Theological Orientations within the African American Protestant Church and Their Relationship to Racial Identity

Sheretta T. Butler-Barnes, M.A.,Wayne State University

Pamela P. Martin, Ph.D., North Carolina State University

Sigrid Julian Dixon, Ph.D., Michigan State University

Simone T. Robinson, B.A., Ecumenical Theological Seminary

Abstract

The purpose of this study was to examine whether theological teachings influence racial identity among a sample of African American church-goers. The study used a convenience sample of 206 African American adults recruited from 18 churches in two Midwestern cities. Simultaneous ordinary least squares regression analyses were used to examine the relationships between gender, education, and three theological orientations (this-worldly, other-worldly and a combination of both) on four distinct ideologies that reflect a black identity (e.g., assimilationist, nationalist, minority, and humanist). Compared to a combination of both this-worldly and other-wordly theological orientations, a this-worldly theological orientation was significantly and positively related to nationalist ideology. An other-worldly theological orientation was significantly and negatively related to an assimilationist ideology. Education was significantly and positively related to two black identity ideologies (humanist and assimilationist) for participants who attended some college. Compared to individuals who earned a college degree, individuals having a high school diploma or less reported a significant and negative association with nationalist ideology. Finally, gender was significantly associated with a black nationalist identity. Implications for African Americans' racial identity beliefs and the role of the church in shaping racial identity are discussed.

Introduction

Research across a variety of disciplines including sociology, anthropology, education, law, and psychology continue to advance our understanding of African American religion and spirituality (Armstrong & Crowther, 2002; Berkel**,** Armstrong, & Cokley, 2004; Billingsley & Caldwell, 1994; Frazier, 1964; Harris, 1994; Lincoln & Mamiya, 1990; Mattis, 1997; 2000; Mattis & Jagers, 2001; Taylor, Chatters, & Levin, 2004). Although some scholars have associated the relationships between the religious behavior and spirituality among African Americans with positive outcomes (Ellison, 1997; Mattis & Jaggers, 2001; Taylor et al., 2004), the implications of religiosity for racial identity construction among African Americans remain uncertain. Regrettably, researchers have overlooked the exploration of how diverse theological orientations in African American Protestant churches affect racial identity.

Linking Theology to Racial Identity

According to some scholars, theology may indeed reinforce, and/or strengthen the teachings articulated within some organized religious settings, placing emphasis upon the nature, creation, and attributes of God (Kyeremateng, 1998). For example, theological teachings have historically been used to help communicate and interpret biblical truths and often provide culturally-situated explanations of creation, love, faith, hope, and salvation. Theological discourse also serves as a vehicle for conveying biblical truths with contemporary foci. Such discourse can involve the reporting of incidents of social injustice and oppression. In addition to themes of social injustice and oppression, the theological perspectives that emerge from the sermons crafted by African American clergy often reflect hope and resilience.

Lincoln and Mamiya (1990) argue that African American religious teachings can include both this-worldly and other-worldly theological perspectives. They also argue that within many black churches, sermons tend to be characterized by the particular

theological orientation of the leader. Furthermore, this-worldly and other-worldly theological perspectives can result in a dialectical tension between theological teachings and belief systems (Lincoln & Mamiya, 1990).

In this study, we explored the variation of theological perspectives along a this-worldly versus an other-worldly continuum. A this-worldly theological perspective stresses the significance of African and African American cultures in understanding the Bible as a symbol of and prophetic call towards the mental, physical, and spiritual liberation of black people in America (Cone, 1997; Martin & Martin, 1985; West & Glaude, 2003). Conversely, an other-worldly theological perspective centers on sanctification and preparation for heaven, while often placing less emphasis on persistent social inequalities that may exist in some African American communities (Lincoln & Mamiya, 1990).

Previous research on the relationship between theological teaching and African American racial identity development suggest that an other-worldly theological perspective actually attenuates African American racial identity development (Ellison, 1993; Frazier, 1964; Marx, 1967). This body of research has been criticized for its oversimplification of other-worldly teachings as only focusing on the afterlife and sanctification, while neglecting to acknowledge the involvement of black churches in historical and contemporary social justice movements (Calhoun-Brown, 1998; Nelson & Nelson, 1975; Nelson, Maldron, & Yokley, 1981). Calhoun-Brown (1998) found that an other-worldly theological orientation positively predicts a separatist-oriented ideology regarding racial empowerment among African American adults. The existing literatures on theology and black racial identity also tend to limit their focus on an other-worldly theology. Findings from this study may help expand our understanding of this relationship.

Martin (2001) examined the theological orientation of a select group of black churches located in the Midwestern United States and found that the African American Protestant churches sampled provided both a "this-worldly" and an "other-worldly" theological perspective. Findings from the Martin study suggest each of these theological orientations address prevalent social issues in the African American community while underscoring religious values. Yet, empirical research focusing on theology and racial identity does not clearly define the role of theology in shaping racial identity. Our review of the literature suggests additional research is needed to help us better understand the relationship between theological teaching and the development of racial identity.

The concept of racial identity refers to the degree to which an individual explores, comprehends and acknowledges a unique heritage associated with African American cultural practices (Helms, 1990; Sanders-Thompson & Akbar, 2004). It also encompasses the numerous qualitative descriptors that represent the experiences of people living in African American communities (Sellers, Rowley, Chavous, Shelton, & Smith 1997; Sellers, Smith, Shelton, Rowley, & Chavous, 1998). Racial identity is not a fixed personality trait and, as such, is influenced and shaped by factors internal and external to the individual. Because of the dearth and equivocal nature of the scientific literature on the relationship between theological orientations and racial identity, this study investigates the role of three theological orientations (other-worldly, this-worldly, and a combination of other-worldly and this-worldly) in shaping racial identity in a sample of African American adults.

Methods

Sample and Data Collection

A purposive sample of 18 predominantly African American churches in two Midwestern cities provided sites for recruiting a convenience sample of 206 African American adults. Participants were part of a larger study that examined religious and racial socialization practices.

A research team consisting of the primary investigator, two trained graduate students, and two trained undergraduate research assistants administered a structured questionnaire to participants, who could choose to complete the questionnaire in either a group setting or privately. The primary investigator met with the appropriate church members (i.e., choir director, Bible study teacher, or the head of the men's or women's auxiliary) to obtain permission to administer the survey during a weekly church meeting time such as Bible study or choir rehearsal. Prior to administering the survey, a trained interviewer explained the study and administered a written informed consent to participants who were told the survey would take approximately an hour. Participants were given a $10 honorarium.

Measures

Socio-demographics. Self-report demographic data were obtained by having participants report their gender (0=male; 1=female) and education, which was assessed as (1) having high school diploma, graduate equivalency diploma (GED) or less, (2) attended some college, and (3) having earned a college degree or an advanced degree.

Theological Orientations. The principal investigator interviewed eight key informants from among representatives of African American organizations, community leaders and politicians. Key informants provided information about churches that represented a this-worldly and an other-worldly theological orientation. The principal investigator used these categories to develop three categories of this-worldly versus other-worldly orientation: (1) solely this-worldly, (2) solely other-worldly, and (3) a combination of both.

To reconcile any differences in identifying categories among key informants, the principal investigator met with each informant separately until consensus was reached regarding the placement of each church in one of the three categories. Most disagreements among key informants occurred in identifying the combination category – both this worldly and other-worldly. The initial inter-rater reliability based on Cohen's Kappa in categorizing churches into one of the three categories was .71; the final inter-rater reliability was .92.

Dependent Measure. This study utilized the ideology subscale of the Multidimensional Inventory of Black Identity (MIBI). This subscale consists of nine items and four subscales that measure individuals' attitudes, behaviors, and beliefs regarding how African Americans should negotiate through society (Sellers et al., 1998). It uses a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = very strongly disagree to 7 = very strongly agree. The Assimilationist Ideology subscale (α =.70) measures the extent to which respondents endorse an ideology that emphasizes the similarities between African Americans and mainstream society (e.g., "A sign of progress is that blacks are in the mainstream of America more than ever before."). The Nationalist Ideology subscale (α =.79) assesses the extent to which respondents endorse an ideology that emphasizes the uniqueness of being African American (e.g., "It is important for black people to surround their children with black art, music and literature."). The Humanist Ideology subscale (α =.70) examines the extent to which respondents endorse an ideology that emphasizes the similarities among individuals of all races (e.g., "People regardless of their race have strengths and limitations."). The Minority Ideology subscale (α =.76) explores the extent to which respondents endorse an ideology that emphasizes the similarities between African Americans and other oppressed groups (e.g. "Black people should treat other oppressed groups as allies."). High scores on each of the ideology dimensions represent a stronger endorsement of each of the respective ideologies.

Analyses Strategies

We conducted descriptive statistics on participants' gender as well as key informants' responses in grouping the three theological orientations. Further, we used simultaneous ordinary least square regression analyses to regress gender, education and the theological

orientations (other-worldly and this worldly as predictors; the combination of other-worldly and this-worldly as the reference category) on each of the four ideological subscales of the MIBI. A statistically significant result for all analyses was defined as p < .05.

Results

Eight key informants classified 206 participants representing the 18 black churches into three categories: 1) other-worldly (n=65), 2) this worldly (n=78), and 3) a combination of other-worldly and this-worldly (n=63). Participants were predominantly female (85%) and had a mean age of 40 years. A majority of participants had completed some college education (20%) or earned a college degree at the bachelors or graduate level (43%) with the remaining participants earning a high school education or less (37%). The mean score for participants on the Assimilationist, Nationalist, Humanist and Minority ideology subscales, which could range from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree), was 4.17, 3.77, 4.37, 3.92, respectively.

Table 1 shows results of simultaneous ordinary least squares regression analyses used to examine an association between gender, education level, theological orientations (other-worldly and this-worldly) and each of the racial ideology subscales. Females were significantly less likely to endorse a nationalist ideology than men, whereas no significant gender difference was observed for either an assimilationist, humanist (Table 1) or minority ideology (data not shown in Table 1). Participants with some college education compared to those who earned either a college degree and/or a professional degree were significantly more likely to endorse an assimilationist ideology or a humanist ideology. In contrast, participants who earned high school diploma or less compared to those with higher levels of education (i.e., earned college degree and/or a professional degree) were least likely to endorse a nationalist ideology. Education was not a significant predictor of minority ideology (data not shown in Table 1).

Table 1. Ordinary Least Squares Regression of the Three Black Identity Ideology Subscales on Gender, Education, Other-Worldly Theological Orientation and This-Worldly Orientation (N=205)

Variables	Model 1 Assimilationist		Model 2 Humanist		Model 3 Nationalist	
	B	SE	B	SE	B	SE
Gender	-.20	.14	-.21	.14	-.25	.12 *
High School Diploma or less[a]	.28	.15	.39	.14 **	-.36	.13 *
Some college[a]	.30	.12 *	.27	.11 *	-.16	.10
Other-Worldly	-.31	.13 *	-.12	.13	-.08	.12
This-Worldly	-.29	.13 *	-.33	.12 *	.28	.11 *
Adjusted R^2	.04		.06		.11	

*p < .05, **p <.01, ***p < .001
[a] Omitted category for education is earned a college degree and/or professional degree
Note: Betas are unstandardized. The reference category for gender is male; the reference category for other-worldly and this-worldly is the combination category of both other-worldly and this worldly.

Regarding the association between the two theological orientations, participants classified as having an other-worldly orientation were significantly less likely to endorse an assimilationist ideology as compared to those classified as having both an other-worldly orientation and a this-worldly orientation. No significant difference was observed between an other-worldly orientation and a nationalist, humanist or minority ideology (data not shown in Table 1). Participants classified as having a this-worldly orientation were significantly less likely to endorse an assimilationist or humanist ideology as compared to those classified as having either an other-worldly or a this-worldly orientation. Table 1 shows a significant positive association between a this-worldly orientation and a nationalist ideology, thus suggesting participants holding a this-worldly orientation were more likely to endorse a nationalist ideology compared to those classified as having both an other-worldly orientation and a this-worldly orientation. Data not shown in Table 1 indicated no statistically significant relationship between a this-worldly orientation and endorsement of a minority ideology.

Discussion

Prior research documents that African American Christians who attend church tend to represent a diverse array of theological orientations and racial identities (Cross, 1991; Levin, Taylor, & Chatters; 1995; Lincoln & Mamiya, 1990; Parham & Helms, 1985; Sellers et al., 1997, 1998). Consistent with prior research, findings from this study indicate variability among African American adults in both theological orientation and racial identity ideologies. Specifically, we found significant positive and negative endorsements of racial identity ideologies among African American adults holding theological orientations who attended churches which key informants described as having an other-worldly theological orientation (i.e., emphasizing solely personal salvation while avoiding teaching congregants about inequalities prevalent in some African American communities), or a this-worldly theological orientation (i.e., preparing the congregation for issues affecting the community). We found significant positive endorsements of nationalist racial identify beliefs among those African American participants attending churches that key informants described as having a "this-worldly" theological orientation. This observation is consistent with evidence indicating the multidimensionality of African Americans' racial identity, thus suggesting that an individual may hold numerous identity beliefs about his or her racial group (Sellers et al., 1998). Findings of this study may be used to illustrate the idea that African American parishioners who attend this-worldly churches indeed recognize that their relationships with God are linked to social and historical contexts within African American communities (Felder, 1989; Mattis, 2000; Mattis & Jagers, 2001). Thus, for these individuals a this-worldly theological orientation is congruent with nationalist attitudes that emphasize an appreciation of African American culture, increased involvement in African American organizations, and engagement in social activities primarily comprised of African Americans.

Regarding different racial ideologies, participants of churches with key informants who characterized the members as holding an other-worldly orientation were significantly less likely to endorse an assimilationist ideology. This finding suggests that adults who attend other-worldly churches may be less likely to emphasize similarities among people in society when compared to individuals attending churches incorporating both theological orientations. Congregants in churches with an approach characterized as other-worldly did not positively endorse any of the four racial ideologies. This finding contradicts prior research which suggests an other-worldly theological perspective is associated with a separatist orientation relating to racial empowerment (Calhoun-Brown, 1998). This finding may be attributed to different measures of the dimensions of racial identity.

Surprisingly, none of the three theological orientations examined in this study were significantly associated with an oppressed minority ideology. We considered the possibility that an oppressed minority identity would be closely linked with (1) this-worldly, and (2) combined this-worldly/other-worldly theological teachings. Thus, African Americans endorsing an oppressed minority identity might attend churches with diverse congregations regarding race/ethnicity. This sample represents African Americans attending predominately African American churches, and it may be that individuals who endorse minority ideology beliefs do not attend predominately African American churches. Future studies should investigate African Americans that attend churches with more ethnically/racially diverse congregations.

Implications and Limitations

This study serves as a preliminary investigation into an area of psychology and theology that has heretofore not received much attention in the social science or theological literatures: the relationship between theological teachings and the development of racial identities and/or ideologies that reflect these teachings. The coming together of the two disciplines – theology and psychology – reflects contemporary thinking about the important influences of religion and spirituality on cognition and behavior and helps to

further illustrate the important role of religion and spirituality in the psychology and culture of African American people. Furthermore, it points to the role of the black church as an important socializing agent as well as a source of empowerment and hope in the African American community.

The pioneers in racial identity research have done a wonderful job of generating robust theoretical models that help explain the development of racial identities. We hope to shed additional light on just one of the many important ways through which African American people develop the identities examined in this study. We argue that racial identity is shaped by a host of variables, including the history of black people in America, social and political zeitgeists, economics, and, most importantly, religion. Our hope is that others will continue this work by examining the theology of the 21st century black church to see if and how the teachings therein influence social and psychological development as well as cultural and racial identities.

Please direct all correspondence to Dr. Pam Martin, Department of Psychology, North Carolina State University, Poe Hall 714C, Box 7801, NCSU Campus, Raleigh, NC 27695, (919) 513-7392, (919) 515-1716-fax, pamela_martin@ncsu.edu.

References

Armstrong, T.D., & Crowther, M.R. (2002). Spirituality among older African Americans. *Journal of Adult Development, 9*(1), 3-12.

Berkel**,** L. A., Armstrong, T. D. & Cokley, K. O. (2004). Similarities and differences between religiosity and spirituality in African American college students: A preliminary investigation. *Counseling & Values, 49*(1), 2-14.

Billingsley, A. & Caldwell, C. H. (1994). The church, the family, and the school in the African American community. *Journal of Negro Education, 60*(3), 427-440.

Calhoun-Brown, A. (1998). While marching to Zion: Otherwordliness and racial empowerment in the black community. *Journal of Scientific Study of Religion, 37*(3), 427-439.

Cone, J. H. (1997). *Black theology & black power*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books.

Cross, W. E. (1991). *Shades of black: Diversity in African-American identity*. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press.

Ellison, C. G. (1993). Religious involvement and self-perception among black Americans. *Social Forces, 71*(4), 1027-1055.

Ellison, C. G. (1997). Contemporary African American religion: What have we learned from NSBA? *African American Research Perspectives, 3*(1), 30-40.

Felder, C. H. (1989). *Troubling biblical waters: Race, class, and family*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books.

Frazier, E. F. (1964). *The Negro church in America*. New York: Schocken Books.

Harris, F. C. (1994). Something within: Religion as a mobilizer of African-American political activism. *Journal of Politics, 56*(1), 42-68.

Helms, J. E. (1990). Introduction: Review of racial identity terminology. In J. E. Helms (Ed.), *Black and white racial identity: Theory, research and practice* (3-8). New York: Greenwood Press.

Kyeremateng, K. N. (1998). *Global religious viewpoints*. Accra, Ghana: Sebewie Publishers.

Levin, J. S., Taylor, L. M., & Chatters, L. M. (1995). A multidimensional measure of religious involvement for African Americans. *The Sociological Quarterly, 36*(1), 157-173.

Lincoln, E. C., & Mamiya, L. H. (1990). *The black church in the African American experience*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Martin, J. M., & Martin, E. P. (1985). *The helping tradition in the black family and community*. Silver Spring, MD: National Association of Social workers, Inc.

Martin, P. (2001). The African American church and African American parents: Examining relationships between racial socialization practices and racial identity attitudes. (Doctoral dissertation, Michigan State University, 2002). *Dissertation Abstracts International: Section B: The Sciences & Engineering*. US: Univ. Microfilms International.

Marx, G. T. (1967). Religion: Opiate or inspiration of civil rights militancy among Negros? *American Sociological Review*, *32*, 64-77.

Mattis, J.S. (1997). The spiritual well-being of African Americans: A preliminary analysis. *Journal of Prevention and Intervention in the Community: Special Issue*, *16*(1-2), 103-120.

Mattis, J. S. (2000). African American women's definitions of spirituality and religiosity. *Journal of Black Psychology*, *26*, 101-122.

Mattis, J. S., & Jagers, R. J. (2001). A relational framework for the study of religiosity and spirituality in the lives of African Americans. *Journal of Community Psychology, 29*(5), 519-539.

Nelson, H. M., Maldron, T. W., & Yokley, R. L. (1981). Black religion's promethean motif: Orthodoxy and militancy. *American Journal of Sociology*, *81*(1), 139-149.

Nelson, H. M., & Nelson, A. K. (1975). *Black church in the sixties.* Lexington, KY: The University of Kentucky Press.

Parham, T.A., & Helms, J.E. (1985). Relation of racial identity attitudes to self-actualization and affective states of black students. *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, *32*(3), 431-440.

Sanders-Thompson, V. L., & Akbar, M. (2004). The understanding of race and the construction of African American identity. *Western Journal of Black Studies*, *27*(2), 80-88.

Sellers, R. M., Rowley, S. A. J., Chavous, T. M., Shelton, J. N., & Smith, M. A. (1997). Multidimensional inventory of black identity: A preliminary investigation of reliability and construct validity. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 73*(4), 805-815.

Sellers, R. M., Smith, M. A., Shelton, J. N., Rowley, S. A. J., & Chavous, T. M. (1998). The multidimensional model of racial identity: A reconceptualization of African American racial identity. *Personality and Social Psychology Review, 2*(1), 18-39.

Taylor, R., Chatters, L., & Levin, J. (2004). *Religion in the lives of African Americans: Social, psychological, and health perspectives*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications.

West, C., & Glaude, E. S. (2003). *African American religious thought.* Louisville, KY: Westminister John Knox Press.