversity in formal, informal, and non-formal
educational settings.

My philosophical stance as a Christian theist (Burton, 2006; Sire, 2004) was to
center this spiritual development on Christian faith inclusive of race, instead of limiting it
to the field of race alone. My assumptions have their foundation in biblical Christianity. I
recognize that, for some, Christianity is associated with exploitation during colonization,
the crusades, or other parts of history (Burton, 2006). For many others, Christians are
known for what they stand against, not what they stand for (Kinnaman & Lyons, 2007).
That is not the Jesus whom the CCDA, research participants, nor I have come to
experience or espouse. Rather, we have come to know Christ as a personal Savior and
friend interested and involved in all areas of our lives. He has reconciled us to himself
and through the power of the Holy Spirit we are being reconciled to each other. This
reconciliation work is difficult and often messy work of imperfect people committed to
living out Christ’s transformative love. Therefore research, like life, is engaged in from a
posture of humility, a commitment to authenticity, and with a spirit of reciprocity. These
commitments pave the way for transformative reconciliation and Christian solidarity to
develop during the research process.

The substantive theory that open sharing by these African American Christian
men helped to develop, reflects transition of primary individual and collective identities;
change in perceptions of challenge and risk, as well as protection and social supports; and
shared influences to responses to adversity across the life span. They give voice (and
potentially emancipatory hope) to other adolescent males who have been placed at risk, and move to further identify positive influential protection factors to be utilized by the family, formal educators, and ministry leaders. Anyone who seeks to replicate this research study, or to engage in others like it, is highly recommended to share researcher positionality.

The following chapters include an outline of the literature review in support of the use of grounded theory in this research (Chapter 2), discuss the methodology used (Chapter 3), share research findings (Chapter 4), and discuss the research (Chapter 5).
The basic premises of grounded theory are that theory emerges during data collection and will “fit the situation being researched and will work when put into use” (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 3) better than if the theory had been identified before the beginning of the study. It “enables you to generate a broad theory about your qualitative central phenomenon ‘grounded’ in the data” (Creswell, 2008, p. 431). In adherence with these basic premises of grounded theory, prior to data collection a general survey of the literature was completed. Investigation of specific literature relevant to the participant-generated theory was conducted throughout the research process as relevant concepts, themes, and ideas emerged from the data.

First Search, EBSCO, Sage Publications, and Google Scholar were initially searched using the following key terms: faith identity, faith identity development, faith commitment, spiritual development, African American males, African American youth, at-risk adolescence, teenagers, positive identity development, and religious commitment. Additionally, book chapters and articles gathered throughout master’s and doctoral courses on the topics of identity formation and development, spirituality and religiosity, at-risk youth, African American at-risk males, dropout rates, the achievement gap, racism, and ecology in education were used and influenced dissertation development. Very few articles pertained to spiritual development and African American males and
adolescents placed at risk. However, a few key articles and a seminal work in the field, *The Handbook of Spiritual Development in Childhood and Adolescence* (Roehlkepartain et al., 2006), offered diverse perspectives and rich reference lists with which to engage. Near completion of this study, dissertation chair Dr. Sherick Hughes shared relevant literature regarding the member check process (Harry, Sturges, & Klingner, 2005) and Identity Control Theory (Burke, 2007; Stets & Burke, 2005).

**Integration**

Initial studies have begun to attempt to discuss the interaction of the central components of this study. Most studies have focused solely on one area, and only a limited amount of them have focused on the places in which two components come together. To my knowledge, no researcher has explored how these three components interact and influence each other. Therefore, this study is placed at the intersection of spiritual development, life course theory, and thriving of adolescent African American males in adverse formal, informal, and non-formal educational settings.

Each one of these areas has its own relatively young academic history. Through this literature review, each will be discussed, particularly in relationship to this overall study (see Figure 2). Differing research will also be discussed.

**Overview of Spiritual Development**

In recent years spiritual development has begun to make its way with more significance into the interests of the general public and to edge its way into the scientific mainstream (Roehlkepartain et al., 2006, p. 1). Among developmental scholars there is emerging a sense that spiritual development is a domain that would elucidate further developmental processes (Benson, 2006; Coles, 1990; Lerner et al., 2006). However,
across the scientific community there is limited agreement on the spiritual and on spiritual development. Roehlkepartain et al. (2006) suggest that spiritual development will not be understood unless significant conversations occur across the various fields of psychology, anthropology, sociology, and others:

The lack of full engagement with this domain in the mainstream social sciences has limited our capacity to fully understand the person in its entirety at all points in the lifespan and within its multiple social, cultural, and national contexts. (p. 2)

Such a lack of consensus is seen quite clearly in the struggle to define the domain of spiritual development.

Spirituality and religiousness have a wide variety of conceptual definitions and are therefore used inconsistently in academic research. While some suggest bifurcation of religion and spirituality, others seek to maintain commonalities as well as delineate differences between the terms. This presents a challenge in conducting research, drawing cohesive implications, and advancing the field. While there is certainly a need for breadth
in spiritual development research, I would argue there is a greater need for deep rigorous study of the complex relationships influencing spiritual development across the life span.

Roehlkepartain et al. (2006) suggest that relatively new waves of definitions rest upon finding a common denominator that binds religion and spirituality together while still demarcating differences between them. These new definitional waves have sought to anchor themselves in one of three ways: the concept of the sacred (Hill & Pargament, 2003; Miller & Thoresen, 2003; Pargament, 1997), without explicit reference to a sacred or transcendent realm (Beck, 1992; Roof, 1993), and as a core, universal dynamic along-side and integrated with other areas of development (Roehlkepartain et al., 2006).

Christian Smith and Denton (2005) suggest a fourth perspective of religion and spirituality, especially in adolescent populations. Analyzing the data collected by the National Study of Youth and Religion (2002-2003), Smith and Denton discovered that regardless of what religious affiliation or identity U.S. teens considered themselves, the majority believe in Moralistic Therapeutic Deism (MTD). MTD, a term coined by Smith and Denton, has five guiding beliefs:

1. A god exists who created and orders the world and watches over life on earth.
2. God wants people to be good, nice, and fair to each other, as taught in the Bible and by most world religions.
3. The central goal of life is to be happy and to feel good about oneself.
4. God is not involved in my life except when I need God to resolve a problem.
5. Good people go to heaven when they die.

Each of these perspectives of religion and spirituality has inherent limitations as well as potential promise. Often these are two sides of the same coin. When considering
the perspective of the concept of the sacred (Hill & Pargament, 2003; Miller & Thoresen, 2003; Pargament, 1997) an area of potential promise is the inclusion of both spiritual and religious concepts. Incorporating the process of searching for the sacred allows for transformation of the sacred in their lives as well as the creating of doctrine, beliefs, and rituals that bind a group of believers together. Limitations may be focused on a narrow definition of what is defined “sacred.” By delineating between sacred and secular, elements of the sacred may be partitioned off from exploration. Yet, its narrowness of focus allows for greater depth of research into the portions of spiritual development it defines.

Defining spiritual development without explicit reference to a sacred or transcendent realm (Beck, 1992; Roof, 1993) “refocuses the concept of spirituality on a set of human qualities rather than a search for the sacred or transcendent” (Beck, 1992, as cited in Roehlkepartain et al., 2006, p. 5). By focusing on human qualities of spirituality, the development of spirituality itself is broadened to include the spiritual development of both religious and nonreligious people. Potential promise is held in exploring qualities such as the connectedness of people, experiences of mystery and awe, or postures of generosity and gratitude among groups that would be otherwise overlooked in spiritual development research. Research from this perspective recognizes that “there are as many pathways as there are persons, with some creating a spiritual development pathway that either purposefully—or because of lack of exposure—has absolutely nothing to do with symbols emanating from religions or other schools of established thought” (Benson, 2006, p. 489). However, the area of greatest potential promise also holds within it inherent limitations. Defining spirituality without reference to a sacred or transcendent
realm reduces spiritual development to its lowest terms. Research of spiritual development with this definition may fail to recognize the rich depth of the sacred or transcendent realm when encountered.

A third perspective of spiritual development definitions offers a core, universal dynamic alongside and integrated with other areas of development (Roehlkepartain et al., 2006). This spiritual development approach places focus on the developmental process in which one pursues “meaning, connectedness to others and the sacred, purpose, and contributions, each and all of which can be addressed by religion or other systems of ideas and belief” (p. 5). Areas of potential promise include the inclusion of humanity’s capacity for creating a narrative within social and historical contexts. It is broad enough to consider a wide variety of ideas and beliefs. Layer upon layer of interactions serve as a rich framework to learn more about spiritual development. Limitations may include difficulty in measuring these complex variables and the relationship between them. However, I believe that this approach is the most comprehensive and offers the greatest amount of promise for future research.

Moralistic Therapeutic Deism (Smith & Denton, 2005) offers a fourth perspective of religion and spirituality. It offers promising areas of further research in adolescent populations. Thus far, MTD research has predominately reflected the majority White, middle-class, Protestant Christian youth population in the United States. Yet it offers great promise in exposing shared belief systems and evolving ideas about the process of spiritual development.

**Life Course Theory**

Life Course Theory was first developed alongside foundational identity formation
research in the 1960s when the findings of three pioneering longitudinal studies of child
development (all begun during the 1920s or 1930s) highlighted issues that could not be
adequately addressed by the theories available at that time (Block & Haan, 1971;
Eichorn, Clausen, Haan, Honzik, & Mussen, 1981; Jones, Bayley, Macfarlane, & Honzik,
1971). Elder (1998) identified three of these central issues as

the recognition that individual lives are influenced by the ever-changing historical
context, that the study of human lives calls for new ways of thinking about their
pattern and dynamic, and that concepts of human development should apply to
processes across the lifespan. (p. 1)

The evolution of Life Course Theory since the 1960s has been in concerted effort
to address these issues. By the 1990s, Life Course Theory had developed into a
multidisciplinary emerging paradigm from which one could study people’s lives,
structural contexts, and social change. Elder’s (1998) research on children of the Great
Depression and World War II suggested that multiple trajectories and their
developmental implications are the basic elements of life course. His research found that
trajectories are not determined in a void. Instead, historical forces shape social
trajectories of family, education, and work. These in turn influence individual behavior
and lines of development. As Elder (1998) states, “all life choices are contingent on the
opportunities and constraints of social structure and culture” (p. 2).

These central premises of Life Course Theory are inherent to the underlying basis
for this study. Historical forced migration from Africa, ensuing generational slavery, and
systemic racism have shaped recent and current injustices particularly with regard to
African American males. Social trajectories in education (Alonso, Anderson, Su, &
Theoharis, 2009; Collins, 2010; Hooks, 2004; Labaree, 1997), residential segregation
(Lewis, Emerson, & Klineberg, 2011; Sugrue, 2005), the criminal justice system
(Alexander, 2010), employment (Sugrue, 2005), and at times the institution of religion (Christerson, Edwards, & Emerson, 2005; Emerson & Woo, 2006) have restricted the probability of success for African American male youth by placing them at risk. Unfortunately family, community, and personal/peer at-risk factors often outweigh the protective factors in the lives of this population. These constraints often limit the decisions and subsequent life trajectories available to African American males who are placed at risk during adolescence.

It is within basic Life Course Theory understanding that Phenomenological Variant of Ecological Systems Theory (PVEST) was developed by M. B. Spencer (1995). It is a Life Course Theory that has an “identity-focused cultural-ecological perspective, integrating issues of social, historical, and cultural context with normative maturation and developmental processes that youth undergo” (Swanson et al., 2002, p. 76). Spencer’s fusion of Bronfenbrenner’s (1989) ecological system with a phenomenological approach depicts a self-appraisal process by which an individual may evaluate him/herself through a series of bidirectional experiences in multiple contexts. Five basic components—net vulnerability, net stress, reactive coping strategies, emergent identities: stable coping responses, life-stage coping outcomes—are linked through a bidirectional, recursive process that forms a dynamic, cyclic model (see Figure 3). This literature provides evidence that choice, influenced by a myriad of ecological aspects, is a core component in the formation of identity.

To my knowledge there is no distinctly Christian theory of identity formation or empirically tested Christian approaches toward the promotion of Christian spiritual development in African American adolescents who are placed at risk. An adaptation of

PVEST, however, offers an integrated theory that provides a viable framework for at-risk youth to enter into spiritual development that encompasses multiple components of identity and may transcend at-risk characteristics.

An adaptation that keeps the components of Spencer’s PVEST (1995; Spencer et al., 1997), but replaces the bi-directional interaction between each stage with turning points represented by roundabouts may offer such a framework. Roundabouts would describe the multiple trajectories a person may go in depending on the choices made at these turning points. While the decision is being made he/she circles the roundabout, not committing to any one direction. At the moment of choice, one either progresses to one of the exit points that move forward, or selects the exit point that takes them back along the road they previously travelled. It is only when looking back on one’s life course that
the most significant turning points can be accurately identified (Elder, 1998; Kurtines et al., 2008).

This framework offers a possible alternative to other identity constructs that focus on only one or two aspects of identity formation. This proves to be especially helpful when attempting to promote healthy Christian identity development in at-risk adolescents. Many at-risk teens are minorities; therefore, race allows for identity factors that include, but are not limited to, race, prior experience, and social interactions to be included for more accurate research (Root, 1998).

**Comprehensive Spiritual Development Theory Development**

Though the above reviewed literature shows that there has been some theory development about spiritual development and religious development, there is near consensus that the field lacks a comprehensive theory (Benson, Donahue, & Erikson, 1989; Benson & King, 2006; Bridges & Moore, 2002; Donahue & Benson, 1995; Kerestes & Youniss, 2003; Pargament, 2002). Benson (2006) proposes an architecture for a comprehensive theory of spiritual development. Eight “girders” form the basic construction (Figure 4). Myths, narratives, and interpretative frameworks construct an organizational frame to understand and explain what is good, important, and real. The primary referent may be the self, as is likely in the United States and European contexts, or the collective, as is likely in other cultural or social locals. A range of different researchers have agreed on a central idea that people may share a developmental process for viewing self, reality, and the world.
CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

General Introduction

The purpose of this study was to explore the influence of Christian spiritual development on the life trajectory of African American males who were placed at risk as adolescents, self-identified as Christian, and are serving or being served by Christian Community Development Association organizations within Michigan, Indiana, and Illinois. Through this exploration, the process of Christian spiritual development, African American male adversities, and the concept of turning points in life trajectory (Elder, 1998) will be discussed.

The central research question reflects the above purpose: “How might spiritual development influence the life trajectory of African American males placed at risk during adolescence, specifically their faith commitment and subsequent turning points to adversity in various educational settings?” Further issues and procedural sub-questions were informed by and developed through theoretical sampling (Charmaz, 2006) based on focus group discussions, initial interviews, data collection, and data analysis. These are:

1. What is the influence of spiritual development on adversities identified and experienced?

2. What is the influence of identity constructs on responses to adversity in academic school, non-academic school, family life, church life, and community life?
3. What has influenced participants’ responses to adversity positively and negatively over the course of their lives?

**Type of Research**

This dissertation involves an interactive, qualitative study utilizing a grounded theory design. Grounded theory, developed in the late 1960s by Glaser and Strauss, states that a theory that emerges from the theory during data collection will “fit the situation being researched and will work when put into use” (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 3) better than if the theory had been identified before the beginning of the study. It “enables you to generate a broad theory about your qualitative central phenomenon ‘grounded’ in the data” (Creswell, 2008, p. 431). Though the central premise remains the same, various grounded theory approaches have evolved since its inception. Glaser has remained consistent to his foundations in positivism. He held fast to grounded theory as a method of discovery and remained stringent on the coding methods of data from which categories emerge. In contrast to the grand theories common in sociology in the 1950s, Glaser advocated for building ‘middle-range’ theories through the systematic analysis of data. On the other hand, Strauss (1987) led grounded theory methodology toward verification. Works co-authored with Corbin (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, 1998) favor technical procedures rather than comparative methods and have drawn objections from Glaser’s purist ideas of grounded theory (Glaser, 1978).

By the 1960s grounded theory had become known for offering rigor and usefulness to the field of research (Creswell, 2007). Quantitative researchers began to utilize it in mixed method studies. Researchers appreciate the flexibility and legitimacy grounded theory lends to a variety of fields and theoretical interests (Charmaz, 2000;
Clarke, 2003). Tools such as coding, memo-writing, sampling for the purpose of theory construction, and use of comparative methods have been made use of across the approaches to grounded theory (Burton, 2010; Creswell, 2007). Researchers may adopt and adapt grounded theory guidelines, therefore embedding the assumptions they bring to research into the research process.

Charmaz (1990, 1995, 2000, 2006), together with Bryant (2002) and Clarke (2003, 2005), is a proponent of a constructivist approach to grounded theory that views grounded theory methods as a set of principles and practices that can complement other approaches to qualitative data analysis. The constructivist approach to grounded theory utilized in this study “explicitly assumes that any theoretical rendering offers an interpretive portrayal of the studied world, not an exact picture of it” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 10). Through this design data were collected and analyzed to generate theory about the influence of spiritual development on faith commitment and life trajectory.

**Population**

The population of this research study is African American males who have been or are currently placed at risk during adolescence and currently self-identify as Christian. For this study, I elected to use an interdenominational Christian association (Christian Community Development Association) that often targets this population. CCDA organizations were selected because they bring together diverse institutions, denominations, and people through a unified mission that reflects a distinctly revolutionary way of living out Christ’s call to discipleship.

CCDA’s mission is “to inspire, train, and connect Christians who seek to bear witness to the Kingdom of God by reclaiming and restoring under-resourced
communities” (CCDA Mission, 2010). Individuals and organizations that are part of the organization support the CCDA philosophy. This philosophy ascribes to eight components of Christian community development:

1. Relocation: living among the people
2. Reconciliation
3. Redistribution (just distribution of resources)
4. Leadership development
5. Listening to community
6. Church-based
7. Wholistic approach
8. Empowerment (Gordan, 2011).

Community centers, thrift stores, churches, schools, after-school programs, and other organizations become members of CCDA because they stand in agreement with these eight core components. When seeking participants for this study in 2012, CCDA consisted of 304 organizations that focused on developing under-resourced communities throughout the United States. Michigan had 24 such organizations, Indiana had 15, and Illinois had 42. Once invitations to participate in this research were made, interest was shown, clarifying discussions took place, and institutional consent forms were signed by one organization from each one of these three states. Each of these organizations was an established Christian Community Development Association hub for their community. They each shared a commitment to the CCDA values described above and indicated support and a willingness to participate in this research. They also each had unique cultures and provided diverse research experiences.
Sample

Two types of sampling techniques were used, purposeful and theoretical (Charmaz, 2006; Creswell, 2007). Purposeful sampling was used to select a cross-section of adolescents (13-17), young adults (18-25), and adults (26+) who were directly connected with three organizations that are part of the Christian Community Development Association (CCDA). The following criteria were used to draw a purposeful sample:

1. African American
2. Male
3. Self-identify as Christian
4. CCDA organization leader or receiving services from CCDA organization and recommended by a CCDA leader in Michigan/Indiana/Illinois
5. Meets/met at least two of the following at-risk characteristics during adolescence: poor academic performance; school dropout; persistent exhibition of behavior problems; extreme bullying; drug or alcohol use; juvenile offender; homelessness; parent physical or mental illness; parental substance abuse; single-parent home; incarcerated parent; foster-care; material poverty; lives in high crime area; lives in high unemployment area.

As far as possible the young adults and adults were drawn from volunteers and leaders of CCDA and its organizations who meet the above criteria. However, young adult and adult participants were also gleaned from individuals served by CCDA organizations that met the participant criteria and were recommended by the leaders of these organizations. All adolescents were directly served by CCDA organizations and
recommended by the leaders and volunteers who serve them. While sharing these central characteristics, the 35 African American males who participated in this study also represent diverse socioeconomic groups, historical contexts, occupations, interests, and degrees of faith commitment.

Researcher Reflexivity (selection of voice memo, February 16, 2014): *Diversity among these participants adds an unexpected but welcomed dimension to this research.* The inclusion of participants that share the study’s criteria, but have such diverse upbringings, educational experiences, and eventual occupations fights against further stereotyping and disenfranchisement of African American men. Upon reflection this should come as no surprise to me while working with Christian Community Development organizations. It fits well within their philosophy, as it also does with mine.

As the study progressed, theoretical sampling was utilized to elaborate and refine categories constituting an emerging theory structure and specific components within it (Charmaz, 2006). Such sampling further focused categories and their relevant characteristics by adding to existing data about each category and subsequent developing theme through the telling of their stories and answering of targeted questions (Morse, 2007). Categories that developed into theory structure include: adversities, self-constructs, responses to adversity, positive influences to responses to adversity, and negative influences to responses to adversity. Further categories that form the specific components of the theory include: introduction to Christianity, introduction to Christ, spiritual grappling, conversion, change in primary identity, and baptism.

Researcher Reflexivity (memo excerpt, May 4, 2014): *Late in the analysis process ‘spiritual grappling’ is replacing the term ‘spiritual transition.’ Triangulation of*
data highlighted nuances that revealed that during times of significant spiritual transition participants were: actively “running away from the cross” (Darell, personal communication, October 6, 2012); wrestled with choosing to follow God’s will or their own; struggled to make sense of Christians not living out Christian norms and values; experienced consistent failure in the areas of masturbation, pornography, and sex; tried to make sense of tragedy; and/or were seeking affirmation for who they were as African American men.

These influence and interact with various educational settings: academic educational experiences, non-academic education experiences, family life, church life, and community life. Subcategories such as fatherlessness, teachers who don’t care, influential role models, and spiritual disciplines honed initial and in vivo codes drawn from focus group interviews and some initial one-on-one interviews. Rich data from in-depth interviews, along with member check and participant artifacts, also significantly contributed information about potential linkages among and between categories and subcategories. Two over-arching themes emerged in order to contribute to the emerging theory (Morse, 2007): external influences that shape worldview and inner relational influences affecting spiritual journey. Additionally, negative cases—those in which the participants did not respond in anticipated ways or with opposite reactions to the majority—were investigated and integrated into the emerging theory.

Researcher Reflexivity: I’m grappling with a negative case. There are two participants—one young adult, one adult—that turned to geek culture during their early adolescence in response to cultural and social isolation in a materially poor community. It is interesting that they adopted a geek community that gave them a minimal sense of
belonging at school but led to further cultural and social isolation in their family life and community life. It is because of negative cases such as this one that I’m beginning to think that the theory needs to have a structural framework that invites a great deal of flexibility within its internal components in order for this theory to truly honor the diversity of responses while not minimizing their voice.

Although it was impossible to know exactly how many participants would need to be interviewed in order to reach saturation point, many qualitative grounded theory researchers recommended between 20-30 interviews (Charmaz, 2006; Creswell, 2007; Morse, 2010). However, due to the inclusion of three separate age groups I recognized that 20-60 interviews might need to be conducted in order to reach saturation point (Creswell, 2007). Throughout the research process analysis was done to indicate when saturation point had been reached. Similar concepts were shared during focus group interviews, and themes became consistent within 22 in-depth interviews, although 25 in-depth interviews were conducted. The greater number of participants (18) are drawn from the adult age group in accordance with the assumption of Life Course Theory (Elder, 1998), that it is only as we go further on our life path that we are able to look back and see turning points in the trajectory of our lives. Ten young adults (ages 18-25) and seven adolescents (ages 13-17) participated over the course of this research. Six of the 10 young adults aged into adulthood and five of the seven adolescents aged into young adulthood over the course of data collection. Maturation of these participants enabled their recognition of new adversities and some evolution of responses to adversity when testing the theory against their own lives.
Self as Researcher

My own life experience supports the notion of age and maturity adding clarity to identifying turning points in one’s life trajectory. Starting at the age of 7, I began to journal about my life. This journaling has continued and evolved until the present day. Throughout my life, prayer journaling has been my primary form of journaling. Reading back through these journals, it is evident that at times what I thought to be turning points were not, and what I did not think were turning points sometimes turned out to be. So, only with time have I been able to see with greater clarity turning points in my Christian spiritual development during adolescence.

Gaining greater clarity over time also held true when reflecting on the adolescent males whom I have worked with in a range of academic, religious, and social settings. The greater the age and maturity, the clearer the perspective on the significant turning points in their life. This is particularly true with regard to the influence of their spiritual development on their life trajectory. A narrative study conducted as part of one of my doctoral courses explored the influence of faith identity on one young, placed ‘at-risk’, African American male’s responses to adversity. In that study I sought to discover whether one 19-year-old’s journey with God resulted in significant turning points in his responses to adversity. In-depth interviewing, along with music lyric artifacts, indicated that it would be advantageous to ask the same questions later in a person’s life as this may result in clearer turning points in a person’s recollection. That small study was influential in my choosing Life Course Theory as a foundational theory from which to base this research.

As with any research, the researcher is the principle tool. Therefore, it is
necessary for me to disclose bias I have as a middle class, bi-racial (White and Latina) Christian woman interviewing Christian, African American males. While there is a shared commitment to Christ and connection through the philosophy of the Christian Community Development Association (CCDA), differences in gender, racial backgrounds, and in some cases socioeconomic status and formal education level, provide a different lens from which to view the world. For this reason an African American male leader of each site organization co-facilitated adolescent and young adult focus groups and all interviews of minors. These same leaders were made available to co-facilitate adult focus groups and interviews with adult participants upon their personal request or the leader’s request. At New Life Community Center the African American male leader was regularly present and at times served in the role of co-facilitator for most of the adult interviews. At MCC, the African American male leader co-facilitated focus group interviews and was present for in-depth interviews of minors. I rejoiced in these leaders’ co-facilitation, as there was an obvious positive impact on the open and authentic nature in which the participants responded to the study and shared their stories.

I was raised for the first 2 years of my life primarily in a materially poor, African American community context. However, after the age of 2 I was raised primarily in a middle class, White context until the age of 18, from which time I have lived, studied, and taught within a range of cultural and multicultural contexts both outside of and within the United States. When beginning this study I was engaged in adolescent African American youth ministry. During the course of this research I settled into teaching and Curriculum and Instruction management in a nontraditional, workforce preparation center for refocused youth ages 16-24. Though most are not professing Christians, many
receiving these services are African American males who would meet the risk factors described in the purposeful sample criteria. These fresh and positive experiences combined with conducting this research study have no doubt significantly influenced my worldview and this study. In addition, months before the first focus group discussions and interviews, I lost a very special 17-year-old girl to suicide. I was experiencing the rawest pain of my life and exuded a mix of passion for this study and authentic vulnerability that through reflexivity I have come to think led me to be able to connect more genuinely with the rawness of the participants’ stories.

My thinking, though in the process of continual expansion, reflects that most of my life I have internalized the structural racism prevalent in the United States and is primarily middle class and White. Believing that reflection is a form of action (Burton, 2013), I have continued to engage in self-education and critical examination of my privilege throughout this research process (Michaels & Conger, 2009). My bias has been addressed through this vigilant reflexivity and through the member-check process. Inserts drawn from memo writing during theory development have made my way of thinking and the researcher’s process of growth transparent to the reader.

**Research Process**

Leaders of the Christian Community Development Association were approached about this research during attendance at the first annual CCDA Immersion program on April 3-8, 2011. Relationship building and networking with leaders of CCDA organizations were intentionally cultivated during this immersion. CCDA leadership and organization leaders were asked during this immersion and a Race to Unity conference in April 29 & 30, 2011, to review the participant criteria and give feedback as to whether
there would be enough such participants within the Michigan, Illinois, and Indiana area to properly conduct a grounded theory study. Assurance was given that there were ample participants within CCDA organizations in these states who would meet the participant criteria. During CCDA’s 21st National Conference on October 12-16, 2011, I engaged in further relationship building with association leadership. On November 27, 2011, a formal request to conduct this research was submitted to the CCDA Board. Once CCDA approval for research was given, CCDA’s board officers and members compiled a list of participants and CCDA organizations that served participants who met the criteria of this study.

These organizations were sent letters via CCDA leaders explaining the research study and requesting their involvement. Six interested CCDA organizations responded to me by email with a desire to talk further. Follow-up emails and phone calls to each interested organization leader were made to further discuss the research and answer any questions. Of the six organizational leaders spoken with, five were encouraged by the direction of my research and supported me conducting it. One expressed concern about the research topic and initially believed a non-African American woman could not conduct research that did not perpetuate negative stereotypes about African American young men. After phone calls and email responses, he was more convinced that the study itself may have value, but his concerns about me conducting the research remained. That organization declined to participate. One organization did not have a sufficient number of African American males fitting the sample criterion to warrant being a participating research organization. Another desired to participate but did not have the infrastructure to provide the support necessary. Three organizations—one in Indiana, one in Illinois, one
in Michigan—had the desire to participate, enough participants to warrant being a research site, and the confidence that I would be able to conduct the research in meaningful ways. These organization leaders approved their involvement in this research and sent institutional consent letters. Once received, semi-structured interview protocols (Appendix B), including a space for researcher reflexivity, were developed. Institutional Review Board (IRB) research applications were submitted and approval obtained. IRB application updates were resubmitted twice as additional changes were made to the study as a result of theoretical sampling.

Appointments were made with CCDA organization leaders in Michigan, Illinois, and Indiana by email and telephone. Organization site coordinators selected participants based by age group based on the provided criteria for focus group discussions by age group. These focus groups served as entry-point interviews in which relationships began to be built, potential interview questions were solicited, and initial ideas were shared. Issues of reciprocity consistent with CCDA philosophy were openly discussed with CCDA leaders, CCDA organization leaders, and all research participants. Each was asked in what way I could make this research most helpful to them. Without making any guarantees, I shared that I would fulfill as many of their requests as possible. A summary of the research findings written in language useful to practitioners and shared with CCDA organizations and all research participants was one of the participants’ requests. Another, is the development of a theater of the oppressed (performed and filmed) with accompanying curriculum to be shared with local ministries and CCDA. Additionally, current CCDA leaders have also expressed a desire to have me share my research findings at a CCDA National Conference and make these findings available through the
Association’s website. In addition, all participants received a $25 gift card as a small form of appreciation and compensation.

Prior to the beginning of each focus group discussion or initial interview I reviewed the research study with the participants. I had participants sign consent forms, and asked them if they had any questions for me—personally or about the research. Without fail, participants would ask me about myself, my history, my relationship with God or CCD work, and the African American community, and then most imperatively about my motivation for doing this study. I shared openly and vulnerably. When participant availability did not allow enough numbers to form a focus group, initial interviews were conducted when individual participants were available. These initial interviews were included with the focus group interviews in the first wave of coding transcripts. Concepts shared within these initial interviews reflected significant similarities with focus group discussions. Together they were used to begin identifying codes, categories, and themes from which this theory began to emerge.

To maximize the likelihood that adolescents and young adults would share more openly and authentically, the leaders themselves were asked to co-facilitate focus group discussions and all interviews with all minors. They were also invited to co-facilitate all focus group discussions and interviews. In addition, adolescents participating in focus group discussions and interviews were given the option to have their parents or guardians present. No adolescent chose to take this option. Thirty-four of the 35 participants engaging in either focus groups or initial interviews said that they would like to continue participating the research if I would like to interview them in the next stage of research. Several in the young adult and adult age groups expressed a desire to continue in the
research process regardless of whether I needed them to or not; they viewed it as a valuable exercise for themselves.

Due to the data-rich nature of focus group discussions and initial interviews, along with the expressed desire of the participants, in-depth interviews were conducted with all participants available during visits to the research sites. Participants over the age of 18 were asked if they would like to continue to have CCD organization leaders co-lead their interview or would like to have me conduct the interview alone. Adolescents under the age of 18 continued to have the CCD organization co-facilitator present and were additionally given the option of having their parent/guardian present during their in-depth interviews.

Interviews were semi-structured. Interview questions were originally written to primarily “focus on the views, values, beliefs, feelings, assumptions, and ideologies of individuals” (Creswell, 2008, p. 439) rather than on fact gathering or description of acts engaged in. This was intentionally done in order to surpass the understanding of what the turning points were, to include the how and why they occurred. However, as interviews progressed I noticed that in the course of participants telling their stories, and some drawing out their life path, they answered the prepared interview questions as well as included information that revealed more of the how and the why than they may have shared openly if directly asked. Notes were taken on interview protocol sheets and overflow notes on legal paper, with special care to make note of my personal reflexivity and thought development. Each initial interview lasted for approximately 1 hour, with actual times ranging from 32 minutes to 3.15 hours. All interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed after each interview. Follow-up interviews were conducted with
all available participants. Of those participating in in-depth interviews, only one stated that he did not want to continue onto the final stage of the research process. However, at the completion of initial interviews the Chicago site coordinator decided that it took too much effort for the infrastructure of the organization to support the research process and withdrew from this research project.

Researcher Reflexivity (excerpt from research journal, October 19, 2012): The guys here are fantastic and want to share their stories. They are raw, courageous, and intentionally engaged in rebuilding their lives. It is so frustratingly disappointing that access to this site closed!

Follow-up interviews were arranged by contacting the remaining research site coordinators when I had coded the data and had a working emerging theory. Appointment times were arranged and follow-up interview participants were asked to bring artifacts that would help them share about turning points in their life and overall spiritual development. Two Indiana-based participants were unavailable for follow-up interviews for various reasons, so their contact information was provided by the research coordinator. Arrangements were made with them via email, phone conversation, or text messaging, and data were collected electronically and discussed in an interview over the phone. In the case of the one minor, the research site coordinator led out in the theory-testing activity and joined the phone conversation.

Throughout the course of the research, my in-depth interview protocol changed through theoretical sampling to reflect the evolving nature of the questions needing to be asked in order to member check the substantive theory developed. Questions regarding categories and relationships between these categories, along with the direct influence of
spiritual development on responses to adversity, were clarified through discussion of the substantive theory and participant artifacts. These artifacts therefore assisted in the member-check process. They included drawings of life path done by some participants during in-depth interviews, artwork, music, photographs, poetry, newspaper articles, and journal entries. Artifacts were scanned, photocopied, or photographed.

Interviews and artifact collection were then zigzagged with data analysis and member-check feedback until theoretical saturation point had been reached (Creswell, 2008). Constant comparative analysis was utilized to achieve saturation of categories (Charmaz, 2006; Creswell, 2008; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Triangulation of data sources (different sites, different age groups of participants, different roles of participants) added credibility to this research.

Taking the first step toward analytic interpretation, I used Nvivo 9 to engage in line-by-line coding of the focus group interviews. Though not originally planned, such coding was necessary due to the rich data in these focus group discussion and initial one-on-one interviews. Coding with gerunds helped me to focus on action and sequence while not leaping to the conceptual level too soon (Charmaz, 2006). Keeping close to data and utilizing in vivo codes during initial coding “preserved participants’ meaning of their views and actions in the coding itself” (p. 55). Complex terms or jargon were avoided as tentative categories and themes were formed. This initial coding of the focus group discussions and initial interviews, along with coding of memos of field observations of setting and participants, was followed by focused coding of particularly data-rich segments of participant focus group discussion and initial interviews. This first wave of data was coded for a total of 1,132 free nodes. These free nodes were reviewed for
duplicates and then sorted into similar ideas in tree node folders. Once completed, tree nodes were consolidated under identified 67 potential categories or themes. Unanswered questions and holes in the data became apparent, particularly data concerning formal educational experience, role of influential role models, adversities, issues stemming from fatherlessness, the development of Christian primary identity, development of spiritual disciplines, and the role of the church as both adversary and encourager. This analysis contributed to revision of protocols to add new questions that were able to be asked during in-depth interviews.

As I progressed to coding the in-depth interviews I moved to coding data-rich sections of interviews primarily by incident or theme—most of which were identified while coding the first wave of data. Data that did not easily fit within the defined incidents or developed themes were coded as free nodes until through constant comparative analysis other themes or incidents were formed. Constant comparative methods (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) were used at every level of the analytic process. Both in the first and second waves of data, I first compared data with data in order to find similarities and differences. Comparing incident to incident, than comparing incident to my conceptualization of these incidents helped me to make sense of the data in new analytic ways. Since Life Course Theory (Elder, 1998) is foundational to this study, sequential comparisons were made when appropriate and were noted both when they were and were not limited to a particular age group. As analysis progressed I also compared what was dissimilar about the participants’ influences, turning points, and/or life trajectory.

I moved toward focused coding of in-depth interviews while knowing that coding
is a continually emerging process. I used focused coding to determine the fit and relevance of the most frequent or significant initial codes. Data were regularly compared to data. Then data were continuously compared to codes. At times this led to the integration of some codes, significant refinement of others, and occasionally the development of new codes altogether. Through this cyclical process categories and themes developed, then were further compared, refined, and advanced. Theoretical coding helped me to conceptualize how the codes are related, form an analytic story that had coherence, and move the analytic in a theoretical direction (Charmaz, 2006). Axial coding was not used because theoretical coding already identified possible relationships between categories developed during focused coding and supplied enough information to weave the parts of the story back together (Charmaz, 2006; Glaser, 1978).

Throughout this process, codes were regularly checked for my preconceptions of the topic through voice memo recordings, memo writing, and reflexive practices. Preconceived ideas have been brought into the dialogue and have had to earn their way into my analysis (Charmaz, 2006; Harry et al., 2005), at times by significantly challenging these notions when lesser importance was given to some adversities and by the sharing of negative cases.

Researcher Reflexivity: When coming into this research—particularly research through the Christian Community Development Association—I expected that more of the participants would have identified neighborhood violence, issues of safety, and racism among their primary adversities. These are certainly the ecological adversities that have served as foundational concerns in my inner city experiences. Yet, with the exception of the older adults that experienced the Jim Crow Era in the South, participants from a
range of socio-economic backgrounds regularly minimized these adversities past their childhoods. Some still shared the presence of racism at other times during the lifespan, but in a limited and unassuming fashion. No doubt there has been progress made, but this seeming minimization of institutional racism, issues of access and privilege and power has me quite angry. Have we really come so far for these youths to be truly part of a post-racial society or is theirs a level of internalized oppression that has become accepted so much it no longer is worthy of time or attention?

Categories and themes were identified through the interpretive lens of myself as researcher (Harry et al., 2005) and refined through triangulation of data and the member-check process. Member checks were conducted through a structured testing of the theory structure and components, participant sharing of artifacts, and a semi-structured exit interview. The theory’s framework was first explained and feedback requested. All participants who engaged in the member-check process responded favorably to it. The explanation of the theory’s framework was met by the nodding of heads, clarification questions, and positive comments across research sites and age brackets referring to the theory as a “mirror” or a “reflection” that “makes sense” and “works.”

Next, participants were asked to test the theory’s structure components—adversities, identities, responses to adversity, and the positive and negative influences on their responses to adversity—across their life span. During these member checks participants selected and/or added to small color-coded index cards that represented collated coded data from all previous focus groups and interviews. This added much depth and dimension to the research. For example, while all age groups spoke about sex in at least some way during the first two stages of research, only the young adults at New
Hope Community Center spoke very openly about masturbation, pornography, lust, and sex as a means of deadening the pain birthed out of adversity. Because they shared so openly, these vitally important aspects to the identity and spiritual development of African American Christian males were included as options in the components of this theoretical model for the participants to choose from—and all of them did.

After selecting the components of the theory that best fit themselves in each category and ordering them by intensity, participants overtly overlaid times and turning points in their spiritual development. Once completed the participants talked about their “lives on a table,” identified themes, shared artifacts that substantiated or refuted what they laid out, and spoke of the experience of participating in the activity and the research as a whole. For those who were unable to have in-person interviews they were provided with an electronic theory framework, an explanation of this framework, a list of model components, and written instructions. They completed the activity electronically and emailed them to me prior to the final interview. In both cases where this was done, participants referred to specific artifacts during the member check and emailed me their artifacts with written explanations after the interviews. Artifacts included books, songs, Scriptures, newspaper articles, and advertisements. These artifacts have been used as exemplars of categories and themes of the substantive theory.

The semi-structured exit interview asked five central questions (see Appendix B) regarding feedback on the theory structure, a description of their experience participating in this research—particularly the testing of the theory themes and themes they see as they look back over their own lives. Participants were also asked what advice they would give to those working with African American males today, and the influence of my
race and gender on what was shared during the research process.

As noted throughout the paper, voice memos and memo writing were imperative to my research process. Memoing was engaged in early and often as I worked to develop a way that allowed me to dialogue with myself about the data, develop ideas, seek to answer questions of fit and relevance, and hone future data collection. By both digitally recording and writing memos, as well as revisiting and revising thoughts on those created throughout the research process, I was prompted to “elaborate processes, assumptions, and actions covered by [my] codes or categories” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 82). Memo writing also provided the opportunity to look for patterns within and between participants. Regular inclusion of raw data in the memo itself allowed me to make explicit comparisons. As I compared data to data, data to codes, codes to codes, codes to categories, and categories to concept my ideas increased in levels abstraction and form theoretical categories. Thus, memo writing served as “the pivotal intermediate step between data collection and writing drafts of papers” (p. 73) as I engaged in the analytic work necessary to raise focused codes to conceptual categories.

Researcher Reflexivity: After attempting to engage in writing memos the “correct way” and have them be time consuming and of little use, I have given up on perfection and embraced a way that works for me—voice memos! There is a new-found freedom in finding a way that fits the way I live and think that actually fulfills the purpose of memo writing. Now when ideas come to me during my commute, while on a walk, or during a lunch hour they are captured and can be later refined.

The role of the researcher was not minimized throughout this process. Instead, the researcher reflexivity notes throughout this paper are provided in order that the reader
may more accurately ascertain the influence of the role of the researcher throughout the research process and upon the research findings. Although predetermined categories were purposefully avoided as to allow the data to play a powerful central role in what has developed into a substantive grounded theory (Creswell, 2008), I made categorical decisions as a theory began to emerge from the data (Charmaz, 1990).

Thought-experiments and emerging relationships between spiritual development and turning points in one’s life course among African American males in adverse settings were recorded in my eclectic collection of digital, written, and drawn-upon research journal. Ways in which my own values, experiences, and priorities affected the analysis have been transparently articulated throughout this paper (Creswell, 2008). How concepts relate or link together, particularly in the felt experience of the sample population, has been explained through narrative. Assumptions and meanings of individuals have been probed. Directionality among interactions of spiritual development in adverse settings as experienced by African American men placed at risk during adolescence is reflected within the grounded theory.

**Ethical Considerations**

Ethical considerations relating to the well-being and protection of participants has been and remains important to this research. Participants were both informed and protected throughout the research process. Informed consent remained a priority throughout the study. All participants volunteered only after being informed about the purpose of the study and signing a consent-to-participate form (Appendix A). Minors interviewed had the study explained in the presence of a guardian by the research site coordinator, and by the researcher in the presence of the research site coordinator. Both
the minor and guardian signed the consent-to-participate form prior to any interviews being conducted. Additionally, adolescents under the age of 18 were given the opportunity to choose to have their parent/guardian in addition to the CCD organization co-facilitator present during focus group interviews, in-depth interviews, and the member-check process.

The research organizations and participants have additionally been protected through anonymity. Pseudonyms selected with organization and participant input have been used throughout this paper for both individuals and organizations. As the research progressed, several young adults and adults requested that their legal names be used in the dissertation. They expressed that they were proud of the journey that God had brought them on, were assured of the way I would represent them and the way the research will be shared, and desired for their true identity to be linked to their stories. While this progression of commitment to the research was validating, in order to protect the organization and other participants’ anonymity, these participants are referred to by their pseudonyms throughout this dissertation.

Confidentiality was also addressed through the signing of a confidentiality agreement by an Andrews University transcriptionist prior to receiving any digital recordings. Transcriptions were reviewed for any errors by the researcher while reading along while listening to the original recording. Errors found during this process were corrected before beginning the coding process. Electronic devices with the interview recordings and dictation were password protected. Original digital recordings, electronic copies of interview recordings, transcription saved on the external hard drive, print copies of interview transcription, photocopies/pictures of artifacts, interview protocol notes,
research journals, memos, and consent-to-participate forms were locked in the bottom
drawer of a filing cabinet within a secure home office when not being used during the
research process. Nobody other than I and my advisors have had or will have access to
this material.

Issues of Trustworthiness and Credibility

The credibility of the findings of this study has been addressed by aligning
research design components (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008). The logic behind the method,
the research questions, and the explanation developed is well matched. To enhance
methodological validity, participant focus group or initial interviews, in-depth interviews,
field observations, and artifacts have been triangulated. Such triangulation addresses
issues of trustworthiness by validating the structure of the theory as well as the specific
categories and themes that make up the more specific theory components. Such
triangulation tests the completeness of the theory, demanding explanation of what does
not fit and bringing substantiation of the theory.

Researcher Reflexivity: In many cases the positive and negative influences on
responses to adversity are the same influences lived out differently. For example,
involvement in sports was frequently and highly ranked as both a positive and negative
influence on responses to adversity particularly during adolescence. Triangulation of
data allowed for clarification of the reasons why participants identified their involvement
in sports in this way. Positives were strongly related to the development of discipline,
access to coaches as positive influential role models and at-times father figures, positive
influence on academic grades, and scholarships to college. Negatives were strongly
related to access to coaches as negative influential role models, the worship of personal
success, and with significant athletic success accessing a lifestyle of drugs, alcohol, and womanizing.

This research has also been significantly enhanced by a two-part member check (Creswell, 2007). A visual representation of the theory’s structure was explained and requested feedback on during the participant’s member-check process. The theory structure was well accepted and no further revisions were suggested. As no adjustment needed to be made to the theory’s structure during the member-check process, much of the focus was on the further development of categories and themes emerging from within the theory’s structure.

Particular emphasis was made to further clarify the influence of spiritual development on the following educational settings across the life span of the participant: academic education, non-academic education, family life, church life, and community life. Participants were invited to share their feedback on the credibility of findings and interpretations through laying out their own life on a table and into the theory structure, helping to move theory development from categories to concepts and themes. How artifacts representative of their lives fit into or do not fit into the theory’s framework and components was discussed. Adjustments to be made were noted by the researcher during the course of the member-check process. Confirmation of what had been laid out on the table as a true reflection of themselves and could be extended to other African American Christian males was given by participants before the end of the member check.

Additionally, when considering the naming of the theory, seven young adult and adult participants were contacted by email and text message to give feedback on two potential names—“Christian-Primary Identity Response Theory” or “Christian-Identity
Response Theory.” The five received responses were split. Three emphasized the importance of including the word “primary.” Caleb stated, “I believe Christian-Primary Identity Response Theory is the best title. There seems to always be multiple subordinate identities at play in one’s response to adversity but I have found Christian is of chief importance.” However, two participants chose Christian-Identity Response Theory because the inclusion of “primary feels limiting” (personal communication, May 29, 2014). After careful consideration I decided to settle on Christian-Identity Response Theory; the name is reflective of the journey of spiritual development and encompasses times of transition from when participants first considered themselves Christian through the turning point of identifying Christian as their primary identity.

Research Reflexivity: *When following up about theory names with Milton via text, I thanked him and let him know that the pre-defense was Friday. His response moved me. Instead of replying, “you got this” he replied “LETS GET IT”* (Milton, personal communication, May 28, 2014). The “us” in this message of encouragement sent a clear message of Christian solidarity and support of this research. I’m honored and humbled.

“Rich, thick description” (Creswell, 2007, p. 209) of organizations, participants, and environment enables readers to make their own decisions about transferability. Interpretive validity is strengthened by open sharing of biases and assumptions from the outset that may impact the study (Creswell, 2007), reflexivity notes on the interview protocol, and inclusion of researcher reflexivity notes drawn from memos recorded or written during data collection, analysis, and theory development. Additionally, as this is a research study in partial fulfillment of a doctoral degree, an external audit will take place at the time of dissertation defense.
Research Settings

New Life Community Center

New Life Community Center’s mission to break the cycle of poverty seeks to meet the needs of its surrounding location on the eastside of a large city in Indiana. Run-down homes and 13 government-supported housing projects are easily spotted within a mile in either direction and within a three-block radius of New Life Community Center. Some are nicer than others. Some advertise new management or vacancy signs. When following the school bus, communities of primarily African American, and some Hispanic mothers, are seen gathered together early in the morning in their pajamas putting their children on the bus. The lack of adult males is apparent within their morning circle. The men are visible on the street corner or walking sometimes alone, but most often in small groups of other men.

Researcher Reflexivity: When driving to my first interviews and noticing the physical environment, I felt at home. I remember thinking, “I know how it is to be here.” Though a little larger than the community I call home, the surroundings relaxed me and reassured me of God’s calling and support of this research.

New Life Community Center provides a continuum of care to 550 of these children and their families. They focus on a child from conception through to college attendance and return to the community. This organization’s commitment to valuing the children of the community was first made clear when driving into the property. A well-positioned sign stated: “Please drive slowly. Your children are valuable to us.” The main building located at the back of a shared church parking lot was well taken care of and
housed several small buses to assist with transportation. Other supporting ministry buildings were located throughout the southeast section of the city.

After having started by offering a Thanksgiving meal to the community out of a nearby church, New Life Community Center slowly blossomed into the community center they were at the time of this study. During the first 15 years they were much smaller and focused on serving the homeless, prostitutes, alcoholics, and some children. Over time they have expanded their physical building space, the scope of their ministry, and became well known throughout the city and with the media. More-structured children’s programs were developed. Three ministry mergers brought additional focuses on youth programming, mother’s ministry, and non-traditional sports ministries. Ten years prior to the beginning of this research New Life Community Center served 60% African Americans, 35% Caucasians, and 5% Hispanics. However, in the more recent years there has been a large shift in the racial population served by New Life. This is arguably due to the organization director’s stand with the Hispanic community after some African Americans shot up Hispanic homes in the community. Out of 55 teens in the mentorship program, five or six of them were African American adolescent males. At the onset of this research the Grades 1-3 Academy served 98% Hispanics, 1% Caucasians, and 1% African Americans. It remained a challenge to hire African American employees or engage African American volunteers. The research site coordinator, an African American male, reported personally advocating for and convincing African American adults to connect with their Campus Outreach program or return to New Life Community Center.
At the time of research New Life Community Center ran a pre-K program, an Academy for Grades 1-3, a mentoring program, and an afterschool program for approximately 200 youth. They also had a range of family ministries that focused on everything from parenting and life skills to tax preparation. Additionally, they served over 2,000 meals a week, ran a Saturday morning health clinic, partnered with a legal clinic, had a food pantry, and had recently started a greenhouse.

Initial contact was made via email. Johnathan, the research site coordinator, followed up my email by calling and engaging in a lengthy phone conversation. He expressed sincere interest in the project and sought to ensure through intense questioning that I was a safe person to gain access to the African American males connected to New Life Community Center.

Researcher Reflexivity: Both during phone conversations and upon my first arrival at New Life Community Center, Johnathan sought to ensure that I was a safe person to allow access to the research participants. It was never in doubt that he believed in the research and never discouraged who I was, but there was a tenacity to his questions that drew out the gravity of the research and refused to reduce it to a trivial matter of access. As I sat at a round table in the cafeteria of NLCC, I felt like I was in the hot seat. I answered with nervous energy in my stomach. I had to earn my access through authenticity. I deeply respected both Johnathan and the process.

Having gained his confidence, Johnathan gave me a tour and explained the history of the organization, scheduled and coordinated interviews, provided snacks for focus groups, co-facilitated interviews, participated willingly, and served as an encourager throughout the research process.
Researcher Reflexivity: Initial contact with Johnathan came after a rather
discouraging phone call with another possible site coordinator. The value of my research
had been questioned and the involvement of myself as a bi-racial woman was attacked.
When Johnathan called and responded with such excitement and encouragement it was a
turning point in the research project for me. In my state of discouragement, his
commitment to the heart of my research felt as if he handed me a lifeline and validated
not only my research, but who I was as a person. Throughout the research project he
served as research site coordinator, co-facilitator of focus groups and some in-depth
interviews, a participant, and encourager. Over the 2½-year research process,
Johnathan became a friend. I’ve had the opportunity to meet his family, visit his home,
and share two meals together. When another job offer was made to him, he sought out my
prayers. When I desperately was looking for work, he asked for my resume and shared it
around town—even arranging for me to have conversations with New Life’s Director
about potential positions. Texts and emails about research and life were exchanged;
prayers over the phone during research check-ins became a regular occurrence. I felt
like Johnathan and I were in this research together. He celebrated who I was as a
researcher and a person, regularly holding up this research as a form of ministry.

Throughout the research process staff was welcoming and eager to share how they
and others benefit from New Life Community Center. They followed the research site
coordinator’s lead in being interested and supportive of the research.

During the final stage of this research, the research site coordinator and several of
the participants had moved on to other jobs. Regardless of having changed jobs or
locations, participants still desired to participate in this research and were looking
forward to joining me in sharing the data in creative ways in the future. Final data collection was completed at the local library, at one of the participant’s new job locations, in the research site coordinator’s home, and in two cases by phone/email.

Michigan Christian Community

Michigan Christian Community is a community development corporation initially commissioned by churches in 1993 within a targeted area of a city to empower people and create positive opportunities through education, employment, and economic development. They work as an outreach arm of the church to be agents of change within the community and to instill hope, faith, and values in order that individuals may reach their highest potential. All except one public school had been closed in their community, unemployment was at least 50%, 79% of children lived in single-parent households, 53.4% of children lived below the poverty line, and only 30% of people owned their homes. Most people rented, had unstable housing, or were homeless. Burnt and boarded-up homes were in close proximity in this clearly residential neighborhood. One must travel two miles to get to Walgreens or most grocery stores. MCC meets these needs by living in the community themselves. They provide education programs from cradle to college. These programs work to empower their community to grow and thrive: parenting classes, karate and other physical exercise programs, programs to explore the arts, middle school and high-school clubs during the school year, along with summer camp and some overnight camping programs.

In order to equip their community to sustain family, MCC works to overcome the unemployment trend through its employment training and placement division. They work with participants to gain employability skills and bridge relationships with employers to
offer much needed employment to those in the area. In order to engage in economic
development that transforms the community, they take on one block and neighborhood at
a time. They have rehabbed housing and led the way in beautification projects to enhance
the community. They have opened a healthy soul food restaurant, have a produce market
and truck, and established a landscaping company and a property management company.
They have also established a community warehouse with needed supplies for the
community.

The organization’s offices are located in a basement building, with apartments
above. A small name was listed next to the button to be buzzed in, but lacked any
significant signage. Across the street, high, uncut grass blew around the tires of an old
painted school bus. Very few people were on the street or in the neighborhood. I received
a welcome by an administrative assistant. As I waited for interviews, a pleasant hum
filled the office as staff and other community members came in and out getting whatever
was needed. Most were dressed casually. With a majority of staff and board members
from the community, MCC’s commitment to be community based is clearly
demonstrated. Further, the deputy director who served both as research site coordinator
and participant was originally served by MCC during his teenage years and grew into
leadership through the organization.

A commitment to be involved with my research was made through concise
responses to emails and brief phone conversations with the director of MCC. During the
member-check process, Dwight, the research site coordinator, shared that he originally
viewed participation in this research to be a top-down decision. No tour was asked for or
offered. He viewed his job as one of coordination and getting me the needed information
for my study. This was clearly demonstrated in the direct manner in which he prompted the adolescents to share during focus group interviews and the matter of fact sharing by himself and other participants that occurred during the combined adult/young adult focus group interview.

Researcher Reflexivity (excerpt from field notes, February 9, 2012): The emphasis on concise conversation, lack of follow-through on organizing scheduling, and matter of fact involvement of the site coordinator and participants seems to send the message of “not a priority” to my communication-dependent self. It is revealing to me the desire to not only find out information for research sake but my desire for this research to be ministry in itself—to connect with these participants as a sister in Christ. On one hand they are demonstrating a commitment to be involved in the research. Yet, there is an underlying resistance to vulnerably sharing. This is expected. It takes time to develop trust.

Without this base-level commitment from Dwight and the respect that all participants had for him, there is little doubt in my mind that rich data would have been significantly lacking from the interviews and there would not have been a commitment made to the research process. Sharing became more authentic during in-depth interviews—though at times scheduling and participant time contraints cut short transformative moments. During the site coordinator’s in-depth interview, more vulnerable sharing was achieved when the protocol was sidestepped for part of the time in order to discuss the realities of racial issues in Christian Community Development work. This led to further buy-in to the research project at a participant and organizational leader level.
Member checks were scheduled and confirmed via email and text. However, upon arrival it was evident that scheduling with participants had not taken place. Phone calls, emails, and texts to the site coordinator were answered within an hour. Dwight contacted participants and asked them to meet me. It is a testament to their relationship with and respect for him that they showed up and participated or made arrangements to participate electronically. Member check with the site coordinator took place the following afternoon. It was through this process that the site coordinator fully embraced this research, shared authentically, and embraced the difficulty of looking at his life on a table. He encouraged the copyrighting of the theory and the theory-testing process so that many others could participate in such a transformative experience.

**Researcher Reflexivity:** What a powerful moment to see Dwight move from fulfilling a task assigned to him by the MCC director to embracing the research process for himself. He identified the difficult task of laying his life on a table in order to test the theory as a “revealing process” and “meaningful turning point.” In that moment research became ministry. And my heart is glad.

Participants, a co-facilitator, and a space to meet were provided during the focus group interviews at MCC basement offices. In-depth interviews and member checks were held at a nearby recreation building of a local Catholic church. Quiet, uninterrupted space was a luxury. Dinner, basketball, and small-group activities happening on the first and second floors drifted up to our third-floor meeting space. Privacy was limited and noise abundant. At times youthful exuberance came bounding in to share this doorless space, at times to stay and other times only to recognize interviews underway and make their exit with apologetic giggles. Those unable to participate in the member-check process in
person, due to scheduling difficulties, completed theory testing electronically and exit interviews via phone. Young adults and adults grew to embrace the research process, while adolescents largely participated throughout the entire research process out of respect for the site coordinator. All, however, did identify involvement in the research process to be a learning experience about themselves and believed it would provide helpful information to those working with African American males.

New Hope Community Development Corporation

New Hope Community Development Corporation is located in what has historically been known for being a notoriously high crime area of a large city in Illinois. In 1987 it was started by one of the local churches to provide wholistic revitalization to the lives and community through economic empowerment, housing improvements, educational enrichments, and community advocacy. The New Start ministry arm that I conducted interviews at is along a busy road. Sirens rang out in the background—three in 20 minutes. New Hope CDC flag markers are on the light poles. Trees, both new and aged, line the streets in front of well-kept brownstone townhomes along side streets. Most lawns are well kept and there is an obvious lack of noticeable tagging in the area. People sit out on the stoop talking. The neighborhood is alive. People are out walking their dogs. There is an obvious presence of men and fathers. People wait for public transportation, and youth walk home from school. An old firehouse has been converted into an arts center. During the day I walk without fear. Once the sun goes down I welcome the presence of participants walking me to my car.

Prior to coming for interviews I had received a full tour of the organization during a Race to Unity conference I had attended. At that time the founder and lead pastor had
invited me to use New Hope CDC as one of the sites for conducting my research. However, gaining actual access to New Hope CDC participants was difficult. Responses to emails and phone mails reflected hesitation to be involved in the study. The institutional consent letter limited access to those age 18 and over in the New Start Ministry—a residential substance abuse program, clearly stating that after focus group interviews it will be up to the participants to decide if they’d like to move forward with further participation in the study. This had been included in the original research proposal that was sent to New Hope CCD, but its inclusion in the institutional consent letter drew attention to the protection of its community. After multiple emails and voicemails to the New Start Ministry director, a date for focus group interviews was arranged. When I arrived I was greeted by New Start Ministry staff and participants. People were casual and friendly. They showed interest in my research. The research site coordinator came in as I was setting up to greet me. He jokingly apologized for seeming to avoid me. I thanked him for organizing this opportunity, shared with him that I had heard him share elements of his own story while on a tour through New Hope CCD previously, and invited him to participate in the interview process himself. He arranged for the focus group to pack into a small room just off the front hallway and left one of the New Start Ministry leaders in training in charge.

When I explained the research to the participants and invited them to ask any questions of me, they asked about my education, the purpose of the research, my background, and my spiritual development. Once satisfied of my intentions participants shared openly—at times joking with each other or chiding me if I missed the meaningfulness of a point. At the end they shared that they enjoyed the focus group
interview and would like to continue in the research process. When I shared this with New Start Ministry director, he was not sure it was possible for the research to move forward. Upon reflection, he decided that since they had made a commitment they would follow through on it. I thanked him and made plans to do in-depth interviews.

Researcher Reflexivity (excerpt from memo, October 20, 2012): When contacting New Hope CCD I was confident of my research involvement with the organization based on the conversation with the founder and lead pastor. Perhaps this assuredness came off as entitled and assuming. When organizing this study and interacting with the New Start Ministry director I felt my outsider status. The founder and lead pastor’s invitation to conduct part of my study here has been met with seeming resistance. I can’t tell if this is because this was a top-down directive, he is too busy, because of my race and gender, or because I don’t live in this community. I had counted on New Hope CCD’s involvement in the study. Now that focus groups have been completed and enjoyed by the participants, I will have to press forward.

In-depth interviews took place in a conference room down the street from New Start Ministry. It was a quiet location that seemed comfortable for both the participants and me. Though time and date was confirmed, it appeared that scheduling of interviews had not taken place. Participants were gathered together and interviews took place around their work schedules and other responsibilities. Time taken to review the research thus far and to take a few moments for small talk were appreciated by participants and set the stage for deep sharing. They shared vulnerably and authentically—often with strong emotion. Upon hearing of the research from the participants, one New Hope staff outside of the New Start ministry sought me out to ask if he could participate in this study. At the
conclusion of in-depth interviews all but one participant wanted to continue in the research process. When I shared this with the director of New Start, he responded that this was simply not possible due to the responsibilities that he and the participants had. The research was cut short. I was invited to conduct member checks with participants when they exited the program. Throughout the process the New Start Ministry director did not embrace this research as a priority and was guarded about my on-going presence. The participants from New Hope fully engaged in this research however. They opened themselves and exposed their vulnerability. They were excited about the research and about their participation in it.

Researcher Reflexivity (excerpt from voice memo, October, 20, 2012): *Access denied prior to member check is so frustrating—not only for the sake of the research itself but for the participants themselves. Many of them described participating in this research process as a turning point in their lives. I feel like by adhering to research ethics I was letting the participants down. I did not want to betray their trust in me or rob them of the transformational journey that they shared they are going on by participating in the research.*
While adversities in various educational settings may remain, evolve, or completely change during one’s life span and spiritual development, the substantive theory developed in this study makes clear that for this group of participants, when one’s primary self-construct becomes that of “Christian” it is the most significant turning point in how he responds to these adversities. This shift in participants’ primary identities rarely happened suddenly, and most often occurred over the course of months and years after first encounters with Christianity. After conversion other constructs of the individual’s identity increasingly became ways of expressing their Christianity. Other identities became integrated with and subservient to the Christian identity. Family, church, school, and societal expectations served both as adversities and as positive and negative influences in response to those adversities. These adversities and influences further shaped the identity development—including the core spiritual identity development—of the participants. In this chapter the structure of the substantive theory grounded in rich data shared by participants will be explained. Additionally, specific findings under each component of the theory’s structure for this group of participants will be shared.
Overview of the Emergent Theory Structure

At every life stage each participant experienced a variety of adversities, unique blend of identities, and a range of responses to adversity. These participants also were shaped by positive and negative influences on their responses to adversity. Figure 5 provides a theoretical structure for the influence of spiritual development on responses to adversity. Located in the far left column are the adversities faced by participants. These adversities mirror the risk factors Spencer (1995) identifies as one’s vulnerability level. How participants view these adversities directly relates to their identities.

These identities are reflected in the second column in the theory’s framework. This unique makeup of self-constructs interacts and acts as a filter or lens through which adversities experienced are viewed. When participants experienced their adversities

Figure 5. Christian-Identity Response Theory (C-IRT).
through the filter of their identity, they responded to their adversities in corresponding ways. Their responses to adversities brought about a resolution to some adversities, an evolution of others, and at times an introduction of new adversities all together. These responses to adversity in various educational settings were additionally impacted by a variety of participant-identified positive and negative influences indicated in the two columns furthest to the right of Figure 5. These influences serve as potential contributors or undermining elements of individual resiliency that play an imperative role in overcoming risk factors. Positive influences to responses to adversity represent the protective factors within a participant’s vulnerability level (Spencer, 1995), while negative responses to adversity represent risk factors within a participant’s level of vulnerability.

Throughout any one or all of these components of the theory’s structure items related to spiritual development may be present. The following specific spiritual development components overlay and interact with the other components: being introduced to Christianity, introduced to Christ, change in primary identity, transition(s), change in primary identity to “Christian,” conversion, and baptism. The flexibility of this spiritual development overlay serves a vital role in the recognition of the interwoven nature of spiritual development in the multiple educational ecologies and contexts of everyday life. This allows for spiritual development to be a core developmental dimension with which other theoretical components interact and enact influence on over the course of the life span.

The Christian-Identity Response Theory’s (C-IRT) framework is used in the same fashion for each of the stages of the life span identified in this research: childhood (birth-
12), adolescence (ages 13-17), young adulthood (ages 18-25), and adulthood (ages 26+).

Such use across the life span reflects the symbiotic interaction of human development, identity development, and spiritual development as crucial to the immediate responses to adversity of the participants, as well as participant life trajectories. Across age brackets participants referred to this process as a “journey.”

**Experiences of Adversity**

*Sub-question 1: What is the influence of spiritual development on adversities identified and experienced?*

Amongst the 74 types of adversities that the participants identified throughout various educational settings throughout the research process, several categories emerge: school, aloneness, religiosity, spiritual development, family, sexual abuse, sex and romantic relationships, environmental, societal, and internal struggles. Specific forms of adversity are listed in Table 1 by order of frequency and intensity. During member-check interviews, participants became aware that the same adversities existed across their life span, but the concentration of these adversities and the form that these adversities took changed during their journeys. Such changes were influenced by age bracket, identity development, and spiritual development.

With the exception of academic education, these may at first glance appear to have little to do with the academic settings that this study is focused upon. However, the home, the church, the street, and media were convincingly shared as educational settings as powerful or more powerful than their more formal academic education. For example, Donald, a 59-year-old participant from New Hope CCD who experienced the South
during the height of Jim Crow laws, shared about the role of the family in providing an education:

The ones that survived some of these nightmarish, horrific situations, it was their [the family’s] wisdom, their guidance, what they went through, and they passed it onto you as to how you survived the situation. It shows you how to walk uptown and not walk on the sidewalk. It shows you how to not look at White people, especially White women. It was their trial and error situations that they passed onto you as you were growing up. The classroom wasn’t your learning ground; it was the kitchen table, sitting on the dirt floor, eating a bowl of beans, a piece of cornbread. That was your teaching, that was your learning. See book learning got you killed; it was that sitting together, family that what kept your survival.

In contrast, Japhia, a young adult participant, shared about the role of the streets and media in educating him in the absence of an active father or father-figure about what he should go after in life:

What you see the most is women, a lot of women, no men. Not men being men, but women leading families. Even when I moved out into the real city where it wasn’t public housing, you see the same. Like my whole block was women, like moms, it was just moms, like they have boyfriends or whatever. But you seen that. You seen brokenness. My view on life, because BRV and MTV, you get so sucked up into that, for me that was my high, I wanted to be that rapper, I wanted the cars, I wanted to do that, so that ended up being the goal, like I want to have the cars, I want to have the women, I want to have the money, that’s what I wanted in life. ‘Cause that was the only male figure speaking to me.

Across all age brackets the church was seen as an educational setting. At times it was a welcome setting that participants engaged with, worshipped in, received encouragement from, developed a sense of belonging within, and embraced the teaching of; other times it was the scene of divisive, hypocritical, or irrelevant teaching. For some participants in the 1950s and 60s the church was also used to organize the Civil Rights Movement.
### Table 1

**Forms of Adversity Over the Life Span, Ranked by Frequency and Intensity**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Adversity</th>
<th>Childhood</th>
<th>Adolescence</th>
<th>Young Adulthood</th>
<th>Adulthood</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>School</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Consistent failure at school</td>
<td>2. Consistent failure at school</td>
<td>2. Unmotivated students*</td>
<td>2. Unmotivated students*</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Reading difficulties</td>
<td>3. Untrained teachers</td>
<td>3. Teachers who don’t care</td>
<td>3. Teachers who don’t care</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Unmotivated students*</td>
<td>5. Lack of relevance</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>7. Racial integration</td>
<td>8. Power of school staff</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>8. Reading difficulties</td>
<td>9. School violence</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>9. Religious</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>2. Church drama*</td>
<td>2. Church atmosphere*</td>
<td>2. Christians not living out Christian values and norms</td>
<td>2. Church drama*</td>
<td>2. Church drama*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4. Forced church attendance</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Spiritual Development</strong></td>
<td>1. Putting other people/things before God*</td>
<td>1. Conflicting Priorities*</td>
<td>1. Pride*</td>
<td>1. Pride*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Conflicting Priorities*</td>
<td>3. Living like Jesus did Selfishness*</td>
<td>3. Not engaging in spiritual disciplines*</td>
<td>3. Putting other people/things before God*</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Understanding God’s character*</td>
<td>5. Living like Jesus did*</td>
<td>5. Not engaging in spiritual disciplines*</td>
<td>5. Selfishness</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Tension between financial stability, love of nice things, &amp; gospel’s call for resources</td>
<td>8. Understanding God’s character*</td>
<td>8. Living like Jesus did*</td>
<td>8. Tension between financial stability, love of nice things, &amp; gospel’s call for resources</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>10. Lack of discipleship</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adversity</td>
<td>Childhood</td>
<td>Adolescence</td>
<td>Young Adulthood</td>
<td>Adulthood</td>
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<td>-----------------------------</td>
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<td>----------------------------------------</td>
<td>-----------------------------------------</td>
<td>----------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Familial</strong></td>
<td>1. Relationship/lack of relationship with father*</td>
<td>1. Relationship/lack of relationship with father*</td>
<td>1. Living situation</td>
<td>1. Family dynamics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2. Family dynamics</td>
<td>2. Living situation</td>
<td>2. Relation-ship/lack of relationship with father*</td>
<td>2. Death of a loved one*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3. Death of a loved one*</td>
<td>3. Family dynamics</td>
<td>3. Death of a loved one*</td>
<td>3. Health concerns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4. Family unemployment</td>
<td>4. Death of a loved one*</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5. Molestation</td>
<td>5. Health concerns</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>6. Living situation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sex &amp; Romantic Relationships</strong></td>
<td>1. Sex*</td>
<td>1. Sex*</td>
<td>1. Relational fears</td>
<td>1. Intimacy with wife</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5. Negative judgment of girls</td>
<td>5. Masturbation</td>
<td>5. Relationship with women*</td>
<td>5. Relationship with women*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>7. Relational fears</td>
<td>7. Relational fears</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Environmental Context</strong></td>
<td>1. Lack of resources</td>
<td>1. Lack of finances*</td>
<td>1. Lack of finances*</td>
<td>1. Lack of finances*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(finances*, stable housing, food)</td>
<td>2. Drug/Alcohol use &amp; abuse</td>
<td>2. Drug/alcohol use &amp; abuse</td>
<td>2. Drug/alcohol use &amp; abuse</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3. Geographic location</td>
<td>5. Safety concerns</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4. Early exposure to</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>drugs/alcohol use &amp; abuse</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Societal</strong></td>
<td>1. Negative African American role models</td>
<td>1. Being stereotyped*</td>
<td>1. Being stereotyped*</td>
<td>1. Racism*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5. Segregation</td>
<td>5. Making a living (legal or illegal)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Internal Struggles</strong></td>
<td>1. Not being good enough*</td>
<td>1. Not being good enough*</td>
<td>1. Not being good enough*</td>
<td>1. Not being good enough*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2. Fear*</td>
<td>2. Fear*</td>
<td>2. Wrestling with internal feelings</td>
<td>2. Worship of personal success*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5. Ways of thinking</td>
<td>5. Ways of thinking</td>
<td>5. Ways of thinking</td>
<td>5. Ways of thinking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>6. Worship of personal success*</td>
<td>6. Dealing with “so you think you’re better than me”</td>
<td>6. Dealing with “so you think you’re better than me”</td>
<td>6. Dealing with “so you think you’re better than me”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>7. Directionless</td>
<td>7. Directionless</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Familial Adversity

Family structure of participants during childhood and adolescence ranged from having a two-parent Christian home, to a mother raising them in a single-parent home, to a single-parent home shared with other family members or a step-father, to living solely under the care of their grandparents. While a few fathers were actively engaged and invested in their son’s life, most fathers were emotionally distant, worked long hours, were addicts, had a violent temper, or were completely absent. Deon’s father was one with an anger problem: “My father had real anger problems, and when we used to get into it, he’d put knives to my throat and say, ‘I brought you into this world, I’ll take you out, he was literally serious like.’” Several participants’ fathers had passed away; some had been murdered. The absence of active and positively involved fathers in the lives of most of the participants left these young men desperately looking for someone to give them guidance about manhood. In the absence of an active father, other male family members were looked up to and became adversities within themselves.

I had a cousin who was a drug dealer; he had the women, the cars. I really idolized everything he had in life, so growing up in was a situation where like my home, my toilets weren’t working so I had to take it out, like whenever you poop you take your hands and put it in back and take it out so man, I can see him with money, man, this is what I want, because I’m tired of going through this, so really looking to him. But then he gets shot. But I still want these things. But I don’t want to go this route about doing it. (Deon, personal communication, May 22, 2012)

Regardless of family structure, participants regularly had difficult living situations during their childhood and young adulthood. This was largely due to relationship struggles that made up family dynamics. Almost all participants had experienced the
death of a family member early on in life—the death of a baby brother, murders of their fathers, a grandfather’s passing.

Unsurprisingly, familial adversities formed roots from which other adversities grew in other educational settings, often through the manner in which these root adversities were responded to. Thereby, adversities in each educational setting had the capacity to compound and influence each other.

School

The amount of school-related adversities spiked during adolescence. Notably school became an intense adversity as participants entered middle school and progressed through high school. The overlap in both number and intensity of familial and school related adversities during adolescence is not surprising given the intense period of identity development during this life stage (Marcia, 1980). However, these participant findings also illustrate the impact of familial adversities on educational experience and subsequent adversities.

Often having had a shaky academic start during the elementary grades—particularly in reading—some participants found academic education to be irrelevant, difficult, or both as they advanced through the grade levels. Being surrounded by “teachers who don’t care” further compounded what had begun by early and consistent failure in academic education. Participant’s defined “teachers who don’t care” as those who do not invest in a relationship with their students, hand out worksheets, don’t teach concepts, play on their cell phones during class, and in the face of difficult classroom-management situations remind students that “I get paid anyway, so if you don’t want to do the work that’s your problem.”
Unmotivated students were also identified by participants as an on-going adversity. Darell, a current young adult college student, reflected back on his middle school and high-school years,

I went to school with some of the brightest people, but in school they were showing that they were dumb. Like they were street smart but I don’t think they were school smart at all. And if they were school smart they were doing a good job of hiding it. They just didn’t want to show it at all.

Environmental Contexts

Environmental context adversities remain fairly steady in amount, with lack of finances holding both the greatest number and intensity ranking across the life span. The presence of drugs/alcohol, along with some form of safety concerns or neighborhood violence, remained steady environmental adversities throughout the majority of the participants’ life spans. With the exception of some adult participants making reference to their own family experiences during childhood in the Jim Crow South, participants identified the stress of raising a family within these environmental contexts as making it difficult for families to thrive economically and relationally.

Those who shared adversities of neighborhood violence and issues of safety either identified being poor or having a lack of resources as adversities. Darell shared his experience with neighborhood violence growing up,

I think the problem with where I grew up was I moved from like a project to a hood back and forth. And when I moved like into a normal area where it was a little bit of both, we were around like a war zone. So there were like gangs right across the track from us. It was really hard because I would hear gun shots like every other week. So that was pretty hard for me. Grandma always telling me to be in the house by a certain time so nothing would happen to us. . . . Definitely seen the struggle.
Bobby also experienced neighborhood violence, “Gunshots every night. Light out. If you stayed outside you might hear somebody getting whupped. And you see all these things. Man, it’s just ridiculous growing up in this area.”

Such issues of violence and safety were largely restricted to participants’ childhoods and it appears as they grew older these simply faded into the backdrop of their lives. This does not mean that these adversities ceased to exist, rather it means that for these participants, issues of violence and safety became normalized and other adversities gained in intensity. Preach stated,

Sirens, constantly, gun shots. It became a way of life. Like when we hear gun shots, some people duck. Or they hear sirens, some people are hysterical. It actually became the norm. So I would hear a shot, or I would hear a siren, it just became the norm.

Due to a lack of resources, some families experienced homelessness and if they did not have relatives to fall back on they would move from shelter to shelter. After Trevor’s mother starting doing drugs they lost everything. They lived at the Salvation Army’s shelter, “It’s a shelter downtown. We went there for a few months, and then we left. Everything was good until again, she wasn’t on drugs, but we lost everything again. We had to go to another shelter.” Almost all families of participants during their childhood and adolescence experienced a lack of stable housing, regularly moving to evade the landlord or find a cheaper place to stay. Bobby shared, “My mother stayed on the run a lot. Like moved from spot to spot. So any spot we moved to . . . catch again. We started moving, moving. . . . All in the same area.”

Along with neighborhood violence and a lack of stable housing, exposure to drug and alcohol started young and was part of the environmental context throughout the life span of the participants. Once exposed to drugs and alcohol, most participants began to
use these as ways of coping with other adversities—to “fill a hole in my soul”—thereby creating further adversities for themselves.

Societal

The number of societal adversities shared by participants was greater during childhood and young adulthood, than in adolescence and adulthood. While sports involvement often emerged as an adversity when success led to idolatry, all other societal adversities identified by participants—negative African American role models, being stereotyped, racism, making a living, and code switching—were strongly related to race.

Issues of racism differed by age bracket of the participants. Those who grew up during the Civil Rights era and experienced Jim Crow laws, had issues of racism permeate their stories. For example, Donald spoke of the use of fear tactics in order to maintain “stringent segregation”—of “constant stalking fear” that you would end up as a “tree ornament,” of “burning crosses in our yards at night time,” and of learning how to “walk uptown and not on the sidewalk . . . how to not look at a white people, especially a white woman.” Other adults were less affected than their older counterparts, but most were more keenly aware of racial issues—particularly being stereotyped and the impact of institutional racism on the “endless cycle of poverty” (Brian, personal communication, May 22, 2012)—than were young adults and adolescents.

Young adults referred to getting pulled over because you’re “driving while black” or “having women grip their purses at the sight of you” primarily as an expected reality and not particularly worth spending the time to talk about. It was assumed by my informants that I knew what they were referring to, “well, you know” followed by laughter. And unfortunately, I did at least think I knew what they were referring to. Most
adolescents further distanced themselves from issues of racism, but continued to grapple with what it meant to be a Christian African American male. Blake admitted to avoiding White neighborhoods and noting that White people “just scatter. . . . They don’t want to have nothing to do with me because they think, ‘oh he’s a criminal.’” Trevor shared, “Everybody just sets up a stereotype, for us to be thugs and knuckle heads and all that.” Racism was clearly considered to be present but “not like it used to be.”

Researcher Reflexivity: *No doubt there has been progress made, but this seeming minimization of institutional racism, issues of access and privilege and power has me quite angry. Have we really come so far for these youths to be truly part of a post-racial society or is theirs a level of internalized oppression that has become so expected it no longer is worthy of time or attention?*

Sexual Abuse

Instances of sexual abuse most often took place over the course of months or years. Such sexual abuse ranged from the perversion of “older kids teaching me how to have sexual intercourse with a little girl while only a child myself” (Johnathan, personal communication, March, 2014), to molestation by an uncle, or years of sexual abuse by a family friend and community member. Acts of sexual abuse shared by participants were limited to childhood. However, coping with the sexual abuse has remained over the course of their life spans. Often their coping was an adversity in itself, as it infiltrated into every aspect of life. Preach, a young adult from MCC, illustrated this ripple effect as he shared his story,

Preach: What’s funny is that even though I was born and raised in a Christian household and went to Christian events all the time in my church, there still was a lack of love. Well, at the time I couldn’t really understand what love was. I just thought everybody was against me, didn’t think that anybody was in my corner. I
grew up having people call me dumb and slow all the time. It just began to be hard for me to keep meandering through the pain. Even when I was younger, it all started when I was sexually abused at the time. . . . It just built up a lot of anger. At that moment when it happened, it was over the course of a year or two. And it had me kind of develop this me-against-the-world mindset. You know? So that’s where my violent tendencies, that’s where it came from. And so my social skills. I didn’t really want to talk to anybody, because I thought people are always subject to hurting. So I didn’t really want to be close to anybody, because I was always afraid of getting hurt. Physically, spiritually. I’m a small guy physically, so I always had to defend myself in fights, so that pertains to that. So I just really didn’t want to open up or even have a relationship with other people, and I would feel lonely. I would see certain things that would kind of shun me away from other people.

Interviewer: Like what?

Preach: I was anti-social, so I didn’t really have many friends. When I went to school, I had about one friend each grade, and it was people that know me. It’s a difference. Because in the community that I lived in, fights, known winning fights, you get all kinds of credibility, and you get associated with people that’s in your corner, yeah, you beat him up. And pumping you up. It feels good. And I equated that to friendship. Deep down inside, those people weren’t friends; they didn’t hang around me, they just in my corner when I needed a fight. And all of a sudden it dawned on me when I came home after every fight, when I got in trouble, and got suspended, and was home, I really didn’t have anybody to talk to, or even as it pertains to family, I was so bad. My sisters are twins, and they are used to getting all As in school, the star-light kids, and here it’s like me that’s right after them. I’m the next on in line of my siblings, known as for as the kid that fights, the outcast. So it’s kind of like they had all the favoritism, and favor I guess, and then there’s me. I felt isolated from everybody else, nobody understands me, my family, these types of things.

Researcher Reflexivity: The adversity of sexual abuse at the hand of family members and close friends influenced participant’s self-constructs greatly and its effects permeated throughout other forms of adversity. While this particular category could have been (and through the data analysis process was) considered a familial adversity or under adversities related to sex and romantic relationships, its level of perversion set itself apart from other forms of adversity within these other categories. I ultimately determined that it should have its own category.
Sex and Romantic Relationships

Adversities related to sex and romantic relationships began early and continued over participants’ life spans. During focus groups, some adolescent and many young adult participants identified inquiring how people deal with “your personal sexual life” and “sexual stuff” to be necessary during the course of my research. Sex, viewing pornography, and engaging in masturbation started during late childhood and has continued as an adversity regardless of stage of life or spiritual development. The ranking and degree of intensity of each of these did shift over the life span.

Early relationships with girls and negative judgment of girls weighed heavily on the minds of these participants during their younger years. This theme continued into young adulthood and adulthood as relationships with girls grew into relationships with women and brought about the possibility of more serious relationships and marriage. For many, sex became a commodity during high school and into young adulthood. “I watched a lot of porn, a lot of masturbation, a lot of that . . . and in college it was, especially coming to college, it was just about how many chicks can you sleep with” (Deon, personal communication, July 24, 2012). Dank further shared about the persistence of pornography as an addiction even as his faith commitment was growing, “even when I was starting to really dig into the church and I was thinking of being baptized, and you know jumping head first, I was still heavily addicted to pornography. I mean it was an obsession, and it was an everyday thing, I couldn’t go without it.”

Viewed as the most “personal” and “private” of adversities—particularly among the adult participants—it was also among the top adversities that changed form the most to reflect the faith commitment of the participants. As faith commitment grew, thinking
about pornography, masturbation, and sex changed. Sex was embraced as “set apart for marriage” and pornography and masturbation as carnal desires that rob relationships of true intimacy. Regardless of age, but directly tied to participants’ spiritual development, the consistent failure to meet the sexual standards that they were convicted that God set forth emerged as an outgrowth of the root adversity. When asked what adversities he still struggles with and could trip up his spiritual development, Deon replied, “I say porno, masturbation . . . trying too hard to hook women.” Darell shares, “Since I struggled with women in my past, it’s so easy to look at pornography. . . . Like when it happens, like oh, man, the devil did that on purpose, no I did that myself. It’s my fault.” Milton further shares on these areas of complexity,

I think that before I became a believer and even as I became a believer, women is a huge struggle. Whether that be in the form of pornography or the real deal holy feel, or no even always sexual struggle, but you know compassion and that thing. I think there is, in my walk in general, there is always this fear of failure in the field of relationships with women and unhealthy relationships, whether that be emotional, physical, and also, making a terrible choice for marriage. ‘Cause you see so many marriages fail. Or I guess, vice versa, being a terrible choice for marriage [LAUGHTER]. Let’s be real.

For those who married, intimacy with their wives has been impacted by prior use of pornography and masturbation. Japhia feared that he will be “a coward that wouldn’t fight for intimacy with my wife and turn to pornography,” while Caleb identified the ongoing adversity of pornography as he adjusts to the reality that sometimes grief or exhaustion or toddlers results in sex with his wife not happening as often as he first thought it would.

For all, the adversity continues in its various forms.
Religiosity

Church atmosphere, church drama, forced church attendance, and Christians not living out Christian values and norms formed the basis of religiously based adversities over the course of the life span and participants’ spiritual development. Church atmosphere and church drama were present through all brackets. Forced church attendance was prevalent during childhood and remained into adolescence, while Christians not living out Christian values and norms developed as an adversity during adolescence and remained through adulthood.

Most participants were at minimum “exposed to the church” during their childhoods. Forced church attendance remained through childhood and into adolescence—until of age to decide for yourself about church attendance or get out of the house, depending on the family. Grandmothers and mothers often ensured their children attended church even if they did not do so themselves. Bobby shared that he “was forced to go to church. ‘You need to put this 50 cents. You’d better put that in the hat, or you get whup’d.’ So I listen. There was a lot of force involved, like a lot.” Many “hated going to church” because they were forced to or did not see the relevance to their lives. For those who attended church with their parents or other family members, church involvement was more consistent regardless of participant desire. During adolescence it was often girls or social life that contributed to attendance.

Over the course of the life span, Mr. Rose shared that his “relationship with the church actually amplified his adversities” in adolescence and led him to “go to war with the church” and seek relationship with God outside of Christianity. He and two other
participants explored the teachings of Muhammad and Islam before returning to the Christian church later in life.

At times the church’s lack of action in under-resourced communities, lack of male presence in the congregation, and idolization of the pastor also became sources of adversity for participants,

The church that my mom was going to at the time, like they were about getting blessings and just the prosperity gospel, you know what I mean, health wealth, you know what I mean. Make sure life is good. And so that was what I was being introduced to. It was real supernatural. Not practical. So it was like real mystical, but there was really like no action. Let the Spirit do it. You got to let go and let God. And that kind of thing. There was no action. The church wasn’t visible. A church body of about 400, 500 people but it was just like they worshiped the pastor. The pastor had a BMW, everybody else had buckets, you know what I mean? And so, but he was idolized, because in a sense he was bringing hope to the community. And so I grew up around that. And it was always just something in me that knew that something about that wasn’t right. Something ain’t adding up here. If the pastor got a BMW and you know what I mean, everybody else got busted Toyotas and it’s a church full of women. And so I didn’t want to be there. I didn’t want nothing to do with God like I was wanting to go to heaven, but I didn’t want to be there ‘cause that’s where women was. And that’s how you identify, like, the women go to church, so to be a man, it just wasn’t, it so I’m not going to be there, ‘cause I can’t be considered a man there. And so that played a huge role just in my spiritual background.

Participants developed a resistance to the church and to church attendance, even while wanting to maintain a relationship with God: “When I grew up, I didn’t really care anything about church or anything like that. I mean, I always wanted to have a relationship with God, but I didn’t really care about the church” (Preach, personal communication, May 29, 2012).

At other times it was the church leader’s lack of positive conflict-resolution skills that resulted in church drama. Donnie grew up very active in the church until he went to a church business meeting that put him on a very different life trajectory:

At 18, I believe I was just going to turn 18, I went to my first business meeting. An argument came up about some money. A certain amount of money was
collected. A different amount was deposited in the bank. So this one deacon who deposited the money, all of a sudden he said it wasn’t the amount that they had written down in church. So there was a big argument that came up about it and some accusations were thrown—some money’d been stolen, this and that—it was very [voice trailing off]. These guys went to their cars to get guns. It got a little crazy there. The police were called and the meeting was broke up and that was the last business meeting I went to. I said, ‘Man, is this the reason why we come to church? I might as well go up on the street to the jip joints, ‘cause that’s what they’re doing up there. It was real eye openin.’ And that’s when I started to see a lot of hypocrites in the church. It turned me, it kinda turned me, no it didn’t kinda, it turned me off. I really believed and I still should have stayed but it kinda pushed me away from the church. ‘Cause I was like, man they’re a bunch of hypocrites and I left the church and I stayed away from the church for many years. Actually until I came to New Hope, I didn’t become actively involved in the church until 2009 and this happened in ’76.

Deon expressed his, and what he has come to know as common to many African American males, experience in the church in some selected lyrics of Hood Prayer. After setting the scene of the struggle for Civil Rights, the introduction of crack, the emergence of the hood, the liquor store and strip joint next to the church, the prevalence of fatherlessness, and neighborhood violence he reflected on the religiosity and the church, But they say there’s some hope. And I need it, and they say it’s found up in Jesus. . . . But I really gotta mention, these people so called Christians, who supposed to add onto me but causing the most division. See some teach tongues, but they ain’t got no vision. Discuss about who’s pregnant or who’s cooking in the kitchen. And others teach theology, like how to make apology or drop all their convictions soon as they hear that doxology. They all owe me apologies. I was raised in the church, shooting at each other. I’m the only one that’s hurt. Yeh, Lord, I don’t know what You doin’ ‘neath that steeple but I got an issue ‘bout this treatment I get from Your people. But Jesus came to help teach about love, about the poor and the weak. So if that’s what You preach and they won’t do it in Your building, then Lord, come build Your churches in my streets. Lord, this is my prayer.

These religious-based adversities often combined with other forms of adversity and contributed to participants’ internal struggles and interacted with their spiritual development.
Internal Struggles

Internal struggles were an outgrowth of experiencing other forms of adversity and their own responses to those adversities. Ways of thinking about God, self, others, and the interaction of them, led to the participants wrestling with many internal feelings. The most prevalent struggle across every age bracket across the life span and every educational was “not being good enough”—not good enough as a son, student, father, husband, ministry leader, role model, provider, sports professional, Christian. This fear of not being good enough was also linked to other fears. Some of the most prevalent fears included fear for personal safety and your family’s well-being, of the lack of finances while facing unemployment or underemployment, of reading, of social isolation, relationships, failure, health concerns, rejection, substance abuse, and own ways of thinking and own reactions. At times, these fears and other internal struggles resulted in the development of drug and/or alcohol dependence. As participants began to gain victory over their addictions, returning to drug/alcohol dependence remained a fear.

During adolescence and young adulthood some participants felt directionless. When they began to find a sense of purpose and belonging within Christianity they experienced rejection from some within their communities, and “dealing with ‘so you think you’re better than me’” emerged as an adversity. As participants gained academic success, professional successes, success in the music industry, or success on the court, mat, or field, “worship of personal success” developed into an adversity. For participants particularly talented in one or more of these areas worship of personal success began young and remained present throughout the lifespan.
Spiritual Development

Many times when talking about spiritual development the positive took precedence in the interview. However, it is the category of adversity that has the most types of adversity within each age bracket and across the life span. Research participants intentionally embarked on their faith journey at various ages, but shared many of the same adversities related to spiritual development along the way. These were: putting people/things before God; not engaging in spiritual disciplines; conflicting priorities; understanding God’s character; living like Jesus did; selfishness, and pride. Additionally, surrender and submission to God’s will; a lack of discipleship; and tension between financial stability, love of nice things, and the gospel call for resources were shared during three of the four age brackets.

Engaging in spiritual disciplines, while seen as crucial to spiritual development, many participants expressed that it was “a consistent struggle to spend time with Jesus” (Milton, personal communication, October, 2012). Darell agreed,

Not spending time in the Word. That is the first thing that affects me. . . . Just my own plans, having my own agenda, and not lining that up with the Word of God and His will for my life.

While prayer was most consistently used, participants recognized the struggle to truly communicate with God and not just approach him in times of duress. This struggle for a devotional life and prayer life, added to the difficulty in practicing faith—trusting that “whatever He got in store is the best thing” (Blake, personal communication, May 29, 2012). It also made it difficult to be obedient, express gratitude, maintain the practice of humility, engage in acts of forgiveness, and live a service-focused life. “Just when I think I’ve got this thing all together, I get haughty or prideful. That’s when I blow it,” Tim stated. Inviting the “Lord to scrub away some things so that I can have a Biblical
worldview” (Caleb, personal communication, May 22, 2012), to “redefine fun” (Crispy, personal communication, May 29, 2012), and “fortify my mind” (Donnie, personal communication, August 22, 2012) were all difficult as they fought against putting other people/things before God and became new creatures in Christ.

Conflicting priorities of all types were adversities to be overcome in participants’ spiritual development and—believing in God versus being Christian; mind-set change or become a statistic; being self-sufficient versus reliance on God; following Jesus versus eating the Krispy Kreme; have financial stability or nice things or answer the gospel’s call for resources; do I fight or cower?; satisfying bosses or following God’s direction; performance and achievement or grace and dependence; my wisdom or God’s wisdom. All these conflicting priorities come down to the adversity of selfishness. Will it be God’s will or my will? Many of these continue to be played out in the lives of the participants, and the lack of discipleship to work through these conflicting priorities is an adversity of its own.

People of all ages and places on the spiritual development journey strongly felt the lack of discipling as an adversity. Even while being a part of a vibrant church community effectively reaching gang members during the height of gang violence, Moses Xavier experienced a lack of discipleship:

I got baptized, gave my life to the Lord. But then, I think you know, the difficulty of that is when you are a young man, you give your life to God, there is no one there to disciple you and show you how to walk that route. I think it is easy to become a carnal Christian. Because even though you had this God experience where God has come, I feel God experience is when the supernatural meets the natural and you know you have encountered the [FINGER SNAP] the living God. I think that can happen. But there is a human element of volatility that I feel that us believers have to embrace. Just the walk out of that life of discipleship. Really have somebody in man form to say, here, let me show you how to walk this out. And so I never had that.
Caleb was also prayerfully searching for such discipleship as he entered into another life turning point:

To whom much is given much is required and so I’m trying to figure out how to harness it. If I had a coach who could say, ‘okay Caleb, let’s do a review. Where are you? Where have you been, your experiences, and your network? We’re going to harness that and help you put together a plan so you can exercise those things for the benefit of the kingdom.’ We’d be onto something. . . . I need a mentor, a coach. (Caleb, personal communication, May 22, 2012)

Summary of Adversities

Out of 74 individual forms of adversities, nine categories emerged: school, religiosity, spiritual development, familial adversities, sexual abuse, sex and romantic relationships, environmental context, internal struggles, and societal adversities. These categories and the types of adversity within them are interdependent—often one category of adversities impacting and sprouting new adversities within its category or branching into other adversity categories. These adversities serve as the data-rich foundation and backdrop that played a powerful role in the molding of participants’ identity constructs, and therefore in their responses to adversity throughout various educational settings throughout the journey of spiritual development.

Self-Construct

Sub-question 2: What is the influence of identity constructs on responses to adversity in academic schooling, non-academic schooling, family life, church life, and community life?

Participants also identified 43 specific identities that formed their self-constructs at one or more times over the course of their life span. These fall within the following
categories: demographics, Christian-based identity constructs, characteristics, descriptors, roles, and cultures (see Table 2).

The unique blend of identities that made up participants’ self-construct was deeply influenced by their spiritual development journeys. It is interesting to note that although several participants experienced time in jail, none of them referred to themselves as convicts at any time during the course of the research. Jail time was freely shared as part of their life span. However, an identity associated with that jail time was not reflected in the way that participants shared how they viewed themselves at any time, and was intentionally shunned by the adolescents experiencing any form of jail time.

Blake, an adolescent who turned young adult during the course of data collection, shared:

Last year, went to jail, didn’t really like it. This is not me right here. I’m not supposed to be here, in here. . . . Couldn’t sleep. Just stayed up and talked to Jesus and such. He kind of put me on the right path. I stopped doing the stuff that got me in there.

A major turning point of faith commitment within the participants’ spiritual development was that of total surrender to Christ.

When I came to know the Lord, it was really the validation of my humanity. Not football [THUMP]. Not who you dating [THUMP]. Not what kind of car you driving [THUMP]. Not what kind of clothes you are wearing. [THUMP]. My search was over when I came to know the Lord. [THUMP]. That’s it. That’s. You can build off that foundation [THUMP, THUMP]. ‘Cause it’s truth. Everything else. Man, someone might find out I’m not all that I portray myself to be. I could stumble. I could be totally honest about who I am as a believer, and it ain’t changing, you know? Hey, what you see is what you get. (Caleb, personal communication, May 22, 2012)

At conversion all participants reported a sense of freedom. “I just felt so free . . . delivered from darkness to light. It was amazing,” Caleb said (personal communication, May 22, 2012). And DeWayne shared, “I think when you know God,
Table 2

*Self-constructs That Form Identity and Worldview*

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<tr>
<th>Self-construct categories</th>
<th>Specific identities</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Demographics</td>
<td>Age—Teenager/adolescent, Young Adult, Adult</td>
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<td>Race—African American</td>
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<td>Class—Poor, Middle class, Wealthy</td>
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<tr>
<td>Roles</td>
<td>Student</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Single</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Enter Occupation</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Husband</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Father</td>
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<td>Uncle</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Code-switcher</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Bridge Builder</td>
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<tr>
<td>Cultures</td>
<td>African American</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Geek culture</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Hip-hop culture</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Christian culture</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
a lot of doors open and you get a lot of freedom” (personal communication, May 29, 2012). This total surrender followed by a sense of freedom often led to the tipping point of their primary identity becoming primarily Christian and strongly influenced responses to adversity across all educational settings. Caleb shared its impact within an academic college setting:

At the University of Illinois nobody was putting me on the dean’s list, ‘cause I was majoring in NFL, minoring in a degree, and my minor—I don’t know if I was about to complete. And then I came to know the Lord. And I had the best semester academically after I came to know the Lord. I was courageous enough to talk to my professors.

While Dwight spoke to how his relationship with Christ infiltrated decision making in multiple areas of life,

my Christian relationship with Jesus Christ has played a big part in my decision making, as far as college, in longevity in ministry, my longevity in ministry, and my decision to become a pastor. It played a great part in the decisions I make, always weighed them with leaders who were Christians, always weighed them with my walk with the Lord. So again, I’m not going to say that I didn’t get into things, and make bad decisions, but it was always in the back of my mind, because I love Jesus, I would do this, I wasn’t going to have sex before I was married, the whole nine yards, because of this I made those decisions to do that. My walk with God had a great influence on that.

However, participants’ identities did not immediately change, rather they evolved throughout their continued spiritual development. Crispy, a young adult leader at MCC, expressed it this way, “My identity is Christ, is wrapped up in Christ and has evolved from having a relationship with Jesus.” Caleb, a college footballer turned professional counselor, shared about how he saw himself at college before conversion, “My language was so . . . One of my favorite songs was by NWA, ‘If It Ain’t Ruff, It Ain’t Me.’ My earring, my goatee, I was a college football player, and I was walking around—What? You know?” As Caleb laid out this part of his life on the table during the member-check
process, he grew increasingly emotional. “I have to stop. How could I have? . . . I need a minute,” he said more to himself than to me. While sharing about completing this portion of the member-check activity, he continued,

When I was going through the young adulthood phase, I almost started crying because it was just so mixed up and confusing and bewildering because I had based my life around my athletics, sports identity. I gained a lot from sports but it wasn’t what I needed. I couldn’t build a life on sports and athletics. It would only go so far. It seemed like my life began when I truly surrendered to Christ. I’m kinda fascinated by how much fear was involved in my journey from the beginning and the [thought and voice fades away]. When Christ came into my life it’s like you have someone who talks to you and communicates with you and so many times I feel like he’s said to me, “Don’t fear. I have this. I’ve got this. I’ll give you everything you’re going to need, for any opportunity that you’re going to face.” And I’m sitting here looking at childhood and going, I had the resource right there. I had the relationship potential right there [said with desperate longing and grief]. It was so close, and yet it was so far away ‘cause I had no idea how to lay hold of that relationship.

When these men had established (a) at least a beginning understanding of who God is and (b) who they are in relationship to Him, then participants began to see that sub-categories of identities could co-exist in submission to their primary identity (see Table 3).

When asked to identify his primary identity, Japhia, a young adult Christian rapper and bank teller, recognized the role of sub-identities in his self-construct:

I think my primary identity comes from who Christ says I am. . . . I’m talking Biblical Christian. I wouldn’t say African American; I feel that’s more sub-identity, for lack of a better term. . . . Ok, follow me. I look at it as Christian on top, then a sub would be African American, and then a sub of that would be of the hip-hop culture. And so I think it’s kind of this is navigating these two, because there’s a culture within African American community but more influenced by hip hop community. . . . I like the fact that I’m black, not that I think I’m better than anybody, I just like the way African Americans do things. I don’t think it’s better. Again, hip-hop culture—I’m intrigued with. So now it’s, I’m a Christian and I’m African American and I’m part of the hip-hop culture.
### Table 3

*Influence of Spiritual Development Journey on Identity Development*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pre-Conversion</th>
<th>Transitional Identities</th>
<th>Distinctly Christian Identities</th>
<th>Remaining Sub-identities of primary identity Christians</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Male Teenager/adolescent</td>
<td>Christian</td>
<td>Ambassador</td>
<td>Leader</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Young Adult</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>Christian</td>
<td>Encourager</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adult</td>
<td>Teenager/adolescent</td>
<td>Biblical/Godly man</td>
<td>Comedian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African American</td>
<td>Adult</td>
<td>Godly husband</td>
<td>Hard worker</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poor</td>
<td>Poor</td>
<td>Christian leader</td>
<td>Work in progress</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle class</td>
<td>Middle class</td>
<td>Pastor</td>
<td>Nice guy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wealthy</td>
<td>Wealthy</td>
<td></td>
<td>Athletic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hard worker</td>
<td>Hip-hop culture</td>
<td></td>
<td>Musician</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Code-switcher</td>
<td>Christian culture</td>
<td></td>
<td>At-risk</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student</td>
<td>Oddball</td>
<td></td>
<td>Stereotyped</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nice guy</td>
<td>Alone/Loner</td>
<td></td>
<td>Single</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Invisible</td>
<td>Boyish/childish</td>
<td></td>
<td>Student</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Encourager</td>
<td>Stature</td>
<td></td>
<td>Bridge Builder</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Athletic</td>
<td>Athletic</td>
<td></td>
<td>Teenager/adolescent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Musician</td>
<td>Musician</td>
<td></td>
<td>Young Adult</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comedian</td>
<td>Addict/Recovering</td>
<td></td>
<td>Adult</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oddball</td>
<td>Addict</td>
<td></td>
<td>African American</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alone/Loner</td>
<td>At-risk</td>
<td></td>
<td>Poor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reject</td>
<td>Tough guy</td>
<td></td>
<td>Middle class</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boyish/childish</td>
<td>Stereotyped</td>
<td></td>
<td>Wealthy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stature</td>
<td>Mixed up</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Addict</td>
<td>Doubtful</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>At-risk</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pimp</td>
<td>Student</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tough guy</td>
<td>Husband</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stereotyped</td>
<td>Father</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student</td>
<td>Man</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mixed up</td>
<td>Uncle</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Doubtful</td>
<td>Code-switcher</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Rather than competing for the role of primary identity, sub-categories became an avenue to express worship for Christ as they engaged in living out their everyday lives Christianly.

I see myself as a Christian first before anything, and applying everything else to what I have. Like for example, my identity now is a Christian. I’m [also] an uncle because I have nephews. I’m a Christian as I work as well. I’m in school right now, and I’m a ministry leader right now, and seeing what I can do with my role as a Christian in those identities too. And show Christian in my actions in everything I do. (Deon, personal communication, May 22, 2012)

Over the course of their spiritual development journey, clarity of participants’ identity emerged as primary identity became “Christian.” Deon shares,

My primary identity is as a Christian, but it wasn’t always that way. For the first 19-20 years of my life, it was just to be known as a musician, just even being that little kid in the church having a solo, always wanting that attention, that joy or false joy, whatever false hope I wanted from playing music. But now it’s . . . I wouldn’t say I’m a man like he is. I’m a babe in this thing. Got a lot of growing to do. So I would say I’m just a babe in the faith. Just really trying to grow and get equipped so I can be that man one day.

This journey of manhood as it relates to self-construct and spiritual development was echoed by many participants. Japhia stated,

If I’m a biblical Christian, biblical man, that’s a Christian, so definitely a male. I think there is a proper way by which we are more so. I wouldn’t say male, I say man. I would say I’m a man because I follow Jesus and I’m running after biblical manhood. ‘Cause anybody can be a male.

Yet, balancing the identity of being an African American male Christian was not always easy. When asked to respond to how you go about balancing being an African American male with being a Christian within his community, Tallness responded,

As you get older and you become your own person, maturity, growing up, becoming a man, you kind of find your own way. . . . I think once you get older, manhood you get. No specific age, ‘cause everybody goes about it differently. Everybody reach manhood at a different age. I know guys who were 16 who were doing real man stuff. I know guys who were 30, 40 still hadn’t grown up, still little kids. And they’re still looking to the acceptance of their friends. So there isn’t a specific age for that. But what I’m saying, when a man does hit that point,
the balance between being an African American male and being Christian is, the balance goes way, because you’re who you want to be. If you want to be a Christian, you be a Christian. If you want to be a thug, you be a thug, if that’s who you want to be. But I think up to that point, the balance is a little bit hard.

These data ground participant self-constructs as filters through which adversities are viewed. The development of these identities is also influenced by both the adversities experienced and even more powerfully by their spiritual development. The most significant turning point in identity occurred as participants’ primary identity became that of “Christian.”

**Adversity Response Strategies**

*Excerpt from central question: How might spiritual development influence turning points in responses to adversity in various educational settings?*

As participants looked through the filter of their own identities they responded to the adversities in their lives. As primary identity shifted to that of “Christian,” participants’ minds were and continued to be renewed over the course of spiritual development. They reported 38 responses to adversity through the course of their life spans. With the exception of leaving the church or lack of school attendance, these responses to adversity cross over boundaries of specific educational settings. They are listed in Table 4 in order of frequency and intensity shared by research participants.

During adolescence, maladaptive responses—avoidance and aggression—to adversities were the most common responses. Participants tended to isolate themselves by building protective emotional walls during childhood and adolescence. Their young adulthood and adulthood then became the story of rewriting their trust maps and dismantling piece by piece the walls that were built to protect themselves but left them spiritually and emotionally isolated from others.
Table 4

Responses to Adversity Across the Life Span, Ranked by Frequency and Intensity

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Responses to Adversity</th>
<th>Childhood</th>
<th>Adolescence</th>
<th>Young Adulthood</th>
<th>Adulthood</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2. Isolate</td>
<td>2. Build walls</td>
<td>2. Build walls</td>
<td>2. Focus on music</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>7. Absorbed situations</td>
<td>7. Leave church</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>8. Shutdown</td>
<td>8. Absorbed situations</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2. Fighting</td>
<td>2. Fighting</td>
<td>2. Engaging in criminal activity</td>
<td>2. Extramarital affair</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>4. Sought help from influential role models</td>
<td>4. Church attendance</td>
<td>4. Sought help from influential role models (+/-)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>5. Seek accountability</td>
<td>5. Seek accountability</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>7. Counseling</td>
<td>7. Counseling</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>8. Surrender</td>
<td>8. Surrender</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2. Focused on academic achievement</td>
<td>2. Talking</td>
<td>2. Talking</td>
<td>2. Focusing on academic development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4. Confronting shame</td>
<td>4. Focus on academic achievement</td>
<td>4. Renewed focus</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5. Humanization of White people</td>
<td>5. Tear down walls</td>
<td>5. Go back to school</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Development/use of spiritual disciplines</td>
<td>7. Development/use of spiritual disciplines</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2. Fear</td>
<td>2. Guilt</td>
<td>2. Guilt</td>
<td>2. Guilt</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5. Crying</td>
<td>5. Shame</td>
<td>5. Shame</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Mr. Roe identified that,

overall, I seem to be my own worst enemy. Starting in adolescence especially, you’ll notice I put isolation and internal feelings and the way I chose to handle that is what I’m realizing now is a growing problem because my response to those feelings ends up . . . then become things I deal with in adulthood . . . . They grow in young adulthood and come to fruition in adulthood. So I’m basically playing clean up from all of that, from all that fallout finally giving birth.

Anger and fighting were the top maladaptive aggression strategies during childhood and adolescence. Trevor recalled that he regularly responded to name calling and bullying in middle school and into high school by “fighting all the time.”

Preach also found himself fighting on a regular basis. He shared his response to the desire to belong but not having the social skills to accomplish this desire with adaptive strategies:

We all look for a sense of wanting to feel like you belong some place. A sense of something to ease your pain, fighting was a way for me to express my feelings, and I used to draw a lot. That was another way, but it was more fighting than drawing. The only way I draw was when I was home, and I couldn’t really put my hands on anybody. So I used to just draw. I wanted to be in it. I wanted friends so bad. The only time I would get noticed was when I fight. Man, it was just hard growing up with no type of social skills. And the only time I would have any interaction with people was when I fought. The only time I could get any attention. So that was the way I was trying to get attention at that time.

Adaptive responses of seeking help began to be noticeably utilized in adolescence, with a significant increase in their use during young adulthood, and continued practice into adulthood. Most often adolescents would seek out a conversation with their mentor, if they had one, or their mother or friends for advice.

Responses to adversities were strongly influenced by participant self-constructs, and, therefore, by their level of faith commitment and spiritual development journey.

Although both maladaptive and adaptive solutions (Spencer, 1995) were used throughout the life span regardless of faith commitment and spiritual development, there
is a significant turning point when participants’ primary identity changes to that of “Christian.” How participants addressed their primal emotional responses does reflect the evolution from maladaptive response strategies toward adaptive strategies through the “renewal of the mind” and the “transformative power of God.” As participants moved into young adulthood they sought assistance from “a band of brothers,” a spiritual group of peers committed to living out Christ in the way they lived. Once into adulthood, these adaptive responses continued and, for some, expanded to seeking help from a professional counselor or substance-abuse program. Mr. Rose sought out a counselor after committing adultery. When getting drawn back into “doing rocks and drinking, [but] not gone back to heroine or marijuana” again, Donald “went to bottom line recovery house” followed by joining the New Hope substance-abuse ministry. When faced with anger, Roger began using prayer and talking with his mom as problem-solving strategies:

Roger: When I was younger I used to get angry in fights. That has changed over the years. . . . I used to fight a lot about silly stuff. Like somebody bump you by accident and like straight flip out. Don’t do that anymore.

Interviewer: When did that change?

Roger: Like when I was nine. I, it didn’t change like straight automatic. It got less and less of a problem. It just stopped all together.

Interviewer: Why do you think it stopped?

Roger: Like I was praying about it. Like talking with my mom. I didn’t like getting in trouble. So I just like tried to keep myself out of trouble, and prayed about it. Basically I would let kids get to me when I was younger. They’d be like “you’re not going to hit them,” “you not going to do this, and that this day, that will make people fight, ‘cause they don’t want to be known as a kid who is a punk and all that stuff. Basically it all boils down to, sorry, they try to impress girls so, they just do all that silly stuff.

Dank used confession to his mentor and a “band of brothers” in an attempt to overcome his obsessive addiction to pornography.
Problem-solving adaptive responses leaned heavily on a strong faith commitment and are scattered across the life span in a way that reflects the spiritual development of the participants. They identified playing sports as a way to deal with aggression, focus on academic achievement, or returning to “get your gift certified” (Caleb, personal communication, May 22, 2012) as purposeful steps out of poverty, the development/use of spiritual disciplines to build a relationship with God to renew their minds, confront shame, tear down walls, and humanize and forgive White people.

Emotional responses consistently reported from childhood through young adulthood were neither solely adaptive nor maladaptive. Rather, they reflect the emotional landscape present during both adaptive and maladaptive response strategies. Most are present throughout the life course regardless of spiritual development. Feelings of inferiority encompass many of the other emotional responses without detracting from the intensity or validity of each of them when stood alone. Within internal struggles, feelings of inferiority, of not being good enough, were prevalent responses throughout participants’ life spans—even in the face of what from the outside would have been viewed as affirming and often led to a deeper faith commitment in one’s spiritual development. Moses Xavier shared about his response to grappling with whether he was good enough to play professional football:

So I got drafted. And it was crazy. Like when I got drafted I felt, I remember just being in my bed and I was a first-round draft pick. So I remember laying in my bed and thinking, God, how did I get picked over all these people. Man, I am not that good. I’m just like bamboozling everybody. I said, “If I am going to do this the right way, You got to be with me? Well, I mean, I’m going to come into a lot of money.” I knew the lifestyle. That was right behind that curtain. It could just easily trap me into a life that I don’t want. And I was scared to death. I just said, “I need You. I’m willing to just lay it all down for You just so that I can just do this the right way.”
Primary ways of coping with adversity prior to making a faith commitment were through avoidance or aggression—sometimes both—rather than problem solving and seeking help. However, as participants continued in their spiritual development and faith commitment, maladaptive coping responses of avoidance and aggression decreased, while adaptive coping responses of problem solving and seeking help increased, thereby leading to an increased likelihood of a positive life trajectory. However, it was the very turning toward these adaptive coping responses—particularly that of seeking out help from role models and the church—that often led to a new set of adversities.

**Positive/Negative Influence(s) on Adversity Response Strategies**

Sub-question 3: What influenced the participants’ responses to adversity positively and negatively over the course of their lives? Throughout the cyclical nature of adversities—responses to them—and the outcomes that manifested themselves, positive and negative influences were at work in shaping how participants responded to their adversities. They identified 40 positive influences to responses to adversity (see Table 5) and 31 negative influences to responses to adversity (see Table 6) over the course of their lives. Some closely aligned to the age they were, such as school attendance and home life. Others dealt more directly with spiritual development and faith commitment than with human development and maturation.

Interestingly and unsurprisingly, the very influences that are positive in one instance can also be the most painful negatives in another. Among the most highly ranked and intense of these are fathers, teachers, influential role models, religious experience, music, and involvement in sports. Positive and negative influencers often fit within more than one of these categories. For example, influential role models could be fathers,
Table 5

*Positive Influences on Responses to Adversity*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Context</th>
<th>Positive Influence</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Academic School Life</td>
<td>Academic experience of school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Geek community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Books</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Caring teachers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Educated teachers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-academic School Life</td>
<td>Involvement with sports</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Coaches (football, wrestling, basketball)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Involvement with music</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Friend’s advice</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Hip hop culture</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family Life</td>
<td>Father</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mother</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Children</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Wife</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Relationship with grandparents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Family expectations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Relationship with siblings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religious Experiences &amp; Expectations</td>
<td>Church attendance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Involvement in church</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Church community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Religious experience</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
<td>The pastor</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Responses from the church</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Discipleship</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Christian Community Development Association</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Spiritual mentor</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Father figure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sunday school teacher(s)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community Life</td>
<td>Creative/Artist Community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Geek community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Hip-hop culture</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Access to health care</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Time in history (historical context)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Social expectations</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Media</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Law</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Police presence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Father figure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Relationship with significant other</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationship With Self</td>
<td>Primary identity (self-construct)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Growing up</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 6

*Negative Influences on Responses to Adversity*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Context</th>
<th>Negative Influence</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Academic School Life</td>
<td>Uncaring teachers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Teachers that don’t teach</td>
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teachers, or coaches. Additionally, participants’ responses to religious experience could be significantly swayed by any one of the relationships with these other groups.

Fathers were among the most highly emotively discussed influences on responses to adversity. The few participants who had Christian fathers, who had engaged them and taught them how to be African American Christian men, spoke of them highly. The older the research participant, the more clearly they could see the tremendous blessing of having such a father. However, most participants who shared a home with their fathers experienced relationships that were distant and often volatile. Often fathers did not live with their sons and with this came its own set of negative influences to responses to adversity. These influences often perpetuated feelings of directionlessness, aloneness, and anger that in turn created their own adversities and spilled over into responses to the other adversities the participants experienced. The death of a father further intensified these reactions, particularly when the participant had experienced the father as a negative influence in their lives but still maintained a desire to be affirmed by their dad. All those who experienced their fathers as negative influences to their responses to adversity sought to be affirmed and deeply felt the loss of their father’s presence in their lives.

Teachers held a special influence over the participants’ academic school life. They could to make or break one’s academic life.

Some of them [teachers] were alright, some of them were the kind of teacher that they would give you work, and then go sit at the desk. ‘Cause there were too many kids, and half the kids weren’t listening. They wouldn’t give examples on the board or anything. So it was kind of like you had to work extra hard just to even get one problem done. (Roger, personal communication, May 22, 2012)

Good teachers would engage with their students, while others would turn their attention to their cell phones. When frustrated they would say, “Well, do what you want. I’m getting paid anyway.”
However, when a teacher tenaciously pursued participants’ academic success while developing relationships built on respect, they could inspire participants:

I can remember one specific teacher. She was Caucasian though. . . . They were ladies that almost seemed to be determined to help me. They by no means were tolerant to my behavior. I still get kicked out of the classes, but it seemed like they didn’t really judge me, they were always excited to see me. She was my science teacher, and no matter how bad I was, she was so kind to me. I used to love her class. ‘Cause nobody was really nice to me or kind to me. . . . Ladies that I can remember being pleasant, wouldn’t settle for my nonsense, but still treated me with love and care. (Preach, personal communication, May 29, 2012)

Other influential role models were identified as a positive role model in their academic educational life. Trevor shared of the importance of Johnathan in his life:

When I had stopped going to school, God brought Johnathan into my life. . . . He started coming to Bible study, that was a while ago, and he offered to be my mentor, so I said yes. And then after he found out that [I stopped going to school] he was . . . disappointed. He offered to drop me to school every morning, so I would get there. I think that was God’s purpose, ‘cause I think He was tired of me skipping school, too. (Trevor, personal communication, May 21, 2012)

Regardless of age, positive influential role models retained their importance and directed future career pathways. Caleb shared a story of a godly, African American colleague who he had shared conversations with all the time:

She saw that I was restless and she was like, I’m thinking about this Master’s in School Counseling [for you]. And she said, “Boy, you should go ahead and get your gift certified so you can get paid.” And I was like, Wow, I have never heard somebody say that.

Role models were also influential in participants’ spiritual life. Seeing people’s mistakes guided some participants in the other direction:

Me personally, I kind of learn off of other’s mistakes. So the majority of family, friends, don’t really, not too much into God, well, they believe in God, but they not really Christians, so they mistakes, half of the stuff that they do, get nothing good out of it. So as long as I don’t go their way, I’m good. (Harry, personal communication, November 9, 2012)

For some others, consistent prayer spoke to participants’ hearts:
One of my Sunday School teachers, Eric, he used to come up to me, every time that I came home, and he’d ask me how things were going, and he’d say, ‘I want you to know, I’m praying for you.’ . . . He would say that, and I knew that. I mean, some folks would say ‘I’m praying for you,’ he was like, my prayer life, you are a priority in my prayer life, and that really just touched me. (Caleb, personal communication, May 22, 2012)

Other role models challenged participants to pray and watch for answers, “My coach had us get a journal. And he asked us to pray about certain things, write in a journal, and if they came true, circle it in your journal” (Roger, personal communication, May 21, 2012). Still other role models affirmed the innate value of the participant’s life and future despite the absence of a father in the home. Sometimes it was a Boy Scout troop leader who “became like my surrogate father, who really helped me in so many ways and about being a man” (Donnie, personal communication, October 19, 2012). Other times it was an older role model who would take a young participant under his wing:

As a little boy in Mississippi there was this 80-plus-old. Like I said, there ain’t no father around. So my role model was this 83, 85 black preacher/civil rights activist. We called him Preacher Cole. And Preacher Cole would always come by the house and he say, ‘What that boy at?’ I would come running, and he would have a bag of pecans, some fruit, something always for me. And he would always say, ‘This boy going to be [WITH EMPHASIS] something. He’s going to be a preacher [EMPHASIS] like me [EMPHASIS] when he grow up. He’s going to lead the civil rights, and he is going to do all this.’ He was the man. I looked up to him, because he was, he had maybe a third grade education, but he was well versed in the Bible, he knew Scripture, and he was one of the main people in the town that was fighting during the Civil Rights era, and I mean, by like trying to get people to register to vote, working with NAACP. . . . When the Freedom Riders, when the White kids from the north came to try to get my mother and my grandmother to vote, I would always yell, ‘Yeah, grandmother, we need to go vote.’ ‘Boy, shut your mouth.’ I was always the little militant. So that’s why I admired Preacher Cole, ‘cause he stood up for something. So he was my role model. (Donnie, personal communication, October 19, 2012)
While positively influential Christian role models added value to the educational settings outside of the church, the ministries of the church themselves became a positive influence within participants’ religious experience:

I’m forever grateful to this church, for me coming here to New Hope, and for this church have the New Hope ministry where I could come and get off of drugs and give my life together and get that personal relationship with Jesus Christ. I know it’s great to be able to say it’s been three years, going on four years that I haven’t had a drink or a cigarette or no drugs, but it’s better that I’ve got this relationship with Jesus Christ back. This is more important to me than a clean day. . . . I’m never going to give up this relationship I’ve got with Jesus again. I would never let nothing come before God and my relationship. I really realize now how my life would have been so much better, and believe it or not I really do believe that one business meeting was one thing that really influenced my opinion of the church, but there was other things, but this thing really showed me some dysfunction in the church that I didn’t want to be a part of but the thing that I feel in this that these were people. You know these were humans. The thing is that Christianity is not perfection. There is no such thing as perfect people. There are none of us that are going to be perfect. I should have never left the church. Maybe changed [chuckle] to a different church, but I should have stayed within the confines of the church and I would have been much more spiritually enriched, better than I am now. But I thought if this is what they going to do in the church than I don’t want to be in the church. But I know that was a mistake and I’m so glad that with me coming here, nothing, I don’t care what happens, nothin’ going to make me walk away from the church, ‘cause this is where, coming here to New Hope this is where I was reborn. I know spiritually I knew I was dead, only God’s grace and mercy kept me from being dead-dead, ‘cause he was protecting me and looking out for me when I was doing things to kill myself and he didn’t allow it to happen. So I’m just so grateful today for what God has done in my life and for what this church has done in my life. . . . New Hope will always been a huge part of me. (Donnie, personal communication, October 19, 2012)

In an earlier historical setting, spiritual gatherings out in the woods served as a foundational positive influence:

Back home we got what we call a hush harbor. Hush harbor is a building that was set deep in the woods to where we had all our spiritual gatherings, so the White master he would hear us and come down and raid it out. And it was in those hush harbors where you got your spiritual education. That’s where you got the Holy Spirit. You got God’s Word. You got your upbringing as to who really to fear. So for me it was it in the backwoods and the elders that would stop the wrong in the community. (Donald, personal communication, October 19, 2012)
For most participants, music also played both a positive and negative influence on responses to adversity. Among the positive influences identified by participants were: singing in church that provided opportunity for active involvement in church life, an Opera scholarship that gave Dwight educational options, and later in life cutting a Christian hip-hop album that gave a purposeful outlet to the frustrations of trying to live Christianly in an unChristian world. Among the ways that participants identified music as a negative influence on adversity was the life associated with hip-hop culture and in coping with racial issues:

It was just like my whole perception of this whole white/black thing was not, I never had a chip on my shoulder about the white man, or that, that, and the other you know. But at the same time, the music that I listened to, like I listened to rap music—Public Enemy, KRS 1, Ice Cube, those artists. Those artists really have a chip on their shoulder. And so I could go there, so I was in a group think type of idea. If I’m in an inner circle, we are talking about the White man, I can go there. (Moses Xavier, personal communication, October 5, 2012)

Sports involvement was another both positive and negative influence on responses to adversity. Sports involvement in K-12, and when applicable through college, provided motivation for participants to keep their academic grade point averages up. However, with great success in sports, participants began to worship their own success and to be drawn away from intentional spiritual development.

There was a lot of accolades, a lot of personal successes. I mean I won a Super Bowl. I mean there were a lot of great things that came out of that. But then there was also some other things that got revealed. The reality of it was that football was a god of mine and I wrapped my identity into it. And that I lived my life, I had no choice but to worship football. And so God had to strip that from me. (Moses Xavier, personal communication, October 5, 2012)

**Summary**

In Chapter 4, Christian-Identity Response Theory was explained. This substantive theory structure has been viewed through the sharing of participant experiences of
adversity, investigation of self-construct as a filter through which adversities are viewed, discussion of adversity response strategies, and examination of positive and negative influences on participant responses to adversity.
CHAPTER 5

SUMMARY, DISCUSSION, AND CONCLUSIONS

The goal of this study was to use grounded theory to explore the influence of spiritual development on responses to adversity for African American males who were placed at risk as adolescents, self-identify as Christian, and are connected to (leaders of or those who directly benefit from the ministries of) Christian Community Development organizations in Michigan, Indiana, and Illinois. There is a gap in the spiritual development literature across academic fields, and this research seeks to join others in filling that gap in the social sciences. Adversities experienced over the life span serve as a backdrop to the exploration of the journey of Christian spiritual development and its influence on faith commitment and identity development, as well as subsequent responses to adversity in academic school, nonacademic school, family, church, and community educational settings.

Whereas, the previous chapter focuses primarily upon evidence-based responses to the three sub-questions that were developed out of theoretical sampling and the pilot work for this dissertation, this final chapter revisits the central research question: How might spiritual development influence the turning points of African American males placed at risk during adolescence, specifically their faith commitment and subsequent turning points in response to adversity in various educational settings? The comprehensive summary below provides an evidence-based response to this question, as
well as additional justification for Christian-Identity Response Theory as a substantive theory for explaining nuanced approaches to adversity shared by a particular group of African American male Christians who were placed at risk during adolescence.

**Summary of Christian-Identity Response Theory**

Christian-Identity Response Theory (C-IRT) is a framework for understanding the influence of spiritual development on responses to adversity in a range of educational settings throughout the life span. During childhood, adolescence, young adulthood, and adulthood, participants experienced adversities—familial, school, environmental contexts, societal, sexual abuse, sex and romantic relationships, religiosity, internal struggles, and spiritual development. These adversities were perceived through the filter of participants’ own self-construct. A unique blend of identities worked together to form a lens, with the primary identity at any one time exerting the most influence.

In this study there were differences in how these African American males who were placed at risk during their adolescence and currently self-identified as Christian recalled identifying themselves before a conversion experience, during times of spiritual transition, and when their primary identity as “Christian” was established. This filter significantly influenced participants’ adversity response strategies. Over the course of the participants’ spiritual development (and subsequent life span), maladaptive adversity coping strategies of avoidance and aggression were increasingly replaced by adaptive coping strategies of problem solving and asking for help. Emotional responses existed throughout both life span and spiritual development. However, responses to them mirrored the participants’ spiritual development journey.

The same influences on responses to adversity could be positive, negative, or a
mixture of both. These influences have been categorized as: academic school life, non-academic school life, family life, religious experiences and expectations, community life, and relationship with self. Although not all influences are relational, those that are relational were identified as the most influential.

C-IRT’s framework is repeated in a cyclical fashion within the researched age brackets and when transitioning from one age bracket to the next.

Discussion

The C-IRT framework builds off Spencer’s (1995) fusion of Bronfenbrenner’s (1989) ecological systems theory. It too is a self-appraisal process by which an individual may evaluate him/herself. While C-IRT heavily builds off of the concepts of the five components—net vulnerability level, net stress, reactive coping strategies, emergent identities: stable coping responses, and coping outcomes—the data that C-IRT is grounded in call into question the compartmentalization of experiences in multiple contexts. C-IRT instead allows for more fluidity of process.

Participants identified “journey” as the overarching story of the influence of spiritual development on responses to adversity across educational settings. Like Elder’s (1998) Life Course Theory, C-IRT recognizes that with age the ability to recognize what is truly a turning point and what may only appear to be a moment in time is refined. With added time and perspective, participants were able to more clearly reflect back on their lives, thus identifying significant turning points in response to adversity and explaining the reasons for that shift.

Participants defined this spiritual development as a journey in which God spoke freedom, peace, and purpose to their lives. The shift from an internal understanding of
who God is and who they were in Him evolved and reflects the primary identity construct of “Christian.” Such internal work has led to external evidence of God’s work in their lives. Major turning points in the responses to adversity accompanied a “renewing of the mind” and therefore a shift in the ways of thinking. Responses to adversity were therefore significantly influenced by the way participants viewed themselves and therefore perceived and responded to the adversity. The direction of this work supports Burke’s early development of Identity Control Theory that posited that “people choose behaviors, the meanings of which correspond to meanings in their identity” (Burke, 1980, as cited in Stets & Burke, 2005, p. 1).

Central to the process of having God renew one’s thinking was complete surrender to God:

I was pursing those things [business start-up and business school] because I was lost. I was looking for identity. And He was like, I want you to come to Me. And it sounds so, every time I say that even, it still sounds real like cliché-ish like. Like oh, I go to God when things aren’t going well. . . . But really, truly cry out to Me, you know? And I just feel like that’s what I’ve been doing. And every time I take that posture, God shows up, and things are very obvious about what He wants me to do. But when I take the posture of trying to do it for myself, then I find myself going to business school for a year and a half and wasting $21,000. (Moses Xavier, personal communication, October 5, 2012)

For adolescents this is seen in a decrease of violence, fighting at school or in the street. Across all age brackets it has led to a decreased use and abuse of drugs and alcohol and the emergence of a renewed view of sex and women.

The evolution from male, to man, to godly man was identified with strongly by adolescents and young adults. Such reflection on the meaning of manhood supports a central concept of meaning in Identity Control Theory (Burke, 2007),

Central to ICT is the concept of meaning around which identities are formed. . . . An identity is a set of meanings applied to the self in a social role or as a member of a social group that define who one is. (p. 2)
Beyond a role, manhood into the development of C-IRT further raised new insights in ways in which a role also interacts with social and personal identities within one identity, meaning,

To be honest, my definition of a man is a leader. And it’s either you are a responsible young man or a grown man, or a young boy, or a boy period. It doesn’t matter what age you are, you still be a boy. And as it pertains to a real manhood, I think in my best accurate definition, that is what a man is, is someone who fears the Lord. That is to be the ultimate leader, someone who is the most responsible because if you fear the Lord, you will be balanced, you’ll learn how to love, you’ll learn how to lead, you know how to support people, you know how to be a father, you know how to be a brother, a cousin. (Preach, personal communication, May 29, 2014)

Interestingly in agreement with Burke (2007), participants found their meaning of manhood to be sustained by what C-IRT identified as positive and negative influences on responses to adversity (and what Burke [2007] identifies as actual or potential resources) or may be changed when a participant’s perceived identity meaning is disrupted by a behavior not aligned to that meaning. When asked to reflect on whether there is a difference between being male, being a man, and being a godly man, Moses Xavier shared a slightly different point of view:

Moses Xavier: I think that the reason we are having this question is that we are trying to overcome. We are trying to overcome the mistakes that men have made that have, basically they haven’t lived up to the definition to be what you are supposed to be in society, or in your family, or in life. So you know we have discussions all the time. Being a man is taking care of your kid. It’s being responsible. It’s being disciplined. It’s being financially responsible. It’s treating women with respect, and we say all these things that probably shouldn’t need to be said, if we just live, if we assume that that is the way you are supposed to act. Then that wouldn’t define being a man. It would just be. Just that. I feel that the definition in this day and age, or even making a distinction is based on the fact that a lot of people aren’t living responsibly.

Interviewer: It’s coming from a place of brokenness.

Moses Xavier: Brokenness. And people not understanding their role, and how to live things out. And so, but a lot of it, we shouldn’t overlook the fact that being male, what comes along with it, is just a long list of strongholds. There’s just natural strongholds that we have because we’re born into sin. . . . Obviously I
have to guard myself from a lot of areas, pornography, sexual sin. . . . Obviously the sexual sin is the thing that sticks out in my mind.

. . . So we thinking, man, that’s the most important thing, but when he buys into it, he can’t, he can’t. He will suffocate in that reality. . . . Whenever you say, I got to pay the bills, I got to be the breadwinner, I go to do this, I got to do that, you put all this expectation on yourself, if it was more like, I’ve got to serve my wife, I’ve got to serve my kids. I’ve to die to myself. I got to do. . . . Those other things, they become idols, they become the gods, because we are living to meet those expectations, and everything we are called to do is supposed to be an outflow of our relationship with God. And I think that is just the hardest thing. Really, that’s what the faith walk is supposed to be about. It’s not about doing, but it’s about surrender. Like when you surrender, then you do. And that’s just hard for us to understand because we have a will, and our will want to do you know? And God is like, no, I want you to surrender your will and I want you to do what I want you to do. And a lot of time what we are asked to do is contrary to what we feel. . . . My interests, my desires are to surrender to God and the outflow of my life is given to my family, because that’s my ministry. And when I’m willing to do that, not only are my joys complete, but I’m living out my true identity. And I feel like a lot of times we want to hold onto, we are trying to hold onto an identity that defines us because we are, we want to be defined in the things that are tangible. The things that are obvious, or the things that maybe other people value, society values. And what God wants to do is strip you of all those things, and He wants to define you. And your definition can only manifest itself when you surrender the things that are obvious. (Moses Xavier, personal communication, October 5, 2012)

When reflecting on the consistent influence of Christ on this journey, Caleb shares,

He’s just [SNIFFLE] though all the ups and downs and twists and turns, as you move forward, as you guys know, He doesn’t necessarily shine light down the path for a mile. He’ll shine it down there so you can take the next step or two. If He is generous He’ll let you see the next three steps. Usually not more than that. (Caleb, personal communication, October 8, 2012)

Tim joined Caleb in reflecting on who he is and his purpose as he continues the journey of spiritual development:

Tim: If I was asked who I was, I’d tell them I’m a work in progress. . . . You pick up yourself and you try to deny yourself daily, trusting in Jesus. . . . I’m very serious about that, so I’m a work in progress. I do like to think of myself as the type who think ahead and really try to move forward in life right now, but not without Jesus. . . . Just when I think I’ve got this thing all together, or I get haughty or prideful—that’s when I blow it. So a work in progress keeps me very
humble. And I love that humble state. For me it’s a big attribute. I want it to be my biggest attribute, humility. Cause Jesus could really walk around like He was all that, consider Himself less than even others, so that always kicked me off.

Male co-facilitator: Came to serve.

Tim: Amen. . . . Not to speak for all the brothers but I’m pretty sure we could write with the same pens. (Tim, personal communication, August 22, 2012)

A heart of service is revealed in participants’ desire to engage in ministry as they live their lives. C-IRT’s identification of a shift in primary identity development to that of “Christian” results in the development of a sense of purpose and calling that supports Spencer’s (1995) fifth component of PVEST and Burke’s (2007) concept of identity change. After conversion, Moses Xavier describes it this way—finding belonging develops sense of purpose and calling:

God just began to define just my ministry and my bent. I begin to figure out who I was in Christ, you know, that it wasn’t just about being a Christian on Sundays. It was just like there was something that God wanted to define me in, and for me to live out, and that it was unique, it wasn’t the same. And then I think I began to figure out that all those different experiences that I had in life, especially that thing racially, socio-economic, insecure experiences, I think it all boiled down to that God has given us all a ministry of reconciliation, but I think that for me, that was like true. I mean, the ministry of reconciliation. The ministry of adoption. It was just two things that just rang true to my soul. I felt that was like my ministry to the world is, to, you know, allow people to see that side of who Jesus is. And He desires to reconcile us back to Him. But He also desires to reconcile us to one another. But that also to understand the fact that He adopted us into a family no matter what our background was like. And it’s like, no matter what I did in life, no matter how shameful, how guilt-ridden, how condemning some of those things were, He is the father of adoption that takes me in as though I was His own. So those are the things that I feel like I have to give to the world. And as a black man to be able to do that I feel is very, is very powerful. . . . Because I feel that there are things that black men in this country experience that many people don’t experience. And when it’s rooted in Christ, it brings an experience and a depth to a ministry that can go a long way. (Moses Xavier, personal communication, October 5, 2012)

When considering societal stereotyping and marginalization, Moses Xavier continues,
I see why that cycle is a continued cycle, but I think that because black men have
gone through things and are forced to deal with those things in society . . . I really
can begin to see how God can use this people group to address some of the
church’s issues, yeah, the church’s issues and really living out what we are
supposed to be. (Moses Xavier, personal communication, October 5, 2012)

Preach also responds to Christ’s calling and purpose in his life:

In my Christ years, after receiving the Lord, I always wanted to be respected as an
adult, a mature young man. So how I view myself is, to be honest, I could be a
father figure to some. I could be a close brother to some. I could be a good son to
many, but above all I like to consider myself a servant of the Lord, a manservant
of the Lord. Above all else, above all the relationships I share with people, just
above all, just a servant of the Lord, and through that and only that, I become a
good father. There are children that I stick close to, and they admonish you as that
type of figure, especially if they don’t have one. (personal communication, May
29, 2012)

Christian spiritual development in the lives of these participants is a journey with
Jesus inextricably woven into the nuances of the ecology of everyday life that Spencer
(1995) refers to. It has been central to the identity development and subsequent responses
to adversity across educational settings. By its very nature Christian spiritual
development for this group of African American males placed at risk during adolescence
is a journey of God growing, engaging, ministering to and equipping His people to fulfill
the calling He placed on their lives as they grapple with internal and external forms of
adversity.

The more participants identified with Christ and Christianity, the more adaptive
(instead of maladaptive) coping strategies (Spencer, 2006) were used regardless of
educational setting. While all participants identified themselves as Christian, varying
degrees of faith commitment were communicated as they shared about their lives,
spiritual development, and responses to adversity in various educational settings. Two
participants in their late adolescents, one young adult, and one adult—all within 2 years
of conversion—could clearly articulate their responses to adversity but had difficulty
identifying how they defined themselves. As Crispy, a young adult at MCC, said, “Whew, I’m still in the process of figuring myself out!” (personal communication, April 29, 2014).

Any identification with Christ had some influence on responses to adversity. However, the most consistent and significant turning points in responses to adversity occurred after participants had a conversion experience and when their spiritual development led them to “Christian” as a primary identity. As participants gained clarity about who God is and who they were in relationship to God, it affirmed a sense of value and belonging, instilled a sense of purpose, and gave them a blend of freedom and responsibility. Sub-identities continued to exist, but instead of competing with the identity of being Christian, they became the vehicles through which Christianity was lived out on a daily basis. “Christian,” “African American,” “Man,” or some derivative thereof routinely worked collaboratively after the shift to “Christian” as the participants’ primary identity. Preach, a young adult and ministry leader at MCC, says it this way:

Not that I don’t take pride in being an African American. But the most I treasure is the fact that I am a follower of Christ. So that’s above all else. Couldn’t care less about being skinny, being tall, being Black, or even being a church so-called goer. But my identity isn’t in any of those things necessarily, as it is being that in Christ. (Preach, personal communication, May 29, 2012)

This challenges Burke’s (2007) Identity Control Theory, which, while acknowledging the complexity of the self and a hierarchy of identities, does not yet appear to address the encompassing integration of a primary identity as detailed by this research’s participants.

Although maladaptive and adaptive coping strategies (Spencer, 1995) still were utilized after participants’ primary identity was “Christian,” maladaptive coping strategies were looked upon less favorably and often were seen as adversities to
overcome in themselves. The longer that a participant viewed themselves primarily as a Catholic, the more they identified as “a work in progress.” Deon, a young adult from New Life Community Center, states,

And lately, I would say, sometimes hypocrite comes in as well. And I say that with all courage, cause I feel like the fact is, I say I’m going to do something, but don’t do it. I say I’m going to do the right thing, I know it’s the right thing to do, but I end up doing the wrong thing. My primary identity is that I’m in Christ now. (Deon, personal communication, May 22, 2012)

Recognizing the continued struggle against longstanding external and internal adversities, these participants openly relied on God’s grace, forgiveness, wisdom, and restoration of their lives.

I have learned that I do have to make mistakes. I learned that I do have to live life. And God does have to test me sometimes and shows me that you know what, you haven’t arrived. You know what? I still got to work that out of your heart. Or you know what, you passed the test. Or you know what? You still got a lot of work to do. And I just think that’s what God has used life for. I like to frame it that way. I don’t think that God makes different things happen to us, but He uses life to shape us, and form us and purify us, and in the process we lose the things that we are supposed to lose and gain more of Him. (Moses Xavier, personal communication, October 5, 2012)

There is a significant influence of spiritual development on adversities identified and experienced by this group of participants. There are two sets of adversities. One that remained consistent through the life span, but the intensity with which they were felt or the manner in which they presented themselves, evolved over the course of the participants’ life span. In these cases spiritual development influenced how the adversities were perceived and therefore experienced. In the other set of adversities, new adversities emerged to reflect the stage of life and/or faith commitment of the participants.
Unanticipated Findings

Along with the anticipated findings, unanticipated findings also emerged from the data. Though the data were shared in Chapter 4, these unanticipated findings are further discussed here.

Relative Silence Within an Academic Educational Context

Initial questions about experiences in academic education were largely met with large exahles, sputtering, nervous laughter, eyes rolling, and leaning back in chairs. Participants answered direct questions, but data lacked the depth and vulnerability shared when discussing other educational settings. Most answers centered on difficulty with reading, relationships with the teacher, and teachers’ knowledge and ability to teach subject matter. This relative silence regarding formal academic education reflects Shujaa’s (1994) idea of “too much schooling, too little education.” Spiritual development has an educative component that is missing in public education today, and is therefore an especially important role to be fulfilled through other educational settings.

Involvement in Research as Educative Turning Point

Involvement in the research process became an educative turning point for participants and for myself. Many of the participants found involvement in the research to be thought-provoking, “You’ve really got me thinking” (Tallness, personal communication, February 9, 2012) and statements such as, “I learned a lot. . . .This is giving me a lot to think about, to consider” (Trevor, personal communication, May 21, 2014), echoed Dwight’s sentiments:

This forced me to sit down and think about my life. It helped me to see myself, the impact of my early life on my current life. Normally, we don’t take the time to take a look at the course of our life. Today has been a turning point for me. I think
staff people need to go through the process of their journey. (Dwight, personal communication, April 30, 2014)

While each responded to engaging in the research differently, many New Life Community Center young adults and adults, some New Hope CDC adults, and one MCC adult evolved into some degree of participant co-researchers. From focus groups participants giving guidance to which questions they would ask if doing this study, to exerting influence on the manner in which the findings are shared, there has been a sense of partnership. New Life Community Center young adults jumped on board with sharing their voices through a theater of the oppressed; they’ve already been thinking about using their connections in order to get it filmed and into the hands of those who work with African American young men. New Life Community Center adults expressed a desire to develop the “My Life on a Table” activity they participated in during the member-check process into a tool to use in counseling sessions or with small groups of young men. They also expressed interest in co-presenting findings. Although New Hope adults’ participation was cut short, some did take the opportunity to refocus my attention if they thought I was not following up on answers to questions they had more to share about. MCC participant Dwight took pause to consider the importance of the developing theory and expressed a desire for the “My Life on a Table” to be copyrighted and used for professional development in families, schools, and ministries.

Some participants found the process not only thought-provoking and engaged as participant co-researchers as the project progressed, but also as a potential personal launch pad. During the exit interview of the member-check process, Johnathan, co-facilitator for New Life Community Center, shared the following:

I really appreciate the opportunity to work alongside of you. To reach out to a wide range of brothers, from various backgrounds and experiences. And as a co-
leader with you in this project, I was able to hear some of their, most of their
testimonies from the beginning. And I was able to see a common theme. And that
just rocked my world because I know my personal struggles as an African
American male growing up in America and I was able to see a common theme
with all of us. . . . We’ve been able to come together as a band of men. To come
together and say, yes this is real. And yes, we have a responsibility. And years
from now I pray that I’m still here and I can look back and see the results and see
fruits, the impact of this project on the lives of a number of guys to come who will
come the same path that we’ve come and they will have a better experience. That
they will meet Jesus early on, that they will have their lives before time, before
our lives were changed if you will, and we see a greater work for the African
American community. I want to see African Americans doing projects like this. I
want to validate you and this work and the fact that it is needed. Whenever I tell
people about this project they’re like “I’ve never heard of anyone doing anything
like that,” and I’m like “I know. That’s why it’s so special and that’s why it’s
important.” So you have a huge work here. You have a huge responsibility. And
God will give you much grace. . . . You are simply giving us keys to unlock our
hearts and for us to then be able to feel it to be able to see it—like everything we
have on the table here—to see it and then to share it. . . . I think this is the making
of a plan to impact and infuse hope in all of America . . . because you’re talking
about it and sharing our story. (Johnathan, personal communication, April 6,
2014)

Caleb shared this in response to being asked to reflect on the process of member
checking the theory against his own life by completing the My Life on a Table activity:

The process was grueling. I’ve mentioned before it is a gift to go back and call up
experiences from the past and try to make sense and put it in order, [Voice thick
with emotion]. I think I’ve longed to do what I’m doing right now, but didn’t
know it. I’m like one day I’m going to write a book, and so this is like some major
pieces to the book. So now I can go back and analyze some of these things
further, and uh maybe ask some key questions to those that were experiencing the
journey with me from a different perspective—maybe my brother or my dad or
my sisters or my mom. So yeah, the process was [voice filling with emotion
again], it was intense but it is my life. I’m so thankful. (Caleb, personal
communication, April 4, 2014)

One night later it was obvious that Caleb was continuing to process. I received the
following email accompanied by a comprehensive inclusion of artifacts from Caleb’s life:

4/5/14 - 2:30AM
I couldn't sleep.
What an amazing gift you have given the small group of African American men
who participated in this research. The privilege of being heard and sorting through
adversities at various life stages, exploring our Christian identity development, our responses to adversities and the positive and negative influences to those responses is invaluable. As a means of thanking you I will start a conversation about this project, and my experience, with my life coach (to determine next steps), the husbands I'm connected with in a couples "church-based" small group and also the African American males participating at the Center for Leadership Development. This framework is power and has the potential as a personal development tool for looking forward not just backward.

Less unexpected is that I also found involvement in this research to be educative for myself. A link between the research process and my own spiritual development however was an unexpected educative turning point. I always sensed that doing this research was a life calling. After some of the transformative experiences they experienced during the research project, some of the young adults and adults began to refer to it as a “sacred” project. Over the course of research I came to share this belief. Theorizing became an act of faith; interviews and data collections an act of ministry; writing the dissertation an act of worship. I expect that the dissertation defense will be an expression of gratitude.

Critiques of this study may include a concern that through the process of research my bias determined what they would share and to what degree they would share it. Over time this has become known as the “Hawthorne effect” (Anteby & Khurana, 2012). Roethlisberger and William Dickson (1966) referred to the Hawthorne effect as “the phenomenon in which subjects in behavioral studies changed their performance in response to being observed” (Dickson & Dickson, 1966, as cited in Anteby & Khurana, 2012). I would agree. Whether when studying particle physics (Ratcliffe, 1983) or engaging in qualitative research (Charmaz, 2006), one is more likely to observe what one is looking for when one actively looks for it.
However, pleasant but controlled facial responses were employed in order to limit the influence of the researcher on the shaping of participant stories. The use of this skill was noticed by Johnathan, co-facilitator and participant at New Life Community Center, after conducting several interviews which included graphic details together. Additionally, researcher reflexivity notes are included throughout this research paper, particularly when discussing methodology, in order for readers to judge for themselves the validity and transferability of C-IRT.

Some Limitations Turn to Strengths

At the outset of this research, I discussed my being female as a limitation of this study. However, after engaging in the research process, young adults and adults were asked what influence my gender played on their research experience. Several expressed that being a female researcher actually helped them to feel comfortable in sharing. Some experienced sexual abuse at the hand of male family members. Many have or had difficult relationships with their fathers. Almost all have had and currently have positive relationships with their mothers, grandmothers, or other matriarchal figures. Participants echoed Dwight’s thought that it “would be more difficult to share such vulnerability with a man; it is easier to share, to share with that nurturing side of a woman” (Dwight, personal communication, April 30, 2014).

Additionally, researcher feelings of inadequacy served as a point of connection with participants. Across all age brackets and journey of spiritual development, participants’ primary emotional response to adversity was a feeling of inadequacy. I felt very much the same way as I went through the research process in a raw emotional state.
I believe these shared feelings of inadequacy, combined with a shared primary identity, led to a greater sense of solidarity and therefore participant vulnerability.

**Finding a Voice Through Authenticity**

Both the participants and I found our voices through authenticity. As I honored their stories, they honored mine. I found my voice in academia through authenticity. Conviction of my ignorant arrogance—particularly with regard to social injustices, a commitment towards a posture of humility, loss of a loved one to suicide, and the slow unraveling of a relationship the following year, left me spiritually and emotionally raw through much of the data collection process. Many commented on my willingness to authentically answer any question asked of me and on the non-judgmental nature of our interactions as being instrumental in their courage to share authentically and vulnerably.

A spirit of reciprocity, not only for myself, but more importantly for the future of other African American males led the research participants to share at times beyond their comfort level. This was particularly true when the adult participants shared about issues around sex. Initially, “fear of over-sharing” or thoughts that it would be “inappropriate” to share such details were overcome when they saw that other participants had shared vulnerably and processed through the need for such vulnerability in order for this study to be most meaningful when influencing practice. Though this research is not alone in bringing forth reciprocal practice (Hughes, 2006), the shift from self-focused love to other-focused love (Sedlacek & Sedlacek, 2014) evidences the continued power of the Holy Spirit in the lives of these participants.
Reconciliation

Several adult participants commented that engaging in this research with me was in itself an act of reconciliation and was identified as a potential turning point on their own lives. One particularly powerful example of this occurred during an interview with Donald. He had not been able to look at me during parts of his interview. The first time was when he shared that he had learned to not only refuse to look at a White woman as she walked down the sidewalk but to step off the sidewalk altogether. The second time was when he shared about the death of his school-aged friend due to racial violence within the school because “it was at times like this he could really hate White people.” However, after the interview he opened the door for me in order to walk me to the car late at night. He chuckled beneath his breath and smiled. I asked him why. He said, rather profoundly, “I’m not afraid to walk a White woman down the sidewalk anymore.”

While secular definitions of reconciliation abound and are often in disagreement with aspects of each other, a foundationally biblical definition of reconciliation refuses to define reconciliation simply as a theory, technique, achievement, or event (Rice & Katongole, 2008). Instead, reconciliation is defined as both a gift from God to a deeply broken world and a journey that leads us into peace with all aspects of humanity. This is the form of reconciliation I believe Donald experienced through this research process. It is recognized that true reconciliation is a journey of love in action (Sedlacek & Sedlacek, 2014), a continual conversion (Rice & Katongole, 2008), and that this type of reconciliation is not sustainable unless it constantly points to this story of “the battle is the Lord’s” (p. 68). It is rare that this radical form of reconciliation is educated for;
however, the vignette of Donald’s story gives emancipatory hope for serendipitous influences of spiritual development on reconciliatory processes across educative settings.

Conclusions

This dissertation research represents an early attempt to develop a theory that gives insight on the influence of spiritual development on responses to adversity in various educational settings by African American males who self-identify as Christian and were placed at-risk during their adolescence. It was undertaken in response to a call for the inclusion of spiritual development in theory development across academic fields. A lack of research, data, and understanding showed a gap in the literature. It was also undertaken because of my personal and professional recognition for needed answers to the research question in order to better inform the work with African American males for myself and others in various educational settings.

Recommendations and Implications

Findings suggest pathways for future research, as well as utilization of processes and findings on current practices in various educational settings. What has developed into a substantive theory during this project needs to be tested for further verification. As discussed in the limitations section, demographically the participants and I shared only a common commitment to Christ. Though researcher gender was generally shared as something that increased the vulnerability of sharing and data richness, it would be interesting for the same research to be conducted by an African American male and/or female principal researcher to see if it reveals another dimension or added depth to aspects of the theory. Additionally, the same research could be conducted while focusing on more limited definitions of educational settings for additional depth of understanding.
the influence of spiritual development’s influence to responses to adversity within that specific educational setting. This would add more specific depth of understanding for teachers, church and community-development ministry professionals and volunteers, and parents in their direct circles of influence.

While this research focused on African American males who self-identified as Christian and were placed at risk during adolescence, the same research process could be used to learn about the influence of spiritual development on responses to adversity among a wide range of populations—women, different racial backgrounds or mix of racial backgrounds, or from a variety of religions. Such studies would serve as voices for other canary groups (Guinier & Torres, 2003) and an opportunity for practices of reconciliation through deep listening and the widening of individual and collective memories (Ricoeur, 2004; Zembylas & Bekerman, 2008). Potential points of interest for those working with any one or more of these populations would also develop through the comparison of data between or amongst groups.

Implications of this research focus on the application of understanding gained through the theory on the utilization of these processes and current practices in various educational settings. Responses to adversity were significantly influenced by participants’ spiritual development. The more participants identified with Christ and Christianity, the more adaptive coping strategies were used. Spiritual development is more likely to be intentional and steady when all educational settings work collaboratively for the spiritual benefit of African American males.

Parents, particularly fathers, need to be educated and embrace their vital role in raising up secure and affirmed Christian, African American men. Those within the church
and church-based ministries need to respond to the call for active and intentional, relational, and consistent discipleship of African American males starting in childhood and continuing into adulthood. Academic educators need to respond to the identified need for relevance of academic subjects to student interests, lives, and employability. All need an understanding of the ecological factors that often compete for the research participant’s attention.
APPENDIX A

CONSENT FORMS
February 21, 2012

Institutional Review Board
Andrews University
4150 Administrative Drive, Room 210
Berrien Springs, MI 49104-0355

To: Institutional Review Board, Andrews University

I approve the research study titled “Influence of Spiritual Development on the Turning Points of African American Males Placed At-risk During Adolescence, Particularly Responses to Adversity in Educational Settings” to be conducted by Charity Garcia. I give consent for the study to be conducted at your organization name and will be of support to Charity through this process.

Sincerely,

Your Name
Your Title
Title: Influence of spiritual development on the turning points of African American males placed at-risk during adolescence, specifically responses in educational settings.

Purpose of the Study: To understand the influence of spiritual development of African American males placed at-risk during adolescence.

Inclusion Criteria: In order to participate in the study, I recognize that I must be:
1. Christian
2. African American
3. Male
4. Participate with a CCDA organization and have been recommended by their leader
5. Has experienced at least two of the following: poor academic performance, school dropout, persistent behavior problems, extreme bullying, drug or alcohol use, juvenile offender, homelessness, parent physical or mental illness, parental substance abuse, single-parent home, incarcerated parent, foster-care, material poverty, live in high crime area, live in high unemployment area.

Benefits: For my participation I will receive a small form of appreciation i.e. gift certificate or metro card. This research will help CCD (Christian Community Development) organizations better understand the needs of African American males.

Risks and Discomforts: There are no known physical or emotional risks associated with this study.

Voluntary participation: I understand that my involvement in this survey is voluntary and that I may withdraw my participation at any time without any pressure, embarrassment, or negative impact on me. I also understand that my participation is confidential and will never be disclosed.

Contact Information: In the even that I have any questions or concerns with regard to my participation in this research project, I understand that I may contact the researchers:

Charity Garcia, Researcher
Bell Hall #013D
4195 Administration Drive
Andrews University
Berrien Springs, MI 49104-9191
269-921-3763
garcia@andrews.edu

Dr. Larry Burton, Research Advisor
Bell Hall #013A
4195 Administration Drive
Andrews University
Berrien Springs, MI 49104-9191
269-471-6674
burton@andrews.edu

If you are under the age of 18 your parent/guardian has to sign this consent form in order for you to participate.

___________________________________________  ______________________________
Signature of Participant      Date

___________________________________________  ______________________________
Signature of Participant Parent/Guardian    Date

___________________________________________  ______________________________
Signature of Witness      Date

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Title: Influence of spiritual development on the turning points of African American males placed at-risk during adolescence, specifically responses in educational settings.

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Berrien Springs, MI 49104-9191
269-471-6674
burton@andrews.edu

___________________________________________ __ ____________________________
Signature of Participant      Date

__________________________________________ ___ ______________________________
Signature of Witness      Date
APPENDIX B

PROTOCOLS
Introduce the study: I’m doing a study to find out the influence of spiritual development on the turning points of African American males placed at-risk during adolescence, specifically responses to adversity in educational settings. Educational settings can be school, church, after school programs, time with family, or any occasion where some sort of learning is taking place. The information and stories you share about your experiences are important. Thank you for being willing to participate. I’m very interested in hearing from each of you.

1. If you were doing this study, what questions would you ask?

Possible questions/issues may include:
- What tough times & situations have you faced in your life? At school? In other settings where learning took place?
- What kind of responses have you gotten from the Christian community when you’ve been in these difficult situations/places? How did this influence the direction of your life?
- What kind of responses did you have from educational settings when you’ve been in difficult situations/places? How did these influence your spiritual development? How did these influence your life turning points?
- In what ways has your spiritual life/development influenced (positively or negatively) the way you respond to tough times & situations? Are there specific turning points that come to mind?
- Where did you go to school (public, private, home school)? What was school like for you?
- What was your family like? Was your dad around? Was he involved?
- Who raised you? (mom, dad, grandma)
- Who helped you along your spiritual journey? (mentors, family members, church community, etc.) In what ways did they help you?

2. Ask them the questions they suggest.

3. Based on your responses, I’m getting some information from you but it doesn’t seem like you are going as deep into your story as you could. What questions would you ask a group in order to get deeper into their stories?

Possible questions/issues may include: racism, struggles with school, various forms of injustice, bullying, disillusionment with the church/Christian community/church leaders, parental disengagement.

4. Ask them the questions they suggest.

5. After each question’s response ask: Did that question bring out what you thought it would? If not, how would you ask it differently or would you just get rid of that question?

6. Is there anything that you haven’t shared that you think would help this study?

Thank participants for sharing their stories and ask who would be willing to be individually interviewed in the future if needed.

Interviewer Reflexivity notes:
IN-DEPTH INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Date: 
Time: 
Location: 
Interviewer: 
Interviewee(s): 
Alias name of interviewee(s): 

(Introduce the study)

What year were you born? Tell me about what was happening in your community and society during your adolescence? How may these have influenced your spiritual development?

When you look back on your adolescence, what have been significant turning points in your spiritual development and the way that you respond to adversity?

In what ways were you considered ‘at-risk’ during your adolescence? How did your educational environment contribute to your at-riskness and/or provide you with support to overcome some of your at-risk factors?

Describe your school experiences. What adversities did you experience while at school? Socially? Academically?

In ways has your spiritual life/development influenced (positively or negatively) the way you respond you to adversity? Are there specific turning points that come to mind?

2nd Interview: Prior to coming to the interview today you collected some artifacts that represent turning points in your spiritual development. Tell me about these artifacts and the turning points they represent? How have these turning points influenced your responses to adversity?

Leadership or employees of CCDA or CCDA organizations:

Are you aware that this is a Christian Community Development Association (CCDA) organization?

The CCDA philosophy has eight components: relocation, reconciliation, redistribution, leadership development, listening to community, church-based, wholistic approach, and empowerment. How have these eight components influenced your spiritual development and responses to adversity?

How does your employment at this organization reflect your spiritual development?

Youth benefitting from CCDA organizations:

Are you aware that this is a Christian Community Development Association (CCDA) organization?

How has your attendance at/benefiting from this organization influenced your spiritual development?

Interviewer Reflexivity notes:
MEMBER-CHECK PROTOCOL

Date: 
Time: 
Location: 
Interviewer: 
Interviewee: 
Alias name of interviewee: 

Welcome and review research purpose/questions.

State the purpose of today’s interview: 
Today you’re going to test the theory that has developed from you and other participants sharing with me over the last two years. I want to know whether this theory reflects what you shared or not. First, I’ll explain the framework of the theory and get your feedback. Then you’ll participate in checking the theory by engaging in a “my life on a table” activity. You’ll then share any artifacts that support what you have laid out. We’ll end by having you talk me through the completed activity and I’ll ask you a few questions.

Describe the theory’s framework and request feedback.

1. What is your feedback on the structure of this theory? Does it seem to agree with your life and your thinking?

“My Life on a Table” Activity
Ask the participants to test the theory’s structure and the themes by selecting or adding small color-coded index cards that represented collated coded data from all previous focus groups and interviewed. These should reflect adversities, identities, responses to adversity, and the positive and negative influences on their responses to adversity across their lifespan (birth-12| 13-17; 18-25; 26+). After selecting the components of the theory that best fit themselves in each category, have participants order them by intensity. Once complete, have participants overlay times and turning points in their spiritual development.

Artifacts
Ask for artifacts (i.e. books, songs, scriptures, newspaper articles, advertisements, etc). Explain that these will be used as exemplars of categories and themes of the substantive theory. Photograph or scan them.

*If artifacts have not been brought, request that participants email these within two weeks and provide email address.

Member-check interview
Participants will talked about their “lives on a table”, identify themes, share artifacts that substantiate or refute what they laid out, and speak of experience participating in the activity and the research as a whole.

Use the following semi-structured interview questions:
2. Describe your experience participating in this research—particularly interviews and the “your life on a table” member check activity.
3. What themes do you see as you look back on your life?
4. What advice you would give to those working with African American males today?
5. What influence has my race and/or gender had on what you shared during the research process?

Researcher Reflexivity notes:
E-mailed Instructions:

Thank you again for participating in my research that is investigating the influence of spiritual development on responses to adversity in various educational environments by African American males considered at-risk in their adolescence. Your willingness to engage in this final part of the research project from a distance is much appreciated!

I've attached two documents that you'll need to test the theory. There is a Research Theory Framework—a group of four tables that framework in which to place your adversities, identity/self-construct, responses to the identified adversities, and the positive & negative influences to your responses to adversities at 4 different stages of your life.

There is also a document called Theory Specifics. This includes lists that have been collated from what was shared by 35 African American males (including yourself) during research interviews.

The understanding of this proposed theory is that at every life stage each individual experienced a variety of adversities. How you viewed these adversities was directly related to your self-construct/identity. Your self-construct/identity serves as a kind of filter or lens. Your responses to adversity reflect the way you viewed your adversities. However, these responses to adversity did not happen in a vacuum. Instead, there were positive and negative influences to your responses to adversity. These are reflected in the two columns furthest to the right of the Theory Framework. The outcomes of how you responded to adversity during each stage of your life will likely influence the adversities that you face during the following stage of life. The stages of life are indicated at bottom of each table (Childhood [birth-12], Adolescence [ages 13-17], Young Adulthood [ages 18-25], and Adulthood [ages 26+]).

Please use the Theory Specifics that reflect your own life to fill in the Theory Framework. You do not need to use all items included in the lists. However, you may use each item as often as desired and may add additional items at your discretion. Please populate each of the columns on the tables from the corresponding attached list (document: Theory Specifics) AND organize by intensity/order of importance (with the most important to you at that time in life being listed first, second, and so on). Once completed, insert the Spiritual Development components onto your tables to indicate when you introduced to Christianity, Christ, experienced conversion, baptism, had a change in primary identity, or were in significant times of transition spiritually.

As you are doing this (or at the completion of this activity), be thinking about what artifacts (newspaper clippings, journal entries, photos, songs, images, etc.) you would be willing to scan/email through to illustrate your story—particularly pertaining to your spiritual development.

I encourage you to engage as fully as possible in this activity. The other participants have given very positive feedback about taking the time to reflect on their lives and participate in this way.

When we talk I will be very interested to hear whether this theory makes sense to you and reflects the way that spiritual development has influenced your responses to adversity adequately. During our phone interview I will ask you to share your response to the theory framework, your experience participating in this research, and ask you to take me through your completed theory tables. There will be additional follow up questions based on what you share. The interview should last between 1-1 1/2 hours.

If you would email the completed Theory Framework and any artifacts prior to the meeting, that would be helpful.

Thank you and many blessings! I look forward to talking with you soon.

Sincerely,
Charity Garcia
## RESEARCH THEORY FRAMEWORK

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Adversities</th>
<th>Responses to Adversity</th>
<th>Positive influences to responses to adversity</th>
<th>Negative influences to responses to adversity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Identity (social construct filter)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


THEORY SPECIFICS

Across the Lifespan
Childhood: Birth -12
Adolescence: ages 13-17
Young Adulthood: ages 18-25
Adulthood: ages 26+

Adversities
1. Unmotivated students
2. Access to quality education
3. Tension between financial stability, love of nice things, and gospel’s call for resources
4. Unemployment
5. Socio-economic isolation
6. Worship of personal success
7. School
8. Stranger in a strange land
9. Living situations
10. Code switching
11. Racism
12. College student
13. Stereotypes
14. Making a living (legal or illegal)
15. Father
16. Sex
17. Cultural Isolation
18. Finances
19. Pornography
20. Church atmosphere
21. Consistent failure
22. Intimacy with wife
23. Masturbation
24. Engage in sexual acts
25. Understanding God’s character
26. Relational fear
27. Conflicting priorities
28. Selfishness (self-centered)
29. Surrender & submission to God’s will
30. Lack of discipleship
31. Not being good enough
32. Lack of positive African American role models (male)
33. Pride
34. Putting other people or things before God
35. Living like Jesus did
36. Internal feelings
37. Death of a loved one
38. Not engaging in spiritual disciplines
39. Relationship/lack of relationship with father
40. Christians not living out Christian values or norms
41. Relationships with women
42. Family dynamics
43. Teachers that don’t care
44. Power of school staff
45. Negative judgment of girls
46. Drugs/Alcohol
47. Worship of personal success
48. Directionless
49. Ways of thinking
50. Church drama
51. Fear
52. Sports involvement
53. Negative African American male role models
54. Geographic location
55. Safety concerns
56. School integration
57. Social isolation
58. Code switching
59. Dealing with “So you think you’re better than me”
60. Lack of resources
61. Lack of food
62. Being stereotyped
63. Bullied
64. Reading
65. Segregation
66. Lack of stable housing
67. Neighborhood violence
68. Diabetes
69. Job as student-athlete
70. Football Coach
71. Overcrowding

Self-Construct/Identity
1. Male
2. Comedian
3. Man
4. African American
5. Student
6. Convict
7. Nice guy
8. At-risk
9. Leader
10. Athletic
11. Boyish/Childish
12. (enter occupation)
13. Pimp
14. Tough guy
15. Single
16. Geek Culture
17. Middle Class
18. Hard worker
19. Stereotypical
20. Godly man/Biblical man
21. Encourager
22. Young adult
23. Adult
24. Musician
25. Poor
26. Christian
27. Alone/Loner
28. Stature
29. Teenager/Adolescent
30. Husband
31. Addict
32. Father
33. Work in progress
34. Godly husband
35. Christian leader
36. Hip hop culture
37. Ambassador
38. Mixed up
39. Unsure
40. Invisible
41. Reject
42. Uncle
43. Oddball

Responses to Adversity
1. Played sports
2. Lack of care/caring
3. Anger
4. Isolated
5. Aggression
6. Engaging in criminal activity
7. Leave church (disengagement with the church)
8. Shutdown
9. Feelings of inferiority
10. Humor
11. Build walls
12. Crying
13. Surrender
14. Seek Accountability
15. Go back to school
16. Focus on music
17. Engage in sexual acts
18. Avoidance
19. Helplessness
20. Wrestling with God
21. Focused on academic achievement
22. Drug/alcohol abuse
23. Tear down walls
24. Humanization of White people
25. Searching
26. Manipulation
27. Violence
28. Absorbed situations
29. Shame
30. Renewed focus
31. Church attendance
32. Guilt
33. Demonizing of White people
34. Counseling
35. Talking
36. Forgiving White people
37. Sought help from influential role models (+/-)
38. Confronting shame

Negative Influences to Responses to Adversity
1. Inappropriate relationships
2. Social expectations
3. Friend’s advice
4. Hip hop culture
5. Involvement with music
6. Laws
7. Primary identity (self-construct)
8. Academic experience of school
9. The pastor
10. Non-academic school experience
11. Responses from the church
12. Family expectations
13. Relationship with significant other
14. Church attendance
15. Involvement with sports
16. Teachers
17. Relationship with siblings
18. Influential role models
19. Police presence
20. Involvement at church
21. Religious experience
22. Media
23. Mother
24. Discipleship
25. Father
26. “Blind Spots”
27. Social norms
28. Time in history (historical context)
29. Coaches
30. Christian Community Development Association
31. Access to healthcare

Positive Influences to Responses to Adversity
1. Christian Community Development Association
2. Geek community
3. Social norms
4. Social expectations
5. Relationship with grandparents
6. Involvement in church
7. Relationship with siblings
8. Mother
9. Family
10. Time in history (historical context)
11. Father
12. Involvement with sports
13. Family expectations
14. The pastor
15. Teachers
16. Church attendance
17. Coaches
18. Non-academic school experience
19. Spiritual mentor
20. Media
21. Primary identity (self-construct)
22. Relationship with significant other
23. Access to healthcare
24. Books
25. Responses from the church
26. Involvement with music
27. Friend’s advice
28. Church community
29. Police presence
30. Creative/Artist Community
31. Influential role models
32. School
33. Academic experience of school
34. Laws
35. Hip hop culture
36. Children
37. Spouse
38. Father figure
39. Religious experience
40. Discipleship

Spiritual Development Overlay
  Introduced to Christianity
  Introduced to Christ
  Change in primary identity
  Transition
  Change in primary identity to “Christianity”
  Conversion
  Baptism
APPENDIX D

PARTICIPANT PSEUDONYMS
PARTICIPANT PSEUDONYMS

Adolescent group

New Life Community Center
1. Trevor
2. Roger

Michigan Christian Community
1. Deshawn
2. Dwayne
3. Blake
4. Savage

Young Adults

New Life Community Center
1. LaRoy
2. Darren
3. Milton
4. Darell
5. Deon
6. Japhia
7. Dank

Michigan Christian Community
1. Preach
2. Tallness
3. Crispy

Adults

New Life Community Center
1. Caleb
2. James
3. Byran
4. Mr. Rose
5. Michael
6. Moses Xavier
7. Johnathan

Michigan Christian Community
1. Dwight

New Hope Christian Community Development
1. Bobby
2. Eric
3. Tim
4. Gee
5. Donnie
6. Rell
7. Alfonzo
8. Donald
9. Rico
10. Arge
REFERENCE LIST
REFERENCE LIST


VITA
CHARITY GARCIA  
9231 Fourth St, Apt 2, Berrien Springs, MI 49103  
269.921.3763  
charhannahgarcia@gmail.com

EDUCATION

Degrees:
Ph.D. 2014* Curriculum & Instruction, Andrews University  
M.A. 2008 Religious Education, Andrews University  
B.Ed. 2001 Secondary Education, Avondale College

Affiliations:
Association of Supervision and Curriculum Development  
American Education and Research Association  
Christian Community Development Association

EXPERIENCE

2013-current Curriculum & Instruction Manager, Bridge Academy  
2008-2013 Adjunct Professor, Andrews University  
2007-2013 Founder & Educational Consultant, Vertical View  
2005-2007 Head Teacher, La Vida Mission  
2002 & 2003 High School Teacher, Longburn Adventist College

PUBLICATIONS


PRESENTATIONS


GUEST LECTURES

