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Wading in the Waters: Spirituality and Older Black Katrina Survivors

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Abstract

Hurricane Katrina has drawn increased interest in coping strategies, spirituality, and mental health among low-income Blacks. Given the paucity of information available regarding the role of spirituality in surviving Hurricane Katrina, this qualitative study explores active coping strategies of older Blacks. Older respondents who were evacuated to a Texas retirement apartment complex participated in a series of three in-depth interviews (starting approximately three weeks after their arrival in the host state and continuing weekly). Without exception, the findings indicate that this population coped with Katrina and its aftermath through reliance on a Higher Power. The relationship to a Higher Power did not necessarily translate into church membership. The conclusions of the respondents' spiritual coping mechanisms revealed the following themes: 1) regular communication with a supernatural power; 2) miracles of faith through this

source of guidance and protection; 3) daily reading of the Bible and various spiritual and devotional materials; and 4) helping others as a consequence of faith and devotion to a supreme being. This study indicates that spirituality promotes emotional resilience in the aftermath of traumatic events such as Hurricane Katrina. These findings also point to the need for researchers to reconsider expressions of spirituality based solely on church membership/attendance and prayer, and to consider redefining spiritual coping as a form of cultural capital.

PART I: ORIGINAL PAPER

Wading in the Waters: Spirituality and Older Black Katrina Survivors

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Abstract: Hurricane Katrina has drawn increased interest in coping strategies, spirituality, and mental health among low-income Blacks. Given the paucity of information available regarding the role of spirituality in surviving Hurricane Katrina, this qualitative study explores active coping strategies of older Blacks. Older respondents who were evacuated to a Texas retirement apartment complex participated in a series of three in-depth interviews (starting approximately three weeks after their arrival in the host state and continuing weekly). Without exception, the findings indicate that this population coped with Katrina and its aftermath through reliance on a Higher Power. The relationship to a Higher Power did not necessarily translate into church membership. The conclusions of the respondents' spiritual coping mechanisms revealed the following themes: 1) regular communication with a supernatural power; 2) miracles of faith through this source of guidance and protection; 3) daily reading of the Bible and various spiritual and devotional materials; and 4) helping others as a consequence of faith and devotion to a supreme being. This study indicates that spirituality promotes emotional resilience in the aftermath of traumatic events such as Hurricane Katrina. These findings also point to the need for researchers to reconsider expressions of spirituality based solely on church membership/attendance and prayer, and to consider redefining spiritual coping as a form of cultural capital.

Key words: Spirituality, religion, African American, Katrina, coping, narratives.

Coping with distress following a hurricane has been a major research interest in public health and sociology.¹⁻³ Researchers have often viewed such coping in terms of psychological resources, cognitive strategies, and behavioral techniques.⁴ For example, hardiness is a positive psychological coping trait; interpretations of an event are considered a cognitive technique;⁵ behavioral strategies include yoga and biofeedback, among many others.⁶ Notably, previous studies have often paid little attention to how older Black hurricane survivors cope.⁴⁻⁶

Katrina, at its height a category 5 hurricane, caused catastrophic damage.⁹⁻¹¹ Breached levees flooded 80% of New Orleans and resulted in \$75 billion in damages.⁹⁻¹¹ Katrina was responsible for at least 1,417 deaths; between 3,000 and 5,000 people remain missing and 1.5 million were displaced.¹² Although it is unclear how many will return, as

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