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Amy Harris Hartsfield
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REVELATION FACILITATED BY NARRATIVE/STORY SHARED WITHIN A GROUP CONTEXT: A PASTORAL THEOLOGICAL METHODOLOGY FOR IDENTITY FORMATION/CHANGE IN AFRICAN-AMERICAN WOMEN

By

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A Doctoral Dissertation
submitted to the faculties of the schools of the
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in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the degree of
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at
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May 1997

ABSTRACT

This dissertation utilizes theoretical and clinical methodology to investigate the relationship between the process of identity formation/change in African-American women and the experience of 'revelation' facilitated in a group context in which members of the group read a common narrative. The novel, Ugly Ways, written by an African-American woman is the selected narrative used in this study. This study postulates a correlation between narrative shared in a group context, revelation, and identity formation/change. This study proposes and investigates narrative as a conducive structure for meaning making which facilitates African-American women recognizing, investigating and integrating information thereby availing to them, via revelation, new options to "reinterpret or transform" their historical life narratives as well as their present life situations and dilemmas. Revelation, in the context of this study, is defined as an organizing, transforming experience resulting in persons reporting a sense of unity and wholeness in their understanding of self, their relationships to others and to God. Finally, this study suggests that revelation experienced within the process of narrative shared
within a group context results in increased reportings of change/growth by study participants. Concurrently this study proposes and investigates the homogenous gender group context for the discussion of the novel as a salient factor for the facilitation of narrative/group context related revelation.

The theoretical expositions of Na' im Akbar’s theory of natural psychology, Heinz Kohut’s theory of self-development, Archie Smith Jr.’s relational self, H. Richard Niebuhr’s theory of revelation, and womanist theology provide the framing upon which the hypothesis of this study and the clinical observations and results generated by this study are perceived and analyzed. Thirty study participants comprised five (5) groups, four (4) experimental and one (1) control. Reported results of this study were generated by 1) observations and interpretations of the researcher and 2) self-assessment accounts composed by each study participant at the completion of the study. Results provided support a correlation between narrative shared within a group context, revelation, and identity formation/change in African-American women. Specifically the study identifies that 1) narrative content that evolves out of or is congruent with the reader’s internal history is most conducive for the experience of revelation and 2) the optimal context for the experience of revelation that facilitates identity formation/change for African-American women consists of the discussion of narrative in an all female African-American group. Also identified in the study results are specific potential inhibitors to the experience of revelation as proposed in this study, such as mixed gender groups, group size and an insufficient quantity of scheduled group meetings.
To My Parents,

Aronul Edwards Harris and Marion Rex Harris

Two persons I love, admire and to whom I am forever thankful.
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It is because of the care, the unselfish efforts and the expertise of so many that I have been enabled to complete this project. I offer at this time my sincere gratitude to those named and those who are unnamed.

First I thank Dr. Thomas J. Pugh for validating my desire to pursue doctoral studies and the numerous hours of encouragement and expertise he provided. Dr. Edward Wimberly’s ongoing moral support, his untiring availability for editing, the use of his library and the endless hours of his time provided secure shoulders for me to stand on. Dr. Charles J. Sargent and Dr. Jonathan Jackson vigilantly listened to my laments, reassured me of the validity of my studies and gingerly urged me to continue writing. I thank the members of my committee, Dr. Jacquelyn Grant, Dr. Thomas L. Brown, Sr., and Dr. Marcia Y. Riggs for their commitment and assistance that facilitated my successful completion of this dissertation. I thank Dr. James H. Costen, President of Interdenominational Theological Center, who consistently provided opportunities for me to learn and grow. I thank all of the students at the ITC who participated as study participants. I also thank my colleagues at the ITC, staff, faculty and administrators, who through acquaintance and friendships have enhanced my being and often times encouraged and sustained me during this dissertation project.
I close my acknowledgments expressing gratitude to my husband, Wallace S. Hartsfield II, and our children Romney and Ryan. Through it all we've made it and I thank God for you.
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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The following pages of this dissertation are the result of my research and observations which suggest a correlation between the processes of identity formation/change in African-American women and the experience of 'revelation' facilitated in a group context in which members of the group read a novel, *Ugly Ways*, written by an African-American woman and engaged in subsequent group discussions. It is my hypothesis that narrative, in this study a novel, functions as an effective cognitive and affective 'meaning-making structure' or hermeneutic, by which African-American women more readily identify and incorporate information towards the purpose of personal identity formation/change. I further propose that such information identified and discussed in the context of a homogeneous group (African-American women) facilitates an experience of revelation for the individual as well as the group; an experience of 'meta understanding' (an overarching and an integrated understanding of self in relationship to God, community and others) and transformation different from 'specific insight' acquired through the acquisition of new information. Hence the combined effect of narrative, group, and revelation facilitates African-American women recognizing, investigating and integrating information towards developing new options to 'reinterpret and transform' their historical life narrative as well as their present life situations and dilemmas. The novel, *Ugly Ways*, authored by an African-American woman, Tina
McElroy-Ansa, is the selected narrative that will serve as the instrument that meaning making paradigms are revealed. Simply speaking, I suggest that story shared in the context of a homogenous group facilitates the identification and incorporation of information that yields meaning to the understanding of the person, their world and their relationship with God.

Story has historically functioned in the African-American community as 'an information carrying vehicle.' It is through this culturally shared understanding of the function of story in African-American internal history (information or perspectives common or indigenous to the African-American culture and community values) that I propose revelation to be facilitated.

I contend that such revelation functions as an “organizing principle and a transforming power” in the life story of the person(s) experiencing the revelation. As an organizing principle, revelation acts as an interpreter, giving meaning to the past, the present and the future and also provides a sense of unity and wholeness to the individual and their understanding of self, their relationship to others, and to God. As a transforming power, revelation equips the experiencer of revelation with the knowledge to change and the motivation to seek change and/or growth; i.e., to re-examine previous understandings and perceptions of self, others and the world, and then to re-interpret and reconstruct their life narrative.

Essential to this exploration of a proposed relationship between revelation and

\[^{1}\text{H. Richard Niebuhr,} \text{ The Meaning of Revelation (New York: Collier MacMillan Publishers, 1941), 68.}\]
narrative/story discussed in a group are cognition, historical relativism, and a theory of self development. Revelation, narrative/story, and group interaction all involve cognition. The manner in which a particular population, in this study African-American women, 'know and make meaning' significantly impacts the design, implementation and the evaluation of this study. Relativism and more specifically, historical relativism as defined by H. Richard Neibuhr is important to this study. Can one talk about African Americans or African-American women as a monolithic group, experiencing and perceiving self and the world and God through a common lens? How does revelation function as a unifying and a unified force in a group context considering that the perception of each person is subjective? And finally, what is the impact and the implications to this study, of the non-existence of an established theory of self development applicable to African Americans, in general, or African-American women specifically?

Thus said, this study seeks to demonstrate that: 1) when narrative/story is explored within the context of a group sharing a common internal history via group discussions, revelation(s) is more readily experienced, identified, critically reflected upon, and incorporated by the individual (and other members of the group) and 2) an increased incidence of self-reported experience of change and/or growth by group participants is reported. Through the process of pastoral theological reflection this study examines 1) narrative theological analysis drawing on the work of H. Richard Niebuhr and Sallie McFague, 2) contextual theological analysis focusing on womanist theology and the contextual factors of gender, race and class, 3) theological anthropological analysis of the nature of human growth, development and change, and 4) a descriptive
theological analysis which offers implications for the future practice of pastoral care and counseling with African-American women.

My methodology for the reporting of this study is chapter presentations. Chapter I introduces my research with a presentation of 1) a statement of the problem, 2) the justification for the research, 3) previous research and relevant literature, 4) pertinent definitions related to the research project, and 5) limitations of this research project. Chapter II presents and details the pastoral theological methodology proposed by T.W. Jennings which I appropriate and modify to guide the investigation and evaluation of my dissertation hypothesis. Chapter III presents a limited examination of the African-American community as an ethnic unit and African Americans as constituents of the larger American community. This chapter explores the function of the African-American community as a self-developing, transforming environment. Also included in this chapter is an overview of African-American identity formation in general and more specifically African-American female identity formation.

Chapter IV presents a theological anthropological integration of Na’im Akbar’s theory of ‘natural psychology,’ Heinz Kohut’s theory of self-development, and various theories of cognitive development in African Americans. Chapter V presents information concerning the function of story as a ‘hermeneutic’ in the African-American context. Topics include the general functions of story/narrative, a historical review of the function of story in the African-American context, and a contemporary overview of the function of story for African-Americans.
Chapter VI presents the function of revelation in self-development, growth and change. This chapter examines the theory of revelation as espoused by H. Richard Niebuhr, and the significance of revelation to the self and to community.

Chapter VII presents the actual study. This chapter details the hypotheses, procedures, evaluative methods and the analysis of the results. Chapter VIII presents a discussion of the results and the implications of the relationship between novel, revelation and group context. The chapter concludes with recommendations for future research.

**Statement of the Problem**

This study investigates the existence of a correlation between narrative/story that is shared and discussed in a group context and the experience of revelation as a methodology for facilitating identity formation/change in African-American women.

**Justification**

In my research of the role of story/narrative as a therapeutic modality for facilitating identity formation/change I have not encountered any projects that attempt to simultaneously investigate the role and the inter-relatedness of story/narrative, revelation and group context. I have neither found any research that specifically investigates the role of story/narrative in the process of identity formation/change in African-American women. Significant research exists in the area of narrative as a therapeutic modality for human growth/change as demonstrated in the writings of Milton Erikson, Charles Gerkin, and Edward Wimberly, to name but a few. More specific to the area of women and the relationship of narrative to growth/change, contributions of female researchers and writers such as Mary Belenky et al., bell hooks, Delores Williams, and Audre Lourdes
suggest story as the predominant mode women incorporate to decipher and to communicate life information. Yet despite the wealth of information suggesting story/narrative as a universal and an effective mode for women in the communication of information, one’s self and one’s perception of life, I have not found any research that examines 1) this (narrative) modus operandi in the particular context of African-American women or 2) the theological implications of narrative as a hermeneutic for facilitating revelation in a group context towards the development of identity formation/change.

This project is justified or worth doing for many reasons. First of all in the scheme of research efforts, I identify this effort as “useful and true” as opposed to “useless and false, useless and true, and/or useful and false.” This research provides observations, interpretations, and analysis of data yielding an empirically supported theoretical basis for the identification and the assessment of the effects of narrative, group context, and revelation in the process of identity formation/change in African-American females. This study contributes to the already existing scholarship in the broad field of human development and change and also to the emerging area of human development and change in African-Americans. This study tentatively investigates and raises questions for future studies regarding 1) the relationship between individual change and community and 2) the relationship between patterns of cognition, self formation, and change. I identify the major significance of this study as its potential to contribute to the

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3Ibid.
research and the scholarship in the specific area of self development, change and growth in African-American women living in America.

**Previous Research and Relevant Literature**

My initial literature survey did not identify any specific research on the relationship of narrative in the form of novel and meaning making for African-American females or any other population in the context of community or group therapy correlated with the experience of revelation. Three recent dissertations offer scholarly research and analysis in the areas of change and narrative significant to my research.

Heinz Strieb-Weickum, in his *Hermeneutics of Metaphor, Symbol, and Narrative in Faith Development Theory*, provides an overview of the works of Paul Ricoeur interlaced with several scholarly studies supporting the use of narrative and its hermeneutical role in facilitating development. This work is relevant to my study in that it suggests that narrative serves as a mechanism by which information is identified and made available for the hearer’s use (meaning-making).

Woon San Sohn’s 1990 dissertation, *Telling and Retelling Life Stories: A Narrative Approach to Pastoral Care*, also relies heavily upon Ricouer’s theory of the narrative (self is narratively constructed and reconstructed) and caring (a narrative event in refiguring the self). Sohn supports Ricouer’s supposition that one is ‘constructed and reconstructed’ vis-à-vis narrative implies a structural relationship or correlation between narrative to growth and/or change. This study also shares in common with my endeavor that the researchers, Sohn and myself, seek to test a theory of change on a specific ethnic group of persons other than those on which the theory was initially hypothesized and
normed (Euro-Americans). Sohn's ethnic group for study are Koreans and their stories, the ethnic group my research focuses on are African-American women.

Gregory A. Hinkle, in his 1992 Ph.D. dissertation, *Analysis of Client Narratives as Methodology for Exploring Change in Pastoral Counseling*, offers a methodology for measuring change in clients who have experienced at least six months of pastoral counseling. The subject participants in Hinkle's study are both women and men. The mode of therapy is individual psychotherapy. Hinkle defines change as

“1) transformations in a client as perceived by the therapist, 2) variation in the client’s written narratives as perceived by the raters and 3) the Schafer’s categories of complexity, responsibility, and hopefulness.”

His dissertation provides a useful summation of the works of Ricoeur and valuable references to other scholarly works in the fields of narrative and its hermeneutical role and capacity to facilitate change.

Hinkle's development of a methodology, the Story Analysis Rating, as an instrument to measure the change reflected in client written narratives who had experienced at least six months of pastoral counseling, suggests a correlation between narrative, change and short term psychotherapy. His utilization of Roy Schafer's change in language patterns and his complexity, responsibility and hopefulness schema acquainted me with a potential measurable evaluative tool that could be adapted for use in future research.

In a 1975 article titled "The Termination of Brief Psychoanalytic Psychotherapy," Schafer hypothesizes three changes observable in clients experiencing individual psychotherapy for a period of at least six months. These changes are 1) the client is more

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aware of the problem and its complexity, 2) the client recognizes his/her role in the problem and 3) the client expresses a sense of hope due to numbers 1 and 2 and begins imagining and trying new strategies. Although the group sessions in this study convene, at maximum, for sixteen weeks as opposed to six months I maintain Schafer’s findings are relevant to my research. Schafer’s change of language categorizations are also relevant to this study’s identification of group participant change. The categorizations, ‘I will - I won't’ as opposed to ‘I must and I can’t,’ according to Schafer, represent a change in the client in the process of psychotherapy. Schafer attributes this change from passive language to active language reflecting an underlying process in which

1) What is to be interpreted is first isolated from the experiencing part of the ego... 2) The patient’s attention is drawn to his own activity... 3) He comprehends that he had motives for this activity... 4) He comes to note that at some other point, too, he harbors something similar, or something that is in some way associatively connected ... 5) With the help of these observations he becomes able to produce less distorted "derivatives..."

Hinkel’s use of Schafer’s process of interpretation, revelation of the relationship of self and community (motives for activity), and the role of objective observations (offered by the therapist) closely resembles my hypothesized correlated functions of narrative, revelation and group in my study on identity formation/change.

Archie Smith Jr., (1982) and Charles Gerkin (1984) present information asserting the basic undergirding structure for meaning making is the narrative, metaphor or story and concurrently stress the relationship of the individual to the larger society in the

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development of that hermeneutic. Archie Smith, in his attempt to develop a 'black liberation ministry' states, "The challenge of Christian ministry is still to liberate and to reconcile the poor and the oppressed; to transform and to humanize society in the conviction that a powerful and gracious God sustains the oppressed even now,..."6 Towards addressing this challenge Smith offers a concept of 'relationality' (the integration of the two disciplines of Christian social ethics and therapy) with the contention that, "...people are constituted in their relations with other people and within a particular historical context and specific social practice."7 Smith utilizes the concept of George Herbert Mead in which "the mind, self, and society is (thought) to be inseparably linked and dialectically interwoven."8 Smith argues that life is fundamentally social or relational in that one cannot know oneself independent of some knowledge of another, neither can one know another without some knowledge of oneself. It is the knowledge of self, cultivated and nurtured within and by the community of the African-American church, Smith contends, which fosters knowledge-based empowerment of the individual and the church community that incites, cultivates, and engages persons in transformative social action. Smith highlights the reflective nature of this knowing experience, "modo praterito... In reflection people may find new possibilities for an alternative plan of action."9 Smith identifies the necessity of a healing and reconciling African-American church community as the environment in which this transforming reflective process

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7 Ibid., 14.

8 Ibid., 16.

9 Ibid., 71.
occurs and is maintained. It is with the historical illustrations of the African-American church (community narrative?) that Smith seeks to re-focus the mission of the African-American church to be 1) interpretive, 2) communal, 3) engaging in a praxis of social action and 4) prophetic, critical and involved in self reflection. It is in this manner that Smith anchors a concept for narrative as the undergirding structure facilitating interpretation and transformation within the context of community.

Charles Gerkin (1984) presents a collage of theorists who in various ways have addressed the issue of individuals and the interpretation of experience and its relationship to individual development and change. Gerkin, borrowing from Antoine Boisen the term 'the living human document,' constructs a hermeneutical process which envisions "pastoral counseling...as a process of interpretation and reinterpretation of human experience within the framework of a primary orientation toward the Christian mode of interpretation in dialogue with contemporary psychological modes of interpretation."10

The works of Hans-George Gadamer, Paul Ricoeur, Sigmund Freud, and D.W. Winnicott provide the major theological and psychological underpinnings and metaphors for Gerkin's self hermeneutic, or "the image of the self as interpreter of its own experience: the living human document."11 Gerkin goes on to define the self hermeneutic as a dialectical process with a task of "holding in tension or dialectical relationship several poles of force and meaning (the interpretations of faith and culture, self/ego, and social

11 Ibid., 97.
situation).” Gerkin asserts, "that the self maintains its sense of being a self primarily by means of the interpretation of life as a story." Gerkin's concern with re-establishing the 'groundedness' of pastoral counseling within the context of theology, locates this re-interpretation within the faith community (Gerkin identifies the pastoral counselor functioning as a representative of the faith community) with a goal of integrating or re-integrating the individual back into the faith community. The primacy of narrative as a meaning making structure and the community as the context in which interpretation and transformation has the potential to occur renders Gerkin's work valuable to this study.

The works of several African-American scholars inform this study concerning the role of African-American culture, narrative, and community to the process of meaning making, identity formation and transformation. Andrew Billingsley (1992) and Robert Staples (1991) identify the intricate weave of narrative and its interrelatedness to the fabric of community, the development of self and the process of change tracings its history from the days of Africans’ arrival as slaves to America’s shores to the present day communities of African Americans. The theological writings of Edward Wimberly, Katie G. Cannon, Delores S. Williams, and Jacquelyn Grant tell a story, an African-American faith story, re-interpreted and transformed yet always rooted in the historical community story that bore and nurtured African Americans and their aspirations. This manner of utilizing the meaning making structure of the community to inform, inquire of,

12Ibid., 102.
13Ibid., 112.
and enhance the theological growth of the community illustrates the liberation theology formulated by James Cone which identifies Jesus (and subsequent Christians) standing amid the oppressed communities posing critical questions to individuals, institutions, communities and the world. The works of numerous African-American women novelists such as Zora Neale Hurston, Alice Walker, Gloria Naylor, and J. California Cooper attest to the relationship of narrative within the context of the African American female community to identity formation/change. These novelists risk to tell stories that hurt yet heal due to the ability of the stories to transcend the conscious life experiences of the individual, and reach back, resurrect and connect with a formerly unconscious or forgotten communal story and offer afresh the possibility of re-interpretation and transformation. The book, *In the Company of My Sisters. Black Women and Self-Esteem*, which reads on the back inner jacket, "The first book by a Black psychotherapist ever to address the emotional issues and realities of Black women's lives..." offers a suggested reading list consisting solely of novels authored by African-American women. This again suggests support for narrative, in the form of a novel, in the context of community (and in her case, as well as in the current study, the population is African American women) as a meaning making structure catalytic for change/growth in African-American women.

**Definitions**

Listed below are the definitions of terms pertinent to this particular study.

Although there may exist other definitions for the same terms, the definitions provided

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illustrate the particular usage for this context.

- **Narrative/Story** - a series of connected events either true, fictitious or both, developed to inform, entertain, or as a form of self or world expression or perception.

- **Hermeneutic** - "the process of bringing a thing or situation from unintelligibility to understanding."15 A process of 'meaning-making' facilitated by the structure of narrative/story.

- **Identity Formation** - a process of the self-development, involving the interaction of the individual and the larger society resulting in a relatively constant and realistic perception of who one is, one's abilities and limitations and one's responsibilities to self and society.

- **Change/Growth** - change/growth, in the context of this study, is limited to the self-reports of group participants of an experience of revelation resulting in a changed life narrative. Change is identified as a cognitive understanding that is manifested in a new or a modified behavioral action. An acquisition of intellectual cognition or knowing alone is not considered change/growth.

- **Revelation** - an organizing and transforming power facilitated through the sharing of narrative in a group context. Revelation is not the transmission of a body of knowledge but the personal disclosure of one subject (God) to other subjects (humanity) facilitated in this study by the novel, one's life and faith narrative.

- **Life Narrative** - "World-orienting and world defining narrative that is presumed to be part of the client's experience, even if it is not part of the client's conscious

awareness."\textsuperscript{16}

- \textit{Re-interpretation/Transformation} - The reorganizing of, the addition to, and/or the deletion from one’s life narrative “in the light of new experience, but doing so in a manner that in some way preserves the force of those deepest patterns of meaning."\textsuperscript{17}

This re-interpretation/transformation is often evidenced through critical reflection by persons seeking to correlate or reduce the cognitive dissonance between the theological doctrines of their faith and their everyday life experiences and activities.

- \textit{Community} - A social group which shares common historical and cultural interest, beliefs, and participation.

- \textit{Group} - In the context of this study, the term group is limited to the five designated clusters of African-American study participants and the writer as researcher/participant.

\textbf{Limitations}

This study limits itself to the effect(s) of narrative as a meaning making structure in the context of a specific community, African-American women, as represented by the five (5) groups of African-American women study participants. Although implications of this study are relevant to African-American men, as well as potentially to other ethnic/cultural groups, the sampled study population is exclusive of such and therefore this study limits its claims accordingly.

\textsuperscript{16} (Gregory Hinkle, \textit{Analysis of Client Narratives as a Methodology for Exploring Change in Pastoral Counseling} 1992, 7-8.)

\textsuperscript{17} Gerkin, \textit{The Living Human Document}, 108.
This study limits the exploration of narrative/story to the novel, *Ugly Ways*, authored by Tina McElroy-Ansa. The criteria used by the researcher for selection of this particular novel were:

1. African-American female authored novels closely model the manner in which life narratives are expressed in the African-American context: an intimate weave of fiction and nonfiction, a combination of personal and communal history, and the hope of obtaining the perceived realizable present as well as the possibly unobtainable future.

2. The novel is set within a context (the family) cognitively and experientially familiar to the reader.

3. *Ugly Ways* presents several familiar relationship challenges encountered in identity formation/change processes in the context of community (mother-daughter, mother-father, father-daughter, sibling-sibling, family-community, individual-world) and various attempts to resolve these inter- and intra-personal conflicts.

4. The novel’s strong tone of ‘the desire for change’ presents the reader with a broad range of affects including joy, despair, a sense of ‘stuckness,’ and hope, any and all with which the reader might readily identify. Such identification allows the reader the potential to experience a sense of community with others in their journey in self identity formation/change and to feel less isolated, different and/or defeated in their own struggles toward identity formation/change.
This study limits its usage of group consultation to a sixteen-week, ninety-minute per week gathering of four (4) of the five (5) groups of African-American women and myself, the researcher. The work of the group is focused around discussions generated primarily by the reading of the novel *Ugly Ways*, and secondarily by self discussions generated by or emanating from the reading. The role of the researcher is participant/observer, functioning in a directive capacity only to the degree of directing the focus of the group toward reflections emanating from the novel and correlations with personal life experiences and dilemmas.

This study limits the use of revelation to the theological doctrine presented by Richard H. Niebuhr expanded from a strictly christocentric perspective to a broader theocentric perspective. This theological approach calls one to respond to God’s revelation, as an individual responsible to God, self and community.

This study limits itself to the pastoral care models derived from the works of Heinz Kohut and his self-psychology and the insights of Na’im Akbar’s natural psychology.

This study limits the determination of change resulting from revelation experienced in the context of narrative share within a group environment to self assessments by study participants of perceived change/growth.
CHAPTER II
PASTORAL THEOLOGICAL METHODOLOGY

"Amazing grace, how sweet the sound
That saved a wretch like me.
I once was lost, but now I'm found
Was blind, but now I see."1

The words of this familiar hymn, often sung in the context of African-American worship and praise is demonstrative of a “first order religious language expression” (the collections of phrases, narratives, {songs} and liturgies which are employed to give expressions to the way in which a person or community’s life is related to God)2 of a subjective experience of the theological doctrine of revelation. These words of thanksgiving testify to an experience of revelation; a disclosure of meaning that has resulted not necessarily in a shift of the person’s temporal condition(s) or her/his physical circumstance(s) but a shift in her/his perspective of her/his condition(s) or circumstance(s). In other words, revelation affects not necessarily the state or ‘the what’ of conditions and circumstances but the perspective towards or ‘the how.’ This song also suggests that the person experiences a feeling of salvation and/or transformation which

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enables her/him to perceive present and future life as meaningful and direction oriented, a state which was lacking in her/his past.

In my experience as a pastoral counselor, the concept of revelation has and continues to significantly guide my deliberations and inform my expectations of the counselor-client therapeutic encounter. Many clients begin the therapeutic process expressing a desire and/or an expectation to experience or to obtain 'something that will give them direction,' or provide meaning and enable them to better understand themselves, their world, and their interactions with others. It is the desire for an experience of knowing oneself and becoming reconciled with oneself and one's world. H. Richard Niebuhr identifies the theological principle of revelation as the process through which such meaning, unity and direction are accessed and achieved in human life.

I experience many clients coming to therapy with the hope of experiencing a revelation, grace and/or a renewed sense of faith in his/herself, his/her world and in others. Clients coming to therapy often look to the pastoral counselor to provide or to facilitate a fulfillment of this expectation of revelation. Here lies the importance of the pastoral theological methodology, as it provides the pastoral counselor a process for the correlating of theology with pastoral practice in the service of the client's attempt to achieve transformative growth and/or change. Theological principles, in this case, are not sufficient for the development of a genuine pastoral theological methodology. What is needed in correlation with theological principles are psychologically informed pastoral care theories and their paradigms for human growth and development. This correlation of theological principles and psychologically informed pastoral care theories equips and
enhances the pastoral counselor's understanding of the human condition and the process of human transformation. In the following pages I present the pastoral theological method utilized in my work with African-American women investigating the relationship of revelation to growth and change. I appropriate and correlate the meaning of revelation as proposed by H. Richard Niebuhr with Heinz Kohut's theory of self psychology experienced in the context of a group discussion of a novel read by the group participants. I use this correlation to the end of investigating the functions and the relationship(s) of revelation, self-growth/change, and narrative/story in a group environment. Drawing upon the analysis of the data generated by the study, I offer results suggestive that the correlation of revelation, self-psychology, and narrative story are effective in enabling group participants to make mutual critical correlations between their contemporary situation, opportunities for transformative growth and/or change, and their faith/community tradition(s).

T. W. Jennings in his entry in the Dictionary of Pastoral Care and Counseling on pastoral theological methodology defines it as, "the critical evaluation of the procedures for arriving at theological judgments, proposals, or assertions." In this research project the pastoral theological methodology defines the manner in which the disciplines of theology and psychology inform the identification and interpretation of processes of change/growth observed by the researcher and perceived and experienced by the study participants. Jennings describes the theological method as a:

normative endeavor (which) entails the facilitation and application of normative judgments (and) seeks not merely to maintain a given situation or pattern of

\[3\] Ibid., 862.
behavior, but to transform it. Thus theological method is concerned with an evaluation of the sources, norms, and procedures of theological judgments.⁴

He presents an epigenetic developmental model for pastoral theological formation focused upon theological reflection consisting of:

1. **First order religious language** (the collections of phrases, narratives, {songs}

   and liturgies which are employed to give expressions to the way in which a person or community’s life is related to God) -*words*-  

2. **Second order religious language** (the explication and critical evaluation or appropriation of their basic meaning, with the more or less provisional result yielding a theological judgment or proposal) -*doctrines or tenets*-  

3. **Third order reflection** (a reflection upon the way in which theological judgments are made and a critical evaluation of the appropriateness of such procedures)" -*thoughts and actions*-  

The process of Jennings’ model involves the identification, explication, correlation and re-interpretation of theological beliefs, doctrines and resultant behaviors and/or practices. Identification is concerned with the recognizing and the naming of the theological doctrines or faith influence(s) that give rise to a client’s world view. According to Jennings, the theological influence of a client’s world view is often conveyed by the client in the form of first order religious language statements.

⁴ Ibid.  
⁵ Ibid.
Explication focuses upon the process by which the client and the counselor are challenged to reflect upon how their identified theological doctrines and/or faith tenets are explained and are proven true in their present life experiences and particular community of faith. For example, how does a person experiencing lock out from educational, vocational and employment opportunities, living in a larger environment where they are the object of systemic oppression in the forms of racism, sexism and classism, explain and understand the veracity of the theological doctrine regarding God’s justice and God’s love? How are these doctrines understood and utilized by the community of faith of which this person is a part? Pastoral theological reflection calls for a critical examination of the continuity between the pastoral counselor’s theological understanding of the condition of human brokenness and transformation and his/her pastoral practice of dealing with the same. For example, how does a pastoral counselor correlate the doctrines of revelation and grace with pastoral interventions of shaming and aggressive confrontation? Finally, pastoral theological methodology calls for a critical reflection upon the identification, explication and correlation of theological beliefs in order to determine if there is a need to re-interpret the theological doctrines and the pastoral practice due to major dissonance between the espoused theology and the actual pastoral practice.

The reflective, re-interpretative nature of pastoral theological methodology as presented by Jennings is a paradigm familiar to African Americans’ practice of ministry and theological reflection. Historically, African Americans have identified, explicated, correlated and re-interpreted theological doctrines to address their particular needs, pastoral concerns and location within a larger context of oppression. One of the major
functions of the evolving black church of the post slavery era was to re-interpret the faith and to insulate African Americans from the negative mirroring by a race conscious society. It was most often within the black church, African Americans heard, that despite Jim Crowism and the racially based segregation of the larger community, that all persons are created equal. This proclamation was not based on the Constitution created by the founding fathers of the United States but by the doctrine of creation—the creation of humans by God. God created us, God created us human, created us in God’s own image and God called us good.

African Americans perceive who they are not by a particular geographical location on earth but by the fact of their being created by the same God who creates the earth, the sun, the stars, and all that is created. Therefore incumbent to knowing oneself, is to know oneself in relationship to God. God is creator and humanity is God’s creation. This revelation of self through the revelation of knowing God provides for African Americans a continuity between their faith belief and their everyday living. They understand and experience God in relationship to them through a shared common past memory; God created them and a common present memory; God with them. Because of this act of creation and because God is their creator, African Americans understand God, themselves and other humans interrelated and interdependent.

Jennings’ process for the development of a pastoral theological methodology and the three key functions Niebuhr associates with revelation share a hermeneutical, or a meaning-making quality. Niebuhr states that revelation

1. makes the past intelligible
2. resurrects the past, and
3. creates a common memory through the appropriation of the past.

It is through this revelatory meaning-making process, according to Niebuhr, that a person becomes a responsible self, a person aware of his/her responsibility to God, self and others.

Identification and explication in Jennings’ model function similarly to the processes of making the past intelligible and resurrecting the past in Niebuhr’s revelation. The processes of correlation and re-interpretation in the pastoral theological method and the processes of appropriation of the past/creating a common memory in Niebuhrs’ revelation are also similar. Some of these similarities in processes are reflected in my study on the relationship of revelation to growth and/or change in African-American women. In this research project, revelation, through making events, actions and thoughts of the past intelligible, facilitates persons identifying and understanding their individual and group or community beliefs and behaviors. In this process of identifying and making sense of their past, persons began to remember phrases and actions that held no relevant significance or made no sense until the revelatory disclosure. This process of remembering their past provides the grist for them to begin correlating what had been said or done with what was believed. Due to remembering what had been individually forgotten was ongoingly shared and stored within the larger community, the individual begins to appropriate what was formerly a part of their inaccessible, unintelligible (unconscious?) past into their present. This taking in or appropriation of their communal past is also accompanied by a re-interpretative process by which the individual accepts
the past as valid while concurrently re-interpreting specifically what that past means for them in their present position in time and space.

Niebuhr speaks of such a communal memory, understanding or interpretation of a particular event as internal history of a particular community. This event holds a particular meaning or value for a particular group of persons which is not objectively apparent or available for understanding to persons outside of the particular community.

Many African Americans today stand as outsiders to the community of faith of the historical black church of their foreparents. Although few, if any, of the doctrines and the rituals of the black church have significantly changed since the post slavery period, currently there appears to exist a gap between the understanding of many of the doctrines and the rituals of the black church and their function in the everyday lives of many African Americans. Possibly along with the intentional forgetting by many African Americans of the humiliation and degradation associated with the periods of slavery and forced segregation there simultaneously occurred a loss of memory of the sustaining components of African-American faith interpretations. It was such components that sustained and nurtured segregated African-American individuals, communities and churches in dehumanizing, demoralizing and life-challenging situations. In an effort to exorcise and/or to possibly even forget the painful aspects of African-American history, much of the strength, the self-value and faith components of that same life-sustaining African-American history, so intermeshed with the pain, was also unknowingly and inadvertently lost in the process. The baby was thrown out with the dirty bath water.

Considering the varied changes in the conditions of life for African Americans in America since the post slavery era, questions arise concerning the relevancy and the
veracity of several historical interpretations of theological doctrines and faith tenets and their ability to address situations and concerns of African Americans in modernity. Niebuhr in his description of humanity as temporal beings living within a particular time and space, perceiving life through the perspective developed by that particular context, suggests that revelation, in the Christian context, provides a particular concrete event, symbolizing an initiative by God in Jesus that reveals or makes God’s self known to humanity. Niebuhr states that although humans are conditioned and located within time, the organizing, revealing event of God in Jesus provides and grounds Christians through a constancy in knowing the will of God. Theological doctrines which reflect humanity’s attempt to interpret God and God’s action are also conceived and developed within a particular time and space. Therefore as creatures of historicity, influenced by the events and thinking of a specific location in time and space, our interpretations and our responses to God’s revelation change as our locations in time and space change.

Pastoral theological methodology offers a process inclusive of re-interpretation by which African Americans have and continue to maintain a correlation between the theological doctrines of their faith and their life circumstances. It is by and through this process that African Americans are challenged to maintain an ongoing vital relationship with the theological doctrines of their faith that facilitate transformative change and/or growth personally or communally. Pastoral theological method offers African Americans an added dimension (psychological theory incorporated in pastoral practice) by which to enhance their experiencing transformative growth and change as well provide a method to renew or to re-investigate the theological doctrines or faith beliefs of their community that have historically served as facilitators for transformative growth and/or change.
The acknowledgment, acceptance and utilization of psychological counseling as a modality for achieving transformative change or growth continue to be received cautiously yet increasingly within many African Americans communities. It is within the process of pastoral counseling and the making use of an appropriate theological method that a pastoral counselor gains entry into the faith world of a client. From this the counselor is able to hypothesize if and how a client understands her/his relationship to God and how this relationship partnered with appropriate psychological practices might effect transformative growth/and or change. The intentionality of the pastoral counselor to be aware of the client’s faith orientation and its function in the client’s life is just as important as the counselor being aware of the client’s developmental history within his/her nuclear and extended family, and her/his immediate and larger community. The use of first order religious language by the client or the client’s response to such language used by the counselor, provides a starting point for both the counselor and the client to do theological reflection as well as creates an environment conducive for the client (and the counselor) to experience revelation within the therapeutic context.

The pastoral theological methodology of Jennings, along with the theological doctrines of Neibuhr, provide a mechanism for identifying growth/change, revelation and their interrelationship. This methodology serves as the fundamental framework for the clinical implementation of this research. Utilizing this methodology, I propose to identify the process by which information generates motivation for the facilitation of transformation via revelation.
CHAPTER III
AFRICAN-AMERICAN WOMEN: THEIR COMMUNITIES AND THEIR SELVES

To talk about African-American women is not only to talk about individuals comprising a particular racial/gender identified group, but it is also to talk about the context or environment in which such individuals are born, reared, live and die. African-American women, like all persons, are the product of both their genetic inheritance and the environment in which they impact and are impacted. They are a part of a larger soup that flavors and alters their thoughts and their behaviors. Thus, to understand the individual or even African-American women as a group, an examination of the context of their origin and their site of being and development is essential.

Historical Context

African American denotes the classification of persons of color who share a dual ancestry of Africa and North America. Contemporary African Americans share a historical ancestry that is documented to have begun with the forced removal of Africans from their native soil of Africa and resulted in their translocation to North America as slaves. Although, the first slaves to arrive in the English colonies in America were put ashore at Jamestown, Virginia in 1619, Portuguese ships had begun raiding the coasts of Africa for forced labor as early as the 15th century. The African Slave Trade which
consisted of the barter of the finest physical African males and females for weapons, ammunition, metal, liquor, trinkets, and cloth became the backbone for the abundant supply of physical labor needed to develop the newly colonized America.

Grolier International Encyclopedia’s entry on Slavery vividly describes the criteria for the selection of Africans for slaves and the inhumane conditions of their transport from Africa to America.

The slavers bought only the finest physical specimens, partly because they would be worth more at their destinations and partly because only the youngest and healthiest had a good chance of reaching their destinations alive. Conditions aboard ship were dreadful. The maximum number of slaves was jammed into the hull, chained to forestall revolts or suicides by drowning. Food, ventilation, light and sanitation were the minimum necessary to keep the cargo alive and often not enough to do that. Mortality ran as high as 20 percent. When an outbreak of smallpox or dysentery occurred, the stricken were cast overboard.¹

Beginning with their initial entry into captivity, Africans experienced a systematic regimentation geared towards dehumanization. This included the denial of tribal or familial associations; they were forbidden to communicate in their native language, to practice religious or customary rituals, forced to live in sub-human conditions and to work beyond the capacity of human productivity. For four hundred years, men, women and children of African descent labored and died, others were born--some lived and some died, all in the bonds and shackles of slavery in America. It is as the descendants of these Africans, brought to America as slaves that African Americans identify their origins.

The eradication of slavery in 1865 with the Emancipation Proclamation ushered in a new era for the life of the African American. Although the African-American population in America prior to the end of slavery included free African Americans, this population was substantially smaller than the slave component. The free African Americans were persons who 1) had never been slaves, entering America as free persons or as indentured servants who subsequently secured their release through payment of their debt, or 2) previous slaves who had purchased their freedom or had eluded slavery by escaping into a non-slave territory or state. The legalization of the prohibition to own persons opened a floodgate of African Americans into a society that was neither prepared or desirous of accepting such persons as persons with full rights and privileges of the society. Also, African Americans, who had prior to the Emancipation Proclamation held the status of free men or women, were anxious about the impact the freeing of the slaves would have on their already fragile position in the larger society.

Over one million unwanted African Americans had been freed from their positions of forced labor and were now looking to enter into the world of freedom, desiring employment, housing, and services in and from a larger society that had not conceptualized them as other than a free means to a prosperous end. These newly freed former slaves were perceived by both the larger white society and the smaller already free African Americans as a major threat. The end of slavery did not eradicate or legislate the end of racism but it did provide a significant marker for the study of the origins of social stratification or classism within the vastly expanding African American sub-culture.

Post slavery life in America presented numerous economic, sociological and psychological challenges for African Americans. How was a population formerly
prohibited the opportunities to acquire the skills and resources to maintain itself and possibly even prosper in a free world to survive? Most former slaves were illiterate and possessed limited skills that restricted them to an agrarian maintenance life style. If they left the growing Jim Crowism, policies of discrimination against African Americans of the South and headed for the industrialized north, how could they make use of their agrarian skills or how would they acquire new income-producing skills? Where would they live and who could help them acclimate to the new demands and the resources of this new northern environment?

The great migration of newly freed African Americans from the south to the industrialized north quickly exhausted the allotted resources and good intentions of white philanthropists as well as the expectations of assimilation and relief efforts by the larger society. It was the enduring support of the African-American church that provided an ongoing beacon of hope and transition for most newly arriving African-American migrants. The meeting of basic needs such as housing, orientation to city life, and opportunities for employment, health care, and education along with spiritual enrichment and nurturance became priorities for the African-American church. Although there were other African-American professionals, such as lawyers, teacher, undertakers, etc., it was the African-American church that was most accessible to persons who lacked the financial means to pay a fee for services. A major function of the historical African-American church was to provide spiritual as well as vocation and life guidance to its constituents and its ever-growing community. The African-American church stood as a beacon, shining a light of entry into the industrialized world of the north for new migrants.
and also as a buffer against the assaults upon the humanity of African Americans in a larger society that denied their God-given gift and right of humanity.

Many of the inequities and indignities of racism that confronted African Americans in slavery persisted and were even exacerbated in freedom. The backlash of Jim Crowism against the newly felt freedom of the Emancipation Proclamation intensified in the south and seemed to follow the migration of the large numbers of African Americans to the northern cities.

The Civil Rights movement of the 1960s was a grassroots initiative in opposition to the years of legislated segregated and peripheralized existence of African Americans. This movement resulted in legislation that made illegal overt acts of segregation in education, housing, and employment. A monumental victory was proclaimed for African Americans; again a definitive blow had been cast against racism. A movement founded on the action of one woman, Rosa Parks, in Selma, Alabama would dramatically change the oppressive racism experienced by African Americans, but it would not alter the oppressive sexism experienced by African-American women both by the larger culture and the African-American sub-culture.

African-American Women as a Community

The identity of African-American women has historically been subsumed under the racial classification of African Americans with little, if any, attention given to the implications of their gender. African-American women are often viewed as the female component of the African-American race, and are supposed to feel, think, and experience life the same as their male racial counterparts. This de-sexualizing perception, having a
history in slavery, denied African-American women their personhood and was
demonstrated in women being forced to labor alongside men performing tasks that
surpassed their physical capabilities and endurance. It was also demonstrated in the
eroticism of African-American women as objects of sexual abuse and vehicles for human
reproduction and nurturance. This section seeks to demystify and deconstruct such
historical and contemporary racist and sexist objectifications of African-American
women.

African Americans are reported to compose twelve percent of the American
population in the United States. African-American women compose roughly sixty-five
percent of the African-American population. Although African-American women form a
numerically larger component of the African-American population, as a gender group,
they have historically contributed less to the defining of themselves as women in general
and as African-American women in particular. Despite the increasing numbers of
African-American women who have obtained higher levels of academic training,
financial independence, and vocational and occupational positions of leadership and
management, African-American women have not, in a unified effort, asserted and
established a self-determined identity and understanding of who they are.

Life in the United States, for African-American women is unlike the existence of
any other racial/gender identified group. bell hooks, in her book Feminist Theory: from
margin to center, speaks to uniqueness of the multi-oppressive context of life of African-
American women. She states:

As a group, black women are in an unusual position in this society, for
not only are we collectively at the bottom of the occupational ladder, but
our overall social status is lower than that of any other group. Occupying
such a position, we bear the brunt of sexist, racist, and classist oppression. At the same time, we are the group that has not been socialized to assume the role of exploiter/oppressor in that we are allowed no institutionalized “other” that we can exploit or oppress. (Children do not represent an institutionalized other even though they may be oppressed by parents.) White women and black men have it both ways. They can act as oppressor or be oppressed. Black men may be victimized by racism, but sexism allows them to act as exploiters and oppressors of women. White women may be victimized by sexism, but racism enables them to act as exploiters and oppressors of black people.

hooks continues:

...Black women with no institutional “other” that we may discriminate against, exploit, or oppress often have a lived experience that directly challenges the prevailing classist, sexist, racist social structure and its concomitant ideology. This lived experience may shape our consciousness in such a way that our world differs from those who have a degree of privilege (however relative within the existing system).

Jacquelyn Grant, a Womanist theologian, describes the tri-dimensional oppressional context in which African-American women exist. She, along with Katie Cannon, another Womanist ethicist theologian, speaks of the racism, sexism, and classism that has historically and even in modernity oppressed and exploited African-American women. Katie Cannon avers that in a society where white supremacy afflicts African Americans in general, the patriarchal nature of such a society heaps an additional burden upon African-American women. These women then find themselves not only racially oppressed and exploited in the white larger culture but also sexually oppressed and exploited within their own African-American sub-culture.

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3 Ibid., 15.
bell hooks, in her books *Sisters of the Yam* and *Talking Back*, speaks specifically
to this dilemma when she talks about African-American communities of opposition.

hooks cites a major flaw in the process of racial integration sought for by African
Americans in the 1960s Civil Rights movement. hooks suggests the nature of
segregation; that of dividing persons by race and restricting their interactions of daily
living to persons of the same race inadvertently generated a strength in African-American
communities and between its members. Segregated living and shopping forced African
Americans to find ways to effectively live together, to develop economic enterprises and
trade with each other. She states that African-American segregated communities
provided opportunities for African Americans to racially re-enforce one another, to dispel
racial untruths about themselves and their sense of value and potential.

Ms. hooks avers that integration opened doors to housing and business trade
opportunities with whites which were formerly inaccessible to African Americans. These
‘doors of opportunity’ were frequented most by the community’s professionals, skilled
laborers, or persons possessing the economic power to ‘buy outside and to live outside of
their indigenous community.’ Many African Americans formerly constricted to their
segregated neighborhoods seized the opportunity to leave these neighborhoods leaving
behind those whose were not economically, socially, or politically able to leave. This
often times left African-American communities depleted and impoverished as many
African Americans possessing resources and skills fled their former segregated
neighborhoods seeking to have their identity merged with newly integrated white
communities.
The race/gender oppression encountered by African-American women presents a particular dilemma in their struggle to establish and to maintain a positive sense of identity and self-esteem. Paradoxically, the oppositional communities that hooks attributes with supplying a degree of racial relief and support for African-Americans were the same communities that sexually oppressed and exploited African-American females. Regretfully, although the African-American community, especially the African-American church, reaffirmed the humanity and the equal racial status of all persons, the patriarchal nature of white supremacy was adopted by many African Americans (both male and female) and females were and still are sexually oppressed. The same empowering, liberative black church, that for years stood as a buffer against the assaults against the humanity of African Americans due to racism, reaffirming that African Americans are children of God, that they could be black and proud, and that they are somebody, also paradoxically stated in sexist language and demonstrated in sexist practices that African-American females were and still are regarded as less than equal to African-American males.

Audre Lorde, in her paper titled Age, Race, Class and Sex: Women Redefining Difference, speaks about the systematic oppressive manner in which western thinking has historically defined difference as deviance. In this power based bi-polar model of superior/inferior, dominant/subordinate, good/bad, African Americans in relationship to white Americans have been labeled inferior, subordinate and bad and African-American women in relationship to African-American men have been labeled inferior and
subordinate. Lorde identifies this "institutionalized rejection of difference" as a necessary tool of a capitalistic society that misnames and misuses differences in the service of separation and confusion. She states:

...we have all been programmed to respond to the human differences between us with fear and loathing and to handle that difference in one of three ways: ignore it, copy it if we think it is dominant, or destroy it if we think it is subordinate. But we have no patterns for relating across our human differences as equals.  

This equating of difference with deviance is demonstrated not only in the racist oppression of African Americans by whites, and the sexist oppression of African-American women by African-American men, but also in the classist oppression of African-American women by other African-American women. To this effect Lorde states:

The threat of difference has been no less blinding to people of Color. Within Black communities where racism is a living reality, differences among us often seem dangerous and suspect. The need for unity is often misnamed as a need for homogeneity. ...Differences between ourselves as Black women are being misnamed and used to separate us one from one another.  

In light of the above presented material on the context of African-American women, this research suggests that there are characteristics particular to the external (capitalistic culture of America) and internal (African-American subculture) environments of African-American women that have specific implications for the manner in which they perceive and make use of information, i.e., a relationship between culture and being, thinking and doing.  


5 Ibid.  

6 Ibid., 119.
survive and to grow within the confines of these two oppressive cultures that deny their equal status, mystifies their strength (superwoman/mammy) and demonizes their sexuality (Jezebels). Yet in this context that is less than conducive for growth, African-American women have forged a tenacious relationship with their faith that has sustained them through both physical and mental degradation that began in slavery and continues even today.

The Black Church and the Care of African-American Women

Archie Smith Jr., in speaking of the multifarious functions of the black church, identifies the black church as a therapeutic salvific community for African Americans. This is not a community where just souls are saved, but it also the community where the flesh, the blood, and the psyche that contains the soul are also saved. It is in this holistic understanding of the ability of God to fight for one and to totally save one that has empowered African-American women to view themselves with worth.

Edward Wimberly, viewing the pastoral activities/functions of the historical and the contemporary African-American church, identifies four modes in which the church has historically administered or understood itself expressing pastoral care. These four modes are guiding, sustaining, reconciling and healing. He correlates the emergence of these particular functions with the particular historical conditions and challenges facing the church and those that formed the church. Although theologically the church aspired to address and heal 'all earthly woes with the salvific heavenly balm of Jesus,' the social, political and economic context in which the black church emerged and continues to survive, presented significant challenges to the abilities of the church to actualize its needs. In other words, in an economic and political structure of capitalism that is
maintained by an inequitable distribution of resources and wealth, where there is a wealthy minority maintained by an impoverished majority, and a social environment promoting white patriarchal supremacy, racial injustice and classism, the black church found itself inundated with the struggle of maintaining survival for itself and its constituents.

Jacquelyn Grant, in her book White Women’s Christ/Black Women’s Jesus, talks about how African-American women have historically understood Jesus as one who stood and stands in solidarity with them in their struggles against racism, sexism and classism. For African-American women, God not only is able but God cares. This provides a sense of self-worth and encouragement that sustained African-American women even in the worst of times.

Delores S. Williams, in her book Sisters in the Wilderness, speaks about the ‘African-American woman as mother and nurturer’ paradigm. Williams describes this role originating in slavery with the female house slave who served as a mammy or substitute mother/servant for the master’s children. Associated with this position of close physical proximity with the master and the master’s family was the African-American mother or nurturer’s strength and power. Such women were assumed to be strong since their task included protecting and providing for the master and his family. They were concurrently considered potentially powerful as they were assumed able to influence or derive favor(s) from their master. The function and the assumption of this role continued after slavery as the major vocational opportunities for African-American women were domestics and nannies.
Williams poses a counter-position, stating:

The antebellum black mother had no real power. The power above her and her family was the white antebellum slave master and his family. ...many antebellum black mothers often had as their helpmate not the black man but black religion. ...God and religion fulfilled some very basic needs that could not be fulfilled by the slave community or the black man. ...they believed there was nobody in the wide world to look to but God.7

bell hooks attacks the racist stereotype of the strong, superhuman black woman stating it allows white women:

to ignore the extent to which black women are likely to be victimized in this society and the role white women may play in the maintenance and perpetuation of that victimization. By projecting onto black women a mythical power and strength, white women both promote a false image of themselves as powerless, passive victims and deflect attention away from their aggressiveness, their power, (however limited in a white supremacist, male-dominated state) their willingness to dominate and control others.8

This same erroneous stereotyping of the power and strength of African-American women has been perpetuated by many African-American males and even some African-American women. Racism, sexism and classism have been and continue to be constants in the African-American women’s world.

For the African-American community as a whole and African-American women in particular religion and the Black church were and are instrumental in the shaping and understanding of God, the world and one’s self. The church functioned as the hub around which the community received and dispersed information, services and fellowship. It was the church that baptized babies into the faith and the community, that presented them

to their community and God at the end of their lives, and it was the church that lauded
their achievements and bemoaned their agonies in life. The church, for most African
Americans was that vital community that connected us with our past and often launched
us into our futures. It was and remains the foundational African-American institution of
the African-American culture.

This chapter, through an examination of 1) the historical context of African
Americans, 2) African-American women as a community, and 3) the black church and its
care of African-American women, presents a diverse community of individuals bound
together by a shared history, discriminations, oppressions, values, institutions, victories,
defeats, and hopes. A random section of this ‘quilt’ collectively identified as African-
American women provides, for this study, the basis for observation, interaction and
reflection.

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CHAPTER IV

AKBAR'S NATURAL PSYCHOLOGY, KOHUT'S SELF-DEVELOPMENT, AND COGNITION DEVELOPMENT IN AFRICAN AMERICANS

How is identity/self developed? Is it a combination of our genetic composition and the subsequent influence(s) and event(s) of our environment (often referred to as the nature/nurture theory)? The work of Archie Smith, Jr. suggests that this communal concept of identity provides the basic construct for understanding self development as well as the facilitation of change in existing identity formations. Smith identifies theological, anthropological, and psychological components to his theory of identity formation. He locates the context or the 'mixing bowl' in which identity formation occurs and develops in the church or the religious community of faith. Integral to Smith's understanding of the church is the church community consisting of individual families of various designs (husband and wife, husband, wife and children, single parent families, blended families, intergenerational families, etc.). The assumption is made that all persons are in some manner related to the church and therefore availed to the influence of the church as well as acting as an influence upon the church. Smith views the church as the embodiment and the facilitator of emancipation, reconciliation and healing with an anticipated goal of empowerment and transformation of oppressed individuals and oppressive social systems. It is with this community, which he further describes as 'the redeemed community,' that the individual encounters and incorporates the community's
understanding of itself and the role of the specific individual within the community. Smith states, "...people are constituted in their relations with other people within a particular context and specific social practice."1 This process, which he calls 'relationality,' proposes that individuals are either born into or later through religious curiosity or conversion are brought into the bowl as a basic ingredient. Another basic ingredient is the culture of the community. The community culture encompasses the ideals, customs, skills, etc. specific to the community and its continued existence. Via interpersonal interactions as well as structured education, the individual is availed, in an intentional manner, to the community's perspective of itself, the individual and the larger society. This interaction of the community, culture, and the individual advocates consciousness raising of both the individual and the community. This interaction of the individual and the community is also both transforming and creative. The community and the individual as different and separate entities are transformed by the presence and the interaction of the other as well as a new whole is created by the individual becoming a part of the community.

Consciousness raising and transformation are vital components in Smith's paradigm of identity/self formation. The community, as one of its objectives in identity/self formation of the individual, is to assist in bringing to the individual's consciousness that which is unconscious. Smith's emphasis on consciousness raising is directly related to his concept of relationality. He states, "...the self cannot be grasped or known in its totality, but only in its fragments. The self is always fragmented in its roles,

1 Archie Smith, The Relational Self, 14.
functions, and appearances. ...In order to be selves people must ex-press or ob-jectify their selves in order to know themselves through others."² Here Smith utilizes the concept of the interrelated mind, self, and society as proposed by George Herbert Mead to suggest the dialectical nature of the development of mind, self and society. Smith argues that life is fundamentally social or relational in that one cannot know oneself independent of some knowledge of another, neither can one know another without some knowledge of oneself. It is the knowledge of self, cultivated and nurtured within and by the community, Smith contends, which fosters knowledge and thereby empowered identity/self formation of the individual, the community and the larger society and its institutions.

**Natural Psychology**

Smith’s theory of identity formation, relying heavily upon the influence and nurturance of the individual by his/her culture, raises questions regarding the identification and the interpretation of the identity formation of a person from a culture by a person who is not a member of that same culture. Can a person who lacks knowledge about, is biased towards and/or lacks interest about a particular people and their culture critically examine the process of identity formation in that particular people? Specifically, does the Euro-American, westernized formulated science of psychology, its discipline trained scientist using the discipline’s psychometric tools for identification and interpretation accurately access the identity formation in African Americans?

The historical relativism of Niebuhr states that we are ‘timeful creatures,’ persons

² Ibid.
conditioned in our perceptions by our interactions with events and individuals of a specific time and place. This statement suggests that we know and understand from our particular place in time and we are often unaware of the nuances, the meanings and the actions in other places and times. Is it then not suspect that in a capitalistic society where racism, sexism and classism abound, that the Eurocentrically based science of psychology as well as its Eurocentrically developed norms may not be inclusive of African-Americans? Believing this to be a rhetorical question, I submit Na'ım Akbar's natural psychology as a scientific method for identifying and interpreting identity formation in African-Americans.

Much concern has been expressed by African Americans in general and African-American psychologists in particular regarding the psychological assessment and interpretation of African-American identity formation. Two major factors contributing to this concern, identified by the National Association of Black Psychologists are 1) the criteria or standards used for psychological assessment and 2) the lack of research focused upon the process of identity formation specifically in African Americans.

Robert V. Guthrie, in his article *The Psychology of African Americans: An Historical Perspective*, states that "we live in a labeling and measuring society" that has "an incredible obsession for the attempted quantification of intangible human attributes."3 He describes human behavior as "learned and maintained because of their consequences"4 and suggests that psychological diagnosis "tells us little about the client however, it

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4 Ibid.
and suggests that psychological diagnosis “tells us little about the client however, it reveals much more about the environment in which the observer finds the individual.”

He further critiques the standards of the field of psychology stating “normalcy categorization and labeling follows the needs of the power holders in a given society.”

Given the context of African Americans in America, African Americans do not hold a position of equality much less a position of power. This further substantiates the allegations of the inadequacy of traditional psychometric tools to accurately assess African-American capabilities or skills.

Guthrie documents a history of western Euro-centri psychology founded upon reaction-action based theories such as Sigmund Freud’s psycho-sexual development model, Charles Darwin’s survival of the fittest, Sir Frances Galton’s eugenics, William McDougall’s theory of instincts, and Gregor Mendel’s theory of genetics. Such models, according to Guthrie, reinforce “nativistic themes by declaring that human difference resulted from causes within people rather than environmental forces in society.”

Although in the contemporary arena of psychological research and application, significant consideration has been given to the relationship of nature to nurture in the process of human development, the myriad forms of oppression, i.e., racism, sexism, classism, ageism, etc., innate to social systems such as capitalism, culturally-biased psychologists continue to develop, administer and interpret culturally-biased assessments for a culturally-biased discipline.

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5 Ibid.

6 Ibid., 34.

7 Ibid., 36.
In an attempt to utilize a psychological perspective that I perceive as less culturally-biased to African Americans and also more harmonious with my experiences in the area of identity formation/change personally and as a therapist, I present the theory of natural psychology espoused by Na’im Akbar. Na’im Akbar, a Muslim psychologist/educator/researcher, proposes a three-stage process of human development based on patterns observed in nature. Akbar states, “Natural psychology is intended to give us a true picture of our nature and real potential as fully evolved human beings.”

Akbar’s approach to psychology, similar to Guthrie’s, begins with the observation that contemporary psychological principles, diagnostic and prescriptive strategies are biased and inadequate for the proper assessment and the efficient assistance to African Americans. He states four major misconceptions by the field of psychology that threaten the field’s ability to render valid human and/or culturally unbiased information. First, he states that the field of psychology attempts through isomorphic similarities to utilize the same methods of observation for humans and non-humans. The significance of this statement is the center of the discussion regarding the understanding of humans as not only a physical being but also a spiritual being. This questions the gap of what does it mean to be like an animal but not an animal subjugated to instinctual imprintation? What does God have to do with it, and how can the God effect be measured and validated?

The second misconception Akbar suggests is that contemporary psychology is based upon a universal description of human life as European-American and Judeo-
Christian. This misconception further feeds the erroneous "representation of the superiority of Caucasian people." A third major misconception is that "essence of human life is its physical manifestation." This is demonstrated in William Sheldon's personality prediction typology based on body size, or Freud's reductionist theory of personality to one's physical needs or desires. And the fourth major misconception is "that the outer observable nature of the human being is the best and most accurate picture of the human being." This perception once again ignores the existence or the significance of the moral or spiritual aspect of the person and its contribution to identity formation/change.

Because of these particular misconceptions as well as the inadequacy of contemporary psychology to acknowledge and to respond as a discipline to the needs of all humans, Na'im Akbar offers a nature-based psychology that addresses the human as a physical, mental, moral and spiritual being. Akbar's natural psychology, congruent with Smith's theory of relationality, underscores the communal nature of African-American identity formation.

Akbar describes the first stage of his three-stage natural psychology developmental process as the "hungering self or soul." He likens this stage to Freud's id, in that the major focus of this stage is concerned with "satisfying needs, maintaining

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9 Ibid., 6.
10 Ibid., 5.
11 Ibid.
12 Ibid., 10.
comfort, and forging the rudiments of physical survival.” Akbar identifies this hunger as the “foundation for our connection with the material world and is characterized by its preoccupation with the needs of the body.” Unlike Freud’s id, the hungering self is considered to be the basis of the developing personality that perpetually remains in a desire-seeking, self-indulgent mode, needing to be subjugated by the ego manager. Akbar theorizes an evolving, transforming community of self working towards a common goal of growth different from Freud’s intra-psychic conflict model.

The second stage of development or transformation is the “self-accusing soul.” This stage is characterized by the self being passive in its desire driveness but becomes more active in intervening in its experiences. This intervention involves rational, reflective, critical thinking abilities. The self experiences a want and at the same time, not in conflict with his/her self, self-determines the response to a need. This is not a simple action-reaction process, but an action-reflection-action process. It is during this stage, a conscience, developed through interaction of the self with her/his larger community, is developed and functioning. This conscience assists the self-determining self-accusing self in the formation of responses responsible to the self and to the community. The conscience in its developmental process also includes an understanding of God and the self as a creation by and in the form of God. This knowledge of self and of God further facilitates the development of the accusing-self and its ability to make less base-level desire responses.

13 Ibid.

14 Ibid., 11.
A part of the self’s development is the development of the desires. Desires develop from an initial stage of basic survival and physical needs to moral and spiritual needs. Akbar states:

The knowledge that is required at this state (self-accusing) is not just the knowledge of the senses but it must be the higher knowledge of Truth. It is the Divine guidance that comes from religious or spiritual Truth which provides an interpretation of the experiences from the environment. It is the kind of metaphysical knowledge that provides both a rational and a moral understanding of reality. It is the knowledge derived from this divine guidance or spiritual truth that re-orient the knowledge of environments and/or societies that locate desire within physical aggrandizement, material amassment and expertise based solely on the mastery of materially based knowledge. The transformation of desire accompanying the stage of the accusing self realizes that success is not measured strictly by economic income, or the degrees granted by prestigious institutions. Success for the accusing self is elevated towards “advancement relative to the ultimate human destiny, to be all that God would have humanity to be.”

The final stage of natural psychology’s transformation is “the completed self.” At this stage the self has evolved from survival desire driven to truth, understanding and self-mastery driven to a desire to “understand the higher meanings of the symbols of nature.” This stage is characterized by an acceptance of the cycle of life including death and the desire to be a creative and harmonious part of nature. The completed self

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15 Ibid., 12.
16 Ibid., 13.
17 Ibid., 14.
understands that it is created by God, “influenced by the creation and the events of the world but we are not subject to those influences, because our capacity for choice permits us to rise above their influence.”

Akbar’s transformative, growth oriented model of natural psychology presents a holistic approach for observing and interpreting identity formation in humans which is congruent with Smith’s theory of relationality and with the hypothesis of this research project. Natural psychology’s divine truth appears similar to the use of revelation in this study. Also, the emphasis on the interaction of the self with others for the purpose of understanding and interpreting life functions much like the group. All of the aforementioned similarities between natural psychology, relationality, and the hypothesis of this research project support natural psychology as a salient contributor to this research project.

Kohut and Self Psychology

In light of my contention that the discipline of psychology is culturally deficient and bias in its ability and limited attempts to examine African-American identity formation, I acknowledge that many of the human development theories offer information that in varying degrees is applicable to the development of persons in general. One such theory is self psychology developed by Heinz Kohut.

The work of Heinz Kohut, a twentieth century psychoanalyst, identifies the context of the process of identity/self formation as communal or interrelational. It is this identification of the necessity of community or relationally for the optimal process of self

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18 Ibid., 16.
development that Kohut’s theory of self formation is significant to this study. In this study community denotes the group, or the seven African-American women study participants that share a common historical, cultural and faith heritage, i.e., African-American Christian women. Many of the dynamics and variances within the group, i.e., the diversity of the perspectives, abilities and experiences of each group member are similar to the dynamics and variances found in naturally existing African-American communities. Other dynamics and variances such as intergenerational and familial relational roles and patterns are not present in this study group.

It is because of the group’s function as a community, I contend it presents an environment demonstrative of Kohut’s theory of self formation. In Kohut’s original theory, Kohut identifies the community as the developing self and the primary care givers which he identifies as the mother and the father. It is through the interaction of the developing self with the mother and the father that the developing self begins to form.

I suggest that in the African-American context, the community is less circumscribed to the nuclear family but is easily expanded to include distant relatives as well as non-blood ‘adopted family.’ Such adopted family could include members of the community who perform any type of nurture function, members of the church or the entire church. In the case of this research project, I identify the group of seven African-American women as a community; persons caring for and with each other, as sister-mother-friend.

Kohut identifies two processes, mirroring and idealizing, by which identity/self development is optimally actualized. In Kohut’s model the mirroring and idealizing functions are performed, in most cases, by the mother and the father respectively.
Likewise in this study the group functions as a community, provides a caring and nurturing environment where the participants share their experiences of revelation(s), their interpretation of information and try out new life strategies and ideas. That is to say, the group provides the mirroring and idealizing function for its members. A closer examination of Kohut’s self psychology offers a clearer understanding of the relationship of the group as community and identity/self development.

Kohut’s self formation theory proposes that every person develops a psychic structure Kohut calls ‘the self.’ This self functions as “a center of initiative and a recipient of impressions.” The development of the self begins with the infantile stage characterized by the infant’s total dependency upon his/her community to provide his/her every need. The infant perceives the primary caregiver as an extension of his/herself and experiences his/herself not only through his/hers own sensory apparatus but also experiences his/herself affectively through the primary caregiver’s affects. Kohut identifies two processes by which this vicarious perception of the self is accomplished as ‘mirroring’ and ‘idealizing.’ Kohut hypothesizes that healthy self formation is dependent upon persons’ core needs, to be mirrored and to be idealized, being met. Mirroring describes the individual’s need “to be looked upon with joy and basic approval by a delighted parental self object,” in response to the individual displaying his/her growing capabilities. Idealizing describes the individual’s need “to form an idealized image of at least one of his/her parents, and to experience a sense of merger with an idealized self image.” The individual’s experiences of mirroring produces a “grandiose, exhibitionist self image” while their experiences of idealizing produces “toned-down images of the self.” As the individual continues to mature and to experience her/himself in relationship
with the parents and the larger world, the individual begins to see that the grandiose, exhibitionistic self as well as the toned-down images of self are not accurate representations of him/herself. For instance, although the individual’s parents may have praised her/him for her/his ability to tie his/her shoes at the age of five, at the age of ten he/she realizes that tying his/her shoes is not such an extraordinary accomplishment for that age. Further investigation may also reveal to him/her that like him/herself others had achieved the same task with relative ease at the same age, while others had accomplished the same feat at a significantly earlier age. Hence the individual’s sense of grandiosity is challenged and reassessed. Likewise, as the individual matures, he/she begins to realize that his/her parents, who she/she once idealized as all-knowing and all-powerful, have limitations. This knowledge decreases the individual’s idealization of the parent and concurrently assists the individual to identify and accept his/her own limitations and weaknesses. This transformation of the self and self objects (mirroring and idealized person) results in a more stable, cohesive and functional identity/self retaining aspects of his/her prior grandiosity, ideals and values.

Kohut suggests that ‘the self’ is a developing structure that begins to emerge as recognizable at about the age of two years. This developed self, having a sense that it is a particular, somewhat independent body begins to experience and approach life with meaning and direction. The self is ongoingly developed by the interactions of the individual with self-objects that provide needed functions that the developing self is unable to provide for itself at that time. Kohut identifies the mother as the caregiver that most often fulfills the mirroring need which is associated with the individual developing a sense of ambition. He identifies the father as the caregiver that most often fulfills the
idealizing need which is associated with the individual’s later ability to establish goals, ideals and values. Between these two bipolar needs of mirroring and idealizing Kohut postulates the existence of a ‘tension arc’ in which the talents and the skills of the individual are developed and enhanced.

According to Kohut, persons, via a process called transmuting internalizations, develop the ability to do for themselves what they were unable to do in the past and had been reliant on self objects to perform. This process consists of the individual internalizing a representation of specific needed functions performed by the self-object. Through this process of transmuting internalizations the developing self can and does make use of self-object functions in the absence of the self-object.

Kohut postulates that a core for self development relies upon the adequate establishment of either the mirroring or the idealizing need of the individual. It is not necessary for a functioning self to have had both of these needs met. Kohut suggests that a satisfactory mirroring experience can compensate for an inadequate or a lack of an idealizing relationship (or vice versa). But if neither the mirroring or the idealizing core needs are met, the self is not able to adequately develop. Kohut describes a resultant psychopathology that is classified between neuroses and psychosis. This psychopathology, identified as narcissistic disorder, may manifest in either narcissistic personality disorder (a disorder that manifests itself more so in the area of the thought processes) resulting from either:

a. an over-stimulated self

b. a fragmented self
c. an under-stimulated self

d. an over burdened self

or narcissistic behavior disorder resulting from either:

e. a mirror hungry self

f. an idealizing hungry self

Kohut suggests that if an individual experiences self objects that allow either or both its mirroring or its idealizing needs to be met, the individual will enter into the succeeding development stage known as the Oedipal state in a ‘joyous state’ and minimally conflicted. On the other hand, if the individual’s self objects, due to self pathologies of their own, were unable to meet neither the mirroring or the idealizing needs of the individual, the individual enters into the Oedipal stage as a deterioration fragment of the self.

Kohut suggests that progressive self development is key to the ongoing health of the individual. He proposes that the central struggle for every individual is to develop and maintain a continuum of relationships with self-objects that are progressively maturing as the individual matures. The object for Kohut is not a process of development beginning with an undifferentiated self moving towards a self-object relationship and resulting in a differentiated/actualized, independent self. Rather, Kohut states that humanity’s need for relationships with self-objects is lifelong; it is the quality of the nature, expectations and mutuality in the self-object relationships that change. In other words, the movement is from archaic self objects to more mature self object relationships.

Kohut’s model of self development suggests that life is based on one’s ability to build and strengthen compensatory structures. For Kohut, an arrest in self development
can be reactivated in the therapeutic context through emphatic introspection employed by the therapist with the client. In such an encounter, the developing energy of the individual is re-activated and re-channeled. The individual resumes his/her strive for constructive self development and growth. Central to Kohut’s theory of self development is the concept that the self constantly strives toward development, but it can only work with the existing structures and the relationships. The aim of self psychology is the ongoing progression of healthy self growth. When such growth has been inhibited or arrested due to trauma, inadequate ego structures or relational experiences, self psychology seeks to re-activate, build and strengthen compensatory structures and experiences.

Kohut places emphasis on the nature of the relationship between the client and the therapist and identified it as a key component for psychotherapeutic self development and change. He suggests that more important than a correct interpretation by the therapist is the rapport or the nature of the relationship between client and therapist in which the client feels heard and valued. Kohut states that although interpretation aids persons to understand the why, it often does not allow them to affectively experience the interpreted event in the here and now and to then work through it. This is the basis for his belief that total interpretation is not necessary for psychotherapeutic treatment to be considered a success. Kohut understands behavior that Freud identified as defensive or regressive as reflecting a less negative resistant client response to therapy. Rather, he proposes that persons’ behavior reflects ‘their doing the best that they can do with what they have’ in their attempt to survive. Therefore, a patient not desirous of bringing a traumatizing pre-verbal narcissistic injury into the therapeutic discussion is not viewed as resistant, but
rather as deciding with intentionality that investigating a particular area might threaten the client’s ability to maintain a cohesive self. For such a client, therapy could still be effective without the investigation into that particular area.

Kohut talks about self psychology as a model that makes use of the cognitive (interpretation), affective (emphatic introspection) and behavioral (experiential) components. Kohut proposes that all three of these components are essential for cure. He states, although knowledge is helpful for understanding, and it is helpful to be in relationship with one who seeks to look at life with you in a caring manner, you must also have the opportunity to experience and to practice the knowledge gained. Kohut characterizes the early therapeutic relationship between therapist and client where the client incorporates the therapist initially as a self-object to perform archaic functions the client is unable to perform for his/herself. The client continues to make use of the therapist seeking to satisfy their mirroring and/or idealizing needs. During this process the client experiences optimal frustrations or failure of the therapist to meet their needs or expectations. This leads to the client internalizing various functions of the therapist or the self-object and beginning to perform the functions for his/herself.

Kohut’s theory of self formation, although helpful, cannot be directly applied to the process of self formation in African-American women. Kohut’s theory is not racially universal, primarily because it does not intentionally take into account racial minority populations living as a race/gender/age conscious society. The process of mirroring and idealizing for African Americans is often an incongruent experience. The positive mirroring that African-American children often receive within their communities is in most instances not validated or even counter-stated in and by the larger society.
Similarly, the idealizing of African-American parents in the larger society are often not only not affirmed in the larger society but are often demonized or negatively stereotyped, i.e., welfare mothers, absentee fathers, etc. Often times African-American parents, communities and institutions intentionally attempt to filter out, negate, rationalize and even sometimes apologize for the negative mirroring and demeaning of African Americans by the larger society. The combination of non-validating and often hostile larger American culture and the internal confusion generated by many of the protective efforts of African-American sub-culture, often leaves the developing self of African-American children in a protracted, confused state in which identity/self formation is traumatized and/or arrested.

Because of this protracted stage of self formation in African Americans, I propose that the group’s mirroring and idealizing functions are as significant and time appropriate for the self development/change in the African-American women in this study as are the mirroring and idealizing functions that Kohut ascribed to the parents of young children in his self formation theory. It is this experience of mirroring and idealizing in the group context that I suggest facilitates the participants’ opportunity to achieve self growth and/or change.

**The African-American Community as Parent**

Robert L. Randall, in his book *Pastor and Parish*, which examines the mirroring and idealizing needs and functions of pastors and the congregations they serve, bases his research on the premise that groups can function like ‘a self.’ He bases this premise upon Kohut’s work in the area of the group. Randall states,

One of Kohut’s important clinical contributions was to begin delineating
how, through the method of empathetic observation and introspection, a group can be understood to have a “self” analogous to the self of an individual. The self is formed and maintained, and its character given direction, via its central narcissistic needs, strengths, and self object respondents.  

Research such as Randall’s yields case studies which support my contention that African-American communities have and continue to function as group selves. As a group self, such a community occupies a parental role providing mirroring and idealizing functions as well as having mirroring and idealizing needs of its own.

African-American families have historically been characterized as “intimate associations of persons of African descent who are related to one another by a variety of means, including blood, marriage, formal adoption, informal adoption, or by appropriation...” This statement appearing in Andrew Billingsley’s, book Climbing Jacob’s Ladder, succinctly describes the variety and fluidity of African-American families that underlie the phenomena of ‘the community as parent’ in African-American culture.

Beginning with the forced separation of families in the capture of Africans for slavery, re-enforced by the institution of slavery in America, and sustained by the economic and racial policies of equality, African Americans developed the survival mechanism of ‘creating family.’ This process was the adaptation of a African cultural tradition that considers all persons being related.

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In a conversation with a group of women, Dr. Mercy Adoyoye, a Ghanian womanist theologian, shared that in her upbringing in a household that included numerous families, all of the children were considered the responsibility of all the adults. There was never any discussion as to whose child was whose as that was considered a disrespectful attempt to make an individual claim on the property shared by the community. Each child was a child of the household whose needs were addressed equally by all the members of the household. Mothers in the household were responsible for the feeding and the nurturing of all the children in the household and not just their child(ren) by birth.

Similarly, in African-American communities children have historically been considered the responsibility of the community. Children in households where parents were absent from the home due to work or other responsibilities were often fed, clothed and housed temporarily by members of the community who had no blood relation to the child or the child’s family. It is not unusual to find in many African-American families persons referred to as cousins, aunts, or uncles who share no blood relationship with the family.

The context of life for many African Americans, finding themselves in cities where they lack blood relationships has and continues to foster the environment where persons either informally adopt a person or are themselves informally adopted into the family. This process provided familial relational fulfillment enabling the person to feel a sense of individual worth and communal responsibility.

The black church, the most prominent and enduring of the African-American communities, reflects this practice of informal adoption in the structure and function of
one of its auxiliaries commonly known as the ‘Mother’s Board.’ This auxiliary composed of the senior women of the church has as its major function the nurture and development of the young (young encompasses any and all persons younger than the mothers) persons in the church community. These senior women serve as surrogate mothers for persons in the church and are commonly referred to using the title of “Mother” and their last name. It is often through this relationship with the Mothers of the church that many African Americans have not only received care and nurture, but it is not uncommon for Mothers to take on educational and economic participation in many of their adopted children’s lives.

It is because of this propensity of African Americans to assume a communal responsibility of the children of the community that I suggest that the community has and continues to provide for many African Americans a parental figure. Stories are often recounted in informal groupings of African-American adults regarding the disadvantages of having so many parents in the community. I remember one young man sharing how it seemed that every adult in his immediate residential community and every adult in his church community had ‘whipping rights’ on him. He explained that if any of these persons observed him misbehaving they had the authority to act as his parents and to do what they would do if they had witnessed the misbehavior. This meant, if the behavior warranted a spanking, the adult with prior consent of and solicitation from the birth parent, had the authority to mete out the punishment. This often resulted in receiving a whipping from the witnessing adult followed by an even more severe whipping from the birth adult when apprised of the misdeed. This type of story is typical among African-
American adults and is often responded to with a chorus of, "I know just what you mean."

Equal to the stories of punishments received as a result of the communal parenting of children, are the stories of support and nurture. It was and is still not uncommon for African-American children to be mentored and cared for by the larger community. Adults in communities, often without being asked, feed and care for community children. Billingsley tells the story of Otis Moss, a renown African American preacher, who upon the death of his mother and the subsequent death of his father a few years later was informally adopted by a woman. The woman observed young Moss at the site of the automobile accident that resulted in the death of his father said, "Come home with me."21

This study builds upon the ability of African Americans to "make or create family" and for the community to function in the role of parents. I propose that the group context in this study functions as a community parent for the individuals of the group performing the mirroring and idealizing processes identified by Kohut in his self psychology theory.

**Cognition in African Americans**

Although much of the scholarly research in this area is somewhat dated, there exist significant data supporting the claim that African Americans perceive and process information in manners differing from that of other American cultural-racial groups (Barbara J. Shade, 1983). C.A. Malone, in a study of African-American children

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21 Ibid., 31.
concluded "that the children used vision as ways of protecting and orienting themselves in the environment rather than for gathering information." In terms of cue selection, studies support that "African Americans are better able to recognize faces and emotions than groups which they are compared (Gapler, 1973; Chance, Goldstein & McBride 1975), and are also extremely sensitive to social situation nuances (Hill & Fox, 1973 Witmer & Ferinden, 1970)." Other reports suggest that African-American learning is optimized in socially interactive environments making use of affective learning materials. A study of ninth grade students conducted by B. Shade in 1983 supports the theory of a particular pattern of cognition utilized by African Americans. Shade administered the Myers-Briggs Indicator to both African-American and Euro-American boys. Both groups were typed as extroverted when typed as a group ("a preference for and attention to the external world rather than the internal world of ideas, concepts or insights"). However, when divided by achievement level, the African-American high achievers and the Euro-American low achievers were extroverted while the Euro-American high achievers and the African-American low achievers preferred their internal world." Other studies have identified 'Black English' as a possible barrier to the learning and the acceptance of written and oral expressions of African Americans in education and occupational settings (G. Smitherman, 1981). Studies have identified that there are particular categories of


23 Ibid., 237.

24 Ibid.

25 Ibid., 238.
words that are more frequent in African-American speech patterns. These words are action and movement oriented (T. Kochman, 1972).

Dr. Janice Hale-Benson states that “Black people participate in a coherent culture that shapes their cognitive development and affects the way they approach academic tasks and the way they behave in traditional academic settings.” T. Ward similarly states, “[They] argue that language and culture virtually program the mind so that the individual as a learner is both bounded and shaped according to the world-and-life view and the mental-process styles of his culture.” Such statements re-enforce the theory that cognition is social as well as biological and that there exists a “relationship between one’s culture and the kinds of cognitive skills one develops.”

Havighurst, in his research on the relationship between social class and ethnicity states,

that within a complex society, social classes and ethnic groups are the two major ecological structures that produce diversity in human life style and development. …Each ethnic group forms a subculture with its own attitudes and behaviors. …cultural patterns are transmitted (socialization occurs) within social class and ethnic groups through the same mechanisms: family, peer group, common literature, formal associations, in group marriage, and residential segregation.

Rosalie Cohen identifies two styles of learning particular to the selecting and classifying of information. They are the analytical style and the relational style. The


27 Ibid., 22.

28 Ibid., 23.

29 Ibid., 36.
analytical style refers to persons “who think attributes of a stimulus have significance in themselves.”\textsuperscript{30} The relational styles refer to persons “who think they have significance only in reference to some total context.”\textsuperscript{31}

All of the above information strongly supports the hypothesis that African Americans perceive and process information in a particular manner that is related to and derived from the development in and the interactions with their African-American culture. This information suggests that a template or structure for learning is unconsciously developed and set in the individual. This is similar to the theories that propose ‘developmentally specific windows of learning.’ Such theories suggest that there exist specific physical, developmental, or maturational stages in which a person’s ability to incorporate language, music and spatial perception are heightened. After or before such age or developmentally specific times these windows diminish and the ability to incorporate or learn is lessened or more difficult to achieve. It is as if the capacity for learning as well as the development of a specific structure for learning is accentuated at such times. The internalization and the imprintation of this particular structure for learning appears to become more rigid and fixated as time progresses. This results in a specific cognitive structure by which all information is perceived and processed. As this imprintation or cognitive structure is developed through the interactions of the individual with their immediate community, it seems reasonable to deduce that the resulting

\textsuperscript{30} Ibid., 30.

\textsuperscript{31} Ibid., 31.
imprintation or structure is a result of both genetics of the person and the culture in which it interacts.

Hale-Benson lists four factors that Swiss psychologist Jean Piaget identifies as influences on cognitive function. They are:

1. biological factors, which account for the invariant sequence of stages
2. equilibration factors, which arise through interaction with the environment and determine the development of mental operations
3. general socialization factors or social interactions between individuals, which are identical for all societies
4. social factors, which differ from one society to another, and include particularly factors of education and cultural transmission.32

African-American patterns of cognition tend more towards the relational style reflecting “highly charismatic and stylistic uses of language,”33 a contextual or circumscribed approach to information as opposed to a linear approach, and strong, colorful expressions. It is this particular cultural modality for learning or identifying and processing information that suggests to me narrative/story as a structure that could easily facilitate the transmission of information for African Americans. The following chapter more thoroughly examines story as a structure or hermeneutic for African Americans processing information.

32 Ibid., 24.
33 Ibid., xiii.
I identify narrative/story as a particular structure in African-American internal history through which revelation, interpretation or meaning making, in this study, is facilitated. Niebuhr states in his book, *The Meaning of Revelation*, “Interpretation of our meaning with the aid of a story is a well-known pedagogical device.” There is an abundance of research that supports the usage of story towards the goal of education or the elucidation of a particular point in teaching. I propose that the reading of a particular type of story, i.e., novels written by African-American women about African-American living, provides for the reader an ‘easy access’ into their internal history; the practical, theoretical and emotional worlds of themselves and others like themselves. By ‘easy access’ I mean, the language of the text, the stories of the lives of the characters, and many of the events in the lives of the characters mirror some of the experiences of the reader through the reader’s direct or indirect history. My selection of story as the modality by which information is presented to the study participants was precipitated by 1) my interest in the developmental cognitive patterns of African Americans and 2) the

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historical usage of story by African Americans as a vehicle for transmitting and maintaining information.

**Story and Life**

The structure of story has been likened by many scholars to the formal structure of human experience or what we commonly call life. This relatedness or similarity allows for the interpretation and the integration of story into human experience and human experience into story.

A common component of story and human experience is language. Human beings are Homo loquens, i.e., we speak. We are creatures and users of language. David Buttrick, in *Homiletic Moves and Structures*, refers to a "natural theology of language," which is observable in the process of the learning of language by children. This learning of language is achieved via three different though related processes. First, children hear words which constitute a hermeneutical task. Second, they speak works, a constitutive act. Thirdly, a relationship between speaking and cognition is initiated and continues to develop as they progressively learn to live in language with and among others. Utilization of words initiates naming. "By *naming*, we *think* the world we live. For not only does language constitute the world-in-consciousness, it enables us to conceive of ourselves as selves-in-a-world." Buttrick goes on to say, "Words do not create the world - but language *does* constitute the world of consciousness."

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3 Ibid., 7.

4 Ibid., 9.
Buttrick states that at the same time language allows us to conceive the world and
to live in the world, the limitation of words in our vocabulary also limits our conception
of the world. This statement suggests that the words of a particular people reflect the
particular world in which they inhabit. For example, persons living in an arctic climate
would have words in their language that may be unfamiliar to persons living in a tropical
climate. Both populations would probably share categorical words (general descriptive
words) such as warm and cold. Yet persons living in an arctic climate would probably be
less likely able to conceive the full descriptiveness of the oceanic trades winds and
monsoons of the tropical climates, and persons living in tropical climates would probably
less likely be able to conceive the full descriptiveness of words such as permafrost
(permanently frozen ground) or frozen desert. In this sense, Buttrick states that “language
acts as a grid, heightening some perceptions while screening out others.”

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sanguinity of language to human existence, personal identity and world perception is
reiterated in the statement, “Human beings are possessed of speech and possessed by
speech.”

Buttrick goes on to say that the use of words through language in the form of
arranging events so that a plot is formed is called story. “Stories arrange past to present
and end up with us where we are. Thus, stories conjoin in consciousness to tell us who
we are and where we are in the world. Stories give identity. Words may name the world,
but narrative consciousness tells us who we are and where in the world.”

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5 Ibid., 8.


Constantine Georgiou, in her book *Children and Their Literature* states:

With a deep understanding of real life at their base, (the folk tale, fair tales, myths, legends, and fables) they mirror in fanciful form the universal truths and passions of humankind. Their portrayal of life is infused with worldly wisdom that knows no boundaries of time or social order.\(^8\)

Georgiou makes this statement within the context that story has as its objective the imparting of cultural values and communal truths. Although she makes a claim for story as a legitimate authority for capturing live experiences and enumerates ways in which story is constructive and enriching to one living life, she also warns that, “literature ...is no substitute for living.”\(^9\)

Georgiou identifies several opportunities literature or story avails to the reader. Four of these are significant to my exploration in the process of identity/change in African-American women. They are:

1. It affords opportunities to explore one’s world - how one sees, thinks and feels.

2. It invites one to experience life from another’s perspective; to see what someone else sees, thinks and feels.

3. It provides experiences by which a person can be self-reflective, a person encounters their self in the story as well as identifies with characteristics or traits of themselves. Conversely, persons often identify with actions of a character and are thereby enlightened to the consequences of their own


\(^9\) Ibid., 10.
actions.

4. Story provides a linking of persons with other generations, cultures, genders, nationalities, etc. It is community broadening and building.

Georgiou presents substantial information supporting the function of story as hermeneutic for the identification and the understanding of human experiences as well as a vehicle for commutation and transmission of information, values and ideals.

Lonnie D. Kliever, in his book *The Shattered Spectrum*, defines story as a “universal form of cultural expression”\(^{10}\) which serves:

1) as a veritable storehouse of models by which to measure good and bad performance, illumine life more clearly, organize our understanding of past actions and future hopes, help us to sort out priorities and set goals, sensitize us to human behavior in concrete situations and serve as mirrors that bring out every side and shade of human behavior, and 2) reveal the formal structures of human experience. ...Every story is a reminder and a reassurance that, no matter how disordered our lives may be at the moment, order and meaning are possible...every story is an opportunity not only to recognize various exemplars of form but to create new forms...we sharpen our ability to shape the stories of our lives.”\(^{11}\)

Kliever reiterates the nature and the mechanism of story that facilitates its relatedness to human experiences in his statement, “stories have a special power to convey and provoke ideas, to express and evoke feeling, and to portray and invoke actions.”\(^{12}\) He further avers,

Human beings surround their lives with stories because they live their lives as stories. ...stories have power over human imagination and behavior because they ring true to life...The power of stories over human imagination and behavior is their power to reveal ourselves, our societies, and our world to us


\(^{11}\) Ibid., 158.

\(^{12}\) Ibid., 155.
in a memorable and moving manner.\textsuperscript{13}

In his chapter titled \textit{Story as Medium and Message}, Kliever proposes that, “stories endow us with the ability to make our own lives into distinctive works of narrative art.”\textsuperscript{14}

He undergirds this statement by identifying the following historical functions of stories. They handled the baffling mysteries of life by envisioning an unseen world of powers that explained the miraculous and controlled the chaotic. They uncovered the recurrent patterns in nature by explaining how the world and everything in it came to be. They established the social identity of the group by defining leadership roles, kinship systems, social levels, and behavioral norms. They shaped the personal identity of each individual by laying out a repertoire of typical responses to the crisis situations of life. In other words, these stories served the metaphysical function of liking the individual to the mystery of the universe as a whole, the cosmological function of furnishing an intelligible and heuristic image of nature, the sociological function of articulating and enforcing a specific social and moral order, and the psychological function of making a pathway to guide the individual through the various stages of life.\textsuperscript{15}

Clearly, Kliever perceives story not only structurally related to human experience(s) but also salient to the perception, understanding, and the development of the identity of the individual and the collective human experience. Kliever does not delve into specific cultural particularities of perception and understanding that might influence the culture’s formation, value and usage of story, rather he presents story as a more general, universal construct consisting of “plot, setting, characterization, and point of view.”\textsuperscript{16}

\textsuperscript{13} Ibid., 156.

\textsuperscript{14} Ibid., 158.

\textsuperscript{15} Ibid., 153.

\textsuperscript{16} Ibid., 155.
Parabolic Theology

Kliever also includes in his perception of story's inherent linkage to human experience in a theological dimension. His interest in story is related to the theology of story or narrative theology, a post-World War II movement which was founded on the premise that "the way towards theological renewal lies in the reconception of theology as story." To this effect, Sallie McFague, a proponent for Parabolic theology (the identification of parable as the specific form of narrative for theological reconception) states,

The language of the Christian tradition is no longer authoritative or meaningful. Over time this dependence [theology's dependence on philosophical and/or scientific inquiry and expression] has emptied the Christian story of its content and its power by systematically reducing that story to what can be philosophically or scientifically expressed and established.18

She continues saying,

Christian theology has been discursive and conceptual, systematizing universal truths in abstract formulation. By contrast, a parabolic theology will be evocative and existential, call persons to hear the word of God through imaginative participation in the stories told.19

Sallie McFague identifies the task of theology as the overcoming of "the gap between the Gospel and contemporary society - to make it possible for the gospel to be heard in our time."20 McFague claims that the language of systematic theology, characterized by its abstract and conceptual nature is not conducive for developing or

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17 Ibid., 160.
18 Ibid., 175.
19 Ibid., 178.
20 Ibid., 175.
maintaining a meaningful integration of belief and life. To this McFague declares it the responsibility of theologians and the discipline of theology to investigate, and identify new contexts in which the word of God might be encountered. McFague avers that a new language, a revelatory language, a language that shares a basic commonality with human experience and faith development and expression is necessary for the effective conveyance of the Gospel to contemporary humanity. In response to this challenge McFague offers parabolic theology stating,

> The revelatory language from which faith was born and in which faith endures is parabolic language. Only a theological return to the 'parabolic tradition' the parabolic language of Scripture and its extension in Christian poetry, narrative, and autobiography can make the Gospel credible and possible for our day.\(^{21}\)

McFague defines parabolic theology as "an intermediary theology between the 'first order' language of living faith and the 'second order' language of systematic theology."\(^{22}\) She identifies the task of parabolic theology not to make theology parable but rather to mediate between parable and theology towards a mutually informing and validating experience of God, self and community. McFague's methodology takes the form of ongoing reflection that stays "close to the parables in both form and content,"\(^{23}\) acknowledges the subjectivity and traditional bias of systematic theology and takes seriously, the world of modernity, its faith needs and faith understandings. "It attempts to

\(^{21}\) Ibid., 176.

\(^{22}\) Ibid.

\(^{23}\) Ibid.
serve the hearing of God’s word for our time by keeping language, belief and life together in solution.”

McFague’s underlying contention is that metaphor, in the form of parable, is not only indigenous to the mode of ministry and teaching of Jesus that facilitated the knowledge of God to persons but that metaphor is moreover indigenous to the Christian faith. In other words, parable was not just Jesus’ personal pedagogy but it is the pedagogy of the Christian faith or of Christians knowing God. Drawing upon this assertion McFague classifies the parables of Jesus as “extended metaphors [containing] something out of the ordinary that breaks the surface realism of the story and shocks us into seeing those familiar circumstances in a new way and at a new depth. …it opens up the hearer of the story to a radically new way of perceiving and engaging the secular world.”

McFague further supports her contention for the parabolic language of metaphor facilitating humankind’s relationship and knowledge of God, stating:

Christianity offers no way to God through mystic encounter or philosophic attraction. The only way we have of naming and knowing the unfamiliar and nonsensuous reality of God is through the familiar and sensuous images of the earth. …In naming, the human mind moves from the familiar to the unfamiliar through metaphors.

Here again McFague asserts the salient nature of metaphors proclaiming metaphors as an effective lingual structure for facilitating the usage of human experience towards the process of ongoing faith development.

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24 Ibid.

25 Ibid., 177.

26 Ibid.
McFague proposes a foundational commonality between the language of human experience and the language of faith which she identifies as metaphor. This is explicitly conveyed in the following statements. “We give order to our world and give ourselves to that ordered world through speech. At the bottom of all such world-ordering and self-involving language are metaphors-those multi-meaning images that jolt us to a new insight by revealing similarities in dissimilarities.” McFague also identifies a foundational commonality between the role of language in human experience and the role of God in human experience; they are both central to and defining of the human experience. Incorporating these two sets of commonalities, McFague deduces that 1) the common lingual component in human experience and faith is metaphor, 2) “the primary form of metaphoric imagination for Christian thought and life is the parables of Jesus,” and 3) the common functional component of metaphor in human experience and faith is that of identification and understanding of human experience and God.

Here lies the critical connection and contribution of parabolic theology to this particular study. McFague’s presentation of the function of metaphor/parable parallels the proposed function of story/novel in this study. Not only does McFague substantiate the important role of language, metaphor and story in the facilitation of meaning making and knowing, she also speaks to the particular form of story used in this study, novel, and its role as a facilitator for meaning making. According to McFague, novels provide the means by which theologians learn about the metaphoric process of coming to belief. She

27 Ibid., 176-177.
28 Ibid., 178.
states, "Novelists have mastered the narrative art of character development. Christian novels reveal much about the process of coming to belief because they show human beings actually grappling with the transcendent through the complexities and limitations of ordinary existence." 29

The work of Sallie McFague offers substantial theoretical support for the usage of story as a facilitator of meaning making. Her identification of metaphor as the most effective form of language for moving from the familiar to the unfamiliar resonates with the hypothesis of meaning making in this study that proposes novels written by African-American women provide an effective vehicle for moving from familiar to unfamiliar. Metaphoric language is epitomized in both its development and usage in the African-American community and reflected in the conversations of African-Americans, their songs, their poems, and their story. Janice Hale, in Black Children, Their Roots, Culture and Learning Styles, states, "Black culture gives rise to highly charismatic and stylized uses of language." 30 Much of African-American visualization and understanding of life has been facilitated through the use of metaphors and similes. Positioned as a community often in marginalized and peripheral locations, African Africans have often conceptualized and verbalized about life in 'the unknown centrality' as either a glorified expression of African-American life at its best or a demonized expression of African-American life at its worst. For example, when African Americans spoke about being rich, it was often described as 'never having to worry about where your next dollar is

29 Ibid., 179-180.

30 Janice Hale, Black Children, Their Roots, Culture and Learning Styles, xiii.
coming from.’ African-Americans are well acclimated to speaking and understanding what we don’t know by speaking of what we do know.

Also significant to this study is the correlation of McFague’s methodology of parabolic theology as an intermediary theology with the pastoral theological methodology of this study. Central to both is the reflection-induced movement between first order faith language and second order systematic religious language. My contention of pairing the language of everyday life (story) with the language of faith as ongoing dialogical partners for the purpose of individual and communal growth and progressive change is supported by McFague’s pairing of metaphor and faith language towards the same end.

**African Americans and Story**

The existence of a relationship between theology and story is further supported in Edward Wimberly’s book, *African-American Pastoral Care* where he proposes a linkage between an overarching God story and African American’s individual life stories. Although making use of story similar to that of narrative theology, and Gerkin’s living human document, i.e., story is the means by which growth or change is facilitated, rather than using theology as story, I interpret Wimberly suggesting life as theology. I understand this to mean that the study of God is not equivalent or contained in a story, whereas life, in all of its facets is part of the study of God. Story is a way of perceiving and understanding God, but God cannot be contained in story. Similarly, although there are parallels between life and story, life and story are not the same. A story about love is not the same as experiencing love and conversely stories about love seldom are the same as the experience.
Wimberly’s God’s story-human life connection, reflects the African proverb, “Because God is, I am,” which understands all life emanating and radiating from and in relationship with God. Wimberly describes a four part process of “unfolding, linking, thickening and twisting,” by which the story of God and humanity life are interrelated. Unfolding speaks to “God’s plot unfolds one scene at the time.” Linking suggests that as God’s story unfolds “one is linked with the dynamic that undergirds the plot.” “Thickening refers to those events that intrude into God’s unfolding story and seek to change the direction of that story for the ill of all involved.” And twisting is “the story begins to unfold in ways that help us to envision God at work, seeking to twist the story back to God’s original intention, despite the thickening that hindered the plot.” Therefore, according to Wimberly, the human story is a theological story, constituted by the intricate weave of the individual, and the community in the world of and in relationship with God.

Historically for African Americans, story has been both a life containing as well as a life sustaining force with the community. A story was not simply entertainment or something that informed one about life, story was life and yet more than life. It safeguarded the past, gave meaning to the present and inspired hope for the future.

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31 Wimberly, African American Pastoral Care, 14.
32 Ibid.
33 Ibid., 15.
34 Ibid.
35 Ibid., 15 & 16.
role of story, for many African Americas, has been and continues to be 1) to preserve, 2) to give value, and 3) to nurture the culture, the community and the individual self.

Story was a history made by and composed of past community(ies) and it was the expectation of the present community to not only maintain but to also nurture and enrich the story. Story enabled one to understand and to see his/herself by comparing and contrasting his/her individual traits, accomplishments, expectations, failures, etc. with the community, the community’s story and the individuals of the community. The community story provided the only true mirror for many African Americans living in a race, gender and class conscious society. It was in the community that African Americans experienced their reflected image as valuable, capable, loved and accepted. It was within the structure of story(ies) of the community that the true revelation of the African-American self was portrayed and experienced.

Story, historically as well as today in modernity, serves as the major mode by which information is communicated in an informal fashion in the African-American context. Whether the story is put to music, or told as a folk tale or even cultural history, the story carries with it an underlying cultural truth. This truth expresses the identity of the African-American community and their understanding of who they are, where they came from and where it is they are aspiring to go. The spirituals sung by African-American slaves declared an identity of a people and their calling to personhood by God. The stories of African kings and queens, African-American inventors and freedom fighters, declare the aptitude and the integrity of a people dedicated to more than his/her individual self. (Being all of oneself meant also being a responsible and productive part of the community.) The stories of African-American preachers stitch together the actions
of God as recorded in the Bible with the situations and circumstances of present-day humanity providing a structure by which persons can identify God in their lives today. For the African American, story has and continues to serve as a vital life hermeneutic. It is often through story that African Americans connect and interpret the events of life. And likewise it is often through the learned and the internalized or transmuted roles of the characters in the stories that African Americans responsively participate in life.

I contend that just as narrative is central to the African-American modality of meaning making, the necessary context for this process is the group or the community. It is my belief that African-American persons are not innately more predisposed to narrative/story as a modality for meaning making than any other ethnic or racial group, but rather the African-American "culture" facilitates and nurtures self/community development and identity utilizing narrative/story. Furthermore, the narratives/stories of African Americans are not developed by individuals but rather the individual is brought into the community story and in so doing is given a sense of self identity. This illustration of a morphological hermeneutic presents the story of the community as the synthesis of the expressions of those who lived the story as well as those who were later born into the ongoing developing community story. In this manner, new member(s) of the community comes to know the story intellectually by hearing it from and experientially through his/her interaction(s) with a community that knows and continues to live their story in their everyday experiences. This story then begins to serve as a structure or paradigm by which persons begin to make meaning of the particular contents or events of their everyday experiences. This leads to the development of the individual's sense of self,
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CHAPTER VI

REVELATION

The word revelation literally means an 'unveiling' or 'disclosure of something previously hidden. Yet the meaning of revelation in Christian theology is much more specific. It refers to the self-disclosure of God in the creation, in the history of the people of Israel, and above all in the person of Jesus. Revelation is not the transmission of a body of knowledge but the personal disclosure of one subject to other subjects. God has taken the initiative and has freely made known the divine identity and purpose. In brief, the knowledge given in revelation is not simply knowledge that, or knowledge about, but knowledge of.\(^1\)

The discussion of revelation, in the context of this study, fittingly follows the discussion of story in that 1) I propose that story facilitates revelation and 2) that revelation validates and reaffirms the subjective life experience of the reader, God's presence in the reader's life story as well as the reader's participation in God's story. This suggests an interrelated, reciprocal quality of both story and revelation. Logistically in this study, story facilitates revelation which then serves to reaffirm the subjective experience of the reader which was raised into consciousness through the story. In other words, I propose that revelation, in the context of this study, facilitated by story shared within a group context, facilitates revelation which then utilizes the story to link the individual stories of the African-American women to God's story. This linking of their

story, seeing their story as an authentic component of God's story validates their own life experiences not as a person, a woman, a Christian woman, an African-American, but specifically as an African-American woman.

This act of revelation facilitated story resulting in the validation of African-American women's life experience qualifies this as a womanist study. In this particular study, the novel *Ugly Ways* 1) forces the study participants to look at their experiences as African-American women, 2) gives the participants permission to take seriously their particular dimensions of life and faith experiences, and 3) facilitates revelation which validates and reaffirms God's presence and importance in their life story, and their presence and importance in God's unfolding story.

Story and revelation share a common function. They both separately and collaboratively, provide for individuals and communities organizing and interpretive functions for meaning making. As presented in the previous chapter, story in the African-American context functions as the overarching vehicle through which the human story is inextricably connected to and interpreted through God and God's unfolding story. Story is the hub or in the words of the great African-American mystic-theologian, Howard Thurman, the location of the "creative encounter," where the infinite encounters the finite. The connection of the individual's story to God's story accesses the individual to constructs, values, meaning, purpose, self, world and God identity that she/he had not been able to access by her/his individual or communal effort(s). It is my contention that this connection of God with humanity, of God making God's self known facilitated by story is revelation. Such revelation acts as an interpreter, giving meaning to the past, present and future while concurrently providing the individual with a sense of unity or
wholeness with self, God and others. This “revelatory moment is one which makes our past intelligible, resurrects our buried past and creates common memory.”

Revelation as a Christian Doctrine-A Historical Perspective

In the Christian tradition, revelation has served as a mechanism that accounts for one’s knowledge of God. George Stroup in Christian Theology states, “Revelation has generally been understood to be correlative with faith.” Stroup defines faith as “a human response to what has been unveiled or disclosed by faith’s object.” Revelation is understood to be initiated by God, not by human activity, and unlike faith not a human act. This statement further confirms the hypothesis of this study, in that story or group context in and of themselves or any combination of, is not the cause of revelation(s). Rather it is my contention that these variables facilitate an environment conducive of the manifestation of revelation. This statement also supports Akbar’s natural psychology’s paradigm for observing and understanding life as an ongoing, and evolving interaction between the creator and the created, and Smith’s relationality as opposed to the action-reaction paradigm of classical psychology.

Revelation is generally viewed as being both objective and subjective. The objective quality of revelation focuses upon what is revealed. The subjective quality focuses upon how the revelation is received. Stroup states that the objective quality, “may be understood to be a proposition, an infallible teaching of scripture, the gospel or

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3 Ibid., 114.

4 Ibid., 114.
world of God, God’s will toward the world the personal being of God, or the moral
order.” Therefore each interpretation reflects a distinct faith doctrine of God and God’s
method of action and interactions with humanity. The subjective quality of revelation
serves to relate what is revealed to those who witness it. Stroup defines this as “the
appropriation of what is objectively revealed.” The mainstream dominant Christian view
of the subjective interpretation of revelation has been in the form of illumination. Such
illumination of God making God’s self known, provides persons with information,
motivation, and encouragement whereby they, as the faithful, are more fully able to live
the Christian experience.

This binary constitutive structure of revelation is responsible for the broad and
varying range of revelatory interpretation. The resultant interpretation of a specific
revelation is dependent on whether the emphasis is placed on the objective or the
subjective quality of the revelation. The variance in the interpretation of revelation has
created a theological spectrum ranging from a “highly subjective interpretation found in
some forms of mysticism, …which refers only to immediate experience to a highly
objective interpretation found in some forms of sacramental theology and
fundamentalism.”

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5 Ibid., 116.
6 Ibid., 116.
7 Ibid., 117.
Augustine developed the theme, "Jesus Christ is the light of God which illumines the darkness of the human intellect and enables it to know God." He distinguished the words illumination of the intellect referring to what the intellect knows when it is illumined yet he failed to define the precise nature of this light and its relationship to the intellect. Thomas Aquinas gave clarification to the problem posed by Augustine's theme by describing the human intellect in terms of two powers, the passive and the agent intellect. Passive intellect is that inward illumining by God's grace which then permits faith, the agent intellect.

The theology of revelation espoused by Martin Luther and John Calvin, presents another variant on the emphasis of the subjective in revelation typified as revelation by word and spirit. They asserted that knowledge of God apart from revelation was of no consequence. Luther saw Jesus Christ as the center of scripture and scripture as gospel only as it points to Christ. Calvin's interpretation of the relationship between scripture and the Word of God differs from Luther in that, "the Word of God in Jesus Christ - at times, the object of faith seems to be the formal authority of scripture rather than scripture's witness to Jesus Christ. This is reflected in Calvin's analogy of the scripture as the spectacles through which God may be seen."

Despite the attempts of Christian theologians to develop a methodology for the critical and objective interpretation of revelation applicable for the entire faith, the interpretation of revelation has and continues to be more subjectively influenced and

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9 Peter C. Hodgson, and Robert H. King, eds., Christian Theology, 121.
determined by the particular faith doctrines and socio-cultural conditionings of the
particular group or individual. H. Richard Niebuhr, in his writings on revelation, avers
that all interpretation(s) of revelation(s) is subjective. This is based upon his contention
that we are timely creatures, precluded in our every thought and action by the influences
and conditions of our location in time and space. Niebuhr contends that time and space
not only frames but also organizes meaning. Therefore to understand an interpretation
entails a critical examination of the culture and its location in time, and in the larger
world.

Revelation and H. Richard Niebuhr

H. Richard Niebuhr defines revelation as, “an organizing principle and a
transforming power.”\textsuperscript{10} He goes on to state that, “Revelation means for us that part of our
inner history which illuminates the rest of it and which is itself intelligible...(and) which
makes all other events intelligible.”\textsuperscript{11} For Niebuhr, a proclaimed Christian, he understood
the intelligible event in human history to be “Jesus Christ, in whom we see the
righteousness of God, his power and wisdom...from that special occasion we also derive
the concepts which make possible the elucidation of all the events in our history.”\textsuperscript{12}
Niebuhr states that “revelation must mean a decisive disclosure of God in and through
ordinary events that have occurred in our past histories.”\textsuperscript{13} According to Niebuhr, the

\begin{itemize}
\item\textsuperscript{10} Jerry A. Irish, \textit{The Religious Thought of H. Richard Niebuhr} (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1983), 39.
\item\textsuperscript{11} Niebuhr, \textit{The Meaning of Revelation}, 68.
\item\textsuperscript{12} Ibid., 69.
\item\textsuperscript{13} Lonnie D. Kliever, \textit{Makers of Modern Theological Mind: H. Richard Niebuhr} (Waco, Texas: Word Books, 1977), 73.
\end{itemize}
past revelation of God in Jesus Christ is and can be transmitted through history via the internal history of the community. He further states that this past revelation makes possible other revelations which occur in ordinary events in the present history. It is this type of revelation, revelation subsequent to the revelation of God in Jesus Christ, I purport to examine in this study. I propose that African-American women encounter information via a specific modality in their internal history (the use of story as a hermeneutic processed a group context) which facilitates their experience of revelation. Niebuhr cautions against “substitut[ing] for the revelatory moment of Jesus Christ some other moment in our history and interpret the latter through the former.”14 It is not the design nor the desire of this research to perceive or to interpret God through story, but rather the hope and the expectation that God might use story and the group context to reveal God’s self and God’s ongoing participation in human life. Because the story of humanity, and specific to this study the story of African-American women, lies within the context of God’s story, a revelation about the identity and purpose of God is also the context in which African-American women are revealed information about their identity and purpose. In other words, through an experience of knowing God, we not only learn more about God but also more about ourselves.

Niebuhr locates the occurrence of revelation in history and more specifically in the internal history of a community. He identifies internal history as the realm of life where the self exists as a participant, a part of a larger community sharing a distinctive history, traditions, values, shared understandings, (faith) tenets, etc. that gives meaning

14 Niebuhr, The Meaning of Revelation, 73.
and direction to their individual and communal lives and to the larger world in which they
live. Conversely, external history represents that larger realm of existence where the self
exists as observer, perceiving the world as object and interpreting and understanding the
world by pure reason.

Internal history is a major variable of the subjective interpretation of revelation. In Niebuhr’s
description of persons as “timely” (persons constituted and influenced not only by the present
but also through our memories, habits, etc., we act and react in the present with the presence
of our past), we know and perceive life through our references of our internal history. Persons
living in societies where they do not share the same internal history, often experience
difficulties in communicating effectively. Within a heterogeneous society containing both
marginalized and non-marginalized communities, the marginalized community’s internal
history (a part of their evolved communal experience of events and sentiments) is external
history (a historical fact, event or occurrence lacking any further affective or cognitive
information than is outwardly presented) to the non-marginalized community. An example in
the American community is the institution of slavery. As perceived by African Americans, slavery
was a time and an event that was not just viewed but was experienced as an atrocity against
African-American humanity; whereas this same event viewed by the non-marginalized
communities is often perceived as a socio-economic institution that provided needed
resources for a developing nation.

I, like many of the historical Christian theologians cited earlier in this chapter, understand
revelation as an illuminating experience through which a person comes to a
new awareness or understanding of their self, God and others. H. Richard Niebuhr describes revelation as an illuminating event by which one “can go forward and backward and so attain to some understanding of the whole...” Niebuhr, in his book The Responsible Self, suggests that revelation is not an end but rather a means by which humanity is invited to be more relational with God. Niebuhr offers in the concept of what he calls ‘the responsible self,’ a paradigm for human response to God’s illuminating initiative of revelation. According to Niebuhr, revelation provides for interpretation organization in the service of equipping humanity for participation in the work of God as demonstrated in the ministry and teachings of Jesus the Christ. Revelation prepares us for action with God.

Niebuhr’s concept of responsible actions are dependent on the individual’s interpretation of the initiating action (revelation), their level of accountability and their commitment to social solidarity. In other words, persons seeking to act responsibly are required to remember the past, reflect upon it and re-interpret it. This process of re-interpreting pushes one to be accountable for the consequences of her/his past action(s) (such actions requiring re-interpretation are usually unpleasant for both the oppressed and the oppressor). This aspect of accountability is not only to the community in which one is a part (marginalized or unmarginalized), but one is also to stand accountable to the entire community (the creation of God) and then to pledge social solidarity in his/her action to the will of God.

15 Ibid., 68.
Niebuhr describes the responsible self as a self reacting or responding to all action understanding it as an initiative of God. This statement is not to be interpreted as a justification for evil, oppression and other negative circumstances of life. Rather this statement asserts that 1) God is present and aware of all actions and 2) every action is related to an initiative of God. This reaffirms God's sovereignty and calls into account humanity's non-responsible actions to God's initiatives. Similarly paradoxical, Niebuhr clearly denounces the 'norming' of responsible actions by suggesting that responsible actions seek to provide the means by which the basic needs for person and community are met and the particular actions are dependent upon the particular needs and resources of that community. Adding to the vagueness, Niebuhr offers no definitive understanding of basic needs. What Niebuhr does offer that is particular salient to this study is the correlation of revelation to action and specially action that is growth oriented, relational and identify forming.

Revelation in the Context of this Study

As a pastoral counselor, I understand myself functioning as an agent authorized by the church to facilitate care and counseling by "skillfully integrating religious resources with insights from the behavioral sciences."\textsuperscript{16} In this capacity, seeking to avail myself and my clients to the transformative powers of theology and psychology, revelation plays an integral role in my pastoral theological methodology.

In the context of this study, I borrow from Niebuhr the understanding that revelation serves as an organizing or a meaning making principle which enables persons

\textsuperscript{16} Ibid., 859.
to interpret themselves, others and the world they live in thereby empowering them with the availability of information and the motivation to make change(s). I am in agreement with Niebuhr in his statement, "the content of revelation is not the self-disclosure of an unknown being, but the unveiling of the value of a known being." I propose that African-American women, through revelations(s) gained by narrative/story shared within the context of a group, access not a new or an unknown self, but a sense of value for and understanding of God, their selves, and their world.

My use of revelation as a theological method takes a departure from Niebuhr in that I do not propose that the sole organizing event of revelation is the revelation of God in the person of Jesus Christ. Niebuhr expresses his understanding of revelation towards the development of a moral ethic exclusively within a Christological paradigm to the end of creating a Christian moral life. Yet he clearly states that the Christian moral life cannot be lifted as superior to other models of human moral ethics and therefore, in my rationalization allows his theory of revelation to be amenable or generally recognizable to other God-centered faiths.

In contrast to Niebuhr, I propose a more theocentric as opposed to an exclusive christocentric approach to the revelatory event. The rationale for this is twofold. First, the movement from christocentric to theocentric is a move towards inclusivity of persons who share a belief in God but not necessarily in Jesus as the Christ. Secondly, I believe the patriarchal nature of the christocentric approach inhibits and limits the ability of women to fully self-identify through revelation.

17 C. David Grant, God the Center of Value (Fort Worth Texas: Christian University Press, 1984), 99-100.
I credit my discomfort with the exclusively male-oriented anthromorphical model for revelation identified by Niebuhr reflective of my experiences as an African-American ordained Baptist woman living in America. The liberation and security derived from my personal sense of positive self identity and esteem as an African-American, an African-American woman, and an African-American ordained Baptist female minister has not been and is not acknowledged, affirmed, or validated in most institutions that consider themselves American or Christian. The paradox of living in the "land of the free," a "free market society," and "the land of opportunity," is paramount for the African-American female in America. African-American women have fought and supported more causes in which men held the positions of power and privilege and yet have received less benefits for their efforts. As I stated in chapter three, African-American women have been oppressed by every group and are even viewed at times to be self-oppressive.

I attribute the development of my sense of positive self identity and esteem to a family and community environment who, with intentionality and faith, emphasized 1) God as my creator, 2) the role of my family and community as those responsible for my self development and 3) my role as responsible to myself, family, community and God. This threefold structure of responsibility and accountability provided both a secure and a stimulating environment for my growth and positive identity formation. Although my interactions with the larger society bombarded me with society's expectations and non-expectations of African Americans, African-American women, and African-American women in ministry, my most influential sphere of persons, my family, particularly my parents and grandparents, "pshawed" what they called the "limitedness of small minds"
and reminded me that I could be whatever I desired to be not in spite of my race, class or sex, but because of them.

Unfortunately, the political institutions that govern the United States of America continue to struggle with (and in many instances continue to perpetuate) the issues of racism, sexism and classism. Many of the religious institutions of this same country are replete with these same biases.

My experiences with persons of faith orientations other than Christian also have caused me to explore the limitations of my knowledge of God and God’s ability to make God’s self known in numerous and varied forms. It is because of the above cited reasons and others uncited that portray the salvation of humanity limited to a patriarchal model of revelation that further binds women in oppressive relationships of abusive and exclusive male power, in which they are defined by men as less than men that I favor a more theocentric model of revelation. My personal experiences, my faith experiences, as well as my relationships with many other women suggest to me that God reveals God’s self in various forms and in various places. I perceive our challenge as persons, and particularly in the case of this study as African-American women, is to allow ourselves to be vulnerable to experience God in a new way.

Particular to my work with African-American women, I suggest that God makes God’s self known through reflective group conversations related to a story they had all read. Through the novel’s numerous and varied presentations involving the subject of God and other less direct religious reflections (first order religious statements, the description of religious rituals and the explication of their meaning for the everyday life of the individual and their community), I foresee the possibility of duplicating in the
group context the everyday, real-life process of integrating God and faith into everyday life conversation. I propose that such conversations, again providing a conducive environment for revelation, also become the spring board from which growth/change begins. This revelation based growth/change is evidenced by the observation of some or all of the following:

1. An increased sense of health and well-being
2. A deeper sense of certainty and conviction in faith
3. An experiential understanding of religious faith which is seen to have meaning in various events and dimensions of a person’s life
4. A sense of gratitude which is manifest in one’s concern for the well-being of other persons.  

For African Americans in general and African-American women specifically, understanding ourselves as persons and as persons of worth has been closely related to our understanding of God. Central to the faith beliefs of most African Americans is (1) God created all that is and (2) we are the creatures, the children of God. This statement in itself enables us to exist beyond the specific conditions and locations of our physical life and connects our being and our identity with a more powerful transcendent entity. Herein, despite the depravity, oppression and injustice to which we might feel powerless to change, our relatedness with God provides an impetus for the development and the sustenance of hope in God and in ourselves to make changes. God is in charge; we’re related to God therefore God does not intend for us to live oppressed and God is able and willing to help us.

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18 Rodney J. Hunter, ed., Dictionary of Pastoral Care and Counseling (Nashville, Tenn.: Abingdon Press, 1990), 569.
Niebuhr’s responsible self, reflecting a self in relationship with God, is a paradigm already familiar to and easily appropriated by African-American women. Although Niebuhr expresses his moral ethic as specifically Christian, his recognition that the Christian moral life cannot be lifted as superior to other models of human moral ethics, allows his theory to be amenable or generally recognizable to other God-centered faiths.

Jacquelyn Grant, in her book, *White Women's Christ/ Black Women's Jesus*, speaks about how African-American women have historically understood Jesus as standing in solidarity with their struggles for survival. Grant speaks about a relationship established between African-American women and their God that has sustained them in what she described as the tri-dimensional oppression of racism, sexism and classism that invaded every aspect of their lives. Katie Cannon states that it was to this Jesus, African-American women bemoaned the rages of injustices that they suffered in a larger society of white supremacy that objectified them as a tool for brute labor and the receptacle of illicit and perverse sexual urges. It was to this same Jesus that African Americans cried as they experienced the silencing and the violence in their own African-American communities which emulated the patriarchal values of the larger society. African-American women know Jesus, God, Allah… if not for themselves they have heard their mothers, aunts, or some other strong African-American women speak of God and the saving and delivering power therein. Therefore, for African-American women seeking to be responsible selves -- a self that is relational with God -- is something that is not only familiar but is also comforting and self-affirming for African-American women.
It is therefore utilizing revelation as that interpreting and organizing initiative of God that I propose African-American women in this study experience growth/change in their understanding of God, themselves, their community and their world. I further contend that such growth/change represent a responsible action, a meeting of basic needs, basic needs particular to African-American women living in a racist, sexist, classist society, yet ongoingly committed to growth and development of self, partnership with God and all humanity.
CHAPTER VII
THE STUDY

This chapter presents the prospectus, the procedures, and the participants of a content analysis study conducted by this writer in the field of pastoral care/counseling.

The Prospectus

This study comprises in a broad sense the research and observations of this writer beginning in 1991 and continuing through 1996 in the area of identity formation/growth/change in African-American women. The research and observations are compiled from four (4) separate experimental group studies and one (1) control group study which I facilitated between 1991 and 1996. All of the groups were homogenous gender groups except for one group. From these five group studies I present, in this paper, my evolving hypothesis, my observations, the results and my analysis of each particular group and the study as a whole. Four (4) study participants' case histories and revelatory accounts are presented (one from group I, two from group II, and one from the control group). These accounts are taken from participants' self assessment of experiencing revelation which they attribute or relate to an enhancement of self-perception or growth.

In 1993, instigated by my small group work with African-American women using novel as a focal point for discussion, I began to investigate the relationship of novel and
the group context to identity formation/growth in African-American women. The results of my observations and analysis of my work with the first two groups strongly suggested a relationship between the reading of the novel and the process of identity formation/change in the African-American women participants. I was presented an opportunity in 1994-1995 to conduct a semester reflection/seminar group composed of seven African-American women and three African-American men. For this particular heterogeneous (in terms of mixed genders) context, I incorporated two African-American authored narrative/stories, *Ugly Ways*, the novel used in my previous group studies and an autobiography by Nathan McCall titled *Makes Me Wanna Holler*. The selection of McCall’s book was based on the same criteria that I used for the selection of *Ugly Ways* (pp.15-16) except I was seeking a book written by an African-American man, dealing with the everyday life issues and conditions of African-American men, and written specifically to an audience of African-American men. The reading of these two books by the group was received with relative enthusiasm as the genre of the books presented a welcomed relief from the standard theoretical, data-intense academic text books.

Relying on my past experiences with groups I and II, I was expecting the females in group III to readily and tenaciously engage *Ugly Ways* as the springboard for getting to their African-American women-based issues. To my surprise this was not the case. The females of group III had little if anything to say about the book. Contrary to the intense level of engagement of the novel by the women in the previous two groups, i.e., the immediate identification with the characters, their conditions and their issues as African-American women, the women in group III vocally evidenced significantly less resonance with the novel, its characters or the conditions and issues presented. This
lower level of self-identification and engagement was also reflected in a considerably lowered self-reporting of change/growth. Interestingly, the males in group III reported a higher level of self understanding than the females from the reading of *Ugly Ways*. The males also stated that the book provided significant insight to their existing understanding of African-American women. Throughout this process the females in the group seemed oblivious to what I termed their self-denying and self-sabotaging behaviors that prohibited them in a heterogeneous context from identifying and identifying with their unique gender issues presented in *Ugly Ways*.

The experience of a cross gender group validated for me the use of narrative as a vehicle for meaning-making in African-Americans, but it also dramatically demonstrated the dynamics and the effects of sexism in cross-gender groups dealing with the issue of identity formation/growth. These dynamics are more thoroughly examined in Chapter VIII's Discussion of the Results. Acknowledging, what I interpreted as an unconscious prohibitive effect of self-definition internalized by African-American women of sexism resulting from their development in and self-defining done by a racist, sexist, classist society, I decided to conduct another group study, this time restricting the participants to African-American females. It is my contention that the presence of African-American males in a group designed to examine the self-formation/growth of African-American females inhibits the self-identification process of women. In other words, through my observations of the behavior of the women in group III, the women were not as attuned to themselves, but appeared more attuned to the perception that they presented to the men. This "trying to present me as I want you to see me," redirected the energy and the focus of the women from their agenda to what they supposed was the male agenda.
In 1995, during the process of reviewing, comparing and contrasting the results of my work with the three groups, I discovered a common response that was characteristic of each of the women in all of the four groups (three groups + one control) who professed experiencing significant growth/change as a result of the group process. This common response, which some of the women defined as an “a-ha” experience, was expressed as an experience that not only gave meaning to their particular personal sense of self and their life story but also gave both clarity and unity to the interrelationship between their personal story and their cultural or communal story. I perceived their definition of this interpretive and meaning-making experience, possessing both a psychological and a theological nature, congruent with revelation. In the fall of 1996, I conducted another group with the specific objective to identify and examine the manifestation of revelation facilitated by the reading of a narrative and subsequent discussions in an African-American female group context.

Therefore the movement of this study, from initially seeking to establish a relationship between narrative/story as a vehicle for facilitating meaning making towards identity formation/growth in African-American women, has evolved into a study that seeks to examine and describe the relationship of story/narrative discussed in a group context to revelation and identity formation/growth in African-American women.

**The Procedure**

The methodology of this study is comparative analysis. Data received via the participants’ self assessment is compiled and analyzed seeking to identify repetitive themes and occurrences. My role in this study is as a participant/observer researcher. I participate in each of the four groups not only as the researcher and the group facilitator,
but I also participate as a group participant or member. That is to say, I function, on the
one hand, to observe the process of the groups and to give structure to and maintain
structure within the groups, and on the other hand, I am also a part of the groups open to
be influenced by the process of the groups and the individuals comprising the group.

Therapeutically, I provide a mirroring and an idealizing function for the members
of the group. As a group participant, I along with the other members of the group
function as a caring reflection for persons in the group. I contend that a major function of
the group is to provide a validating mirror by which group members are able to see
themselves in a caring and respected manner. The group being composed of several
persons offers group members opportunities to be viewed in many perspectives but
always in a caring and supportive manner. This human mirroring by the group provides
persons the opportunity to share and receive feedback without the fear of persecution or
judgment. Such an environment enables persons to attempt change, identify self
weaknesses and develop new strategies. These mirrors also allow persons to compare the
various reflections they receive both inside and outside of the group.

I also serve an idealizing function for the group. Although I am a part of the
group I am also perceived as not a part of the group as the researcher/therapist. Because
of this 'other than group member/researcher' status, I serve as a person that the group
members are able to idealize. In this function, group members identify with me or make
use of my perceived strength, experience and/or knowledge to accomplish functions that
they feel inadequate or unable to accomplish for themselves. Other members of the
group are also used as idealizing self-objects due to skills, traits, possessions, etc. that are
perceived by other members of the group as desirable or necessary to accomplish or attain a need or want.

Evaluation and analysis of this study is both qualitative and quantitative. The qualitative component of this evaluation incorporates the subjective critical evaluations of the study participants and the researcher. In this manner an assessment of the individual and group experience is facilitated by participants’ written self-assessments and the observations of the researcher. The study participants’ self-assessments consist of a written reflection paper composed by the individuals in which they are asked to address the same four questions presented orally to the control group (see page 117) in the form of two post-study interviews with the researcher. This assessment seeks to obtain from the client her perception of the occurrence of change in herself due to her participation in the study. This written account also provides the opportunity for the participant to identify the particular factor or combination of factors to which they attribute the change to have been facilitated.

An evaluation of each group is provided by the researcher assessing the function of the group process. For the purpose of the study, group process function refers to the three (3) stage group process consisting of “norming, storming and performing.” Although Gladding in his book Group Work, identifies the stages of group transition as storming, norming and performing, my observations in this study suggested a sequence of norming, storming and performing. Therefore I define the norming stage as the initial stage of group development where the group establishes rules and procedures that identify as a group as well as govern their actions. Storming stage is the second stage of
this development group process where conflicts usually arise as the group tries to become less individually focused and more group focused.

Storming is a time of conflict and anxiety when the group moves from primary tension (awkwardness about being in a strange situation) to secondary tension (intragroup conflict). This is a time when the group works out its “threshold for tension” and reaches a balance between too little too much tension. It is also a period when group members and leaders struggle with issues related to structure, direction, control, catharsis, and interpersonal relationships.¹

The performing stage is when the group understands it rules, is no longer majorly conflicted due to power struggles and directs the major energy of the group towards accomplishing the group objective.

Another component of the evaluation is quantitative and is more objectively determined. From the self-assessment accounts of the study participants a numerical summary of all the collected data is tabulated and presented in chart form. Areas included are 1) the number of participants reporting an experience of revelation, 2) the number of participants reporting experiencing a change or enhancement in self perception attributed or related to their experience of revelation, 3) the number of participants reporting experiencing revelation and attributing or relating it to the combined effects of reading the novel and the group experience, 4) number of participants experiencing revelation and attributing or relating it to the group experience only, 5) number of participants reporting experiencing revelation and attributing or relating it to reading the novel only, and 6) the number of participants reporting no experience of revelation.

The following pages present an overview of the four groups that compose this research study. A more complete discussion of the results is given in Chapter VIII.

Group I

As I mentioned in the prospectus, I conducted four different groups at four different time periods. The first group consisted of seven African-American women, between 26 and 44 years of age. The women represented various denominations of the Christian faith and were all affiliated with a church that they attended at least twice a month. Two of the women were full-time seminary students. The remaining five women were full-time professional employees earning between $20,000.00 - $35,000.00. All of the women were single (never married, divorced and/or widowed) and currently not in a committed relationship with a male. Three of the women were mothers and all of the women had other siblings.

Each of the women had been in individual psychotherapy with me for at least six months prior to the group encounter. Approximately one month prior to the starting of the group I had extended an invitation to eight African-American female clients to participate in a group that would consist of five (5) to eight (8) African-American women who would meet for twelve weeks to discuss a novel. From this invitation, seven persons consented to be a part of the group and to allow me to participate/observe the process towards research.

This group contracted to meet for ninety (90) minutes once a week for twelve weeks. Meeting Number I consisted of introductions, as none of the women were acquainted with each other, but each woman was acquainted with me through our
individual therapeutic relationship. Also during this meeting 1) I presented to the group my purpose for the group, 2) solicited the group's response to my stated group purpose, 3) solicited the individuals in the group to express their expectations of the group and the process and 3) conjointly with the group proposed the basic norms or rules that would govern our actions and responsibilities as group participants.

I shared with the group that my purpose for the group was two-fold. First, as the therapist for each of the women, I felt they were all at a transitional stage in their individual therapy where termination was becoming a feasible reality within a six-month period or less. In my estimation, some of the women had developed, since being in therapy, or had entered into therapy with established relationships of care and concern where they could ongoingly receive and give support and care. A few of the women did not have such relationships upon entering therapy nor had developed such relationships during their time in therapy and possessed limited skills, experience and/or confidence in establishing and maintaining such relationships. As a part of maintaining and continuing the growth these women had achieved through the therapeutic experience, I perceived the need for them to develop reciprocal care based relationships. These relationships would continue to provide the necessary mirroring and idealizing functions initiated or revitalized in therapy. It was with this impending termination for the women with established relationships and the impending termination compounded with nonexistent relationships for the other women, I considered group an experience that could possibly facilitate a smoother transition. I also looked at the group process to provide an arena for the women who did not have relationships to gain practice in relationship building in a less threatening environment.
My second objective was to test my hypothesis of the role of novel as a vehicle for identity formation/growth in African-American women. I introduced the book, *Ugly Ways*, to the group and requested that each group participant secure the book and read the first third of the book for our next group meeting. Each of the women had been advised of the title of the book and where it could be purchased when the invitation was originally extended to become a member of the group. The second third of the book was scheduled to be read for the third week group meeting and the book was to be completed by the fourth group meeting.

The group participants for the most part appeared comfortable with the two objectives that I presented. Two persons expressed to me and the group slight reservations about being a part of a study or “being watched,” as one woman stated. After further discussion about specifically what would or would not be recorded (no sessions would be recorded, the only recorded information would be the written reflection statements by the group participants), the group unanimously agreed to move forward.

Persons began to state their expectations of the group and their reasons for consenting to be a group participant. Some responses were:

“*I’ve never been in a group before, and I thought this would be a good opportunity for me to check one out.*”

“I thought it would be good for me.”

“I want to learn how to say no to what I don’t want and not be afraid to say yes or let persons know what I do want.”

From these statements and others the group established as its main objective to “learn how to get what we want.” This was to include 1) individually identifying what it is we feel we want and/or need to feel better about ourselves and others, 2) identifying what has historically prevented us from getting our want(s) or need(s) met, 3) accessing
our present abilities and disabilities related to the successful acquisition of our need(s) and/or want(s) 4) developing a strategy for acquisition and 5) developing a method to evaluate the results.

Once the group agreed on its major objective, attention was focused on the rules of the group. The group members, feeling the excitement of the possibility of being able as a group to achieve something that had not been feasible individually, soon began to express concern regarding the subject of confidentiality and group members' commitment to the group and the group process. The realization that the achievement of their individual desired goals was inextricably tied to their willingness to trust the group with personal information presented the group with its first major paradox. In order to solicit the group's help on how to get a specific need met, or how that need is perceived by others, or hear strategies that have worked or not worked from other group members experiences, was all predicated on the individual's commitment to and willingness to share. Could they trust each other to hear their wants and needs without fear of judgment? Would the group handle their feelings, desires, hurts, etc. carefully like fragile, delicate bubbles? And if they did share, could they trust their fellow group members to maintain confidentiality? With these paradoxes and questions in mind, the group rigorously set about developing group norms. They decided and agreed that: 1) Confidentiality was a must. There was to be no discussion of information shared in the group by group members outside of the group. (This also banned conversations between group members outside of the group context regarding conversations or information shared in the group context.) 2) Persons must be committed to the group (attend all
meetings and be on time.) 3) Persons must regard each other, their opinions and their life with respect. With the establishment of these basic rules the group began.

The group met weekly, consistently and with full attendance. From week II through week IV the group conversation focused on the characters of the novel. Various persons in the group spoke to how aspects of the lives of the characters paralleled their own life experiences. Others responded to how different their lives were from the characters of the novel and their world view. Group conversations were often generated by a group member making a remark about a common everyday life experience depicted in the novel, to which the group member either agreed or disagreed with the characters’ action or reaction. For example, a remark was made about the ability of the characters in the novel to continue to appear to the outer world to be “all that” (having control of their self and their situation) when actually they were “all out” (personally and in every other way out of control). Another group member commented saying it’s crazy how people are penny conscious but pound foolish. Both comments reflected the women vicariously and emphatically experiencing paradoxical situations and conditions experienced in their life through the portrayed characterizations in the novel. The novel no longer was just story, it became a story like their story, a story that in some parts read uncomfortably similar to their stories of pain and ambiguity.

Weeks VI through VIII were unsettling times for group members individually as well as collectively. The group’s usage of the characters to express their situations, world views, hurts and hungers was no longer sufficient. Persons appeared anxious to get on with their objective, to learn how to get what they wanted or needed, but they weren’t sure they were ready to trust the group. During this storming period, group members
quarreled over time; persons were accused of demanding too much group time. Group members quarreled among themselves tossing accusations like a hot potato, accusing person after person of holding the group back and inhibiting the group from performing and accomplishing their goal. The group also became angry with me as the facilitator. I was accused of not doing my part to help the group move on. They felt they could not fulfill their objective because I wasn't helping them; I was the therapist, I knew what to do and should do it and stop withholding from them. A more terrifying thought that was felt but not so easily verbalized was the fear that I might be incompetent, and even if I wanted to, I wouldn't be able to help them.

During meeting IX, I reminded the group that we had contracted to meet for twelve weeks and we had only three more weeks remaining. I suggested that the group adhere to our time table and with that in mind we should soon begin to work towards preparing for closure. The group completed meeting IX with a low amount of energy. Meeting X opened with the group members having a definite agenda. They presented a united desire for the re-negotiation of our time contract. The group proposed that we meet an additional four weeks and stated that if this was not acceptable with me they would continue to meet as a group without me for that time. Upon consideration, I agreed with the proposal to extend the meetings for four (4) additional weeks.

Beginning with week X the group became more task centered and settled down to struggles associated with sharing and giving constructive feedback. Persons began to share with the group some of their desires and dilemmas and to solicit and engage the group's participation. The group continued to meet and to work through week XVI. During our final scheduled meeting many of the group members again expressed the
desire to continue meeting. I affirmed the groups desire to continue to meet and also their capability to function as a group. I also shared with the group my inability to continue to be a part of that particular group process and expressed my gratitude to them for the invitation and our experience as a group. The group officially disbanded for the purpose of this research at the conclusion of the week XVI meeting. As I still was in individual therapy with four of the members of the group I was made aware that many of the members continued to meet and also some of the group members had formed specific relationships with other group members.

**Group II**

This group consisted of five African-American female seminarians who enrolled in a women's group therapy class I facilitated at Interdenominational Theological Center. The women once again represented various denominations within the Christian faith. The ages of the women ranged from 20 to 55 years. All of the women were full-time students who held part-time employment from work study to employment in the larger Atlanta area. One of the women in the group was married, two women had never been married and the remaining two women were divorced. Three of the women were mothers and all of the women had siblings.

This group met for ninety minutes, once per week for sixteen weeks. The group read two books, *Ugly Ways* and *Sisters of the Yam*, a self-help book by womanist-ethnicist theologian, bell hooks. The reading of *Sisters of the Yam* was incorporated for two reasons. First, only one woman out of the five women in this group had previous therapeutic experiences. *Sisters of the Yam* provides a simple format for African-American women that assists them to acknowledge themselves as a particular entity with
the God-given rights to self-determination and self-fulfillment. The second reason for using the book was an academic requirement for course reading content.

The procedure of orientating group II was similar to that used with group I. I advised the group of my objectives and invited them to share their reasons for signing up for the course. The group’s responses ranged from “the scheduling of this class coincides to my already existing schedule,” curiosity about the therapeutic process, to “I needed a class that wouldn’t require too much of me.” The nature of this process falling within the paradigm of a credit earning class, I informed the group of the academic requirements. They would be expected to be in attendance, on time, and to produce a two-page reflection paper on their experience of self and the group process. The group decided as their goal 1) to be open to the process of experiencing their self as a part of a group 2) to learn something about their self and to identify a quality about their self that makes them feel good.

The novel was read in three parts and completed by meeting IV. Meetings V-XII focused around conversations initiated by the reading or particular life experiences shared by group members. As in group I, my role was participant/observer/researcher. Group II’s process paralleled that of group I in terms of the initial norming phase followed by a storming phase that finally was resolved so that performing phase could begin. In contrast to group I, the storming phase for group II lasted all the way through meeting XIII. I attribute this to 1) the newness of the therapeutic experience 2) two of the participants entered the group with a strong dislike for each other, and utilized considerable group time and effort seeking allies, and 3) the context of the group, i.e., a course offering suggested to some participants that their commitment to the group was
synonymous to their commitment to the class, i.e., just be there. Although the group members were unable to focus on their goals until late in the process, once they were able to focus their energies towards getting something out of the process for their self, they worked with intensity as listeners/respondents and group members utilizing the group for self needs.

**Group III**

Group III consisted of a reflection group of seven African-American females and three African-American males. All of the participants were seminary students engaged in a project that provided stipends for student interns placed in community organizations for service learning and community service. I met with these students as a facilitator for eight, ninety-minute sessions. Because of the brevity of the number of scheduled meetings, this group was not able to coalesce and become a group but functioned more as a seminar/reflection class.

The demographics I collected on this group consisted of the names, ages and the marital status. The ages ranged from 21 - 41 years. Three of the females in the group were married, one of males was married and the remaining six persons were single. The married females both were mothers of two children and the married male was a father of three sons.

Within the constraints of time, the group consented to read two African-American works, *Ugly Ways* and *Makes Me Wanna Holler*. I suggested the two works because I was still interested in examining the effect of narrative as a vehicle facilitating meaning-making in the identity formation/growth process of African-American women but the
The group set no goals except that everyone would read both books, be active participants in our group discussions and write a two-page reflection paper on the value of the readings. As reported in the subsequent chapter, the dynamics of the interaction of the female participants with *Ugly Ways*, by my observations, were far less intense than in groups I and II. More of the women in group III expressed a lack of being able to identify with novel characters and the difficulties, joys, and dilemmas portrayed in the characters' ongoing struggle for self-identity and intimacy. The reaction and interaction of the men to the contents of *Ugly Ways* was also minimal. This lack of interaction was rationalized by two of the male participants stating that the novel was written by a female, about females, to females and they felt neither addressed nor possessing any authoritative female information to bring to the conversation.

Conversely, the level of interaction by both the males and females with the book, *Makes Me Wanna Holler* was intense. The men in the group explained this saying, “Now you’re in my ball park, I can talk with authority!” The women came on board speaking on one hand in disgust regarding the way McCall recants his early life of abusive relationships with women, and on the other hand praising McCall for writing a book that advocates young black men seek meaningful, non-criminal lives, and strive to develop constructive, non-abusive relationships with African-American women. I interpreted the women exhibiting, in the context of a male/female group, a hesitancy or an inability to identify and/or to validate African-American women experiences and issues as presented by an African-American women or possibly echoed in their own personal
experience. Rather, I observed them more ready to identify themselves through a male presentation of femaleness therefore subjugating themselves to a male-defined, sexist, fragmented identity.

**Group IV**

Group IV consisted of three persons, myself and two African-American female seminary students. The motivation for this group was that the two students had participated in a summer service learning project I designed that examined the content and meaning of the stories of eight African-American women ranging from age 64 to 87 years. These students subsequently expressed to me a desire to further examine their particular life and communal stories with the goal of better understanding themselves. Initially, the group was to consist of five persons but two persons were unable to schedule the time needed for the group, so we formed as a trio.

The age range of the group was from 42-53 years. Both women were single. One woman had never been married and had no children while the other woman was a divorced mother of two adult children. Both women had other siblings. Although both women were currently full-time students, they had previously occupied professional employment positions, one in the field of accounting and the other in the field of social work. Neither of the women expressed that they had been in either individual or group therapy as a client prior to this experience.

The group met weekly for ninety minutes for sixteen weeks. The group determined as its goals: 1) to learn more about our personal and communal selves and 2) to identify an ongoing personal behavior in our life story that has and continues to
hinder us. The group agreed that we would be timely in our meeting and that confidentiality and respect was a must.

The small size of the group as well as our working together as a group with a common task the previous summer presented both an advantage and a challenge to the group process. The advantage was the size and past familiarity promoted our experiencing ourselves as a group. The ice had already been broken, we knew each other as acquaintances and also knew something about how each other approached and dealt with task. These same factors of size and familiarity were also the source of a major challenge for the group. Because we knew each other, we were passed the honeymoon stage. We were aware of habits and attitudes about each other that we lacked appreciation. Also, the small size of the group meant that fewer persons had to handle the anxiety generated by the group. These two factors contributed to a reduced period of norming and an early onset of storming in the group.

A major challenge that faced this group was the management of group anxiety. The composition of the group in number, three, and in status, two students and one facilitator, presented the ideal condition for the development of triangulation. Triangulation is a psychotherapeutic term which describes the process of incorporating another into an anxiety-filled relationship in the hopes of restoring stability by relieving the anxiety between the two persons composing the initial anxiety filled relationship. In the context of group IV, I quickly observed that the anxiety generated between the two students, plus the anxiety generated between the two students and me, plus the anxiety generated between each student and me would present a challenge for the group to manage as well as become a source for the generation of additional anxiety. The
participants' awareness of this anxiety compounded by their need to reduce it was first demonstrated in a vocal sparring of who would side with who. It was very quickly demonstrated that there existed some difficulty between the two students viewing each other as authentic persons, each possessing distinct valuable skills and experiences. The students initially sought to relieve the tension between the two of them by triangulating me in to the situation. This was attempted by student A seeking to ally herself with me which would give her a sense of empowerment over student B. Concurrently this would also lower student A's level of resentment toward student B and inversely increase student A's level of guilt. This would manifest in student A acting kinder and more respectful to student B. This would encourage student B to see the empowered student in a less critical light and a basis for reconciliation between the two students is now established. This reconciliation would not completely resolve the anxiety between the two students or their individual anxiety with me, therefore the anxiety would then manifest in their collectively allying against me. When the anxiety between the two students would again reach an unmanageable level again due to their overzealous attempts to be relational with each other in opposition to me, the cycle would resume with one of the students seeking to ally with me to relieve the anxiety experienced with the other student. This particular ineffective strategy for dealing with intra-group tension was the major source of the storming experienced in the group. The group's identification of this group behavior as personally and collectively ineffective and prohibitive towards constructive group action freed the group from its stuckness, enabled them to develop a more effective way of dealing with interpersonal and group anxiety and to get on with their primary task of self discovery.
Six persons who were not participants in any of the groups related to this study were invited to read the novel *Ugly Ways* and asked to share with me on two subsequent occasions their reaction to the novel and its impact, if any, on their perception of self, God and others. Collectively, these six persons composed Group V. All of the persons were African-American females. These women did not meet as a group nor have a group experience. One of women was in individual psychotherapy with me. None of the other four women were currently in any form of therapy and only one of these four women reported having a prior therapeutic experience. The youngest reader was a nineteen-year old college sophomore. Another reader was her 44-year old mother, married, mother of two and a board of education employee. The third reader was a 57-year old, separated after 30 years of marriage, mother of three, retired entrepreneur. Another reader was a 28-year old, divorced mother of one employed as a receptionist. The fifth reader was a 56-year old teacher, a mother of three who was recently divorced after thirty years of marriage. The last reader was a 34-year old single woman working in the field of accounting.

Each of the women were asked by me on an individual basis to participate as a reader in a study I was conducting. The requirements for the study were 1) each woman was to read the novel *Ugly Ways* and 2) to meet with me for two fifty (50) minute sessions (three weeks post reading and fifteen weeks post reading) to discuss the novel. During these sessions my questions included 1) what did you like about the book? 2) how did the book speak to your particular life experiences and issues? 3) was the book helpful to you? If so, in what way? and 4) did the book cause you to learn anything about yourself? If so, what, and how did you understand that happening?
The Persons

Case histories and the revelatory accounts of four participants from three of the five groups that comprised this study are presented below. These persons and their revelatory accounts were selected because 1) they self-reported experiencing identity formation/growth due to the novel/group process and 2) they identify the process as revelatory in that they experienced meaning-making in an interpretative and unifying fashion.

Case History I - Judy

Judy is a 32-year old African-American who entered individual therapy, presenting depression that she attributed to her failure to cope with an overload of problems. She is an active and involved member in her church and was referred to me by her pastor. She had sought counsel with him regarding her feelings of depression and an unending sense of void in her life. After meeting with Judy on three occasions he suggested that she seek a more intense therapy than he was able to afford.

Judy is a hardworking individual who prides herself on being independent. She is employed in an administrative position and has recently completed a two-year associate degree in business. She is an attractive although overly thin young woman. Judy constantly complains about her inability to be connected with people in a satisfying manner. She has not experienced a gratifying male relationship since the death of her husband. Judy often speaks about her mother with irritation. Judy feels that she is the one who has the mother role in her family and she is pulled between liking the power and hating the irresponsibility of others.
Judy is the second of five children, having one older brother, a younger sister and two younger brothers. She and two of her siblings were born in Judy’s mother’s hometown in northern Georgia. Judy and two of her siblings, born out of wedlock, spent their early years there. Judy speaks of her birthplace as home and speaks of it with fond memories saying they had a lot of fun times there. Judy along with her mother and her two siblings resided in the home of her maternal grandparents. Judy’s maternal aunt and her three children also shared the residence. Judy recalls that when she was about five years old her mother became involved with a man that subsequently fathered her two youngest brothers. This is the person who Judy refers to as her father. Judy had never met her biological father but was aware of his name through family conversations which usually did not include her. While Judy was in individual therapy, the man she understood to be her biological father called her during a visit to Atlanta. Judy experienced a sense of being re-claimed by this interaction only to be subsequently informed by her mother that this man was not her father. Judy’s other two siblings living in the home were fathered by another man with whom they had intermittent contact.

Judy cited a major discovery she made in her family history. She recalled finding her parents’ marriage certificate after they had divorced and discovered that they had lived together for several years prior to their marrying. This was an unsettling find for Judy as this conflicted with her previous good feelings about her mother’s husband. She rationalized her parents living together due to her father having been married when he met her mother and remaining so for subsequent years thereafter.

Judy’s parents divorced after being together ten years. Judy’s mother moved with her children to Atlanta, trained as a practical nurse, secured employment that she
continues to the present. Judy assesses her family’s life prior to the divorce as good, she loved her father and he provided well for the family. Her only negative comment about this period was that her father drank.

Judy described life after her parents’ divorce negatively. Money and basic accommodations were scant. Judy at sixteen became pregnant, and as she bitterly described it, was physically forced by her mother to have an abortion. A year later, upon graduating from high school, Judy married her aborted child’s father. Judy described her husband as supportive both mentally and financially. She said he worked hard, they had a nice apartment, and they were able to afford extras for themselves as well as assist other family members in need. Judy’s husband was killed four years later by his brother-in-law as he sought to assist his sister in a domestic dispute. The only complaint Judy offered about her husband was that he drank excessively every weekend with his friends. Judy has no children and reports no subsequent pregnancies after her abortion.

Judy described her current relationship with her mother as strained. Judy describes her mother as having destructive behaviors towards those who care about her. Judy supports her perspective citing various injustices she identifies done to her, her other siblings and her father by her mother. Currently Judy’s mother is married to a man Judy states that she despises because of his past drug usage and his current alleged drug selling. Judy states she also resents her mother’s preferential treatment of her step-father over her children. Judy expresses anger with her mother for not being a good enough mother when she was a child as well as continuing to fail to meet her or her other siblings’ mothering ideal or needs. Currently, Judy’s eldest brother is employed by the Army and separated from his wife and their son. Judy’s sister is living with her mother,
is drug addicted and unable to adequately parent her six-year old daughter. Judy’s next to the youngest brother is in college and her youngest brother is completing high school. Judy shares with her mother the responsibility of her niece. Judy also expresses her resentment towards her mother for soliciting Judy for advice that she never heeds to or the continual request for physical or monetary assistance. Judy interprets these requests as demands which she cannot refuse.

Two years following the death of Judy’s husband, she became involved with a young man. He asked Judy to marry him on several occasions to which she continually declined. Both Judy and the young man were riders in a work car pool. One day as they rode to work he informed her that if she would not marry him, he knew someone who would. After this incident Judy did not see the young man for a week. He later appeared at Judy’s house unexpected late one evening and demanded that they talk. Judy opened the door, he entered and became instantly enraged and raped her. Judy pressed charges of rape, went to court, and testified against him. He was found not guilty.

The year before Judy entered therapy she suffered a substantial financial and emotional loss. A man she had been dating for less than six months had stolen her car and her credit cards. This event marked the culmination of Judy’s ability to suppress the years of personal and relational disappointment and the future possibility of financial ruin. Judy had been in individual therapy for nineteen months when she entered the group study. (Group I)

Revelation: I’ve always felt unloved. Unloved by my mother, my father, whoever he is, and my family too. I don’t have any real friends. I have people I do things with or
for but I wouldn’t call that a friend. I’ve always wanted male validation. I wanted my step-father to love me, I wanted my husband to love me, but none of them loved me the way I wanted to be loved. I love my mother and she can’t love me like I want to be loved. I never thought about it before, but I don’t really know how to tell someone or even describe to myself what I’m looking for. I know my mother loves me but its always works out best when I’m mad at her. I don’t know how to be with her when I’m not mad.

I guess that’s one of the reasons I seek male friends more than women. But those haven’t worked out either. I always say I love me, I take care of me, but I wonder if deep down inside if I like me. My mother tells me that I’m always looking for love in all the wrong places. Could be, or maybe I don’t know it when I see it.

Case History II - Pam

Pam is a 34-year old African American who entered individual therapy stating she “wants to deal with experiences of her past that impede her today.” Pam identifies her major fear as the thought of being alone: unwed, companionless, friendless and childless. Since graduating from college, all of Pam’s girlfriends have married and started families. She says that she has not developed any real friends since college and with her friends being married and mothers they no longer are available to do things with her like they used to. She also fears that she has a physiological disorder that will prevent her from having children. This has not been substantiated by medical examination. Pam says she frequently experiences awful churning sensations in her lower abdomen and attributes this to her perceived malady. She claims her reasoning for not seeking medical evaluation is that she’s afraid of having her diagnosis affirmed.
Pam is the eldest of two children. She has a brother three years her junior. Pam’s parents presently live in a small south Georgia town. Pam recalls her childhood as happy and uneventful, spending most of her idle time with her brother who served as her primary playmate. They lived a mile from their nearest neighbor.

Pam’s mother married at the age of 23 and Pam was born a year later. Her mother was the youngest of seven siblings and discontinued her education during the seventh grade due to the difficulty of getting to a school that was located several miles from their home. Pam’s father, who is five years his wife’s senior and an only child, also did not complete high school.

Pam describes her father as a hard worker. Currently, he is retired due to a job-related disability. He had worked at a local quarry for as long as Pam could remember working his way from a menial laborer to a supervisor. She recalls her father’s ability to ‘fix things’ and states her only shared enjoyable memories with her father are related to his repairing or preparing items for her or other family members. Pam states that her father had been an alcoholic until a few years ago when he began to have problems with his health. She states that his alcoholism had long been a major source of arguments between her parents. Pam appears conflicted and agitated discussing her father. She states that she did not like him because he made life so miserable for her mother and consequently herself. Pam finds it difficult to hold in tension her positive and negative feelings and images of her father. She verbalizes this conflict stating whatever he did good was of little or no consequence; whereas whatever he did that she considered bad was intentional and with malice.
Pam's description of her mother was no less conflicting. She recalls her mother being in the home during her and her brother's pre-school years. These early recollections are of her mother sewing while she and her brother played in and out of the house. She remembers her mother as a loner, recalling no visitations by either family relations or friends. Central to Pam's understanding of her relationship as a daughter, is her mother's constant reminder, "you're the only one who will listen to me." After Pam and her brother began school her mother secured a position in the school cafeteria where she is still employed today. Pam understood her mother's working as not necessary for the support of the family's basic needs but affording the extras that provided comfort. In describing her relationship with her mother, Pam calls herself her mother's confidante. Pam heard from her mother the distresses of being in relationship with a man whom she felt did not respect or care for her. Pam interpreted the actions of her father to be unwarranted and therefore saw her father as a villain and her mother as a victim. Pam perceived her role as mediator. This mediating service was originally provided by Pam for both her parents. She listened to her father express his displeasure with her mother and also listened to her mother express her displeasure with her father. This process was discontinued when Pam's father accused her of disclosing information that he had shared with Pam to her mother. This resulted in Pam feeling betrayed by her father and aligning solely with her mother. This situation re-enforced Pam's identification with her mother as victim and herself as the devoted daughter. After this incident, Pam describes the house as divided into two camps: she and her mother against her brother and her father.

Pam speaks of her relationship with her brother as being the most satisfying and the less conflicted relationship she has. She recalls happy childhood memories of
playing with her brother and his trucks under the trees in her family's yard. Pam expresses admiration for her brother, who is currently a long distance truck driver which she understands to be the fulfillment of his childhood dream. To Pam, this symbolizes making a decision and sticking with it. This is very important for Pam who expresses with conviction that once a decision is made, it should be adhered to or one risks being considered not true to his/her word, i.e., your word is your bond, and you are bound to it regardless of any new information and/or situation changes.

Pam speaks about her school experiences, stating she was a good student and participated in school activities such as the chorus and the business club. She remembers having friends but when questioned about dating, she quickly replies that she didn’t date and that she intentionally did not allow herself to be in the position to be asked. Several sessions later into therapy, I again inquired about her having relationships with males and she responded that she had participated in heavy petting once with one male after she moved to Atlanta but that subject was private and personal and she would rather not talk about it.

Upon completion of high school, Pam attended college approximately an hour from her home. She majored in business and during her second year pledged a sorority. Her close relationship with her sorors distressed her mother who felt that Pam was spending too much time with those young ladies and their inclination to social activities were unbecoming. Pam withdrew from the pledging process to appease her mother but decided the following year to reapply and completed the process to her mother's disappointment. Pam’s graduation from college marked not only a personal goal attainment but also one for the family as Pam was the first person in her extended family.
to receive a college degree. Pam immediately secured employment in the secondary school system from which she had previously graduated and remained there for one year. Pam states that due to the ongoing discomfort she continued to experience in her home as the result of the quarrelsome nature of her parents' relationship, she relocated to Atlanta, roomed with a sorority sister and sought employment. Presently Pam lives in Atlanta working a full-time and a part-time job in the field of accounting.

Pam had been in individual therapy for eighteen months when I suggested that she read the book *Ugly Ways*. (Control group- individual therapy and narrative)

**Revelation:** I always thought the best thing to do is to stick to your word, do what you said you would do. It's like the 11th commandment. When I went to the beach I made myself do something that I was afraid to do. I walked up to the top of the light house. A lot of the people didn't go all the way to the top, but I did. Even when it got narrower I was determined to go. I guess that's me... When I was walking on the beach I thought about a Sunday school lesson that talked about casting your cares on the water. I walked up and down the beach collecting pieces of shells and rocks. I threw them all in the water, one by one. I thought about what Mudear (a character in the novel) would say every time her daughters would talk about what they wouldn't do, "just keep on living, daughter." I tell myself that now.

**Case History III - Mimi**

Mimi is a 26-year old African-American seminary student who participated in group II. The extent of my therapeutic contact with Mimi was in the group context environment and therefore a detailed history is not available. The following history is constructed from the information Mimi shared with the group about herself.
Mimi understands the central influence in her life has been the teachings, rituals, activities and expectations of her local church. She describes her life as being organized around her understanding of servanthood, i.e., all that she is, is because of God. Therefore, all her efforts should be directed to service to God. This is manifested in Mimi’s vocational desire to work with and for the church in the capacity of a trained leader ranging from Christian Education Director to Pastor.

Mimi’s attitude of service, gratitude and commitment to the church parallels her relationship to her family. Mimi is the eldest of four children and has functioned as the caretaker. Mimi states that she and her mother have a strained relationship which Mimi attributes to her confiding to her mother at the age of ten that she was being sexually molested by her father. Mimi recalls that she experienced her mother distancing herself from Mimi as well as her siblings after this sharing by Mimi. Mimi laments that her mother refused to accept her allegation as truthful and has continually refused to discuss it with Mimi. Consequently, Mimi feels that she has spent the last sixteen years of her life trying to get her mother to love her, to believe her and to accept her.

Despite Mimi’s commitment to the church, she is also involved with the same type of relationship where she is seeking the church to validate her, to believe that she is capable, and to accept her. The basis of the tension in Mimi’s church relationship is that the church’s tradition and polity does not validate or accept women in the leadership roles that Mimi desires and is spiritually and academically equipped to serve. Again, Mimi finds herself conflicted in a needed relationship in which she is not able to receive the support, care and validation that she needs. Currently, Mimi is engaged to be married but
fears that her neediness for acceptance, love and validation might be too cumbersome and possibly even detrimental to this relationship.

Revelation: I've been afraid for a long time. Not just afraid but ashamed too. People don't know what it's like to be sexually abused as a child. You don't get over it, you just get older with it. But that's the revelation for me, it's with me and it's going to stay with me. I haven't been able to live with it or anything else for that matter since it happened. I still hate it, if it was a finger, my hand or even my arm I would cut it off. But it's in my heart, and I have to learn to live, not to survive or exist, but to live with it.

Case History IV - Gina

Gina is a 37-year old African-American who is also a participant in group II. Gina comes to the group with a variety of life experiences. She has been a successful entrepreneur, prior to that working as a waitress, and a consultant for beauty products and fashion. Gina appears to like herself, ready to point out what she considered her assets and also willing to talk about what she considered her faults. She often stated, “I sure don’t believe I'm not the most beautiful or the smartest black female around, but it sure doesn’t hurt to try.”

Gina’s care for herself appeared to mirror her care for others. Gina shared with the group that life as a child had not been the best. She states that she felt loved by her parents but also abused. Similar to Mimi, Gina recalled having a strained relationship with her mother. This began when Gina was around twelve years of age and her mother became suspicious of Gina and her father. Gina recalls her mother monitoring what Gina wore in and out of the house and Gina’s conversations and interactions with her father.
On occasions overt accusations were made, suggesting that Gina was trying to seduce her father or that her father was being inappropriate in his actions towards and with Gina.

Gina never confirmed or denied her mother's accusations to the group. She stated that as a consequence of her mother's intense "hawkings," both Gina's mother and father were very strict about her socializing with males. Gina stated that her parents refused to let her date boys one on one. All of her social activities that included males had to be done in a group context. Gina stated that as soon as she finished high school she married as a way to get out of her parents' home and to be able to be in a relationship with a male. The marriage lasted for two years and netted two sons. Gina stated that the years immediately following the breakup of her marriage were difficult but she knew that she was a survivor and that she could make it. Her parents assisted her with child care and college tuition. She worked full-time, maintained an apartment and in seven years graduated from college.

Gina stated that she has always been a religious person and realized about two years prior to coming to seminary that her life was about doing ministry. With her sons grown and living independently Gina relocated to Atlanta to pursue educational preparation in response to her call to ministry.

**Revelation:** *Being in the group took away some of the fears I have had about being close to other black women. Reading the book and being with the group caused me to realize that my family was no different. When I go home my mother has a habit of saying "That's how Tiny is." I have lived in other states for the last eighteen years away, far away, from my family. I have changed a lot. How could they know that? I guess, only God and Tiny really knows.*
CHAPTER VIII
DISCUSSION OF STUDY RESULTS

This study investigates the existence of a relationship between narrative/story that is shared and discussed in a group context and the experience of revelation as a methodology for identity formation/change in African-American women. In the following pages I present the results generated from five groups (four experimental groups and one control group) that composed this study in two sections; the objective quantitative results and the qualitative subjective interpretation of the quantitative results.

The Quantitative Results

Group I consisted of seven African-American women who had been in individual therapy with me for at least twelve months and myself as participant/observer/researcher. Group II consisted of five African-American seminarians who were enrolled in a women’s group therapy course and myself as participant/observer/researcher. Group III consisted of ten African-American seminarians who were enrolled in a reflection class as a part of a community service internship and myself. This group consisted of seven females and three males. The large size of the group, the heterogeneous gender mixture, and the limited times we were scheduled to meet impeded the ability of group formation, therefore this group functioned more as a class than a therapeutic environment. Group IV consisted of two African-American seminarian students and myself as
participant/observer/researcher. Group V consisted of six African-American women. These six women represent a group only figuratively in that 1) they shared in common the reading of the novel Ugly Ways, and 2) they were not exposed to a group environment for discussions of the reading. These women did not in the context of this study meet each other or discuss the book with each other. Within the control group, there were two sub-groups. One sub-group consisted of African-American women who were currently in individual therapy with me. There were two women in this sub-group. The second sub-group consisted of women who at the time of the study were not in any form of therapy. This sub-group consisted of four women. One woman in the group reported having psychoanalysis for three years approximately ten years, prior to her participation in this study. The other three women reported no prior psychotherapeutic experience.

The total number of group participants, excluding myself, were thirty (30).

Of the total number, twenty-seven (27) were African-American women and (3) were African-American men. Out of the twenty-seven (27) women, fourteen (14) were seminarians, one (1) was a college student, one (1) was a retired entrepreneur and eleven (11) full-time employees. All of the participants except one had some college experience. Twenty-six (26) of the participants (23 female and 3 male) had a bachelor's degree. Two (2) of the female participants possessed master level degrees, one (1) female had an associate degree and one (1) female had completed three years of college and discontinued.

All of the participants are active members of a Christian church and expressed
that their faith has been and continues to be central to their understanding of their self, their actions and their relationship with others. The denominational breakdown is as follows: Group I consisted of three (3) African Methodist Episcopal, two (2) United Methodist, (1) Baptist, and one (1) Pentecostal. Group II consisted of one (1) African Methodist Episcopal, two (2) United Methodist, one (1) Baptist, and one (1) Pentecostal. Group III consisted of three (3) African Methodist Episcopal, two (2) United Methodist, four (4) Baptist, and one (1) Church of God in Christ. Group IV consisted of two (2) African Methodist Episcopal. Group V consisted of one (1) African Methodist Episcopal, three (3) Baptist and two (2) non-denominational. A denominational breakdown of the entire study yields ten (10) African Methodist Episcopal, five (5) United Methodist, nine (9) Baptist, two (2) Pentecostal, one (1) Church of God in Christ, and two (2) non-denominational.

Having shared information concerning the educational status and the faith preferences of the participants in the study, I now focus on reporting the participants' self-assessment evaluations. The method of participants' self-assessment for Groups I-IV was in the form of a two-page reflection paper. Participants were asked to write about their experience as it related to 1) reading the novel, *Ugly Ways*, and 2) participating in a group context. They were asked to assess if they felt they had experienced, in this process revelation, i.e., had they experienced a sense of illumination that gave meaning to, not only their individual self, but also to the way they understood God working in their lives and in the larger world? Was this experience of understanding also organizing and unifying, i.e., did it help them to better understand themselves in light of their personal and communal past and present? Did it also help them to envision not only a
personal future but, through an appropriation of a common history, perceive a communal future hope? Did they feel reading the novel had anything to do with that experience, and if so how? Did they think being in a group context, having group discussions had anything to do with having that experience, and if so how?

From the reading of the reflection papers generated by the four groups (twenty one (21) reflection papers were submitted- three participants in group III did not submit a reflection paper) and the oral interviews with six participants comprising the control group, six (6) tables were generated for reporting the results. Table 1 reports the study participants’ assessment of experiencing revelation. (Revelation was defined to the group participants as an organizing, transforming power that gives clarity and unity to one’s past, present, and future. This transforming power renders one more knowledgeable of God, self, and the world.) Table 2 reports participants’ assessment of experiencing change or enhancement in self perception and attributing or relating that to the experience of revelation. (Change or Enhancement in Self Perception was the phrase I identified to be synonymous with identity formation/change.) Table 3 reports the participants’ assessment of their experience of revelation attributed or related to the combined effects of the novel and the group. Table 4 reports the participants’ assessment of their experience of revelation attributed or related to the group experience only. Table 5 reports the participants’ assessment of their experience of revelation attributed or related to only the reading of the novel. Table 6 reports participants’ assessment of having no experience of revelation. Another area that could have provided valuable information is the assessment of participants’ reporting the experience of change or enhancement in Self Perception with no experience of revelation. Although this could be inferred by the lack

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of it being presented in any of the participant assessments, regretfully during the time of research development and implementation this particular information was not identified to the study participants as an item to be considered in the development of their reflection paper.
Table 1

Participants Reporting an Experience of Revelation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Groups</th>
<th>Number of Persons Reporting</th>
<th>Total Number of Persons in Group</th>
<th>Percentage of Group Reporting</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Group I</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>(7)</td>
<td>71%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group II</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>(5)</td>
<td>60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group III</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>(10)</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group IV</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>(2)</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group V</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>(6)</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group Totals</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>(30)</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2

Participants Reporting Experiencing a Change or Enhancement in Self Perception Attributed or Related to Their Experience of Revelation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Groups</th>
<th>Number of Persons Reporting</th>
<th>Total Number of Persons in Group</th>
<th>Percentage of Group Reporting</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Group I</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>(7)</td>
<td>71%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group II</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>(5)</td>
<td>60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group III</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>(10)</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group IV</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>(2)</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group V</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>(6)</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group Totals</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>(30)</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Table 3

**Participants Reporting Experiencing Revelation and Attributing or Relating It to the Combined Effects of Reading the Novel and the Group Experience**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Groups</th>
<th>Number of Persons Reporting</th>
<th>Total Number of Persons in Group</th>
<th>Percentage of Group Reporting</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Group I</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>(7)</td>
<td>71%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group II</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>(5)</td>
<td>60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group III</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>(10)</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group IV</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>(2)</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group V</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>(6)</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group Totals</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>(30)</td>
<td>26%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Table 4

**Participants Reporting Experiencing Revelation and Attributing or Relating It to the Group Experience Only**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Groups</th>
<th>Number of Persons Reporting</th>
<th>Total Number of Persons in Group</th>
<th>Percentage of Group Reporting</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Group I</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>(7)</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group II</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>(5)</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group III</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>(10)</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group IV</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>(2)</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group V</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>(6)</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group Totals</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>(30)</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Table 5

Participants Reporting Experiencing Revelation and Attributing or Relating It to Reading the Novel Only

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Groups</th>
<th>Number of Persons Reporting</th>
<th>Total Number of Persons in Group</th>
<th>Percentage of Group Reporting</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Group I</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>(7)</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group II</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>(5)</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group III</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>(10)</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group IV</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>(2)</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group V</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>(6)</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group Totals</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>(30)</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Table 6

Participants Reporting No Experience of Revelation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Groups</th>
<th>Number of Persons Reporting</th>
<th>Total Number of Persons</th>
<th>Percentage of Group Reporting</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Group I</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>(7)</td>
<td>29%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group II</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>(5)</td>
<td>40%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group III</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>(10)</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group IV</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>(2)</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group V</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>(6)</td>
<td>83%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group Totals</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>(30)</td>
<td>60%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Interpretation of the Results

This study sought to identify a relationship between narrative/story, group context and revelation that facilitated identity formation/change in African-American women. I proposed that narrative/story functions as a hermeneutic or a meaning-making vehicle that when combined within the context of a homogeneous group creates a conducive environment whereby revelation is facilitated. Such revelation, having both organizing and interpretive functions facilitates identity formation/growth. An equation of the process that I propose would be:

\[
\text{nove}l + \text{group} \rightarrow \text{revelation} \rightarrow \text{identity formation/change}
\]

i.e.,

\[
\text{nove}l \text{ plus group (facilitates or leads to) revelation (facilitates or leads to) identity formation/change.}
\]

I propose that the presence of two variables, novel and group, produce a conducive environment in which the manifestation of revelation is facilitated. This is not to say that the presence of novel and group = revelation (the presence of novel and group produces revelation), but that the probability of the manifestation of revelation is increased when both variables are present. This is an important clarification as I propose that revelation is not purely a cognitive phenomenon of gaining insight about one’s self, situation or condition, but rather revelation is a theological phenomenon representing the initiating action of God to humanity to better know one’s self through knowledge of and an ongoing relationship with God. Therefore I do not suggest that revelation will be experienced or can be created by the presence of novel and group rather, I propose that
revelation occurs more frequently in environments that contain both novel and group as opposed to environments consisting of either novel or group alone.

The second part of my hypothesis equation, revelation \(\rightarrow\) identity formation/change, states that revelation facilitates or tends towards \((\rightarrow)\) identity formation/change. This equation suggests a relationship between revelation and identity/formation. Specifically the equation, supported by the results of this study, suggests revelation tends to initiate, act as a catalyst, and/or precede identity formation/change.

My analysis or interpretation of the results compiled from the participants’ change self-assessments and the oral interviews begins with a comparison of the results to the hypothetical equation. A comparative analysis of the data of Table 1 (Participants Reporting an Experience of Revelation) with the data of Table II (Participants Reporting Experiencing a Change or Enhancement of Self Perception Attributed to Their Experience of Revelation) shows 100% congruence. That is, participants who reported an experience of revelation also reported experiencing a change or enhancement of self perception and attributed their experience of change or enhancement of self perception to the experience of revelation.

These results raise two significant issues for further discussion. First, the 100% congruency strongly supports the relationship proposed in this study and symbolized in the equation, revelation \(\rightarrow\) identity formation/change. In each case reporting an experience of revelation there was the correlating report of experiencing enhanced/self perception/change. Although this raises strong support for my proposed relationship between revelation and identity formation/change, the overall study’s numerical results
(the combined results of groups I-IV) present only 33% of the total study participants reporting an experience of revelation-identity formation/change.

A closer look at the reportings of the individual groups provides salient insight regarding the role of novel and the group context in the reporting of experiences of revelation. Group I presents the highest reporting of the experience of revelation (71%) followed by group II (60%). The reporting of the experience of revelation by group V is significantly lower, 16%. This wide disparity between the reportings of the experience of revelation-identity formation/change between groups I and II and group V is the basis for the second issue of significance generated by the results of the comparative analysis of the data of Table 1 and Table 2. Why were the reportings of revelation-identity formation/change significantly higher in groups I and II than in group V? What identifiable factors or conditions existed in groups I and II that were not present in group V? What identifiable factors or conditions did not exist in groups I and II that did exist in group V?

My methodology for this exploration and interpretation is as follows 1) conduct a comparative analysis of Tables 3, 4 and 5 with the goal of examining the factors and/or conditions that the study participants attributed or related to their experience of revelation-identity formation/change followed by 2) a group-by-group interpretation of the results, the structure and function of the group, and the role or usage of the novel by the group.
A Comparative Analysis of Tables 3, 4, and 5

Table 3 (p. 139) presents the results of the study participants’ reportings of experiencing a change or an enhancement in self perception that they attributed or related to their experience of revelation in the study. The results of Tables 1, 2 (p. 140) suggest a relationship between revelation and identity formation/change that is further substantiated in the data in Table 3. All of the participants of Groups I and II who reported an experience of revelation in Table 1, also reported an experience of change or enhancement in self perception in Table 2, and attributed or related the change or enhancement in self perception to the combined effects of reading the novel and the group experience. Group V’s reporting on Table 3 was not consistent with their reportings on Tables 1 and 2. (Group V reported one (1) in Tables 1 and 2 and zero (0) in Table 3.) The reporting of Group V is not interpreted as contra-indicative of the relationship of revelation to identity formation/change. Conversely, Group V’s reporting of zero (0) in Table 3 indicates that the participants did not assess their experience of revelation being attributed or related to the combined effects of reading the novel and the group experience, as the participant was not availed to a group context.

An examination of the individual groups provides pertinent information for a more in-depth interpretation of these results. Groups I, II, III, and IV met and interacted (on various levels) as a group in which the novel as well as issues of personal interest were discussed. Group V consisted of individual participants who never collectively met as the group and was not in the context of this study exposed to a group context for the discussion of the novel. Considering that Group V’s participation in the study did not include group exposure, it could be interpreted that the participant who had in Tables 1
and 2 reported experiencing revelation and change or enhancement in self perception did not report in Table 3 because reporting was precipitated by having participated in a group experience, which Group V participants were not privy to.

Table 4 (participants reporting experiencing revelation and attributing it or relating it to the group experience only p.139) and Table 5 (participants reporting experiencing revelation and attributing or relating it reading the novel only p.140) yield consistent reportings of zero (0) by Groups I and II. The results of the reportings of these two groups suggest that the group experience alone or the novel alone, was not assessed by the participant as sufficient for their experience of revelation reported in Tables 1 and 2. This reporting by Groups I and II is also consistent with their reporting in Table 3.

Group V reports one (1) assessment of the experience of revelation that is attributed or related to the reading of the novel only. This is consistent with participants of Group V only having access to the novel and an interview with the researcher. The participant reporting in Group V was in individual therapy with the researcher during the time of the study. The possible effects of the therapeutic relationship and the participants’ experience of revelation will be discussed later.

Consolidating the results of Tables 1-5 appears to substantiate the equation

\[ \text{novel} + \text{group experience} \rightarrow \text{revelation} \rightarrow \text{identity formation/change}. \]

An Interpretation of Table 6

Table 6 (p. 140) presents the assessment of participants reporting no experience of revelation. The reported results in Table 6 appear to be a simple inverse of the reported results in Table 1. What the results do not indicate are the participants’ assessments that
report an experience of increased understanding about self or others that do meet the organizing, transforming, unifying definition of revelation. Some comments reflective of such understanding and/or insight were, “I was shocked and comforted to read about persons who seem to get tripped up in life as much as I do, and still are perceived by others as successful.” Another participant stated, “I like to reread parts of the book at home by myself. It reminds me of my relationship with my mother, I loved her but I didn’t love her too.”

**A Group-by-Group Interpretation of the Results**

The results reported in Tables 1-5 reflect the work of the five groups. As reported in Tables 1 -3, five (5) of the seven (7) participants of Group I reported experiencing change or enhancement in their self perception which they attributed to an experience of revelation that was facilitated by the reading of the novel and the group experience. This group reported the highest number of participants experiencing revelation of all the five groups (Group II reported three (3), Group III reported zero (0), Group IV reported zero (0) and Group V reported one (1) ). Conversely, Group V reported one (1) of six (6) participants experiencing change or enhancement in their self perception which they attributed to revelation facilitated by the reading of the novel only.

An examination of the implementation of the two study factors, novel and group context, offers an interpretation for the wide range of reported results. Each study participant read the novel *Ugly Ways*, individually and outside of a group context. In this manner, the novel served as a constant factor in that its application to each study participant was not varied. The varying factor in this study was the structure and
composition of the five groups. Groups I, II, III, and IV were organized and met as collective bodies. Group V consisted of a collection of individuals who read the novel but never met as a group for subsequent discussions. The following discussion of the results of the individual groups offers information which suggests that the disparity in the range of the participants reporting an experience of revelation is directly related to the structure (group therapy or class/group therapy) and the composition of the group (all female or female and male).

Group I was organized and functioned as a therapeutic group. That is, the group understood itself organized towards the function of individually and collectively focused objective self-learning for the purpose of enhanced self understanding and growth. Each of the participants in this group had as his/her single motivation for being in the group, a desire to achieve something for himself/herself. Their participation in the group offered no compensation other than what they were able to receive through their investment in themselves and the group process. This self-help motivation, coupled with the participants’ previous and ongoing individual psychotherapeutic experience, enhanced the group’s ability to begin the process of norming, or developing the rules by which they would interact and work. The participants’ familiarity with the therapeutic environment and process facilitated the group’s ability to identify their objectives, set the rules by which the group would attempt to realize their objectives and then get to work.

The women of Group I, although sharing a familiarity with the therapeutic process, were still strangers to each other. The process of norming was easy for the group but a period of storming soon followed. Issues of control quickly surfaced as persons sought to establish themselves as group leader or to identify their perspectives as
normative. Much of the storming conversations involved participants speaking to their understanding of the nature of African-American male-female relationships. “What do men want?” “African-American women are stepped on by everyone, all the time.” “It seems like we’re the doormat for the world, ump, God’s gift to man.” These comments and others led the group into conversations of self-identity, “How do I understand who I am?” “Do I see myself as valuable, lovable, able, or even useful?” On occasions, group participants would use first order religious language for expressing their doubts or frustrations. “Maybe life would be better if I was more involved in the church,” or “Maybe God is just not too pleased with me, and that’s why I can’t seem to get my life together.” It was in the midst of such conversations that the transition from storming to performing began. The women appeared to experience a common feeling of longing, frustration and hurt. They knew something of what the novel talked about and how it was being told through their story and the stories of the other women in the group. They knew about loving themselves, loving others and loving God and yet somehow wondering if they felt loved by themselves, others and even God.

The sense of community generated among and experienced by the women facilitated many of the group members to venture to not only re-examine their understanding of their relationship with their self and others but also their relationship with God. One participant stated after sharing an account of being denied a position in her church because of her gender and the church’s tradition, “In spite of it all, God is able.” This statement was responded to by another participant retort of, “Yeah, I don’t doubt that God is able, but I sure do question if God’s willing.” Such remarks became foundational for persons re-examining their faith beliefs and more importantly seeking to
re-interpret God’s action in light of their personal and collective experiences as African-American women.

Group II was organized as a class that would participate in a group therapy experience. The objective of this group was to receive course credit with the secondary objective to have a therapeutic group experience. Only one woman out of the six composing the group had previous therapeutic experience; therefore, for the majority of the group this was to be their first therapeutic experience. The newness of the experience was manifested in participants wanting to assume a student observational approach to the encounter. Considerable time was spent in persons expressing verbally and behaviorally their preconceptions, expectations and reservations concerning group therapy. The group was finally able to began to develop a sense of cohesiveness and identity surrounding their commonality of being African-American females. Although they also shared in common being seminarians, they did not express this as central to their group identity.

Because of this newness to the therapeutic environment, and it being subsumed within a larger structure of a class, Group II spent a considerably longer period than Group I norming and storming towards becoming a cohesive group. This resulted in Group II having considerably less time than Group I for performing or working individually and collectively towards the group’s objectives.

Even though Group II was able to get into the performing mode, the group was subdivided into two factions. One faction wanted to function as a therapeutic group and committed themselves to sharing and listening towards the goal of further understanding and growth. The second faction was more class-oriented and expressed a suspicion and a resistance towards sharing with fellow classmates. This schism in the group was
demonstrated by persons in the second faction often being absent or late for the group meeting. I interpret the overall effects of the schism as delaying the initial performing of the group but having no overall detrimental effect.

Group III was composed of African-American seminarians, seven females and three males. Group III differed from Groups I, II and IV, not only in consisting of a hetero-gender population but also in the duration that the group met (eight meetings as opposed to sixteen) and the way the group functioned. This group functioned more as a class or a seminar than a therapeutic group. The combination of a hetero-gender population and the limited numbers of scheduled group meetings were not conducive for the development of a therapeutic group and the development of group cohesiveness or a group identity. This lack of a group cohesiveness prohibited the development of the freedom achieved in Groups I, II and IV that permitted those participants to challenge preconceptions of their self, their community and their faith. Group III participants functioned throughout the tenure of their meetings predominantly out of an individualistic, defensive posture. This was interpreted from the verbal expressions that were restricted to the promotion of their own particular perspectives and the validity of their individual belief claims and practices. This was often demonstrated by persons prefacing their comments with the phrase, “I could be wrong, but I’ve always…” Such comments were most often left unchallenged or responded to with, “I’m not saying that you’re wrong, but…” Declaration rather than discussion was the predominant form of verbalization in this group.

I also observed in Group III a marked difference in the manner and the intensity with which the females identified with the novel Ugly Ways as compared to Groups I
Female participants in Group III demonstrated difficulty engaging the novel. Many of the female participants stated that they were unable to relate to characters or the situations they encountered. Interestingly, the men appeared more verbal in the discussing of the novel. Comments such as, “I never knew that women thought like that,” “I would have never thought that was so important to women,” were characteristic. The females in the group, paradoxically, were more verbally engaging of the book Makes Me Wanna Holler that presented limited and male-oriented perceptions of African-American women. One female seminarian in this group wrote in her reflection paper,

The story by Nathan McCall was very insightful for me personally. I felt like I was able to “get in the head” of an African-American male by reading the book. I know I gained more insight on the “whys” behind the actions of African-American males. Ugly Ways is much harder to get “connected” with as the story unfolds.

I interpreted the hesitancy of the women to identify with Ugly Ways and their reticence to identify with Makes Me Wanna Holler indicative of the pervasive and unconscious effects of sexism. This situation suggested to me that women in a physical context inclusive of men are less able or willing to self-identify but rather subsume their experience to the experience of the men.

This phenomenon is described by Roberta Chopp in her book The Power to Speak. Chopp suggests that the pressure of conformity exuded by sexism, both overtly and covertly and both by men and women, often forces women seeking to find their own voice to withdraw from the conversations of males and seek an all-female context in order to hear and identify with their own voices. The process of separation for the purpose of differentiation is echoed in Erik Erikson’s identity stage (stage five) of his Eight Stages of Human Development. In this stage according to Erikson, persons
Eight Stages of Human Development. In this stage according to Erikson, persons struggle with the establishment and maintenance of a cohesive self as opposed to being enmeshed by or subsumed under stronger self images. This particular behavior of the women in Group III, having difficulty identifying with characters and situations that most of the women in Groups I, II, IV, and V immediately resonated with, suggests that the hetero-gender composition of Group III directly affected the women's ability and/or their willingness to respond to the novel *Ugly Ways*.

Consideration must also be given to the relationship of the lack of group cohesiveness to the observed lack of response by the women in Group III to the novel *Ugly Ways*. As I stated earlier, the limited times of meeting negatively affected Group III's ability to develop cohesiveness and a group identity. I do not presume that a hetero-gender cohesive group would be devoid of the sexism, but more importantly I do not propose nor do the reportings of Group V support that group experience is essential for women identifying with characters and their situations in the novel *Ugly Ways*. The ability of the women in Group V, who were not exposed to a group context for the discussion of the novel, to identify with the characters and situations portrayed in *Ugly Ways* adds credence to the conjecture that the hetero-gender composition of Group III was the major factor effecting the response of the females of that group. Therefore considering the proposed effects of group cohesiveness and hetero-gender composition on the functioning of Group III, I identify sexism as the specific altering variable contributing to the disparity of the results reporting experiences of revelation (Tables 1, 2, and 3) between Groups I and II and Group III.
Although Group III had no reports of the experience of revelation there were three reports of the experience of insight. Two of these reports were by males and one by a female. The males reporting an experience of insight associated it with the reading of *Ugly Ways* and the female reporting an experience of insight associated it with her reading of *Makes Me Wanna Holler*. These three reportings suggest to me a relationship between the experience of insight and external history and the experience of revelation and internal history. (I suggest that although African Americans share a cultural internal history, there exists even within that shared cultural internal history a more specific internal history of African-American females and African-American males that is external to the other gender.) That is, the reportings of insight were directly related to a perceived experience of “learning about another” through additional information provided rather than a “learning about self.” This inference supports the saliency of the correlation of internal history to revelation and also suggests a correlation between insight and external history. A broad statement summarizing the relationship of revelation to insight as evidenced in this study is: Revelation is about oneself and can include insight about self and others; insight is about another and does not include revelation about self but can include insight about self.

Group IV was organized as a reflection class for students who had the previous summer participated in a service learning project. Due to a conflict of scheduling only two students participated. The small size of this group presented certain challenges (see Chapter VII - Group IV), yet the group was able to establish its objectives and strive towards achieving them. For this group storming and performing existed side by side. The group functioned more on the format of a single-parent family with two children.
Both of the participants were experienced and capable African-American women who had functioned and continued to function in the role of leaders and caretakers. They were accustomed to identifying what they wanted and getting it. With their mastery of words and ideas they had not only seen themselves thus far through life but had assisted numerous others as well. They came to the group encounter to take notes and possibly learn something that they could apply to their helping of others.

The discussions generated by the reading of the novel often times took the form of a debate. One participant expressed extreme difficulty identifying with the characters and their situations. She quickly typified them as “dysfunctional,” stating that they or their situations no way remotely resonated with her experiences as a person or as a part of a family. She characterized the novel as presenting the “bad stuff” of persons’ lives, “having no point and no plot.” She stated in her reflection paper, “I render the challenge to those who see that God’s way is the best way, to actively engage in prayer to break the yoke that separates us.” This student utilized the group to express anger. She often spoke of the discrimination of African-American women in the work force and African-American female ministers in the church. She had shared with the group of her previous career in middle management and how she had always loved numbers because they were exact. I interpreted this student’s anger to be directly related to past experiences in her career as well as current and future challenges of being an African-American woman in ministry. The group was unable to engage her in a discussion about these feelings. Any such invitation for her to share disappointments or hurts was met with a broad ecclesiastical proclamation such as, “I contend that we are a people who have been set
free from the chains of slavery, but allow the enemy of God to spiritually bind us against ourselves.”

Conversely, the other participant in the group appeared to immediately engage and resonate with the characters of the novel and some of their situations. In her reflection paper she stated,

In the novel I encountered many experiences to reflect upon. They were parts of my life experiences and childhood reminiscence. However, I did not encounter an experience that has become revelatory to the extent that it helped me to understand something about me that caused me to make a positive change.

She goes on to state,

I have always felt that fiction mirrors the unconscious mind. In *Ugly Ways* my unconscious thoughts, fears and behaviors were signified.

This student used the group to explore her unresolved feelings of abandonment. She paralleled the mental illness of a character in the novel with a particular situation within her own family experience. Through viewing a similar situation from a safe distance, she was able to better appreciate the challenges faced by the person in her family as well as identify and appreciate her strength as a child living in an unstable environment.

Group V served as a control group. Six individuals were asked to read the novel *Ugly Ways* and were interviewed on two times by the researcher subsequent to their reading. The purpose of the interviews was to obtain information for analysis as to whether persons reading the novel without having exposure to the therapeutic group process evidenced experiences of revelation.
Each of the six women were interviewed individually. Out of the six participants only one participant reported an experience that fit the criteria for revelation. Four of the remaining five participants stated that the book had resonated with their experiences and had provided some insights of themselves and/or various aspects of their relating with family and others. One participant, a nineteen-year old college student stated that she enjoyed the book but she identified the characters and their experiences more akin to the experiences of her mother and her mother's generation.

The participant who reported experiencing revelation was at the time of the study also in individual therapy with me. She had opted, at the time when I extended the invitation to persons to be a participant in Group I, not to participate. Later on in her therapy she purchased the book and read it. After the participant read the book, I observed her using the novel to speak of her relationship with her mother. It appeared that talking about her mother in this fashion was less threatening for her and also allowed her to view her mother more distantly and objectively through the use of the novel character. Therefore although the participant was not formally availed to the group process, the function of the group process was facilitated in a limited fashion through her individual therapy sessions.

**Results Summary**

The results of this study strongly confirm a correlation between novel, group context, revelation and identity formation/change. Novels, in the context of this study, appear to provide the link that connects the world of the individual to the world of a larger community. This study does not suggest that the particular novel used in this study is the only or the best narrative to facilitate an experience of revelation in the context of a
group for African-American women. What this study does propose is that narrative working as a hermeneutic makes meaning available in a form that can be recognized, understood and incorporated by the reader. Further, the content of the narrative optimal for the individual is a narrative that evolves out of or is congruent with the reader's internal history. When this identification and interpretation takes place within a context of commonality, care and nurture, where constructive and adequate mirroring and idealizing are available, I propose that revelation facilitated identity formation/change is probable. The results of this study further substantiates that the optimal context for the experience of revelation that facilitates identity formation/growth for African-American women consists of the discussion of novel in an all-female African-American therapeutic group.

The results of this study also identify specific potential factors that may inhibit the experience of revelation that facilitates identity formation/growth. They are 1) mixed gender groups, 2) groups that are subsumed under class structures, 3) group size (too small-less than five or too large- more than eight), and 4) the scheduled duration of group (no less than sixteen weeks).
CHAPTER IX
STUDY IMPLICATIONS

I understand the implications for this study to be various and far-reaching. The implications are applicable to future research as well as directly applicable to contemporary situations and issues of human identity and development. I list three implications of further study that became evident and sparked keen interest for me in the process of my research.

This study suggests the need for the development of a more empirically-based research design resulting in a quantitative assessment of the relationship of narrative/story to identify formation/growth/change. Such research would require a significant larger and more diverse study population which would more definitively identify the role of narrative/story as a vehicle facilitating meaning making towards identity formation/growth/change.

Further research is also indicated and necessary to identify the cultural universality of this hypothesis. Does story function as a vehicle for facilitating meaning making towards identity formation/growth/change in other ethnic-gender groups? If so, to what degree and if not, are there cultural specific meaning making structures or vehicles specifically related to identity formation/growth/change?
Also, further research might examine the effects of such a study of identity formation in heterogeneous groups (cross-cultural and cross-gender). Are identity formation studies utilizing heterogeneous groups compromised in their group process and function or do individuals in the group feel oppressed or viewed as oppressors because of the overarching ramifications and often unconscious implications of racism, sexism and classism?

This study not only has implications for future study but also presents pertinent information and critical challenges for contemporary situations. There are three particular areas that I propose could significantly benefit from the research of this study that I will briefly introduce.

The first is the discipline of pastoral care/counseling, specifically in the area of identity formation/growth/change examining the relationship of culture and language to our understanding of self and the world. Although significant work has been done in examining and developing models for identity formation in Euro-Americans, very little attention has been focused on the systematically researching and developing such a model for African Americans in general and more specifically for African-American women. I believe this study weaves a connecting thread between various disciplines (theology, psychology and anthropology) as researched by African-American and Euro-American scholars, adding another patch to the developing quilt of understanding the African-American self.

The second area that I understand this study having direct implication is that of education. This study identifies the importance of context for achievement of goals.
Specifically in the field of education, African Americans have since the early 1900s questioned the effects of context and content in learning. In other words there appears to be a direct correlation between the context and content (where it’s taught, who does the teaching, what is taught and how is it taught) of education to the acquisition of knowledge and a healthy sense of self. To that effect, this study affirms 1) the necessity of establishing a wholesome and nurturing environment for learning, 2) content that is true and/or valid to the experience of the learner, and 3) the mediating of content in a manner that allows the person to make-meaning.

The third contemporary implication I identify for this study is no less important than those already mentioned. I believe this study offers significance, hope, and a methodology for many faithful African-American Christian women to examine or re-examine the basis of their understandings of self, God and others in light of their own particular African-American women experiences. As I proposed in this study, it is through the painful process of maintaining focus on understanding ourselves through a critical review of our personal and collective experiences and placing them alongside our understandings of God’s commitment to humanity and our culture’s commitment to our nurturance and growth we can, as African-American women, begin to identify the inconsistencies, the injustices, the irrelevancy and possibly even the omission of our particular African-American woman’s identity and experience in our individual lives, in the lives of our community, in our faith history and contemporary faith expressions, and in the larger world. This step of examination equips us to 1) re-interpret and re-align our understandings of self and, faith and community through our experience of God working in our lives as African-American women and 2) acknowledge our particular lived
experiences as valid and significant for our selves as African-American women, for God and others.
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