ABSTRACT

BROWN, SHANITA SHANTELL. Intersections of Race, Spirituality, and Domestic Violence: The Counternarratives of African American Women Survivors. (Under the direction of Dr. Sylvia Nassar-McMillan).

The purpose of this qualitative research study was to explore, through narrative inquiry, the domestic violence experiences of African American women and the perceived role of spirituality in shaping those experiences. This study contributes to the scholarly understanding of domestic violence in the African American community by examining the intersection of race and spirituality using the lenses of Critical Race Theory and Relational Cultural Theory, thereby capturing the experiences of the participants as told in their own voices. The eight participants, women who had become homeless as a result of domestic violence experiences, engaged in semi-structured interviews. They responded to questions around the two research questions: How do African American women experience domestic violence, and how do these women perceive the role of spirituality in their experience of domestic violence? Interviews were transcribed and coded, and themes were developed utilizing a narrative analysis approach.

Themes that emerged from the women’s stories provide insight on which experiences were meaningful to them and how spirituality shaped their decisions to stay in volatile relationships. Under the first research question, regarding narrating domestic violence experiences, three themes emerged: (a) intersectionality-related discrimination, (b) strategies of disconnection for survival, and (c) strategies of disconnection for survivors. Under the second research question, regarding the perceived role of spirituality in domestic violence experiences, two more themes emerged: (c) spirituality as an obstacle and (d) spirituality as a
source of strength. Results of the study revealed the prevalence of spirituality within the African American community, as well as the prominence of the Black Church and the influence of pastors and ministers. The participants’ stories shed light on the phenomenon of how spirituality serves, paradoxically, as both a protective factor and a barrier in their process of leaving. All of the participants experienced spiritual abuse from pastors and church leaders. In addition, all of the participants experienced racism and discrimination when they attempted to access resources for domestic violence. Finally, the narratives highlighted the participants’ multiple oppressions due to their intersecting identities of race, gender, and socioeconomic status.

The study’s qualitative, narrative inquiry design validated the participants’ experiences and enabled the researcher to capture the voices of African American women as they narrate their experiences. The findings suggest implications for clinicians and helping professionals (including counselor education programs and domestic violence agencies), as well as policymakers and faith-based communities (including pastors). The findings can deepen these stakeholders’ understanding of domestic violence in the African American community and help them to examine the intersection of gender, race, and domestic violence in ways that may not have been previously considered. Concluding remarks are provided regarding the significance of understanding systemic barriers and multiple layers of oppression for African American women that experience domestic violence, and the potential impact of including Critical Race Theory and Relational Cultural Theory as frameworks for future research are discussed.
Keywords: Narrative Inquiry, Domestic Violence, Interpersonal Violence, African American Women, Spirituality, Black church, Critical Race Theory, Relational Cultural Theory
Intersections of Race, Spirituality, and Domestic Violence: The Counternarratives of African American Women Survivors

by
Shanita Shantelle Brown

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty of North Carolina State University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Counseling and Counselor Education

Raleigh, North Carolina 2016

APPROVED BY:

_______________________________
Dr. Sylvia Nassar-McMillan
Committee Chair

_______________________________
Dr. Jose Picart

_______________________________
Dr. Marc A. Grimmett

_______________________________
Dr. Jessica Decuir-Gunby
DEDICATION

First and foremost, this dissertation is dedicated to God—thank you for providing me unwavering grace, mercy, favor and strength during this academy journey. Second, to my parents, Sandy E. Brown (deceased) and Cora Brown, thanks for providing unconditional love and support, and teaching me to believe in myself and persevere through obstacles. I am here as a result of your prayers, sacrifices and inspirations. Thanks for teaching me to always keep God first in everything I do, and to maintain a relationship with Christ. To my mother, Cora Brown, following the death of your husband and mother, thanks for demonstrating the real meaning of resilience.

Third, I dedicate this research to the eight brave African American women who opened up their lives and trusted me with vivid details of their domestic violence experiences. I respect their strength to share their stories of pain, oppression, and struggle as a way to empower others. Their courage has made this research possible, and I am grateful and humbled to honor their voices.

Finally, this dissertation is dedicated to all women of different ethnicities and religions who have endured domestic violence and suffer in silence and isolation. May the narratives provided offer a source of power, hope, and resilience.
BIOGRAPHY

Shanita Brown was born in Harlem, New York, and raised in Kinston, North Carolina. She is the daughter of Sandy E. Brown (deceased) and Cora Brown. She received a Bachelor of Arts in Sociology with a concentration in Criminal Justice (1998). She worked as a paralegal for 10 years assisting people who were seriously injured as a result of motor vehicle accidents and work-related injuries, and then she worked as a community support professional for a mental health agency. During this time, her passion for the helping profession in the area of counseling began to flourish. She returned to North Carolina State University and received her Masters of Education in Clinical Mental Health Counseling in 2011. As a master’s student, her interests develop in working with adolescents and families that experienced intimate partner violence (domestic violence).

Shanita is a Licensed Professional Counselor Associate and National Certified Counselor. She has provided counseling to adolescents and families in a variety of settings, including school-based mental health, in-home counseling, and private practice. Areas of counseling include trauma, substance abuse, ADHD, mood disorders, behavioral issues, and grief. Her clinical experience, as well as her collaborations with practitioners serving African American families that have experienced intimate partner violence, led to her research interest in domestic violence, spirituality, and African American women.

As a doctoral student in Counselor Education, Shanita further developed her research, teaching, research methods, and clinical supervision skills. She completed a Certificate of Accomplishment in Teaching, and was selected for the competitive Preparing the Professoriate Fellow Program. She was also selected as a National Board for Certified
Counselors Minority Fellow and as a Substance Abuse Mental Health Program Fellow. She has taught asynchronous, synchronous, and direct-instruction classes.

Shanita is very active in the counseling profession with service and leadership roles. She has served as graduate student representative for the Licensed Professional Counselors Association of North Carolina, secretary of the North Carolina Counseling Association, past governing board member of the North Carolina Counseling Association, and President of Chi Sigma Iota. She was selected as an emerging leader for the North Carolina Counseling Association (state level) and for Southern Association for Counselor Education and Supervision (regional level).

Shanita’s research and service activities focus on examining, addressing, and bringing awareness to intimate partner violence. She is interested in various themes and contexts around intimate partner violence, including spirituality, the experiences of racial/ethnic women and adolescents, culturally specific interventions, and social justice advocacy issues. She serves on the board of SafeSpace, Inc., a domestic violence and sexual assault agency. She also presents at state, regional, and national conferences, and provides workshops and consultation on intimate partner violence.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

“I can do all things through Christ that strengthens me”
Philippians 4:13

I would like to first give thanks and honor to God for unwavering strength, grace and mercy throughout this dissertation journey. I could not have done this alone. Thank you for connecting me with mentors of various disciplines that provided encouragement, critical feedback and a source of hope when things became difficult.

Dr. Sylvia Nassar-McMillan, my dissertation chair and advisor, has been a constant influence and model for me since I started the doctoral program. I have grown as a professional and have learned the importance of saying no. Thanks for helping me to put things in perspective when I presented various ideas. Most importantly, thanks for the frequent reminder of self-care! Thanks for helping me maneuver my studies when faced with challenging moments (terminal illness of close family members, and death of my grandmother and first cousin). Your support and encouragement was priceless during that time, and I made it to this moment because of your assistance. I hope to model what I’ve learned from you and continue making a scholarly contribution to the counseling profession. Thank you and God bless you.

Dr. Marc Grimmett, our relationship flourished from the time I was your advisee as a master’s student. The eclectic blend of love, peace, and advocacy you bring to the counseling profession and teaching is one of a kind! I admire your energy and belief system to fight for what you believe in, even when you’re the minority. Thanks for your encouragement and
belief in me to research a tabooed subject in the African American community and Black Church.

Dr. Jessica Decuir-Gunby, my love for researching and counseling adolescents started when I was a master’s student in your Adolescent Development course. Thanks for introducing me to Critical Race Theory, as it has expanded my lens and provided clarity on experiences of marginalized populations. I appreciate the opportunity to teach summer school classes and work on a mixed-methods research project, as I am more confident as an instructor and researcher as a result of these experiences.

Dr. Jose Picart, thanks for introducing me to Bowlby’s Attachment Theory. I started my dissertation wanting to examine adolescents’ experiences with domestic violence. I have added this theory to my clinical practice and it has helped many adolescents and families understand that trauma such as domestic violence creates separation, insecurity, and fear.

To Dr. Stanley Baker, Dr. Raymond Ting, Dr. Ed Gerler, Ms. Pauline, and the remaining counselor education faculty, I started my journey with the counselor education in 2009, and it is bittersweet for me to complete the program. I will cherish the memories and support each of you has provided me on this journey. I am grateful.

I am forever grateful to my “unofficial dissertation committee,” Dr. Don C. Locke, Dr. Kim Frazier, and Dr. Karrie Dixon. The consistent emotional support, guidance, and love during this journey are priceless. I am because we are; we are because I am.

To Monika Johnson Hostler, Executive Director of North Carolina Coalition Against Sexual Assault, I appreciate the words of encouragement and support of my research.
Jasmin – Mr. G.S.D., my accountability partner and dedicated “dissertation coach.”

Thanks for investing your time and energy throughout my dissertation journey. I especially thank you for creating an accountability contract, listening to my “up and down” moments, the prayers, the extra pushes to keep writing and pressing, providing constructive feedback, the mini “fusses,” and most of all…your belief in me to complete this journey. Your unwavering support and encouragement is a true testament of your commitment to my overall success. Your knowledge, time, and friendship are greatly appreciated.

To my village, Dr. Robert Horne, Taheera, Anjabeen, Regina, Nick, LaVera, and Katrina, blood, sweat and tears! I could not have gotten through this journey without your support and encouragement. What a journey!

To my extended village from my master’s cohort, Leslie, Chuck, Tania, Hiroko, Alex, and Monica, thanks for allowing me to vent when you didn’t fully understand the doctoral journey. I really enjoyed meeting up for dinner during fall and spring breaks.

Finally, to my three sisters, Terri, Sandra, and Karisa; my niece, Shandi, and three nephews, Gregory, Darius, and Cameron: Although on many occasions, you didn’t understand why I couldn’t attend events, and had to write, you tried your best to support to me and your efforts were not in vain and unnoticed. I love you.
TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF TABLES ............................................................................................................................. vii
LIST OF FIGURES ............................................................................................................................. viii
CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION ............................................................................................................ 1
  Statement of the Problem ............................................................................................................... 4
  Purpose of the Study ....................................................................................................................... 8
  Rationale for the Study .................................................................................................................. 9
  Research Questions ....................................................................................................................... 12
  Research Design .......................................................................................................................... 12
  Definition of Terms ...................................................................................................................... 13
  Overview and Organization of Dissertation .............................................................................. 15
CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW ................................................................................................. 17
  Prevalence of Domestic Violence in the African American Community .................................. 17
  Process of Leaving ....................................................................................................................... 22
  Importance of Spirituality in the African American Community ............................................. 24
    Importance of the Black Church ............................................................................................... 25
    The Black Church and Domestic Violence ............................................................................. 29
    Role of Pastors .......................................................................................................................... 30
    Spirituality and Domestic Violence Among African Americans ............................................. 33
    Spirituality as a Barrier ............................................................................................................. 35
    Spirituality as a Coping Mechanism ....................................................................................... 39
  Theoretical Framework .............................................................................................................. 42
    Critical Race Theory ............................................................................................................... 43
    Relational Cultural Theory ..................................................................................................... 53
  Synthesis ..................................................................................................................................... 58
    Synthesis of CRT and RCT ..................................................................................................... 59
    Synthesis of Research Studies ................................................................................................. 60
  Summary ..................................................................................................................................... 63
CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY .......................................................................................................... 65
  Rationale for Qualitative Methodology ....................................................................................... 66
  Research Design .......................................................................................................................... 67
    Narrative Inquiry ..................................................................................................................... 67
    Rationale for Narrative Analysis .............................................................................................. 68
  Research Procedures .................................................................................................................. 71
    Sample Selection and Site Selection ....................................................................................... 71
    Informed Consent ..................................................................................................................... 73
    Instrument for Demographic Questionnaire ........................................................................... 74
    Instrument for Semi-Structured Interviews .......................................................................... 75
  Role of the Researcher ................................................................................................................ 80
  Data Collection ............................................................................................................................ 82
    Interviews .................................................................................................................................. 82
    Researcher Field Notes ............................................................................................................. 84
Data Analysis ........................................................................................................85
Coding ..................................................................................................................88
Interviews .............................................................................................................90
Establishing Trustworthiness .................................................................91
  Authenticity and Credibility .................................................................91
  Reliability ..................................................................................................93
Subjectivity Statement ...................................................................................95
Summary .............................................................................................................97
CHAPTER 4: PARTICIPANT PROFILES ..........................................................98
  Location .......................................................................................................99
  Participant Overviews ...........................................................................100
  Participant Narratives ..........................................................................102
  Rachel’s Story ..........................................................................................103
  Carla’s Story ..............................................................................................105
  April’s Story ...............................................................................................107
  Bobbi’s Story ..............................................................................................109
  Vanessa’s Story ..........................................................................................111
  Sami’s Story ...............................................................................................113
  Sarah’s Story ..............................................................................................115
  Tina’s Story ...............................................................................................117
Summary .............................................................................................................120
CHAPTER 5: FINDINGS .................................................................................122
  Research Question One: Narrating Domestic Violence Experiences ........124
    Intersectionality-Related Discrimination ...............................................125
    Strategies of Disconnection for Survival ...............................................132
  Research Question Two: Perceived Role of Spirituality .....................134
    Spirituality as an Obstacle .................................................................135
    Spirituality as a Source Of Strength ....................................................140
Summary .............................................................................................................143
CHAPTER 6: DISCUSSION ..............................................................................145
  Discussion of Findings ..............................................................................146
    Intersectionality-Related Discrimination ...............................................147
    Strategies of Disconnection for Survival ...............................................153
    Spirituality as an Obstacle .................................................................155
    Spirituality as a Source Of Strength ....................................................158
  Limitations/Delimitations .......................................................................159
  Implications for Clinicians and Helping Professionals .......................160
    Counselor Education ..........................................................................163
    Domestic Violence Agencies ...............................................................164
  Implications for Policymakers ...............................................................164
  Implications for Faith Communities and Pastors ................................165
  Recommendations for Future Research ................................................167
Conclusion .........................................................................................................169
LIST OF TABLES

Table 1. Research Questions and Interview Questions ........................................... 79
Table 2. Participant Demographics ........................................................................... 102
Table 3. Findings by Research Question ..................................................................... 124
LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1. Tenets of CRT and RCT. .................................................................................................. 60
CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) is a social problem of global proportions (Drumm et al., 2013). IPV comes with a high cost to individuals and to society at large that is well documented in the research literature (Cavanaugh et al., 2012). According to the National Coalition Against Domestic Violence, an estimated 1.3 million women in the United States experience domestic violence each year, and women make up 85% of the victims of domestic violence. Thus, domestic violence is a leading public health issue. According to results from the National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey (NISVS) (2014), one in every four women in the United States (24.3%) has experience domestic violence in her lifetime, translating to nearly 29 million women. NISVS has also found that 43.7% of African American women experience domestic violence, compared to 34.6% of White women, and about 2.5 times the rate of women of other races.

While domestic violence affects women of all racial and socioeconomic backgrounds, the intersection of gender, race, and socioeconomic status places African American women at an increased risk for experiencing violence from an intimate partner. Experts in the domestic violence field state that one set of victims, black women, is at a far greater risk to experience the grimmest of all domestic violence statistics (Violence Policy Center, 2012). Due to complex underlying causes that in some cases stretch back generations including unemployment, poverty, lack of education, incarceration, and violence, the plight of African American women might not change anytime soon. Therefore, it behooves researchers and practitioners to examine factors that perpetuate African American women’s experiences with domestic violence.
Scholars have proposed many explanations for African American women’s high incidence of domestic violence. One explanation is that, as a result of historical oppression and present-day racism, an African American woman may be less likely to report her perpetrator or seek help (Bent-Goodley, 2013). Awareness of discrimination, negative stereotyping, and the vulnerability of African American men to police brutality are all factors that can discourage African American women from seeking help with domestic violence, and thus contribute to the high rates of domestic violence that they experience.

Another possible explanation for the high rates of domestic violence among African American women is the importance of spirituality among this population. Because religion can significantly influence people’s decisions, African American women often seek spiritual guidance in understanding and resolving problems (Wang et al., 2009). In particular, the spirituality of African American women could help to explain why they are so often reluctant to seek help or attempt to escape from an abusive relationship (Gillum, 2006). In a study of battered women of diverse ethnicities who self-identified as Christian, Knickmeyer (2010) found that the battered women’s faith communities made them feel compelled not to report the violence and to keep the violence a secret; the women’s religious convictions and fear of shame or rejection from the Church may have contributed to their remaining in abusive relationships (2010).

Religion plays a central role in the lives of most African American women. According to the Pew Research Religion and Public Life Forum project (2009), over 84% of African American women said that religion was important to them, and roughly 59% stated that they attended religious services at least once per week. Not surprisingly, then, as women
search for means of coping with living with or leaving an abusive partner, many of them turn to their religious institutions and religious families for strength, comfort, and support (Popescu & Drumm, 2009). Watlington and Murphy (2006) found in a quantitative study that women who described themselves as more spiritual and involved in religious communities reported lower levels of depression in domestic violence situations. Consequently, spirituality has traditionally served, and continues to serve, as a significant coping mechanism in the African American community.

For the African American community in the United States, the Black Church has long been the most central and stable institution (Bent-Goodley, 2012). Statistics show that 62% of African American women are members of historically black Protestant churches, while only 55% of men are (Pew Research Religion and Public Life Project, 2009). The Black Church is central to the faith-based experience in the African American community. The Black Church has historically been, and still remains, the place where important issues concerning the African American community are addressed. For example, during slavery, the Black Church provided slaves with opportunities for literacy development (Carlton-LaNey, 2001). At times when Black people were not permitted to access services outside their communities, the Black Church was a source of healing and strength. African Americans seek the Black Church for goods, services, food, clothing, and shelter and a positive outlook on the Black community. In addition, the Black Church has been an organizing center for political and social movements, such as the Civil Rights moment of the 1960s (Martin & Martin, 2002). Such movements empowered African Americans with hope and strength to face the challenges associated with their status as an oppressed minority. Research suggests
that religious involvement is generally higher among African Americans than among the general population, with 79% of African Americans saying that religion is very important to them, as compared to 56% of all U.S. adults (Pew Research, 2009).

The use of religion and spirituality has been repeatedly documented as a traditional means of coping in the African American community (Bent-Goodley, 2013; Watlington & Murphy, 2006; Gillum et al., 2006). For instance, research has indicated that African Americans use spirituality and religious involvement to cope with life stressors from perceived discrimination to recovery from substance abuse (Stevens-Watkins et al., 2012). It is thus not surprising that African American women in abusive relationships seek the Black Church for strength and support. African American women who are experiencing domestic violence often turn to their faith-based communities before they go to mental health, social service, or medical care providers (Bent-Goodley & Fowler, 2006).

**Statement of the Problem**

Evidence indicates that domestic violence is a very common phenomenon. There is a general consensus that domestic violence is costly in terms of the mental and physical health problems it creates (Ramos et al., 2004). One of the most widely cited studies is the National Violence Against Women Survey (NVAWS; Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000), which was sponsored by the National Institute of Justice (NIJ) and Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). The study indicated that domestic violence creates tremendous suffering beyond the individual woman’s suffering, bringing significant social and financial costs to a broader community (Tjaden & Thomes, 2000). The damage resulting from domestic violence is disproportionately borne by African Americans. The highest rates of domestic violence
occur with African American women between the ages of 20 and 24 who are earning low incomes and living in rental housing in urban areas. A national survey by the Center for Disease Control entitled “Prevalence and Characteristics of Sexual Violence, Stalking, and Intimate Partner Violence Victimization,” found that the rate of victimization for African American women is 43.7%, higher than the 34.6% for White women (CDC, 2014). The added impact of racism and poverty exacerbate the increased toll from domestic violence for African American women. Consequently, the needs of African American survivors remain largely unmet.

Domestic violence first began to receive national attention from scholars in the 1980s. Spurred by the feminist movement, most of the literature about domestic violence has been written from an Anglo-centric perspective and has been fueled and shaped by the White middle class (Green, 1997; Taylor, 1999). This changed when Coley and Beckett (1998) combed through the available literature to compile information about the particular experiences of African American women subjected to domestic violence. Not surprisingly, very little literature at that time related specifically to African American women and domestic violence.

In the last decade, with the development of multicultural viewpoints, a body of literature specifically pertaining to African American women and domestic violence has begun to emerge. There is growing awareness that the marginalized racial status of African American women contributes to a very different experience of domestic violence that must be understood in order to intervene in effective ways (Bent-Goodley, 2013).
There is also a growing consensus that traditional models for understanding, preventing, and treating domestic violence are not readily applicable to African Americans (Few, 2005) and in some cases, are actually deleterious (Taylor, 2005). While the relative incidence of what is considered domestic violence among African Americans is sometimes debated, there is a growing consensus that domestic violence is an acute problem for African Americans (Ramons et al., 2004). Troublingly, African American women experience higher rates of intimate partner homicide than their White counterparts. According to the Violence Policy Center, “Overall, Black women were murdered by men at a rate (2.74 per 100,000) more than two and half times higher than White women (1.92 per 100,000)” (2010, pg. 9). Therefore, Black women are more likely to be killed as a result of domestic violence than any other female population.

The statistics and literature cited above provide support for further examining factors that contribute to African American women’s experiences in abusive relationships, particularly their spirituality. Ellison et al. (2007) found that spirituality and religious involvement can have a protective effect on women who experience domestic violence. Indeed, the use of religion and spirituality has been repeatedly documented as a traditional means of coping in the African American community (Washington & Murphy, 2006).

At times, the Black Church can exacerbate the domestic violence problem rather than helping to alleviate it. While many women turned to their religious communities for social support and spiritual encouragement, some of these communities have minimized, denied, or enabled the abuse. For example, Bent-Goodley (2006) found that some participants thought the clergy missed opportunities to stop the violence or even helped to perpetuate the violence
because of their own sexism. Knickmeyer (2010) found that social pressures from the Church compelled participants to keep silent about the violence they experienced. Another study found that African American women are often blamed and ridiculed by pastors for the behavior of the perpetrator or for staying in abusive relationships (Bell, 2000). As a result, some women may feel because of their religious beliefs they must impact forgiveness for their abuser’s behavior and endure the abuse due to religious obligations under Christian doctrine (Nash, 2005). Despite this treatment—which amounts to spiritual abuse—the powerfully influential Black Church remains the first source of help and pillar of strength for African American women in abusive relationships.

Although religious groups typically have policies against domestic violence, women who seek help often continue to encounter rejection by faith-based leaders when they attempt to address domestic violence in their lives. They also receive messages to stay in the relationship, with justifications derived from interpretations of the Bible (Brade & Bent-Goodley, 2010; Adams & Fortune, 1995). Being that African American women are an oppressed racial minority, the experiences of domestic violence create a piling on of oppression that intensifies the trauma. To make matters worse, domestic violence agencies often lack the cultural competency skills and training to help African American women with the racial and gender complexities of their situation. As a result, the potential for secondary trauma for the women is increased because of lack of knowledge and lack of racial sensitivity.

In light of this research, it is surprising that so little is known about how domestic violence among African American women affects survivors from a spiritual perspective.
Scant research exists on African American women and domestic violence, and there are even fewer studies on and the importance of spirituality to African American women. The absence of literature on the role of spirituality as a coping mechanism for African American women presents challenges for assessing and understanding the decision-making thought processes and patterns of African American women. As a result, counselors and various helping professionals who work with this population face difficulty.

In order for counselors to competently address the effects of domestic violence among African American women, it is essential to understand the role of spirituality in these women’s experiences. Greater acknowledgment of spirituality would also increase clarity on the role of the Black Church and its crucial contributor to domestic violence within the African American community. Because African American women live at the dangerous intersection of race and gender, awareness of spirituality would provide a multifaceted perspective when working with this population. Therefore, further examination of spirituality and its importance among African American women in abusive relationships is warranted.

**Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this qualitative research study was to explore, through narrative inquiry, the domestic violence experiences of African American women and the perceived role of spirituality in shaping those experiences. The women’s experiences were understood through the lens of two theories, CRT and RCT. Utilizing a narrative analysis approach, the researcher sought to (1) capture the voices of African American women as they narrated their experiences, with particular attention to how spirituality might serve, paradoxically, as both a protective factor and a barrier to recovery; (2) help researchers, counselors, community
agencies, and faith-based communities gain a better understanding of domestic violence in the African American community; and (3) examine the intersection of gender, race, and domestic violence in ways that may not have been previously considered.

**Rationale for the Study**

Even though IPV is recognized as a costly problem that disproportionately affects African American women, and even though social work scholars and quantitative researchers have done some work on this problem, scholars in the field of counseling have not yet conducted qualitative research that specifically investigates the interrelationship of domestic violence and spirituality for African American women. Moreover, the recent literature addressing African American women’s experience of spirituality and domestic violence has consisted predominantly conceptual articles, rather than research studies. The gap in knowledge on African American women’s experiences of IPV and spirituality is particularly troubling given the recent emphasis on multiculturalism in the counseling profession. Thus, capturing the voices of these women and the importance of spirituality in their experiences is essential.

As previously stated, African American survivors who turn to their churches for strength, support, and guidance are often ridiculed for the abusive situation; little is known about the impact of such ridicule on women, or about how women feel when church leaders encourage them to stay in abusive relationships. Given the higher statistical prevalence of domestic violence among African American women (Center for Disease Control, 2014) and the dominant cultural bias found in most domestic violence agencies (Fowler et al., 2011),
there is a significant need for increased awareness of and sensitivity to the interwoven dynamics of race and gender for African American survivors of domestic violence.

The literature that addresses African American women’s experiences with domestic violence repeatedly notes the need for more culturally sensitive research and exploration, especially as it might impact the delivery of culturally appropriate services (Gillum, 2008). Numerous studies note the relatively low utilization rates by African American women of domestic violence services (Fowler et al., 2011; Paranjape, 2006; Weisz, 2005). These low rates are linked to a lack of cultural sensitivity in current service provision (Fowler et al., 2011; Donnelly et al., 2005). Being that the Black Church remains a pillar of strength and support for Black families and communities, examining spirituality provides in-depth knowledge on the importance of culture, and ritualistic traditions in the context of delivering appropriate services.

Over the past two decades, a growing body of research has attempted to identify various strategies women employ to protect themselves from the devastating impact of domestic violence on their mental and physical health. Despite the need for greater inclusion of ethnically diverse samples in studies of domestic violence, the research examining culturally specific strategies for African American women is scarce (Bent-Goodley, 2013; Wyatt et al., 2000). The insufficient research about African American survivors of domestic violence is more than just a problem about limited quantity; there is also a glaring need for research that is rooted in a conceptual understanding of the African American experience and fully understanding the impact that White systemic structures have on African Americans.
Further examining spirituality closes the gap in literature on its role as a healthy coping mechanism and barrier.

Most of the research on the importance of spirituality for African American survivors of domestic violence, as well as on the intersections of gender, race, class, and domestic violence for this population, comes from a social work perspective. There remains a gap on this subject in the counseling field of knowledge and practice. The multicultural movement in counseling has helped to focus attention on multicultural needs; attending to clients’ spiritual and religious issues is an important aspect of being a multiculturally competent counselor. This study provides information for counselor education programs that lack training in spirituality and religious issues. Hall et al. (2014) has noted that the failure to integrate spirituality within the counselor training experience has increased the risk that counselors will unknowingly impose attitude and beliefs on their clients. As a result, some counselors might lack sensitivity and thus be ill equipped to address such issues with their clients. Therefore, this study contributes to the overall literature on IPV and provides greater insight into this problem. The study also provides information that can inform future research and culturally specific interventions, and that can enhance training for domestic violence agencies and shelters.

The present research study has future implications on the convergence of race, gender, and domestic violence that can inform counselors, scholars, and policymakers. Moreover, using qualitative questioning to discuss spirituality and domestic violence with the participants allows a safe space for the participants’ voices to be heard. This study illuminates the role of churches in responding to domestic violence. The researcher
considered culturally competent approaches to assessing and responding to domestic violence, and investigated how racism, oppression, and discrimination impact survivors’ experiences with accessing resources. The findings from this study add to the counseling body of knowledge and the body of literature on Interpersonal Violence (IPV).

Research Questions

The purpose of this study was to examine the domestic violence experiences of African American women and the perceived role of spirituality in shaping those experiences, using narrative inquiry to explore the women’s experiences in their own words. In seeking to understand this experience, this narrative inquiry explored the following research questions:

1. How do African American women experience domestic violence?

2. How do African American women perceive the role of spirituality in their experience of domestic violence?

Research Design

This study employed qualitative methods and a narrative analysis approach, and it drew upon two theoretical frameworks: Critical Race Theory (CRT) and Relational Cultural Theory (RCT). Qualitative methods were appropriate because this study sought to develop a complex understanding of individuals’ perception of an issue and to hear the previously silenced voices of a marginalized group (Creswell, 2006). The narrative analysis approach was appropriate because it enabled the researcher to capture rich descriptive stories of African American women’s experiences and perceptions of spirituality and domestic violence. Using this approach enabled the collection and analysis of data through interviews
and thematic coding. Narrative analysis deals primarily with stories or accounts of personal experiences. This technique is used to study individuals, groups, and culture by providing information that may not be accessible by other methods. In this study, the researcher could only understand African American women’s experience of spirituality and domestic violence by talking directly with African American women and allowing them to tell their own stories. Consequently, this study was designed to allow the emergent themes generated from the participant’s narratives to give power to an oppressed group.

This study used an eclectic framework of Critical Race Theory (CRT) and Relational Cultural Theory (RCT). CRT explains the relationship among race, racism, and power (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). RCT is a comprehensive, evidenced-based theory of counseling and development that addresses the relational experiences of women and people in devalued groups (Comstock et al., 2008). Because of African American women’s marginalized status and their history of oppression, the combination of both CRT and RCT provides an appropriate lens to guide the study’s quest to examine a complex issue such as spirituality and domestic violence for African American women.

**Definition of Terms**

The following terms are used in this study.

**Interpersonal Violence (IPV).** IPV is the umbrella term to describe violence that occurs when one person uses power and control over another through physical, sexual, or emotional threats or actions, economic control, isolation, or other kinds of coercive behavior. The term “IPV” has been used interchangeably with “domestic violence” and “intimate partner violence/relationship violence.”
**Intimate Partner Violence (IPV).** The term “IPV” is the current umbrella term to describe physical, sexual, or psychological harm by a current or former partner or spouse (Center for Disease Control, 2014).

**Domestic Violence.** Domestic Violence is defined as “a pattern of assaultive and coercive behaviors that adults use against their intimate partners” (Holden, 2003). For this study, the term is used to encompass the range of physical, psychological, verbal, and mental abuse experienced by victims at the hands of their partners. Throughout the study, this term is used rather than intimate partner violence, as it is the more popular term in the African American community.

**Process of Leaving.** Process of leaving is a term that refers to a process of decisions to stay, leave, and return several times over varied time periods. During this process of separating themselves from the relationship, survivors internally experience cognitive and emotional stages (Campbell et al., 1998; Kearney, 2001; Merrit-Gray & Wuest, 1995).

**African American.** African American is a descriptive term that refers to descendants of African slaves. In this study, this term will be used interchangeably with “Black American” and “Black.”

**The Black Church.** The Black Church refers to a church headed by an African American pastor that has a majority African American congregation and a majority African American ministerial staff.

**Spiritual abuse.** Spiritual abuse in a Christian context is the misuse of God, Jesus Christ, Church doctrine, sacred texts (the Hebrew Bible and Christian scripture), and cultural and familial teachings and traditions to encourage, excuse, maintain, and promote male
entitlement or male privilege, or to offer justification for beliefs and practices that objectify women (Miles, 2002). For the purpose of this study, *spiritual abuse* refers to the misinterpretations of biblical scriptures, ridicule, and perpetuation of domestic abuse by pastors, ministers, faith-based communities, and perpetrators.

**Spirituality and religion.** According to Cashwell et al. (2007), the terms *spirituality* and *religion* have traditionally been used interchangeably, but they have grown to represent separate entities of similar experiences. Spirituality propels the search for connectedness, meaning, purpose, and contribution. It encompasses individuals’ personal values and constructions of the meaning and the purpose of life (Gilbert, 2000). It is also shaped both within and outside religious traditions, beliefs, and practices (Benson et al., 2003). Religion is a set of beliefs or a specific system of beliefs that typically utilizes rituals and rules. According to Cashwell and Young (2011), religion provides a structure for human spirituality, including narratives, symbols, beliefs, and practices, which are embedded in ancestral traditions, cultural traditions, or both. For the purpose of this dissertation, the terms *religion* and *spirituality* will be used interchangeably.

**Overview and Organization of Dissertation**

This dissertation consists of six chapters. Chapter 1 presented an overview of the problem, purpose, and rationale for this study. It explained the importance of the study, introduced the dissertation research questions, and provided definitions of key terms. Chapter 2 is a comprehensive review of literature and research related to spirituality and African American women’s experiences with domestic violence. The chapter explores the experiences of African American women with domestic violence through the lens of Critical
Race Theory (CRT) and Relational Cultural Theory (RCT). Chapter 3 provides the methodology, description of participants, procedures, and narrative analysis, while Chapter 4 presents the participants’ narratives. Chapter 5 provides the results and findings, and Chapter 6 summarizes and analyzes the research, including implications for the counseling and IPV bodies of knowledge. Limitations and future directions for research are also addressed.
CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

The purpose of this qualitative research study was to explore, through narrative inquiry, the domestic violence experiences of African American women and the perceived role of spirituality in shaping those experiences. This chapter provides an overview of literature that is relevant to this study of the importance of spirituality and domestic violence experiences among African American women. The chapter discusses literature on four themes: (a) the prevalence of domestic violence in the African American community; (b) Critical Race Theory and Relational Culture Theory as theoretical frameworks that can be used to understand this phenomenon; (c) women’s decision to leave abusive relationships; and (d) the importance of spirituality for the African American community. In each of these four sections, relevant literature is described and critiqued. Finally, the chapter concludes with a synthesis that points out gaps in the prior research and provides the rationale for this study.

Prevalence of Domestic Violence in the African American Community

Domestic violence among African Americans has been found to be correlated with several factors, including poverty; social class; substance abuse; lack of integration in primary networks; styles of dispute settlement based on exposure to lower-class values, norms, and role expectations; and exposure to societal stress (Bent-Goodley, 2012). Furthermore, the cultural mindset, social organization, and behavior of African Americans has been influenced by exposure to slavery, segregation, and the denial of civil rights; lynching and police brutality; education and employment discrimination; and the
construction and dissemination of stereotypes designed to distort the image of African Americans (Richie, 2012).

Researchers have found a correlation between domestic violence in the African American community and factors such as socioeconomic status, substance abuse, role expectations, and exposure to societal stress—in other words, racism. Additional barriers that contribute to the perpetuation of domestic violence in the African American community include inaccessibility of services, lack of cultural competence among service producers, racial loyalty, and gender entrapment (Bent-Goodley, 2009). The inaccessibility of domestic violence services has been noted in the literature as a barrier to the receipt of services among African Americans (Gillum, 2009; Joseph, 1997; West, 1999). In addition, domestic violence shelters and intervention programs are not community-based, thus creating a challenge for survivors who lack transportation. For instance, survivors who rely on public transportation as their primary means of transportation have scarce options to access shelters and programs. Furthermore, lack of transportation and financial means to obtain transportation creates a lingering impact that discourages African Americans from keeping appointments. Examples of appointments include court appearance for domestic violence protective order hearings and meetings with lawyers and agencies.

McLeod et al. (2010) facilitated a qualitative study that examined the types of personal and community resources that female IPV survivors used when leaving abusive male partners. The researchers utilized an Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis to present how the participants made sense of their social and personal experiences within the context of their abusive status. The central phenomenon to be better understood was the lived
experiences of survivors as they attempted to access resources. More importantly, the researchers acknowledged the lack of research in the counseling profession.

The study consisted of a criterion sample of five women, three African American and two Caucasian. The participants were recruited through counseling centers and community agencies, and were asked open-ended questions to elicit responses that elaborated on their experiences accessing resources. After thorough examination of the responses, the researchers followed precise steps to analyze the data. Through the use of bracketing, reflexive journaling, and horizontalization of the data, two codes emerged: personal resources and community resources. The findings identified experiences that were helpful and not so helpful regarding using personal and community resources. The research design and methodology, as well as the procedures for recruiting participants, measuring, collecting data, and analyzing data, were all appropriate. Recommendations were presented in relation to the study’s goal and previous research.

However, a significant flaw in this study was the lack of culturally sensitive measures taken to interview the African American women. While the researchers did have a wealth of clinical knowledge, the intersection of race and gender and the experiences of discrimination are paramount considerations when defining and understanding African American women. Behaviors seen in African American women are adaptations to a complex set of gender, generational, chronic, and extreme life stressors and should be viewed in terms of the psychosocial and cultural factors unique to this population. Another weakness of McLeod et al.’s (2010) study was the lack of a theoretical guide to support an existing theory. Finally, the study lacked African American researchers. This could possibly pose an issue for the
African American participants’ ability to connect and share their experiences with someone outside their culture.

The research described above provides insight on how others’ lack of cultural competence can keep African Americans from reporting abuse. Specifically, African Americans often do not complete or obtain domestic violence services because of a lack of cultural competence among counselors and other helping professionals (Bent-Goodley, 2009). Cultural competence can be defined as “a set of behaviors, attitudes, and policies that enable a system, agency, and/or individual to function effectively with culturally diverse clients and communities” (Rorie et al., 1996, p. 92). In accordance with the multicultural counseling competencies developed by the Association of Multicultural Counseling and Development (AMCD) and endorsed by the American Counseling Association (ACA), culturally competent counselors possess knowledge and understanding about how oppression, racism, discrimination, and stereotyping affect them personally and in their work (ACA Code of Ethics; 2005; Arrendondo et al., 1996; Daya, 2000; Schwartz & Feisthamel, 2009; & Wood & Hilton, 2012).

The cultural context of domestic violence is imperative to consider when seeking to understand and appreciate how domestic violence uniquely impacts various populations. Cultural contexts include historical experiences of oppression; contemporary realities of discrimination; customs, traditions, and practices that can serve as barriers and strengths; and intergenerational exchanges about culture that inform the knowledge, thinking, experiences and perceived realities of communities of color (Bent-Goodley, 2012). For example, counselors and other helping professionals who work at domestic violence shelters and
agencies but who have a deficient knowledge of their clients or inability to connect with the clients are ill equipped to provide high-quality service. Therefore, if counselors are to address domestic violence effectively across diverse populations, it is vital to understand the cultural context to connect and build trust with these communities.

Among service providers with low levels of cultural competence, biases and negative stereotypes are often at the heart of the problem (Bent-Goodley, 2004). In provider–client relationships, stereotyped views of African American survivors can be damaging. For instance, one dangerous stereotype associated with African American women is the “Strong Black Woman.” According to Patricia Hill-Collins, a strong Black woman is one who can sustain anything, has no fear, and can easily protect herself (2008). This and other stereotypes can blind helping professionals to the real needs of the women who come to them for support and thus delay or prevent the delivery of domestic violence services.

Ample research has shown that domestic violence undermines healthy African American families and communities. The National Black Women's Health Imperative identified domestic violence as the number one health issue for African American women (2014). Yet, African Americans themselves do not necessarily perceive domestic violence as an issue of concern (Briggs & Davis, 1994; White, 1994). For example, studies have documented that one of African American women’s self-perceived roles is putting the needs of others first (Hill-Collins, 2008). Another role is being the matriarch of the family. This archetypal role dates back to the days of slavery, when Black couples and families were intentionally torn apart to keep them from unifying and building strength to rise against their oppressors (Hill-Collins, 2008). In this context, Black women took on the roles of matriarchs,
often heading families that were not even related to them. Today, even though Black women are no longer enslaved, many still have an “enslavement mentality” and find themselves holding their families together amidst difficult circumstances. Therefore, it makes sense that Black women tend to put their perpetrators’ needs before their own safety.

Indeed, many African American women hesitate to report domestic violence for fear of the discrimination and injustice that African American men often experience in the criminal justice system (Chavis & Hill, 2009). As such, the police are often not viewed as a resource and can instead be viewed as a hindrance and perhaps even a barrier to getting help (Potter, 2008; Richie, 2012). Therefore, being acutely aware of police brutality and other forms of injustice, the woman forgoes her own needs. This concern for her partner increases her chances of physical injury and mental anguish. She is almost expected, or expects herself, to sustain the abuse to protect the family, maintain the relationship, and spare the larger community of embarrassment, all while denying her own mental health needs and physical safety (Bent-Goodley, 2004). Research indicates that maintaining racial loyalty and her identity as the matriarch of the family can have devastating physical and mental health effects. Such research is important because it is impossible to create effective interventions, policies, and programs without understanding how African Americans understand domestic violence and perceive its impact on themselves and their communities.

**Process of Leaving**

Battered women’s reasons for staying or leaving an abusive relationship are varied and complex. Recent research has moved away from “blaming the victim” in order to examine various macro and micro barriers to leaving (Kim & Gray, 2008). Several factors
are associated with staying in an abusive relationship. Among the most prominent factors are economic dependency, mental health concerns, witnessing domestic violence, problems with the criminal justice system, and police response to domestic violence calls (Kim & Gray, 2008).

The influence of social and cultural discourse affect the process followed by the abused woman as she deals with the abusive situation. There are many theories in the literature that focused on why women stay in or leave domestic violence relationships. The frameworks about the process of leaving were developed by various authors based on information gathered from survivors about their experiences (Kearney, 2001). Also, several studies had applied Prochaska and DiClemente’s Transtheoretical Model of Change to the process of leaving (Burke et al., 2001 & Khaw & Hardesty, 2007). The various phases that make up the process of leaving an abusive relationship have been described, in very widely used formulations, by Landenburger (1998), Lempert (1996), and Merritt-Gray and Wuest (1999). The leaving process begins when the survivor realizes that she cannot control her partner’s violent behavior. There are four stages of leaving: turning point, breaking free, not going back, and recovery (Few & Bell-Scott, 2002). The turning point is a pivotal event that causes the woman to reassess her relationship and characterize it as abusive. Breaking free (Wuest & Merritt-Gray, 1999) or disengaging (Landenburger, 1998) may be accomplished in a variety of ways, such as spending longer periods away from home, leaving town, and emotionally withdrawing. Not going back is the stage when the survivor has terminated the relationship and is actively working to sustain the separation. Reestablishing social networks and activities is crucial during this time. The survivor may seek assistance from therapists,
friends, or relatives. Last, during *recovery* (Landenburger, 1998), the final stage of the leaving process, the survivor continues to work toward healing and empowerment. From a relational perspective, establishing healthy connections, a sense of worth and authenticity is essential during the process of leaving. Being that African American women embody the American double negative—black and female—and their lives are often filled with the chore of overcoming hurdles, they often feel stuck and powerless.

Living in a racist society contributes to African American women’s inability to connect, increase their sense of worth, and heal. Baly (2010) found that in leaving abusive situations, women were influenced by wider social and cultural discourses. Discourses such as history of injustices, police brutality, poverty, and negatives stereotypes applied to African American women makes it very taxing for them to establish healthy connections and leave abusive situations. As a result, chronic disconnections hinder their capability to reason and leave abusive relationships, thereby creating a repeated pattern of cycle of abuse. However, by utilizing these strategies of disconnection, they are able to protect themselves from perceived danger in emotionally charged situations; in this way, strategies of disconnection can become a roadmap of endurance for African American women in abusive relationships.

**Importance of Spirituality in the African American Community**

One model that is widely recognized as describing the various components of domestic violence is the Power and Control Wheel, which includes physical, sexual, psychological, emotional, and economic abuse (Domestic Abuse Intervention Project, 2004). The dimensions of domestic violence that are included on the Power and Control Wheel are indeed important, and the model does assist helping professionals in understanding that
domestic violence is not limited to hitting, kicking, punching, shooting, stabbing, or killing—rather, domestic violence can also mean terrorizing and harming an individual’s thoughts and feelings. However, despite the usefulness of the Power and Control Wheel, it is missing one dimension that for many African American women is one of the most critical areas in their lives: their faith.

This study seeks to remedy that omission by investigating the experiences of domestic violence survivors while paying particular attention to how these women narrate the role of spirituality in their experiences of domestic violence. This section of the literature review provides context for the study by describing research on the important role that the Black Church has long played in the lives of African Americans; then, it discusses the literature on the Church’s habitual treatment of domestic violence, including the role of pastors in the spiritual abuse of domestic violence sufferers; and finally, it describes how, for African American women survivors of domestic abuse, research has found that their spirituality can serve both as a barrier to escape, and as a coping mechanism in the midst of difficult, violent circumstances.

**Importance of the Black Church**

Research shows that the Black Church has long been a source of strength and hope for the African American community. According to Wortham, understanding the Black Church is the gateway into the lives of many Black Americans (2009). Over 50% of African Americans attend church at least once a week (Pew Research Center, 2009). *Black Church* is the term used in both popular culture and scholarly literature to refer to the overall institution that consists of independently led local congregations of predominately African American
Christians. The Black Church has been defined by Lincoln and Mamiya (1990) as Black-controlled independent denominations, composed primary of Black Christians and concerned with the expression of spirituality and the religious practices of African Americans.

Historically and traditionally, the Black Church has functioned as the institution that provides Black Americans with a venue to meet their social, religious, spiritual and communal needs (Plunkett, 2014). According to Zuckerman et al. (2003), the roles and responsibilities of the Black Church are vast and often include providing clothing and shelter, financial assistance, educational empowerment, and social justice advocacy. Recent studies indicate that contemporary African American congregations sponsor a wide array of programs, including ones that provide aid to the poor, promote community development, assist families, foster health education, encourage civil rights, and support at-risk youth (Ellison et al., 2012).

As mentioned earlier, research demonstrates that African Americans look to the Black Church for support with psychological issues such as depression, anxiety, and grief; for relationship concerns; and to serve as a guiding light as they make meaning of their experiences in the world. In fact, the Black Church has been referred to as a psychologically therapeutic community, a psychiatric hospital, and a refuge for many African Americans (Boyd-Franklin & Lockwood, 2009; Douglas & Hopson, 2001). The Black Church serves as a place for African Americans to freely express themselves emotionally, and this release has, in itself, been deemed a successful therapeutic intervention (Gaines, 2010; Gilkes, 1980). Consequently, understanding the role of the Black Church is essential when seeking to understand domestic violence in the African American community. To understand the Black
Church and the people who worship within it, one must understand the origins and historical significance of the Church.

Much of the literature on the Black Church traces its origins to the era of slavery. Africans brought to the United States as slaves came with a culture rich in spiritual and religious traditions and practices. However, during that era, the enslaved people were prohibited from gathering together unless supervised by a White man. This prohibition dampened their desire for religious and spiritual expression and also complicated their ability to assemble for worship services. In an effort to maintain their sense of community, the people resorted to informal worship, gathering in secret locations that included swamps and wooded areas (Lincoln, 1973). At these informal worship gatherings, gospel songs were developed and sung to communicate secret messages of hope, freedom, and endurance (Lincoln, 1973). After some time, these meetings became more visible and frequent, laying the foundation for the institution now referred to the Black Church. The first formal Black Church was established between 1750 and 1773, and soon after others followed (Lincoln & Mamiya, 1991).

The Black Church became the core of the enslaved peoples’ community and provided the fellowship that they lacked elsewhere on the plantation. It was through the Church that many enslaved people were educated and learned to read biblical scriptures (Wilmore, 2006). These scriptures provided emotional relief and hope of a promising future, despite the oppressive living conditions that the people were experiencing in slavery. As the people continued to read scriptures and educate themselves, their awareness of the enslavement of innocent people was heightened (Collins & Moore, 2006). Slave masters became afraid that
if slaves were able to read the Bible, they would gain strength, and a demand for
emancipation of slavery would emerge. The slave masters’ fears came true when slaves
gained strength and began to use the Church as the epicenter of their efforts to bring about
change.

After the abolition of slavery, the Black Church continued to serve the Black
community by ministering to a people who were theoretically free from slavery, but who in
practice were still in the bondage of segregation and racial intimidation (Collins & Moore,
2006). For instance, in some areas of the Southern states, Blacks and Whites sometimes
attended church services together, but because of racist practices, Black were often not
allowed to fully participate in church services and other activities that were dominated by
Whites (Collins & Moore, 2006). Despite the White hegemony in which they lived, the
Church still ministered to the community’s spiritual, emotional, psychological, physical, and
moral support needs.

As stated earlier, other Black churches were developed following the establishment of
the first Black Church. These institutions provided service functions and were responsible for
the eventual formation of African American seminaries, black colleges, academies, insurance
companies, and banks, as well as the NAACP and the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s
(Gaines, 2010; Lincoln & Mamiya, 1990). According to the Pew Research Forum on
Religion and Life, approximately three-fourths of African Americans hold church
memberships, and on average, two-thirds of them attend church monthly (2010). It is worth
noting that the Black Church has changed over these many years. Martin et al. (2011)
identified Black mega-churches as the most significant development in the Black Church’s
response to changes in the African American community over time. Today, The Potter’s House, led by Bishop T.D. Jakes, is one of the largest mega-churches in the country, with over 30,000 members.

It was the feeling of discrimination and racism that incited Blacks to create separate structures for worship that eventually developed into the institution that has come to be known as the Black Church (Lincoln, 1973). In its earliest days, the Church provided a space for emotional relief and escape from the pressures and brutality of the plantation lifestyle (Whilmore, 2006). Today, the Black Church remains a powerful institution. It continues to be the nexus of Black political activity and the vehicle through which Blacks can address the dominant social order and relate to the deity through their cultural heritage (Collins & Moore, 2006).

**The Black Church and Domestic Violence**

Research indicates that the Black Church has historically been silent on the issue of domestic violence. However, just as it attends to the spiritual, material, and political needs of its members, it has a responsibility to address this issue as well if it is to affirm the social gospel and mission of social justice as prescribed by its chief example, Christ (Bent-Goodley, 2008; Cummings, 2001). Some scholars have begun to recognize the importance of having the Black Church acknowledge the existence and severity of domestic violence. Jordan (2007) wrote the following regarding African American churches:

The silence of the Church regarding the “abuse of women” is in conspiracy against the total liberation of the African American community. An African American woman is expected to “suffer in silence” for the sake of others; when she assumes this
role in the Black Church, she is elevated to the level of martyrdom. Hence, her oppression is guaranteed. (p. 17)

In other words, researchers have shown that the Black Church can exacerbate the oppression of African American women by remaining silent on the leading health issue among all socioeconomic strata of African American women. Since the Black Church continues to serve as a pillar of strength and guidance in such areas as civil rights, politics, socioeconomics, health initiatives, family preservation, relationships, and education, the examination of its pastors’ views and knowledge of domestic violence is warranted. The following section addresses the role of pastors in the Black Church and in the domestic violence issue.

**Role of Pastors**

Although research has shown that domestic violence is a pervasive problem in the African American community, scholars have also found that African Americans often view places of worship as safe places to obtain information about resources for managing situations of domestic violence. For this reason, pastors play an important role in identifying and assisting survivors of domestic violence. Historically, African Americans credit much of their growth to the efforts of leaders in the Black Church. The pastor has traditionally been considered the leader of the church, or shepherd in charge, and has spiritual care of the congregation. As such, Black pastors are in a unique position to help the church minimize its denial regarding the problem and develop sensitivity to African American women who suffer domestic abuse and violence (Kroeger & Nason-Clark, 2010 [2010]; Miles, 2002). Unfortunately, like the Black Church as a whole, African American pastors and church
leaders have generally not held perpetrators accountable and have responded to the problem of domestic violence with silence or denial (Collins & Moore, 2006). According to a recent survey conducted by Lifeway Research, which interviewed 1,000 senior pastors of Protestant Churches in the United States, 42% rarely or never speak about domestic violence in their sermons (2014). According to researchers, such responses send a message that violence is acceptable.

Pastors in the Black Church have traditionally taught that women are to be submissive and to believe that the man is the “head of the household.” This patriarchal way of thinking reinforces women’s sense that they are subordinate and men are superior. In this context, it is clear why many African American women would seek the advice and guidance of their (male) pastors and feel loyal to these men’s teaching and Biblical interpretations.

Weaver at al. (2000) found that clergy are often first responders to victims of abuse. Their national survey of 1,000 battered women found that one in three of the women received assistance from pastors. However, this research and similar studies also showed that spiritual leaders are seriously unprepared and ineffective when dealing with domestic violence (Weaver et al, 2001; Miles, 2000). For instance, African American pastors have often given African American women the dangerous advice to “work harder at being a better wife, to pray for strength, or to submit to their husband,” with the promise that God would not put any more on their shoulders than they could bear (Kroeger & Nason-Clark, 2010; Miles, 2003). Also, women are continually encouraged to forgive their partners, pray for change, and not “abandon” their relationships (Nanson-Clark, 2010). Because of pastors’ lack of spousal and partner abuse training, they are generally unable to recognize the ways in which
abusive men utilize emotional, physical, psychological, and sexual tactics to maintain power and control over their wives and girlfriends.

An example of pastoral acknowledgement of the domestic violence issue is found in Miles’s (2000) book Domestic Violence: What Every Pastor Needs to Know. Miles (2000), wrote as follows:

As long as we (clergy) refuse to carry out our pastoral duties, victims of domestic violence will continue to crumble emotionally, psychologically, and spiritually underneath the weight of brutality and scriptural misinterpretations, which no human deserves. (p. 41)

A more recent example of a pastor’s lack of knowledge about domestic violence is the horrific incident between former NFL Baltimore Ravens football player Ray Rice and his then-fiancée (now wife) Janay Rice. On March, 27, 2014, Ray Rice punched Janay Rice in an elevator. The blow knocked her unconscious. The video of the incident went viral, and as a result, Ray Rice was released by the Ravens and indefinitely suspended by the NFL. Pastor Bryan Fishcer, Pastor of Community Church of the Valley, and now Director of Issues Analysis for the American Family Association, stated that “Ray Rice and Janay were living in sin, violating God’s standard for sexual and marital intimacy.” He then stated, “The single most dangerous place on the planet, for a woman, is when she is cohabiting, not married to a guy.” Pastor Fishcer’s comments are an example of victim-blaming based on faulty interpretations of the Bible.

In essence, it is critical for pastors to recognize their roles in domestic violence and the influence that they themselves have on African American women’s decisions of whether
and when to leave abusive relationships. Given that pastors are charged with maintaining “spiritual care” over their worshippers, they have a duty to seek domestic violence training for themselves and their ministerial staff. They have an obligation to create domestic violence ministries and promote National Domestic Violence Awareness Month. Pastors have the authority to preach sermons about the equality and inherent dignity of women and men. Last, pastors should solicit grants to fund workshops on relationship and communication skills that are essential for African American parishioners.

**Spirituality and Domestic Violence Among African Americans**

Martin and Martin (2002) stated that the concepts of spirituality and religion are so interconnected that the two are often discussed interchangeably, particularly within communities of color. Although scholars do distinguish between spirituality and religion, communities such as African Americans do not necessarily separate the two. The concepts of spirituality and religion are two ways of organizing people’s worldviews, that is, the way people understand and interpret their life experiences and attach meanings to events and experiences (Ortiz et al., 2000). Spirituality can be defined as “the sense of the sacred and divine” (Martin & Martin, 2002), involving belief in a higher power, whereas religion is a practice that involves external expressions of faith (Gilbert, 2000). For racial and ethnic minority groups, spirituality and religiosity are also intertwined with marginalization, racism, and oppression; certainly, spirituality and religious beliefs can serve as a buffer to these types of stressors (Yick, 2008).

Washington and Murphy (2006) examined religious involvement, spirituality, religious coping, and social support as correlates of posttraumatic stress symptoms and
depression symptoms in African American survivors of domestic violence. The researchers utilized four different scales in order to study depression, the importance of spirituality, religious coping, and religious involvement. The researchers found that women with higher levels of spirituality and greater religious involvement reported fewer depressive symptoms. Also, religious involvement was found to be negatively associated with posttraumatic stress symptoms. Further, women who reported higher levels of spirituality reported higher levels of religious coping strategies, and women who reported higher levels of religious involvement reported higher levels of social support. The participants were 65 women from various domestic violence agencies in the northeast. Once the participants were contacted by phone to participate and completed the consent forms, they were mailed a questionnaire packet. The questionnaire included questions regarding demographics, severity and frequency of physical and psychological abuse, aspects of social support, types of services utilized, religious involvement, spiritual experiences, and symptoms related to depression and posttraumatic stress disorder.

This study had several limitations. First, generalizability is confined to African American women of domestic violence. While this is the purpose of the study, it lacks information on the roles of such variables in the lives of non-African American women. Second, the sample size is relatively small, which explains why some correlations were in the expected direction, but not significant. Last, and most significant to the present proposed study, the quantitative nature of Washington and Murphy’s (2006) study prohibited the women participants from speaking and defining the variables for themselves. Because
spirituality is so central to how African American women understand themselves and the world, it plays a key role in how they experience domestic violence.

To understand the relationship among spirituality, religion, and domestic violence, one must understand that religious and spiritual beliefs are central to the survivor’s understanding of and response to the violence. The survivor’s own faith, church affiliation, and biblical perspective can be vital to her healing process, even as it can be damaging to her psychological well being. Therefore, it is critical to recognize spirituality as part of a culturally competent approach with African American women survivors of domestic violence.

**Spirituality as a Barrier**

An overview of the literature revealed that African American women viewed both their experience with abuse and their recovery from abuse within the context of their faith and spirituality, and that they turned to their pastors and churches for guidance, support, and safety. However, little is known about how spirituality serves as a barrier for African American women to escape domestic abuse. Black churches and pastors can perpetuate domestic violence in both overt and covert ways. Covert messages may take the form of isolating the women by denying communal worship or limiting religious activities (Yick, 2008). This form of isolation can take women away from their primary source of support and limit their time for spiritual renewal. Also, biblical scriptures are often seen as a source of refuge and solace, yet when used to manipulate and control women, they become a source of confusion and anger.
Bent-Goodley and Fowler (2006) conducted a qualitative study to examine how church congregants and leaders perceived spiritual and religious abuse. Following three community education forums about domestic violence in the African American community at three different churches, the researchers facilitated three focus groups. Field notes were taken, and each focus group was videotaped and later examined through transcript-based analysis. Using a grounded theory approach, the transcripts were analyzed through open coding, which yielded four themes: concerns about defining spiritual abuse, methods used by the abuser to influence the women’s spirituality and religious practices, the use of spirituality and religion by others to perpetuate abuse, and the spiritual impact of abuse on the survivor.

The findings point to the need to understand and identify the impact of spiritual and religious abuse of women. Furthermore, the findings indicate that more research is required to identify the ways in which perpetrators and others use spirituality and religion to perpetuate violence. However, because the participants chose to participate, it is possible that those who opted out could have provided essential insights related to the connection among spirituality, religion, and domestic violence. Also, the sample was small, which limits the generalizability of the findings.

Limited information exists on how spirituality and religion can overtly and covertly promote abuse; thus, Yick (2006) conducted a metasynthesis of qualitative findings on the role of spirituality and religion among culturally diverse domestic violence survivors (Yick, 2006). This study yielded nine themes, all of which concerned how religious teachings on gender role expectations perpetuate abuse. Gender role expectations are often manifested within marriages and within family structures more broadly. In traditional Protestant faiths.
such as evangelical Christianity, the language of husband headship and wifely submission are often used (Nason-Clark, 2010). These messages can become embedded in women’s consciousness, and when abuse occurs, psychological dissonance might result. For example, Nash’s (2006) study described a woman who was told by her pastor that “the Bible said the woman is to be submissive to her own husband, lest the will of God be blasphemed” (p. 202). She later went to God, consumed by anguish, asking, “I have to be submissive to my husband, God? How long do I have to go here? (p. 203).

Even research that shows the power of spirituality to help women forgive and feel forgiven indicates that spirituality can have a downside for women. In a study of imprisoned battered women who had killed their partners, Schneider and Felty (2009) found that spirituality gave the women a way to reinterpret their experiences and forgive themselves. Giesbrecht and Sevckik’s (2000) study found that women linked forgiveness to God, whom they acknowledged to be forgiving. However, due to women’s gender role expectations and the church community’s disapproval of divorce, self-blame was prevalent among the women, which made their need to feel forgiven that much stronger. During their processing, they acknowledged that “God is a forgiving God” and that the “things in the [the] past, that’s then. This is now. God is not concerned about [the] past” (p. 240). Yet, the research makes apparent that religious teachings and ideal standards of marriage create inner discord, cast doubt on the pastor’s interpretations, and lead women to rethink attending church.

As African American women rely on their faith and spirituality for strength in the midst of abusive relationships, a woman’s perpetrator can often use her spiritual and religious beliefs against her. Spiritual abuse is defined as using the survivor’s spiritual or religious
beliefs to manipulate her (National Coalition Against Domestic Violence Statistics, 2007). This type of abuse is another form of control that an abuser can wield; such tactics include preventing the partner from practicing his or her religious or spiritual beliefs; ridiculing the other person’s beliefs; forcing the children to be reared in the faith that the partner has not agreed to; and citing scriptures to justify physical, sexual, and other abusive behavior (Faith Communities: Domestic Violence Protocol, 2007).

Although the Bible can be a resource for spiritual living and a powerful guide to help people of faith live righteous, humble lives, men who abuse often use the Bible and its scriptural teachings to rationalize their actions (Collins & Moore, 2006). Scriptures can thus become a barrier for survivors. To illustrate, abusive men often cite Ephesians 5:22–28 as an admonishment to women to be submissive to their husbands (Jordan, 2005; Lindquiest, 2001; Miles, 2000). The abuser uses this tactic to “remind” the survivor that it is God’s plan that the man should be the head of the home. The more appropriate interpretation of this scripture, according to the New International Bible, is that husbands and wives submit to each other out of love for Christ. Another misapplied text is Malachi 2:16 (Jordan, 2005). This verse reads, “‘For I hate divorce!’ says the Lord, the God of Israel.” Abusers use this scripture to manipulate women into not dissolving the marriage. One final scripture that abusers cite is Matthew 18:21–22, in which Christ instructs his followers to forgive seventy-seven times, to induce feelings of guilt in their victims and pressure women into forgiving abusive and vicious act (Hylen, 2000). As a result, survivors get entangled in repeated broken promises to end the abuse, and the cycle of abuse is prolonged.
In short, spirituality and religion can be a hindrance for African American women in abusive relationships. Faith communities and pastors can inadvertently cause damage that is greater than the support they provide. Consequently, survivors can be left feeling hopeless, shameful, and unworthy of love, respect, and dignity. Research suggests that survivors benefit when, instead of being advised to pray more and be more religious, they are told that their faith does not condone abuse and that their physical, emotional, and spiritual well being are important. Such guidance empowers survivors, uplifts their spirits, and even validates their spiritual and religious beliefs.

**Spirituality as a Coping Mechanism**

Coping refers to the cognitive and behavioral efforts that a person employs to manage “the demands of the person–environment relationship that are appraised as stressful and the emotions they generate” (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, p. 19). While coping remains a constant construct in mental health research and practice, its role in the lives of domestic violence survivors is not well understood. A central component in a coping model is that coping methods use to deal with trauma may be disengaging or engaging (Kemp et al., 1995). For example, “disengage coping” involves managing stress or trauma in ways that adversely affect and individual’s mental health, such as through alcohol or drug abuse. “Engaging coping,” on the other hand, involves constructive responses that have positive effects on mental health. Examples of engaging coping include spirituality and social support.

Research has repeatedly documented the use of spirituality and religion as a traditional means of coping in the African American community. Spirituality refers to the perception of and interaction with the transcendent and a sense of inner life (Underwood &
The overarching purpose of religion in the lives of African Americans is as a vehicle to speak to issues of oppression and the quest for liberation, love, hope, and justice (Boyd-Franklin & Lockwood, 2009; Anderson & Black, 1995). Not surprisingly, African American women have long utilized spirituality and religion to withstand the adversities of an abusive relationship.

Spirituality and religion play an essential role in the lives of African American women, the most consistent finding being that religion and spirituality hold central places in these women’s coping repertoires. For example, in a study of African American women with cancer, Holt et al. (2009) found that religion and spirituality had an important role in the women’s coping with their disease. Other research shows that African American women cite their religious upbringing as foundational, saying that the habit of turning to spirituality during troubled times was ingrained in them from childhood (Yick, 2008). As adults, African American women are often inclined to turn to their faith in God and use prayer and spiritual development when they feel stressed. For instance, African American women use formal religious involvement and private devotional practices (e.g., prayer) to negotiate a range of adversities including oppression based on race, class, and gender; family and parenting stress; financial stress; psychological distress; and a vast array of daily hassles (Jang & Johnson, 2004). African American women in abusive relationships utilize prayer along with social support networks (i.e., family and friends) to cope with distressing circumstances.

According to Gillum and Sullivan (2006), an overwhelming majority of African American survivors of domestic violence noted that spirituality or God was a source of strength or comfort for them (97%), with 76% reporting that these sources provided “a great
deal” of comfort (pg. 245). The study also indicated that a greater extent of religious involvement predicted increased psychological well being and decreased depression. However, the study only asked three questions to address the issue of spirituality and religious involvement in women’s lives. Also, the researchers failed to identify the participants’ religious affiliations and examine how their religious communities had been supportive or unsupportive of them in the past. As such, more research is warranted to examine the full extent of the role spirituality plays in the lives of domestic violence survivors.

Jang and Johnson (2004) found that African American women who were more religious tended to have more social support from family and friends and tended to be less distressed than African American women who were not religious. This finding suggests that for African American women, an association exists between religious involvement and mental health outcomes. Examples of religious involvement include attending church services and Bible studies, and practicing one-on-one scripture reading, and fasting. However, this study left a few questions unanswered. First, what specifically is it about religious institutions that serve communities of color that increase women’s social support? Second, what is it about the spiritual identity of women of color that facilitates the increased network of support that they receive by their involvement in a Black church?

Social support, which can involve both emotional support and more direct forms of support, improves the coping capacity of women survivors of partner abuse (Fowler & Hill, 2010. This support can make a difference in the likelihood that a woman sustains mental health and remains abuse-free. Fowler and Hill’s (2004) findings are significant as they
indicate that women who are more religious tend to have more opportunities to talk about the abuse with family and friends, as well more options of places to stay when or if they leave their abusers. According to one nationally representative survey, 68% of women who leave their partners go to stay with family members or friends (Tjaden & Thomas, 2000).

In summary, research shows that, as a result of the detrimental effects of domestic violence, women are left with feelings of guilt, shame, low self-esteem, and helplessness. Many other domains of a women’s life are threatened when she experiences domestic violence: her financial stability, the safety of her children, her social status, and the degree to which she is subjected to a stigmatized identity. For African American women, the threats to her domains are greater due to the intersecting identities of race, class, and gender. These threats result in discriminatory practices and create an extra barrier to escape from domestic violence. The long history of slavery, racism, and oppressive living conditions have primed African American women to look to spirituality as their primary coping mechanism in the face of domestic violence. Thus, it makes sense that African American women turn first to their spiritual and religious beliefs when coping with abusive relationships. For this reason, spirituality is a crucial theme in the survival of domestic violence, and it requires further study.

### Theoretical Framework

A theoretical framework is a collection of interrelated concepts that, together, constitute a cohesive context for examining a phenomenon, serve as a guide for research, and provide the infrastructure for data analysis. For this study, a blending of Critical Race Theory and Relational Cultural Theory provides a suitable lens for understanding the experiences of
African American women in abusive relationships. CRT is the overarching framework that explains the systemic barriers that African American women in abusive relationships face. As a complementary theory, RCT provides a relational perspective for understanding individual abusive relationships. CRT and RCT are complementary because CRT enables us to understand how African American women’s experiences are shaped by systemic factors, while RCT illuminates the role of individual relationships in their experiences.

Critical Race Theory

Background and History

Critical Race Theory (CRT), developed in the mid-1970s by Derrick Bell, focuses directly on the effects of race and racism, while simultaneously addressing the hegemonic system of White supremacy (Decuir & Dixon, 2004). It originated as an outgrowth of Critical Legal Studies’ (CLS) failure to take race and racism seriously, highlighting the ways in which the law is not neutral and objective, but rather is designed to support White supremacy and the subordination of people of color (Ladson-Billings, 1999). While CRT proper was formulated by legal scholars in the 1970s, critical theories of race in the United States date back as far as the mid-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, with roots in the writings of prominent intellectual–activists such as Frederick Douglass, Sojourner Truth, and W.E. B DuBois (Tate; Gillborn & Ladson-Billings, 1997; 2010). CRT is based on the understanding that structural and systemic racism, also known as “institutional racism,” is embedded not only in individual minds, but also in social relationships, practices, and institutions (Delgado, 1995). Consequently, these social structures and relationships shape individual minds and
identities, as well as the allocation of economic, political, and social resources (housing, voting rights, employment practices), in racially unequal ways.

Key Tenets

Critical Race Theory (CRT) explores the relationships among race, racism, and power. CRT consists of five interdisciplinary tenets: (1) the permanence of racism, which explains how racism is enacted, widespread, and engrained in the fabric and system of American society; (2) the critique of liberalism, which acknowledges White privilege and refutes the claims of color and gender blindness and equal opportunity within society; (3) intersectionality, which points to the multidimensionality of oppressions and recognizes that race alone cannot account for disempowerment; (4) interest convergence, which explains how White people will support the advancement of minority rights only when Whites can benefit; and finally (5) centrality of experiential knowledge or counter-storytelling, which allows the unique voices of people of color to be heard and de-marginalizes the experiences of marginalized groups (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012).

In order to illustrate how CRT illuminates the problem of domestic violence among African American women, the following section will discuss the problem in terms of three tenets of CRT: permanence of racism, intersectionality, and counter-storytelling.

Permanence of Racism

Despite tremendous progress toward racial equality in the United States, ample research shows that people in racial minorities still experience negative circumstances and poor treatment due to race. Researchers indicate that race-based discrimination, hostility, and prejudice are stress stimuli that, when experienced by racial/ethnic minorities, lead to low
self-esteem, a sense of helplessness, depression, anxiety, and physical health problems such as hypertension (Williams & Mohammed, 2009). The multidimensional layers of racism (individual, institutional, and cultural) are the basis for much of the literature on race-related stress. Individual racism typically occurs on the personal level, where racial prejudice is acted out, either consciously or unconsciously, within some interpersonal interaction. Institutional racism is an institutionalized version of the individual act of racism in which institutional practices and policies are based in the belief of racial superiority of one group over another. Finally, cultural racism is demonstrated through the assertion of the dominant group's cultural heritage and values (i.e., traditions, language, arts, values) over the values, beliefs, and traditions of all other groups. These levels of racism are both insidious and chronic, and they are likely to test the individual and collective resources and resolve of people of color. Cultural racism and ethnic identity correlate with the lower quality of life among ethnic minorities such as Blacks, Asian Americans, and Latino Americans (Smith & Silva, 2011).

In a study of the psychological effects of generic stressors and racist discrimination, Klonoff et al. (1999) found that frequent exposure to racism (both in the previous year and across a lifetime) was a significant predictor of psychological symptoms for African Americans (Greer, 2011). In another analysis, Hedwig and Turney (2012) found that perceived discrimination, chronic everyday discrimination, and major lifetime discrimination were linked to greater depressive symptoms, loneliness, and hostility. A vast body of interdisciplinary literature has documented the influence of racial discrimination on Black individuals. Works by DuBois (1898), Fanon (1963; 1967), and Feagin (2001), though
separated by a century in time, speak to a common theme: that experiences of racism exact a significant psychological toll on people.

CRT illuminates what racism means and how it operates, so as theoretical framework, it can contribute to understanding the historical and contemporary patterns of racial discrimination, of which domestic violence against African American women is just one example. Acknowledging the permanence of racism helps to provide clarity about how certain structural systems have enabled and reinforced racist practices against people of color. These various structural systems generate stressful circumstances and cognitive states that are conductive to emotional distress, and thus exacerbate the problem for African American women seeking assistance for domestic violence.

African American women’s responses to abusive behavior may be influenced by the chronic experiences of racism and by the social contexts in which these women live; circumstances often provide them with different opportunities for and restrictions on their resistance to violence (Taft et al., 2009). For example, according to Taft et al. (2009), contextual variables such as poverty, low income, and other barriers to service utilization were consistently related to increased risk of domestic violence for African American women. It was also found that previous experiences of racism might prevent African American women from seeking help from institutional services, which traditionally safeguard or protect Caucasian women from abuse (Nnawulezi & Sullivan, 2013).

Researchers have consistently demonstrated that emotional and economic resources across multiple ecological contexts are necessary to reduce women’s abuse risk. Lack of economic resources, weakened community social networks, and low self-efficacy contribute
to women’s difficulties in staying away from abusive partners and creating different lives for themselves and their children (Taft et al., 2009). These barriers diminish African American women’s confidence and impact their ability to seek help. CRT’s emphasis on the permanence of racism draws attention to how structural systems have operated against people of color. Specifically for this study, this tenet of CRT shows how White systemic structures impact social context variables for African American women in abusive relationships.

Intersectionality

Because CRT emphasizes what racism means and how it operates, this theoretical framework can contribute to understanding domestic violence at the intersections of race, class, and gender. This framework provides a lens for understanding how institutional racism and systemic barriers limit resources for African American women who seek to leave abusive relationships. Research has shown that African American battered women confront multiple oppressions when they attempt to extract themselves from abusive relationships. For example, Sharma (2001) observed that “racist and discriminatory practices within community services, such as police departments, government organizations, and even shelter facilities also complicate matters” for women of color (p. 1413). African American women may mistrust White agencies and service providers due to the historically oppressive ways in which White society has treated them. This mistrust often keeps abused women from reaching out for help. Other examples of multiple oppressions are institutional racism and sexism, which may pull African American women in two directions. On the one hand, they may be at increased risk for abuse because some African American men (though not all) have been socialized by a Western patriarchal system that keeps them economically and politically
disempowered, while simultaneously encouraging them to project their anger toward African American women without fear of legal sanctions. On the other hand, racial loyalty dictates that African American women protect African American men from a discriminatory legal system, even at the risk of their own physical and mental health (Bent-Goodley, 2009).

The concept of intersectionality was developed by critical feminist theorist and legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw (1995), to critique “Eurocentric” feminist models that over-universalize and over-simplify links between gender and domestic violence. Intersectionality is the notion of how various social identities simultaneously affect the lives of marginalized community members. The concept illuminates how the intersections of systems of oppression such as discrimination and cultural categories such as race, gender, and class contribute to multiple forms of discrimination that are simultaneous and intertwined. Mahalingam (2007) characterized intersectionality in terms of the “interplay between person and social location, with particular emphasis on power relations among various social locations” (p. 31).

In a study examining the domestic violence shelter experiences of African American women, Crenshaw found that structural intersectionality and domestic violence hindered the women’s ability to find solutions, specifically ways of leaving the volatile relationship that they initially sought services for (Crenshaw, 2001). In addition, many African American women who seek shelter services are unemployed, underemployed, burdened with poverty, child-care responsibilities and lack job seeking skills. Crenshaw asserts that these burdens are the consequences of gender and class oppression along with racist discriminatory practices that African American women face for employment and housing. Consequently, these structural multilayered systems demonstrate how intersectionality shapes the experiences of
African American women in domestic violence relationships. Therefore, the concept of intersectionality in relation to domestic violence is crucial because it provides understanding of how multiple identities impact perceptions, experiences, and outcomes.

Cultural barriers often discourage African American women from reporting or escaping battering situations. For example, the procedures that women have to follow to get assistance, such as filing protective orders and finding shelters and career services, can be intimidating. Often African American women do not have nearly as many resources available to them as Caucasian women do. Largely because of institutional racism and relatively low incomes, African American women lack access to necessary support such as counseling, financial services, and housing. These examples illustrate how patterns of disadvantage intersect in African American women’s experiences with domestic violence.

Structural and institutional racism contribute to and perpetuate economic inequality. Racism is reflected in how those in the bottom rungs of society, socio-economically speaking, are often blamed for their circumstances. African American women are impoverished at rates disproportionate to the U.S. population (U.S. Poverty Report, 2011). African American women represent 6% of the U.S. population, but nearly 37% of impoverished females in the United States are African American. African American women account for nearly the largest number of women living in poverty.

With women bearing the brunt of poverty, income inequality is especially devastating for African American women. African American women who live in poverty-stricken neighborhoods have higher rates of domestic violence than women in other neighborhoods (Hetling & Zhang, 2010). Poor African American women are more vulnerable to domestic
violence than any other group because they are the lowest on the socioeconomic scale. With fewer options for economic self-sufficiency and with social support systems that are unable to offer much financial help, poor women are more likely than affluent ones to feel trapped in unhealthy relationships. A poor woman may feel even more trapped by the prospect of being considered a “welfare queen,” a label implying that assistance from social services and legal aid may be hard to come by. The “welfare queen” stereotype started in the 1970s during Ronald Reagan’s presidential campaign; he used the image to suggest that there existed widespread depravity and criminality among low-income women of color (Gallaher, 2010). Since then, the term has become widespread as a derogatory label for poor African American women. Women who are labeled welfare queens are generally treated with disrespect and suspicion by those in power, as though the abuse these women allege may never have occurred. These women are often undermined, questioned about their motives for seeking help, and ridiculed for staying in abusive relationships. Courts wonder why abused women stay in violent relationships because they fail to understand that economic abuse is a component of domestic violence (Hetling & Zhang, 2010).

Scholars have documented how, historically, myriad negative racial stereotypes have been applied to African American women. Beginning with the caricatures of Mammy, Aunt Jemima, and Jezebel, African American women have been subjected to negative stereotypes throughout history U.S. history (Collins, 1991). These stereotypes hinder poor African American women who seek interventions in abusive relationships and negatively impact how the legal system treats impoverished African American women who seek resources and justice. Thus, race and poverty compound the complexities of domestic violence.
According to Holvino (2010), the race, class, gender perspective attempts to address social problems and to represent the interests and voices of a vast array of marginalized peoples. Its focus is on multiple oppressions of individuals. Understanding intersectionality provides ways to legitimate the experiences of women who have been marginalized and hidden from dominant cultural discourses about battered women (Mullings, 2014 [1997]). Attention to the multiple identities of African American women in abusive relationship brings to light different perspectives and voices that are often silenced and misunderstood, and reveals how systems of oppression and discrimination debilitate women in the process of seeking assistance to leave abusive relationships.

Counter-storytelling

Narratives by dominant groups such as Whites, males, and the elite are generally legitimiz...
the power to make decisions that affect the services that survivors seek for assistance. For example, one dominant view is that African American women are “welfare queens.” The reality, or counter-story, is that African American women have a very hard time finding employment due to the discriminatory structural systems in the United States. Research shows that even African American women who are highly educated still face challenges. For instance, a quantitative study found that African American women with Master’s degrees or higher experienced racial microaggressions in various workplace environments (Brown, 2014). In battling poverty, chronic stress, and daily economic and health concerns, African American women can experience acute stress, despair, loss of self-worth, and chronic hopelessness. These challenges exacerbate their struggles in abusive relationships. In this context, the practice of counter-storytelling—sharing stories about the challenges of living in a poverty-stricken environment—can help to correct the view that African American women are lazy and should work harder to be successful. Such stories will show that people are trying, but cannot get past the discriminatory barriers in the United States.

An important use of counter-storytelling for women in abusive relationships is to claim opportunities to share their experiences of seeking services for domestic violence. For example, poor African American women can share their experiences standing in front of a white male judge for a domestic violence hearing. Such experiences are vital and can provide better understanding on the negative perceptions of law enforcement officials and representatives of the legal system that affect these women’s attempts to get assistance. Furthermore, the stories can address how racial stereotypes exist in the court system when laws are racially neutral and judges are impartial.
People of color can give voice to powerful counter-stories. It is their stories that can challenge the perspectives of society’s dominant members and simultaneously encourage other people of color. Storytelling builds a community of wisdom, hope, and the possibility of change. It provides audiences the opportunity to listen to others’ views and connect with others’ stories. Counter-stories also provide people of color a chance to describe the impact of White systemic barriers and shed light on the permanence of racism. Many survivors of domestic violence suffer in silence and blame themselves. Therefore, sharing their stories can give voice and help others who have had similar experiences.

**Relational Cultural Theory**

**Background and History**

Relational Cultural Theory (RCT) is a comprehensive theory of counseling and development that emerged from the notion that traditional models of human development and psychotherapy do not accurately address the relational experiences of women and people in other devalued cultural groups (Comstock et. al., 2008). RCT arose from an effort to better understand the importance of growth-fostering relationships in people’s lives, and the theory seeks to lessen the suffering caused by chronic disconnection and isolation, whether at an individual or societal level, to increase the capacity for relational resilience, and to foster social justice (Walker, 2005). Scholars and researchers in the field of counseling have widely documented the belief that traditional counseling theories do not adequately serve women, members of racial and ethnic minority groups, and members of spiritual and religious groups (Duffey & Somody, 2012; Jordan, 2010; Ruiz, 2012; Wade & Post, 2009; Sue & Sue, 2012).
Therefore, RCT, like CRT, is a critical, tangible framework for understanding African American women’s experiences with domestic violence.

Relational Cultural Theory (RCT) was developed in 1976 through the work of psychiatrist Jean Baker Miller, in collaboration with Judith V. Jordan, Janet Surrey, and Irene Stiver at the Stone Center at Wellesley College (Duffey & Somody, 2012; Comstock et al., 2008). RCT proposes that people develop through connections. Relationships are the cornerstone of growth, and it is through the complexity of relationships and the context of those connections that development can be assessed (Duffey & Somody, 2011).

Key Tenets

The RCT framework has seven comprehensive tenets (Comstock et al., 2008), which are as follows. (1) Growth-fostering relationships are interpersonal connections through which healing takes place, so that each person involved feels a greater sense of “zest,” sense of worth, and stronger connections with each other. (2) Mutual empathy, which is based on the Rogerian model of empathy, is a characteristic of relationships that are based on equality and mutual exchange of information, which facilitate people’s connections with one another. (3) Connections and disconnections include strategies to create relational resiliency in order to manage hindrances in relationships caused by shame, guilt, marginalization, and/or social injustice. (4) Authenticity refers to one’s ability to fully and honestly represent oneself. (5) The central relational paradox explains that, while an individual yearns for connection, he or she may, due to feelings of shame, fear, suspicion, and mistrust, develop strategies that result in further disconnection and isolation. (6) Relational images are the inner construction and expectations that people create out of their experiences in relationships (Duffey & Somody,
Finally, relational resilience/relational competence is the process of developing resilience by preparing people to move toward growth-fostering relationships and mutual empathy (Duffey & Somody, 2011).

The goal of the subsequent section is to examine the impact of domestic violence among African American women from a relational context. For this study, two tenets of RCT are especially relevant: strategies of disconnection and relational images. These two tenets will be applied to better understand the domestic violence experiences of African American women.

Strategies of Disconnection

Strategies of disconnection represent a major component of RCT. The concept refers to interruptions or hindrances in relationships caused by shame, guilt, marginalization, or social injustice (Comstock et al., 2008). When in a state of disconnection, a person experiences a general decrease of energy. For instance, one feels unable to act constructively in many aspects of life, and experiences confusion regarding herself and others. This decreased sense of worth prompts one to turn away from relationships in general. Chronic disconnection takes place when there are repeated disconnections in the context of one’s relationships. Disconnection is also defined as a method of self-preservation that can be used when individuals refrain from sharing information when they believe it will be detrimental (Duffey & Somody, 2012). A form of disconnection can develop that is known as the central relational paradox, in which an individual desires but avoids connections. Examples of strategies of disconnection include isolation, withdrawing, blaming, and criticism. Disconnections are undoubtedly part of every relationship, occurring when people
let each other down, fail to respond empathically, behave in hurtful ways, or inflict or experience a myriad of other relational injuries (Walker, 2013; Jordan, 2001). However, disconnections are likely to occur when members of minority groups are marginalized and discounted by people in power.

From a relational perspective, strategies of disconnection are critical to African American women in abusive relationships because they become techniques for survival. As mentioned earlier, experiences with racism and discrimination place a psychological toll on African American people. It makes sense that strategies such as isolation, withdrawing, and blaming develop out of such detrimental experiences. Likewise, African American women in abusive relationships often blame themselves for the abuse and isolate themselves from family and friends. They also refrain from seeking legal assistance due to the negative racist stereotypes of African American women.

According to RCT, a woman’s primary motivation in life is to build a sense of connection with others. Women develop a sense of self and self-worth when their actions arise out of, and lead back into connections with others (Miller, 1990). Therefore, connection, not separation, is the guiding principle of growth for women. Yet it can be quite challenging for African American women in abusive relationships to connect and develop a sense of self and self-worth. The constant struggle of living in a system of White hegemony can deplete her sense of worth and her energy to fight the system.

*Relational Images*

Relational images are the inner constructions and expectations that people create out of their experiences in relationships (Jordan, 2013). Relational imaging can be useful for
individuals who are members of underserved populations that have experienced systemic injustices or marginalization (Comstock et al., 2008; Duffey & Somody, 2012). Generated from previous experiences, relational images act as a template for how relationships are perceived. These images develop early in life and are carried from one relationship to another, sometimes subject to growth and sometimes limiting a person’s expectations in ways that anchor her in the relational past. These expectations influence how she will be treated in relationships and how she interprets relational dynamics. Also, the relational images and patterns of relating produced by experiences of chronic disconnections or abusive behaviors can be very difficult to change.

African American women that witnessed domestic violence in their early childhood developed inner pictures of what a relationship looks like. According to Banks (2010: 2006), the destruction of relationships from witnessing abuse or experiencing abuse during childhood presents the largest obstacle to healing; these images create a set of beliefs about why the relationships are the way they are, and determine expectations not only about what will occur in relationships but their sense of themselves. These negative templates become the unconscious frameworks and often become the source of a sense of lack of relational competence and worth and support strategies of disconnection and hopelessness.

Experiences with racism and discriminatory practices contribute to the relational template for African American women in abusive relationship. These experiences of injustice and marginalization contribute to how they feel the legal system will treat them. Dating back to the slavery era, African Americans’ distrust of White people has also contributed to the development of their relational images and expectations. Thus, it is not surprising that they
do not first seek out legal assistance and domestic violence agencies for help. These relational templates are deeply embedded, often exacerbating the strategies of disconnection and making the cycle of abuse more difficult to overcome.

**Synthesis**

The preceding literature review discussed both theoretical and empirical literature that is relevant to this study of how African American women who have experienced domestic violence narrate their experiences, with particular attention to how they narrate the role of spirituality in their experiences. The following paragraphs synthesize the theoretical and empirical literature presented above. In the discussion of theoretical literature, Critical Race Theory and Relational Culture Theory are presented as theoretical frameworks for understanding African American women’s layered experiences of oppression and the strategies they develop for coping. As such, I argue that these frameworks can be used to understand African American women’s experiences of domestic violence. In the empirical research discussed in this literature review, both domestic violence and a sense of spirituality are shown to be prevalent in the African American community; due in part to these competing trends, African American women face many obstacles in their process of leaving abusive relationships. In the paragraphs to follow, the theoretical and empirical literature are synthesized in such a way as to show their common threads, point out gaps in the existing understanding, and provide the rationale for this study. Ultimately, the purpose of this study is to address the lack of qualitative research on the experiences of African American women survivors of domestic abuse. Only when researchers and helping professionals understand the unique struggles of this population can effective interventions be designed to support them.
Synthesis of CRT and RCT

As shown in this review of the literature, African American women face systemic challenges that impact their decision to leave abusive relationships. Barriers such as lack of economic resources, weakened community and social networks, and low self-efficacy can all contribute to women’s difficulties in staying away from abusive partners. These barriers diminish African American women’s confidence and impact their ability to seek help. The literature review also established why spirituality plays such a powerful role in the lives of many African American women in domestic violence relationships, and thus shows why this study was needed. A greater understanding of this culturally specific theme will benefit counselors as well as scholars who research IPV.

As this literature review demonstrates, scholars’ research on domestic violence among African American women has been limited by its neglect of Critical Race Theory and Relational Cultural Theory. Both CRT and RCT overlap and provide approaches for working with African American survivors of domestic violence and for enhancing one’s cultural competence in general. CRT explores the relationships among race, racism, and power and is the overarching framework that explains the systemic obstacles that African American women in abusive relationships face. RCT extends CRT as it provides a relational perspective to examine the impact of domestic violence among African American women. For instance, RCT supports the multicultural–social justice movement as it recognizes the pain and suffering caused by social injustices and the importance of the person’s life experiences in relation to their well-being. Paired together, CRT and RCT consider the environment, relationships, culture, and background of individuals from marginalized
populations. Therefore, the integration of these theories provides a solid cultural lens needed for the present study and research design. The diagram below illustrates the interconnections of the five tenets of CRT and RCT.

Figure 1. Tenets of CRT and RCT.

Synthesis of Research Studies

In one of the studies reviewed above, researchers identified experiences with personal and community resources that were helpful and not helpful when leaving an abusive male partner. This research shows that African American women do experience challenges with accessing resources in domestic violence situations. According to CRT, previous racism and other negative experiences may prevent African American women from seeking help from
institutional services that traditionally safeguard or protect Caucasian women from abuse. However, because this study failed to identify issues of racism, oppression, and discrimination—and specifically the way these issues shape the lives of African American women and impact their access to resources—more information is needed to understand fully the experiences of African American women in accessing resources to escape situations of domestic violence.

In another study, it was reported that women with relatively high levels of spirituality and religious involvement reported fewer depressive symptoms. Religious involvement was found to be negatively associated with posttraumatic stress symptoms. Further, women who reported high levels of spirituality reported high levels of religious coping strategies, and women who reported high levels of religious involvement reported high levels of social support. This research demonstrates an association between spirituality and religious involvement on one hand, and mental health outcomes on the other hand, for African American women in abusive relationships.

Another study examined how church congregants and leaders perceived spiritual and religious abuse. It was reported that African American women and church leaders were unsure of how to define spiritual abuse, how to identify the methods used by abusers to influence women’s spirituality and religious practices, how to describe others’ use of spirituality and religion to perpetuate abuse, and how to characterize the spiritual impact of abuse on the survivor. These findings demonstrate that the spiritual abuse is indeed a barrier to escape for African American women who experience domestic violence; however, the finding requires further examination.
Researchers of another study found that God and spirituality remained sources of strength for African American women in abusive relationships, and that religious involvement provided greater social support than was experienced by women who were less religiously involved. However, the extent of the religious involvement and the nature of what the Black churches provided remain unknown.

To assure a thorough review of the literature, a comprehensive search was conducted through online databases such as Psych Lit, Google Scholar, North Carolina State University’s library search, the Educational Research and Information Center (ERIC), and EBSCO Host Online Research Databases (DBSCO). Unfortunately, there is a limited amount of scholarly counseling literature that specifically investigates the interrelationship of domestic violence and spirituality for African American women. Moreover, very little of the counseling literature on African American females has been authored by African American women. Thus, it can be inferred that African American females’ perspectives and experiences may not be authentically represented in the literature on counseling and IPV. More research is available from social work scholars, but it tends to be quantitative. Moreover, much of the recent literature addressing African American women’s experiences of spirituality and domestic violence has been conceptual articles, rather than research studies. Thus, more research is needed to fill the gap in knowledge on African American women’s experiences of IPV and spirituality.

Through the above exploration of literature on the importance of the Black Church, spirituality, and coping mechanisms for African American women who experience IPV, several questions were answered. However, more research was needed to gain a full
understanding of how spirituality serves as a protector factor and barrier for these women. This study sought to fill this gap by capturing the women’s voices and the importance of spirituality in their experiences.

As mentioned above, researchers know that spirituality serves as a coping mechanism for African Americans in stressful situations and that the Black Church remains an essential pillar of the African American community. However, there has been little qualitative research that examines the experiences of African American women in domestic violence relationships from a counseling perspective. The counseling perspective of this study was essential because counselors are social agents of change. This study sought to understand how African American women who had experienced domestic violence narrated their experiences, with particular attention to spirituality as a protective factor and barrier.

Summary

This chapter provided an overview of the research on the prevalence of domestic violence in the African American community, discussed two theories that can provide better understanding of this phenomenon, and described studies that have established the importance of spirituality for the African American community.

At this time of this study, there were limited and outdated qualitative studies on the experiences of African American women with domestic violence experiences, or on how spirituality mediated these women’s experiences. There is an obvious need for greater knowledge of and sensitivity to the unique struggles and dilemmas that African American survivors of domestic violence face. Granted, domestic violence is a painful experience for all women; but African American women are caught in a vice of intersecting oppressions that
leave them slim to no options for escape. They face greater obstacles to healing because they live with racism on a daily basis. This research yielded important insights into the lives of African American survivors of domestic violence and raised significant questions about how they can be better served by helping professionals. The following chapter describes the methodology for this study, including the selection of participants, the interview procedures, and the narrative analysis process.
CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

Domestic violence is widely recognized as a problem in our culture. For African American women, the intersection of domestic violence with race, gender, and class triply victimizes women as they seek resources and try to break out of the cycle of abuse. Spirituality has been identified in the literature as both a protective factor and a barrier to escape for African American women experiencing domestic violence.

The purpose of this narrative study was to extend the line of research on domestic violence by examining the domestic violence experiences of African American women and the perceived role of spirituality in shaping those experiences. Through analyzing the narratives of the participants’ stories, this research sought to better understand the domestic violence experiences and circumstances that impacted their process of leaving. Using a narrative analysis approach enabled the researcher to elicit the participants’ stories of domestic violence and spirituality and the meaning they attached to those stories. Ultimately, these stories helped the researcher to make sense of these women’s spirituality and domestic violence experiences, and thus to understand the cultural and social meanings of the experiences. The primary research questions that guided this qualitative research study were as follows: (1) How do African American women experience domestic violence? (2) How did African American women perceive the role of spirituality in their domestic violence experience?

This qualitative research study explored the narratives of African American women in domestic violence relationships with particular attention to what these narratives revealed about their experiences and the role of spirituality in their experiences. The previous two
chapters explained the importance of the study and discussed relevant literature and theoretical frameworks. This chapter provides a rationale for using a qualitative methodology, describes the research design, and identifies the role of the researcher. Next, participants, interview procedures, data collection and analysis are presented. Finally, steps for maintaining the trustworthiness of the research are discussed.

**Rationale for Qualitative Methodology**

Qualitative methodology allows for an in-depth understanding of the meanings that individuals make from their experiences, which would otherwise not be accessible to researchers (Morrow, 2007). In order to understand what a woman is going through in an abusive relationship, her voice must be heard. It can be easy to become desensitized to numbers so large that they seem unreal, such as the four to six million assaults committed by intimate partners every year (Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000). However, it is not so easy to ignore the compelling voices of women themselves, and to know that for every woman who survived to tell her story, countless others did not. One-third of female murder victims are killed by an intimate partner (Matthews, 2004). This amounts to around 1,200 women every year (Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000). Much quantitative research has been done to demonstrate the extent of the problem and who is affected by it; however, quantitative studies can only show the numbers, not the lived experiences. For this study, a qualitative methodology was used because this was the most appropriate method for examining the stories behind the numbers, the experiences of African American women in abusive relationships.
Research Design

A research methodology provides the rationale, structure, and parameters for a given study’s research procedures. In this section, key points about the theoretical methodological approach are presented. Narrative analysis was the methodology used for this research because it serves as a powerful tool by which the researcher can gather and interpret the stories individuals use to describe their experiences (Hatch, 2012).

Narrative Inquiry

Narrative inquiry is a specific type of qualitative research that embraces a study of life experiences through the use and analysis of stories (Riessman, 2008; Schwandt, 2007). According to Ollerenshaw and Creswell (2002), telling stories helps people to think about and understand their own or others’ thinking, actions, and reactions. Riessman (2008) asserted, “Narratives are strategic, functional and purposeful” (p. 8).

The use of narratives in social science research, specifically sociology and anthropology, emerged in the 1920s and 1930s, when interest in personal life histories and cultural groups began to flourish. However, the exact beginnings remain in question. Some scholars argue that the “narrative turn” began in the 1960s and resulted from significant societal shifts (Riessman, 2008). For instance, during the Civil Rights Movement, the utilization of narratives brought marginal voices to the forefront to challenge hegemonic influences in society (Butler-Kisber, 2010; Riessman, 2008). Additional factors that contributed to the narrative turn included the disputing of positivist methodologies and the turn from realist epistemologies. In addition, a growing interest in the study of oral and written language, including memoir, sparked the interest of sociolinguists, literary analysts,
educators, and sociologists, all of whom began to use narratives in social science research (Butler-Kisber, 2010).

Narrative studies explain or normalize what has occurred; they lay out why and how things have become the way they are. They become the realm of experience, where speakers lay out how they as individuals experience certain events and confer their subjective meaning onto these experiences (Creswell, 2007). Personal experience provides the basis for most narrative studies (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Narrative research comprises an array of different approaches, uses a variety of analytic practices, and is rooted in different social and humanities disciplines (Daiute & Lightfoot, 2004). For example, history, sociology, anthropology, and education have all adopted their own approaches to using narratives (Chase, 2005).

**Rationale for Narrative Analysis**

As stated earlier, narrative analysis serves as a powerful tool by which the researcher can gather and interpret the stories that individuals use to describe their experiences (Hatch, 2012). Qualitative studies of African American women frequently use narrative analysis because its interactive and collaborative nature helps to attenuate much of the natural power disparities between researcher and participant (Choo & Ferree, 2010; Johnson-Bailey, 2003). Such empowerment of African American women is consistent with Critical Race Theory and Relational Cultural Theory.

As discussed in the previous chapters, the larger theoretical frameworks for this study are Critical Race Theory (CRT) and Relational Cultural Theory (RCT). CRT postulates that narratives, or counterstories, contribute to the experiences of people of color and serve a
powerful additional function for minority communities (Delgado & Stefanic, 2012). Whooley (2006) posits that placing narratives in historical context is implicative of the concept of counterstories (Solórzano & Yosso, 2004). As such, these stories about people of color illuminate the experiences of marginalization and oppression in a racist society, and counter the dominant culture views and stereotypes. RCT asserts that narratives address the relational experiences of women and people in devalued groups. These stories give voice to women from marginalized communities and offer hope for an expanded version of human possibility (Jordan, 2006).

Narrative analysis complements CRT and RCT in various ways. First, it affords African American women the opportunity to tell their own stories and to build on existing ones. Narratives provide meaning for marginalized people by critically examining sociocultural issues such as race and gender. According to Marshall and Rossman (2010), narrative analysis seeks to describe the meaning of experiences for those who are frequently socially marginalized or oppressed, as they construct stories about their lives. Narrative analysis also has the capacity to consider the relationships among the various oppressed identities that African American women hold simultaneously, rather than reducing any of these identities to an independent variable. Consequently, narrative analysis is well suited for a qualitative examination of the intersection of race, gender, and class.

The practice of storytelling (or narrative-making) is deeply rooted in African American culture. It is a tradition based on the continuity of wisdom, and it functions to assert the voice of the oppressed (Amoah, 1997). The practice of narrative allows traditionally marginalized and disempowered groups, such as women and people of color, to
reclaim their own stories. Storytelling, which began as an oral tradition of passing on information and family wisdom, can now be seen as a means to confront and deny the myths of the dominant mainstream (Amoah, 1997). Storytelling serves as powerful vehicle for communicating, fostering, understanding, and transmitting knowledge. People make meaning of their lives through the telling and retelling of stories (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000: Koch, 1998).

As a subjugated people, African Americans have relied on stories to preserve their histories. From generation to generation, they have passed down stories depicting the oppression that they have endured and the resistance and perseverance that have prevailed despite the oppression. While formal accounts of history are created and controlled by the dominant culture, stories provide counter-narratives to formal history that contain both the wisdom and the resistance of the subjugated race. For instance, Sojourner Truth famously used narrative accounts of her own life to deconstruct stereotypes about women and to bring a measure of self-definition to the knowledge of African American women (Collins, 2008).

This study used a narrative approach because, until now, the voices of African American women in abusive relationships have been largely absent from the scholarly literature. Researchers have not yet recorded the voices of these women speaking about their everyday situations, circumstances, and experiences. Such records are urgently needed because an understanding of the overwhelmingly prevalent societal issue of domestic violence is best achieved by eliciting the stories of the people who experience it—most of whom are African American women. In this study, by highlighting the narrative account of
each woman’s experience, the researcher moves the woman from an object to subject, liberates her, and provide an avenue of self-empowerment.

**Research Procedures**

**Sample Selection and Site Selection**

This study sought to understand the experiences of African American women in domestic violence relationships and the perceived importance of spirituality in these experiences. Purposeful sampling was used to obtain a sample that typified the phenomenon under investigation and to achieve the maximum variance and the richest information (Patton, 2002).

Purposeful sampling was used to attain a relatively homogenous sample of people who, despite an array of differences, shared essential characteristics or met key criteria. The specific criteria for the sample included the following: (a) African American female; (b) had experienced domestic violence in a relationship for two years or longer; (c) was 25 years or older at the time of the study; (d) resided in a domestic violence shelter at the time of the study; and (e) had attended or been a member of a Black church. The specific criteria were based on the literature related to African American women’s domestic violence experiences and their perceptions of spirituality. (a) First, African American women were selected for study because this group has experienced domestic violence at a higher rates than any other ethnic group, so it is important to investigate their experiences. (b) Second, the literature states that women that had experienced domestic violence for two years or longer have endured the cycle of abuse, so the researcher selected participants who had been in cycles of abuse for at least this length of time. (c) Third, only women age 25 and older were selected.
because, according to G. Stanley Hall, known as the “Father of Adolescence,” 25 is the age at which the brain has matured from adolescence to adulthood. (d) Fourth, participants were selected from among residents at shelters because the literature has noted that survivors who become homeless as a result of their domestic violence experiences have distinct narratives of desperation, as they evade near-death experiences and desperately seek the basic needs on Maslow’s, such as safety, shelter, water, and food. (e) Finally, the researcher selected participants who had attended or been a member of a Black church because of the importance of spirituality in the African American community. The second research question specifically asks about African American woman survivors’ experiences with the Black church, including pastors and church leaders, and the role of spirituality in their process of leaving.

After North Carolina Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval, participants were recruited with the assistance of employees of a domestic violence shelter. The researcher provided the staff a handout of recruitment talking points (Appendix E) for shelter staff to use in recruiting participants. Next, the researcher advertised the study by posting flyers in domestic violence agencies and domestic violence shelters. The advertisement described the study and invited potential informants to participate. A $15 gift card to Walmart was offered as an incentive to participants upon completion of the interview. Once participants were identified who met the criteria, the researcher contacted them to schedule the interviews.

This study was set in domestic violence shelters because such sites are important within the context of domestic violence. Shelter services are an essential means of providing help to women and children who are in immediate danger as a result of domestic violence (Grossman & Lundy, 2011). Women who utilize domestic violence shelters have been found
to need a variety of community resources (Few, 2005). Women in shelters face unique barriers such as trying to obtain the first level of needs (food, sleep, water, warmth and safety) according to Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs. Therefore, to understand the environmental and contextual factors that influence African American women’s survivors’ access to resources, it is important to investigate their experiences in shelters.

Participants in the study were residents of two separate domestic violence shelters in central North Carolina. This region, known as the Piedmont region, is the most urbanized in the state and contains its largest cities. Shelters in this region are surrounded by large, diverse populations that are rapidly growing. All interviews took place at two separate domestic violence shelters in central North Carolina. These shelters were non-profit organizations that relied solely on state and federal grants, monetary donations, and volunteers to serve women and their children in immediate crisis from nearby small towns and large cities. These shelters received additional funding from the United Way, Family Violence Prevention Programs, NC Governor’s Crime Commission, and NC Council for Women. Depending upon the shelters’ funding at any given time, women may lack access to resources such as counseling, transitional housing, and faith-based support services.

**Informed Consent**

At the beginning of each participant’s meeting with the researcher, she was given a copy of an informed consent agreement (Appendix A). The researcher discussed major points of the consent form with each participant. Next, the researcher reviewed the difference between confidentiality and anonymity to ensure the participant understood that the stories she told and even some of her actual words would become part of a written study. The
researcher reinforced the fact that the participant’s anonymity would be closely guarded to ensure anonymity. For instance, story details that may reveal the participant’s identity were omitted or changed.

The researcher selected a pseudonym by which to identity each participant throughout the research process. The pseudonyms were only attached to the tape recordings, written documentation, and transcripts. Pseudonyms were also chosen for other people or places that were discussed in the interviews. Finally, the researcher explained to each participant the procedures for data collection, tape recording, and data storage, ensuring that participants understood how the researcher would safeguard the material.

**Instrument for Demographic Questionnaire**

Prior to the start of the semi-structured interview, each participant was asked to complete a brief demographic questionnaire. The questions are as follows:

1. What is your race/ethnicity?
   a. African American/Black
   b. Hispanic/Latino
   c. Native American
   d. Asian/Pacific Islander
   e. Other

2. What is your age?

3. What is the highest level of education you completed?
   a. High School
   b. Some College
   c. Associate Degree
   d. Bachelor of Arts
   e. Master’s Degree
   f. Doctoral Degree
   g. Other
4. What is your current employment status?
   a. Full time
   b. Part time
   c. Unemployed

5. What is your monthly income?

6. Do you have children?
   a. Yes, what are their ages?
   b. No

7. How many years have you been in a domestic violence relationship?

8. How long have you been residing at a domestic violence shelter?

9. Have you attended, currently attends or affiliated with a Black Church?
   a. How many years?

The answers to participants’ questions on the demographic questionnaire provided characteristics about the participants and added depth to their profiles.

**Instrument for Semi-Structured Interviews**

For this study, in-depth, semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions were used (Moustakas, 1994). Qualitative research interviews “attempt to understand the world from the subject’s point of view, to unfold the meaning of people’s experiences, to uncover their lived world” (Kvale, 1996, p. 1). While numerous data collection methods are available within the qualitative research paradigm, interviews provide perhaps the richest form of gathering intact narratives in narrative analysis. As Polkinghorne (1995) noted, “Interviews appear to be the most often used source of storied narrative in contemporary narrative inquiry” (p. 12). Interviews offered participants an opportunity to reflect and reveal, thereby
providing the thick, rich descriptions indicative of a narrative analysis approach to qualitative research. The interviews for this study allowed the participants to formulate their own narratives of domestic violence and the perceived role of spirituality in those narratives.

The interview protocol for this study was influenced by narrative analysis, with the reviewer paying special attention to the power relationship between the researcher and participant. Furthermore, given the narrative emphasis of this research, it was important to invite the participant into the research to develop her own boundaries to the stories and not be steered by what the researcher wanted or expected to hear. Minimal encouragers such as “Tell me more about that” were utilized to advance the narrative. In addition, probing questions were made available to encourage the participants to reflect more deeply on key points. The semi-structured interview for this study consisted of twelve questions (Appendix C).

The interview questions were created with the goal of collecting data from the retelling of women’s stories to answer the two research questions. The questions were developed based on the literature, and were first implemented in a pilot test. A pilot test assists the researcher in determining flaws, limitations, or other weaknesses within the interview design before the main data collection process (Kvale, 2007). According to Seidman, a pilot test should be conducted with participants who have similar characteristics as those participants in the implemented study (2013). In summary, a pilot test allows the researcher to make necessary adjustments prior to implementation of the study and also to refine the research questions. In this study, considerable changes were made from questions used in the pilot test to strengthen the development of the questions for the current study and
support the research questions and theoretical framework. See below the description of questions and explanations. For the complete interview protocol, refer to Appendix C. For a justification of each interview question, refer to Table 1.

**Question 1.** *Tell me about yourself.* To stay consistent with narrative inquiry and the objective of allowing the participant to tell her own domestic violence story in her words and begin where she wanted to, the first question on the interview protocol provided the opportunity for the participant to have power and share vivid details about herself. She may not have had this opportunity with the first question that was originally proposed: “What brought you to the shelter?” This revised question also allowed the researcher to gather information about early childhood experiences with domestic violence and family dynamics.

**Question 2.** *What brought you to the shelter? Follow up question: What was the relationship like?* The second question in the interview protocol was a revised question of the question mentioned above. This question was modified to capture a rich understanding of the deep meaning of the participants’ experiences (Creswell, 1998) with domestic violence. The follow-up question was created to capture vivid details of the volatile relationship. The original question was, “What brought you to the shelter?”

**Question 3.** *Tell me about your experiences accessing resources to help you leave an abusive relationship; for example, not just the shelter, but also programs that assist people with finding employment and housing. Follow up question 1. What made this experience stand out for you? Follow up question 2. What experience made you feel discriminated against? (Due to race, gender, SES)?* The original question was created to obtain information about the participants’ experience accessing resources and experiences with racism and
discrimination; however, in the pilot test, follow up question 1 did not elicit any details about experiences with racism and discrimination. Therefore, follow up question 2 was created to support the research questions, and to learn how participants’ multiple identities created barriers for them.

**Question 4.** Think back to a time when you went to a pastor/minister or someone in the Church for support for domestic violence; what was that experience like? Follow up question 1: Why did this experience stand out for you? Follow up question 2: what did you do as a result of this experience? This question sought to obtain information on the participants’ experiences with the pastors, minister and the Black Church. A key purpose of this study was to examine the role of the Black Church, pastors, and ministers, so it was important to obtain information on their role and influence on the process of leaving for African American women in domestic violence relationship. Thus, follow up question 2 was added.

Introductory statements were also added to the interview protocol preceding the questions that asked about domestic violence experiences, the Black Church, pastors, and ministers, as well as questions about spirituality as a source of strength and barrier. See the interview protocol (Appendix C). The introductory statements were provided in order to explain to the participants the next set of questions that they would be asked, as well as to clarify the context of the questions.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Question</th>
<th>Related Interview Questions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>How do African American women experience domestic violence?</td>
<td>• Tell me about yourself?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• What brought you to the shelter?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(a) What was the relationship like?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• How do you define domestic violence?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Tell me about your experience accessing resources to help you leave an abusive relationship.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>For example, not just the shelter, but also programs that assist people with finding employment and housing.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>a. What made this experience stand out for you?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>b. What experience made you feel discriminated against? (Due to race, gender, SES)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• As you think back over your life, how has your experience with DV changed over time?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How do African American women perceive the role of spirituality in their experience of domestic violence?</td>
<td>• How would you describe your association with the Black Church?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Thinking back to your time in church, what have you heard pastors/leaders teach about violence in relationships (ie., between partners, siblings, etc.)?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• In what ways do pastors/ministers or the Church influence or encourage women to stay in abusive relationships?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Think back to a time when you went to a pastor/minister or someone in the Church for support for domestic violence; what was that experience like?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>a. Why did this experience stand out for you?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>b. What did you do as a result of this experience?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Tell me about a time when spirituality served as a protective factor – a source of strength, support, and hope for you.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Tell me about a time when spirituality served as a barrier – a source of discouragement, shame, and ridicule for you.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Role of the Researcher

In qualitative research, the researcher is the main instrument of data collection and analysis. Thus, the quality and credibility of the research depends on the researcher (Patton, 2002). For a narrative analysis, the researcher uses paradigm thinking to create descriptions of themes that hold across stories (Creswell, 2007). The researcher selects the participants, conducts the interviews, and analyzes the data. In the present study design, the researcher uses critical paradigms, Critical Race Theory and Relational Cultural Theory. These are considered critical paradigms because they focus on marginalized groups of people that are usually silenced. These two theories guided the research inquiry, informed the research questions, and provided a lens for interpreting results.

The researcher is a doctoral student at North Carolina State University. She has taken several doctoral-level courses in research, engaged in a mix-methods research project, and conducted a quantitative thesis. Also, she is a Licensed Professional Counselor Associate in North Carolina with over 10 years of experience in the mental health field. In order to facilitate discussion regarding a sensitive topic that has the potential to foster unpleasant feelings and painful experiences, the researcher had to establish trust and familiarity with the participants. As a counselor, she had developed clinical skills to foster empathy and build harmony with individuals, thus creating a safe, nonjudgmental space for sharing sensitive thoughts and feelings associated with domestic violence.

Due to the researcher’s personal experience with domestic violence, professional knowledge about the population and construct of the study, she was aware how this insight
contributed to her worldview. The prior experiences, knowledge, and beliefs did not bias the research process or research objectivity.

However, to ensure that she maintained the role of the researcher, avoided transferring into the counselor role, and kept her own prior experiences and knowledge separate from the data collection process in an effort to reduce possible bias, she bracketed those experiences before the interview and enlisted a peer reviewer to monitor biases. The peer reviewer also monitored biases in the transcripts, including questions asked by the researcher and responses by the participants. To further guard against researcher bias, the researcher kept a reflexive journal throughout the research process.

The researcher was both an insider and outsider to the participants. The researcher identifies as African American, and her ethnicity provided insider knowledge and allowed her to recruit and identify participants and understand cultural experiences and responses. The researcher was able to describe the data in terms of spiritual and religious connotations. Also, the researcher has developed professional relationships with domestic violence researchers and domestic violence shelters. Being an insider within the domestic violence community in North Carolina has afforded access to participants for this study. Furthermore, the researcher is a licensed professional counselor associate with experience working with this population, although she has never resided in a domestic violence shelter or had to seek assistance for domestic violence. In these ways, the researcher maintained an outside perspective. The researcher is also an outsider in that she has never consulted with a pastor, minister, or church member regarding her domestic violence experience, and she has not had
a near-death experience with domestic violence. Consequently, the researcher was able to remain open in her role as the investigator.

**Data Collection**

**Interviews**

In narrative inquiry, the primary focus is on the stories of the participants. The researcher collects stories or data from participants to make meaning of their experiences. Examples of narrative data include interviews, field notes, journal entries, poetry, and biographies (Crewsell, 2007; Elbaz-Luwishch, 2010). Consistent with narrative inquiry, the primary data collection for the current study was semi-structured interviews. Secondary data for this study was field notes.

At the beginning of the data collection phase, once participants had been selected, the researcher placed a telephone call to each participant to arrange a meeting time to review the research study and informed consent procedures and allow an opportunity to answer questions. Following this initial meeting, if the participant was ready, the interview proceeded immediately. If the participant was not ready to proceed with the interview immediately following the meeting, the researcher and participant scheduled a mutually convenient, separate time for the interview.

At the onset of each interview, the researcher discussed the risks involved with the interview process. Such risks included the possible stirring up of uncomfortable feelings or painful memories. Participants were reminded that breaks were allowed if they felt the need to do so. Also, each participant was told that they may withdraw from the study at any point. Prior to the start of the semi-structured interview, participants were asked to complete a brief
demographic questionnaire (discussed above) to develop a participant profile and sign the informed consent form (Appendix A). Each interview was scheduled for 90 minutes, but they actually lasted 45 to 80 minutes. Interviews were held either in the playroom or the library of the shelter; the location was decided by the participant in order to ensure a comfortable environment that would allow her to feel relaxed and unrestricted as she shared her story. The semi-structured interviews were audio-recorded on two digital recorders, and the researcher took notes during the interviews.

Eight face-to-face interviews were conducted over a three-week period. Following each interview, the researcher held a debriefing session with the participant. A counselor was available in case the participants needed to process any emotions that may have flared up during the interview. Following the debriefing session, the researcher provided the participant a list of domestic violence resources (Appendix D). Finally, the researcher used a password-protected computer to transmit the large data files (via Velocity, a secure North Carolina State University-developed product) to a transcriptionist. To strengthen confidentiality, the transcriptionist signed a confidentiality agreement ensuring that he would maintain the confidentiality of the data.

During each interview, the researcher reflected back the participant’s major themes and events to encourage her to clarify and expand on her narratives. By giving this immediate feedback to participants and asking them to respond, the researcher was able to enhance the hermeneutic process between the researcher and the participant (Ezzy, 2002). This process also allowed each participant to continue with the development of her narrative throughout the interpretive interaction. As Ezzy (2002) stated, narrative accounts are created within the
context of the interview. The conditions that exist in the physical context of the interview, as well as the participant’s particular emotional and psychological state during the interview, all contribute to the narrative that is constructed. Ezzy (2002) encouraged a dialogue about the narrative that makes the co-creative process explicit and deepens the understanding of the narrative for both the interviewer and the participant. In this way, the influence of the researcher or the impact of the contextual factors can come to light through the discussion.

After the transcripts were typed, the researcher further ensured faithfulness to the participants’ experiences by giving each participant a chance to change or elaborate on her narrative. However, due to the sensitive information shared in the interview and flaring up of unpleasant feelings and emotions, this member-checking was successful with only six out of the eight participants. That is, two of the participants declined to review the transcripts. Finally, each participant was given an opportunity to obtain a copy of her transcripts for her records; however, all the participants declined a copy of her transcript.

**Researcher Field Notes**

The researcher utilized a reflexive journal that allowed for the tracking of personal notes, points of clarification, and other information that was pertinent to the data collection and analysis process. The use of a reflexive journal also added rigor to the qualitative inquiry as it enabled the investigator to records her reactions, assumptions, expectations, and biases about the research process (Marshall & Rossman, 2010: Morrow, 2000). For this study, the journal allowed the researcher to describe her feelings about conducting research in domestic violence, and assisted in sharpening the researcher’s critical thinking skills in categorizing new information during data collection. As such, field notes became another source of
qualitative research, as the information collection guided her data analysis, led to new insights, and added validity to the other sources of data (Merrian, 2009). The field notes provided additional data for the analysis; notes about each participant’s physical appearance, facial expressions, and body language were included in the reflexive fieldwork journal.

**Data Analysis**

Data analysis is the systematic process of organizing, synthesizing, and interpreting the collected data, thereby increasing one’s understanding of the phenomenon of study (Creswell, 2007: Merrian, 1998). Creswell (2007) suggests that narrative can be both a method and a phenomenon. Riley and Hawe (2005) describe narrative as a method in which it is the researcher’s role to interpret the stories in order to analyze the underlying narrative that the participants may not be able to give voice to themselves. For this study, the researcher utilized narrative as a method. Qualitative research is inductive in that data analysis occurs simultaneously with data collection (Merrian & Associates, 2002). The process of collecting and interpreting texts that have a story form is referred to as narrative analysis. The analysis component of narrative inquiry is essential and helps distinguish it as a research method versus an independent story. Narratives do not speak for themselves; they require interpretation (Reissman, 2008). For this study, each interview was transcribed immediately after the interview. This was critical; as Reissman (1997) noted, the analytic work of narrative analysis requires “detailed transcriptions” and attention to “narrative form” and “rhythmicity” (p. 47). Thus, the basis of the data analysis included the researcher reading the transcripts numerous times and reviewing the field notes. To stay grounded with the
conceptual framework, the researcher frequently reread the purpose statement, problem statement, and research questions.

There are numerous conflicting methods of data analysis that have been used in recent years (Ezzy, 2002, Hatch & Wisniewski, 1995; Polkinghorne, 1988, 1995; Riessman, 2008). For instance, some methods focus on thematic analysis and some focus on structural and dialogic/performative approaches. One common approach to analyzing narratives is thematic analysis (Riessman, 2008). In this approach, the focus is on the content of narration, or what is said; the analysis is focused on the narrative itself. Polkinghorne (1998) termed this process “analysis of narrative” (p. 38). Thematic analysis is a categorizing approach that uses the stories to identify themes (Kramp, 2004). Using thematic analysis also helps keep the story together by enabling the researcher to theorize from each case rather than across cases or participants (Riesmman, 2008).

“Story” and “narrative” are words often used interchangeably, but they are analytically different. The difference relates to where the primary data ends and where the primary data begins. According to Frank (2000), people tell stories, but narratives come from the analysis of the stories. As previously mentioned, there is no general consensus method to narrative analysis, but there is solidarity in which it is imperative that narrative analysis go beyond the surface (Riesmann, 2005; Riley & Hawe, 2005). For instance, the researcher can analyze narratives for who, what and why the participant included what they did in the narrative, in addition to what was deleted from the narrative.

In addition, the analysis of narrative data is a process of conceptualizing the structure and meaning of the story and then identifying the elements of the narrative that impact the
development of the events, both positively and negatively. The end result is a story of which components of woven together to present a coherent story line that is true to the essence of the narrative data as a whole. It is the job of the researcher to utilize expertise with the specific topic under examination to sort through the collected data and identify what is useful for understanding the story (Polkinghorne, 1995). Thus, the process of narrative analysis involves interpreting the data, synthesizing it into a congruent whole and producing a story that provides an answer to the research questions.

For the current study, data analysis and coding began at the conclusion of the interviews. Immediately following each interview, the researcher began reflecting on emerging themes. All data collected, including interviews and researcher field notes, were systemically reviewed and coded for analysis (Clandinin & Connelly, 1990). First, a codebook was created, drawn from a CRT and RCT lens and used to narrow down the code categories (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008). This information was used in collaboration with literature review findings to enable comprehensive coding for this study. Next, the researcher developed a coding system suitable for narrative inquiry and analysis. A coding system was created as a means of ultimately determining themes from the women’s stories. The final coding outcome was framed in the context of reflexive practice to answer the two research questions.

To reconstruct the narrative, the researcher provided a cultural context for the narrative, such as familial, socioeconomic, religious, gendered and specific cultural influences that were deemed important to the progress of the plot. Being that CRT and RCT are the theoretical frameworks for this study, special attention was given to the racial, social
and gendered influences in each participant’s life. The researcher described each participant with physical, cognitive, emotional and spiritual features that help to bring her to life. Next, the researcher identified other participants in the plot that helped or impeded their progress and outcome. The researcher also noted lack of absence or support of their progress. Following that, the researcher identified preceding events such as past history with domestic violence, discrimination and spiritual abuse that influenced the participants’ process of leaving. The narratives were organized with a beginning, middle and an end, and various key components of the story were included. The researcher critiqued the constructed narratives for cohesiveness and effectiveness. Next, the researcher analyzed and consulted with the reflexive journal to bring greater insights to the story and monitor for bias or omission of critical observations in the analysis process. Last, the researcher wove direct quotations into the narrative to highlight meaning, personality, and beliefs.

Coding

Data analysis consisted of numerous stages after transcription of the interviews, including the comparison of themes from this study with the previous literature in order to determine new meanings. As mentioned in the previous section, the researcher developed a coding system. Categories for coding can come to the researcher while collecting data that can later be used to develop final codes or themes (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). For this study, the researcher coded interview transcripts and field notes using an eclectic blend of a priori, open, and thematic coding.

The first level of coding began with a priori coding, which was informed by the CRT and RCT constructs (permanence of racism, intersectionality, counter-storytelling, strategies
of disconnection and relational images). The researcher utilized transcripts and field notes to look for themes consistent with the language and constructs of CRT and RCT discussed in the literature review. Following the preliminary codes, the researcher utilized open coding to seek commonalities and differences among the narratives. Polkinghorne (1995) recommends analyzing data thematically, looking for categories and connecting threads, patterns, and themes within and across each participant’s experience. Last, thematic coding was used to help discover categories based on what the participants said. Utilizing thematic analysis assists with keeping the story together by theorizing from each case rather than across cases or participants (Riesmman, 2008). Therefore, to obtain codes from thematic analysis, the researcher read through each transcript and selected ideas or concepts that seemed important to the participants’ stories and recorded them by hand (each code was assigned a color). The combination of a priori, open and thematic coding resulted in 21 codes.

After the researcher completed a priori, open, and thematic coding, she sorted through the 21 codes and combined similar codes. This process resulted in 15 codes. Following that, the researcher utilized a priori codes or prefigured codes, categories from the theoretical models (CRT & RCT) to revise the name of some of the 15 codes as appropriate. For codes that did not fit an a priori category or were not represented by the literature, the researcher labeled these according to the concept presented in the participants’ narratives. Next, the researcher created a chart to display each code and placed corresponding quotes from each participant with the appropriate code. Then, the researcher eliminated codes that were not frequently used in multiple stories or that did not seem to be meaningful to the women’s domestic violence experiences. These codes were organized and put in a chart. As a result of
this analysis, the researcher determined five final themes and twelve subthemes to answer the two research questions.

**Interviews**

The researcher typed up field notes the day after each interview, which allowed her reflections, thoughts, and observations to be recorded with a high level of accuracy. Field notes were analyzed to provide support for her study and interpretations of the data. Following each interview, the researcher listened to each interview recording and immediately emailed the data via a secure system to the transcriptionist. The researcher received the interview transcript within two days of each interview, and she reviewed the transcripts for accuracy. Prior to coding the transcripts, the researcher read each transcript at least two times. This process allowed the researcher to become familiar with the text and data. Then, the researcher utilized the coding system described in the previous section to analyze the transcripts. According to Riessmann (2008), in order to improve the accuracy of emerging codes from each individual story, it is better for the researcher to code each interview separately, and focus less on codes that emerged across stories. Thus, the researcher coded each interview separately, before coding the subsequent participants’ interviews.

As mentioned in the previous section, open coding led to narrower themes and allowed for more commonalities and differences among the participants as it pertained to their domestic violence experiences and how they perceived the role of spirituality. Thematic coding allowed themes to emerge based on the content of what was said (Riessmann, 2008). After the researcher coded the interviews individually, she created a master theme list and
selected themes that were both consistent and different among the participants’ interviews. Last, the master theme list was developed to help with identifying the final themes. The end result was five themes and twelve subthemes.

**Establishing Trustworthiness**

The trustworthiness of a study is established by addressing such features as credibility, transferability, dependability, and conformability (Williams & Morrow, 2009; Guba, 1981). Qualitative research is subjective and exploratory in nature; therefore, trustworthiness must be carefully ensured through attention to various aspects of the research methodology and implementation.

Numerous researchers use the concept of trustworthiness as a gauge of persuasiveness and credibility among qualitative research studies (Butler-Kisber, 2010; Creswell, 2009). Trustworthiness in qualitative research refers to issues of internal validity, reliability, and external validity, also known as generalizability. Credibility or internal validity in qualitative research refers to congruency between findings and reality. Reliability refers to the consistency of the results in relation to the data collected. Finally, external validity or generalizability refers to the transferability of the findings to other situations (Merrian, 2009). These are important considerations to address when producing rigorous research.

**Authenticity and Credibility**

The stories and voices of African American survivors of domestic violence are critical in this study. Therefore, several steps were taken to promote authenticity within this study. These included efforts to understand the participant’s reality, questions of how the researcher represents her experience, and accuracy in grounding the narratives within the
interview data (Butler-Kisber, 2010). To ensure the credibility of the study, the researcher listened to each interview recording following the transcription of data and reviewed all transcripts for accuracy.

The credibility of this study was further enhanced by the researcher’s own immersion in the culture of domestic violence and its effects. For example, before the researcher completed this study, she worked in a domestic violence shelter for over a year, where she provided individual and group counseling to domestic violence survivors following their experiences of abuse. At the time of this writing, the researcher was still providing therapy for African American survivors of domestic violence. In addition, the researcher attended research conferences on domestic violence and closely followed developments about the dynamics of domestic violence abuse in the scholarly literature. Furthermore, as of this writing, the researcher had been a member of a Black church for over 16 years and understood the role of spirituality in the African American community. More importantly, the researcher had spent time reflecting on her personal experience with domestic violence. This first-hand experience enhanced the researcher’s ability to understand and interpret the data.

In order to keep her own prior experiences separate from the data collection process, the researcher bracketed those experiences before each interview and enlisted a peer reviewer to monitor biases. To further guard against researcher bias, the researcher kept a reflexive journal throughout the research process. In addition, she enlisted peer reviewers to provide debriefing and offer any observations about researcher bias. To further establish the credibility of the findings, the researcher also utilized member checking, which involved taking data, analyses, interpretations, and conclusions back to the participants so that they
could judge the credibility of the account (Creswell, 2005). For this study, all participants were given a chance to review the transcripts for accuracy; however, as mentioned earlier, only six out of eight participants chose to review their transcripts. Due to the sensitive information and flaring up of unpleasant emotions and feelings, two participants declined to review their transcripts. Being that narrative inquiry focus on participant recall of an event, which is subjective and at the behest of the participant’s memory, the inability to verify the authenticity is challenging in managing validity issues. To minimize concerns about validity, all participants were directed to focus on the same questions and topics (Sharoff, 2008).

Riesmann (2008) asserts that to address issues of validity with narrative projects “the validity of the project must be assessed from within the situated perspective and the traditions that frame it” (p. 185). Therefore, to address issues of validity, the researcher stayed true to narrative methods, utilized cultural frameworks such as Critical Race Theory and Relational Cultural Theory, and allowed the women to use their voice to make meaning of their experiences. As a final measure to ensure the trustworthiness of the study, an external audit was utilized through collaboration with peer reviewers. These colleagues were given the reflexive journal, transcripts, notes, and analysis procedures for review. By engaging in this procedure, the researcher welcomed the different perspectives that her peer reviewers may have on the subject of spirituality among African American women survivors of domestic violence.

**Reliability**

Reliability refers to the consistency between the data collected and the results of the study. That is to say, a study is considered dependable if there is consistency between the
findings and the presented data. In this study, peer reviews, field notes, and the researcher’s position and triangulation served as strategies to support both validity and the reliability (Merrian, 2009). Peer reviewers consisted of doctoral student colleagues and a domestic violence researcher who had experience working with African American survivors of domestic violence. Together, these individuals reviewed the interview questions and journal notes to assess whether the questions asked resulted in the desired data. Each reviewer was instructed to compare themes and corresponding quotes to determine if the themes were accurate and the quotes represented the assigned theme. In the case of a discrepancy between the themes reported and discovered by the researcher, a discussion was held between the researcher and additional reviewers to reach a consensus on the appropriate theme. Also, each reviewer was instructed to read each participant’s narrative and determine if the story highlighted the participants’ experiences with domestic violence, discrimination and the perceived role of spirituality for their process of leaving. To further establish the reliability of the findings, the researcher utilized member checking, which involved taking data, analyses, interpretations, and conclusions back to the participants so that they could judge the credibility of the account (Creswell, 2005). By providing the narrative profiles to the participants, they were enabled to determine whether their words, experiences, and intent had been captured accurately and contextually. Also, the study’s reliability was further enhanced by the limited time that passed between writing field notes and reading the transcriptions of interviews. In addition, the researcher’s subjectivity statement served as a means of disclosing biases that she brings as a researcher. This assisted the researcher in the data collection and analysis phases as it increased her awareness of her own experiences and
decreased the probability of the researcher projecting her experiences onto the participants and their narratives. Finally, the researcher utilized triangulation of data sources to strengthen the validity and reliability of the study.

Subjectivity Statement

In keeping with the ethics of accountability, I present the salient parts of my own lived experiences and my motivations for this research. I grew up in a Christian home and watched my father physically, verbally, and emotionally abuse my mother. In addition, during my undergraduate studies, I was in an abusive relationship myself. Consequently, I know what it is like to witness abuse and believe the abusive behavior is normal. I also know what is like to believe that my faith and strong religious practices such as attending church and partaking in communion would end the abuse. I also know what it is like to feel that because my mother had gone through the abuse (which eventually stopped), it was acceptable for me to stay in my abusive relationship. I have experienced the shame and confusion that comes with the realization that something is wrong in the relationship and family dynamics.

Despite this profound realization, like most abused women, I was unable to reach out for help or support. Like most African American women, I was silent, as I was grew up with the mindset that you keep your business within, and let God handle the situation. The low self-esteem, isolation, and powerlessness that come from not only living in abuse, but also witnessing abuse, are very challenging to overcome.

The impetus for me to leave the abusive relationship happened in therapy. While in therapy to deal with a separate family issue, I received clarity about the cycle of abuse for women in my family. During this process, self-awareness became the key to leaving the
relationship and healing from the aftermath of the abuse. I was blessed to have the resources to attend therapy and begin a more productive, self-empowered life.

I appreciate my family’s strong Christian faith and religious traditions. These experiences have built a strong foundation for my own personal beliefs and worldview. I value my mother’s explanation that her primary reason to stay in an abusive marriage was to keep the family together. Her second reason was to make sure her daughters had a father present in their lives. I feel her reasons were shaped by her religious beliefs and faulty Bible interpretations. My own religious beliefs are shaped more by the values of having a personal relationship with God and treating people with love and respect.

My career as a counselor is centered on my passion to help people live and create happier, more productive lives. My therapeutic approach is eclectic, typically blending Insight-Oriented, Cognitive-Behavior, Family Systems, Adlerian, and Person-Centered philosophies. However, my training and studies in my doctoral program have broadened my theoretical orientation to include not only Western approaches, but also non-Western theories such as Relational Cultural Theory and Critical Race Theory. Adding RCT and CRT enables me to use an integrated, holistic approach that takes into account an individual’s psychological, biological, social, and cultural dimensions. These two theories have become part of my professional and personal framework for enhancing self-reflection, development, and relationship-building. During my professional growth as a counselor, I have been drawn to working with adolescents and adults who have experienced domestic violence. Most of the adolescents with whom I work have witnessed domestic violence in early childhood and also struggled with the aftermath of abuse in the form of PTSD, and, in some cases, passive–
aggressive behavior. The adults are survivors of domestic violence. My personal experience with domestic violence gives me a unique ability to empathize with the experiences of my clients. I have both worked and volunteered at a domestic violence shelter providing individual and group counseling to clients who have experienced abuse. I feel that I have a calling to specifically work with this population. I am passionate about my research in domestic violence and want to be a voice for African American women and my community.

In order to conduct research on African American survivors of domestic violence, it was necessary for me to monitor and manage the potential influence of my own subjectivity on the study design, data collection, and data analysis. Thus, while conducting this study, I was careful to maintain the role of the researcher. Before each interview, I bracketed my past experiences with domestic violence, and in interpreting the results, I enlisted a peer reviewer to monitor biases. The peer reviewer also monitored biases in the transcripts, including questions asked by the researcher and responses by the participants. To further guard against researcher bias, I kept a reflexive journal throughout the research process.

Summary

This chapter described the qualitative research methodology used in the study, a narrative analysis. The procedures for participant selection, interviewing, data collection, and data analysis were presented. This chapter also outlined the various steps that were taken throughout the study in order to ensure quality and trustworthiness, including the researcher’s reflexive journal, identification of her own biases in her subjectivity statement, member checks, and peer reviews. The following chapter presents each participant’s narrative, followed by a discussion of the major themes that emerged from the narratives.
CHAPTER 4: PARTICIPANT PROFILES

The aim of this study was to understand, through narrative inquiry, the domestic violence experiences of African American women survivors and the perceived role of spirituality in shaping those experiences. According to the criteria for the sample selection, each participant must have identified as an African American, resided in a homeless domestic violence shelter, be at least 25 years of age, have experienced domestic violence for two years or more, and have attended or been a member of a Black Church. The research questions that guided this study were the following: (1) How do African American women experience domestic violence? (2) How do African American women perceive the role of spirituality in their domestic violence experience?

In order to give voice to the participants’ lived experiences as African American women survivors of domestic violence, this study used a narrative inquiry data collection method. The researcher allowed each participant to tell her own unique story of experiencing domestic violence and her own perceptions of spirituality during the experience. The stories shared by the participants were rich and often deeply personal, and they presented a variety of interesting perspectives for this research. The participants expressed interest in the research and were happy to contribute their voices and experiences to further the literature on domestic violence among African American women. However, as expected and due to the sensitive nature of the topic, some women were initially cautious and apprehensive about speaking on the subject. Some had had near-death experiences and were involved in active, ongoing domestic violence court proceedings. This section provides a description of the two interview locations, as well as an overview of as well as an overview of participant
demographics and eight brief constructed narratives, one on each participant. A summary profile of the participants can be found in Table 2.

**Location**

All interviews took place at two separate domestic violence shelters in central North Carolina. As previously mentioned these shelters are non-profit organizations that rely solely on state and federal grants, monetary donations, and volunteers to serve women and their children in immediate crisis from nearby small towns and large cities. These shelters receive additional funding from the United Way, Family Violence Prevention Programs, NC Governors Crime Commission, and NC Council for Women. Thus, given the variability and inconsistency in funding across and within agencies, women may lack access to resources such as counseling, transitional housing, and faith-based support.

Five interviews were conducted in the children’s playroom of one shelter, and three interviews were conducted in the library at the other shelter. The participants were given a choice of whether to meet in a jury room at a courthouse or a private room at the shelter. All participants readily decided that they were most comfortable interviewing in a comfortable, private room at the shelter. The children’s playroom where five of the interviews were conducted had a mixture of colorful toys, a rocking chair, a bookshelf with books, a television, and a round table with two chairs. The blinds in the playroom allowed the participants to control how much sunlight they wanted in the room; in this way, participants could make the room feel dim and private so that they could feel more relaxed for their interviews. The interviews were held at the round table with each participant sitting across from the researcher. The library where three of the interviews were conducted
included a couch, a bookshelf with a variety of books, two chairs, and a bulletin board with various domestic violence posters and resources. The participant sat on the couch, and researcher sat in chair across from the participant. No additional people were present in the room while the interviews took place. The researcher provided a sound screen noise machine to diminish surrounding distracting noises, prevent accidental eavesdropping, and improve privacy. The interviews were held over a four-week period, each participant choosing a convenient time for her own interview.

**Participant Overviews**

Table 2 presents participant demographics regarding the eight African American women in this study. The participants came from Massachusetts, Virginia, and North Carolina, and had grown up in rural, suburban, and urban settings. The age of those in the study ranged from 25 to 55 years old, with an average age of slightly over 40 years old. The level of education varied significantly. One participant was in the process of completing a Graduation Equivalency Diploma (GED), four participants had graduated from high school and had taken classes at a college, one had an associate’s degree, one had a bachelor’s degree, and one had a master’s degree. Four women were unemployed, and four were employed with monthly income ranges from $700 to $2,000. It is worth noting that, of the three unemployed women, one woman was receiving social security disability benefits. Three women had their children with them in the shelter. The ages of the children ranged from 11 months to 10 years old. The years of domestic violence experience ranged from 2 ½ to 20 years, with an average duration of 8 years. The length of stay at the shelter varied from
6 days to 4 months. The years of attendance or membership at a Black church ranged from 4 to 50 years, with an average of slightly over 22 years.

In addition to the demographics, it is worth mentioning that 50% of the participants had been transferred to the shelter from the hospital after having sustained serious bodily injuries. Examples of the injuries included, but were not limited to, fractured ribs, herniated discs, swollen faces, and black eyes. Also, 50% of the participants had abused alcohol and drugs as a coping strategy during the domestic violence experience. The drug of choice ranged from alcohol, to prescription drugs, to crack cocaine. Of the 8 women, one woman was receiving mental health counseling from an agency. These details along with the demographics, illustrate the universality and seriousness of domestic violence, and the detrimental impacts it has on women. The 8 participants are designated by the pseudonyms Rachel, Carla, April, Bobbi, Vanessa, Sami, Sarah, and Tina.
Table 2. Participant Demographics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Highest level of education</th>
<th>Employment Status</th>
<th>Monthly Income</th>
<th># of children</th>
<th># of years in DV</th>
<th>Length of stay at shelter</th>
<th># of years Black Church</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rachel</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>GED in process</td>
<td>Unemployed</td>
<td>$733</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>3 months</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carla</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>Some college</td>
<td>Unemployed</td>
<td>$0</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>30 days</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>April</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>Master’s</td>
<td>Unemployed</td>
<td>$725</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>6 days</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bobbi</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>Associate</td>
<td>Full-time</td>
<td>$1,400</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>30 days</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vanessa</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>Some college</td>
<td>Full-time</td>
<td>$1,600</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4 months</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sami</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>Some college</td>
<td>Unemployed</td>
<td>$700</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>5 weeks</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sarah</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>Bachelor</td>
<td>Full-time</td>
<td>$2,000</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2 months</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tina</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>Some college</td>
<td>Full-time</td>
<td>$1,600</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>1 month</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Participant Narratives**

The goal of the narratives is to provide enough context on the women’s unique domestic violence stories to situate the findings. The narratives differ in length and complexity due to the various storytelling styles of the women. The 8 participants embodied diverse identities and experiences that contributed to the richness and depth of the findings. Each participant provided her own voice to give meaning to her domestic violence experiences and express the significance of spirituality, the Black Church, pastors, and ministers during this experience. Each narrative was constructed by following the steps outlined in the research methodology in Chapter 3. Each narrative begins with the researcher’s initial perception about each participant, including her physical appearance, and her individual personality characteristic that created a first impression. The narratives begin
with important information about childhood experiences and basic family information (where applicable). Next, there is a description of how each woman’s domestic violence relationship began and progress, including descriptions of physical and emotional abuse. The majority of the narratives focused on the woman’s journey of experiences with accessing resources for domestic violence and the role of spirituality, the Black Church, pastors and ministers during this experience. The narratives presented here illustrate the diversity and similarities of how spirituality impacted the women’s decisions to stay in or leave their relationships. In addition, the stories are reconstructed here as closely as possible to how they were recounted by the participants themselves, with confidentiality measures taken by the researcher to protect the women’s identities. Each narrative begins with the woman’s most poignant quotation.

**Rachel’s Story**

“I’m really trying to find myself.”

Rachel (age 32) had little formal education and had not completed high school. She told her story in a confusing non-linear way that made it hard to follow the sequence of events. Her emotions changed quickly and visibly. She could switch from happiness and joy to deep melancholy, fighting back tears. As the interview began, she appeared sad. She had recently learned that she had been denied housing and would now have to stay longer than anticipated at the shelter. She lived in the shelter with 2 children, ages 3 and 8. She struggled with describing herself.

I don’t know ….I guess I’m really trying to find myself. I really can’t tell you anything other than my name and my children’s names and ages. I guess it’s kind of hard because I don’t even know who I am.
Rachel’s story of abuse had started in childhood, when she had witnessed domestic violence between her parents. It continued when she was in foster care, group homes, and even when her mother had regained custody of her. As Rachel had matured, she had sought love from unhealthy relationships. She explained that she had a history of domestic violence relationships for many years. She described abuse from both heterosexual and same-sex relationships. She explained,

It is a struggle every day to wake up being scared of somebody, not knowing what mood he was in. I’ve been hospitalized more than once…I had my teeth knocked out…little stuff like that. I’ve been kidnapped and thrown in a car trunk…raped…even had to medicate myself the street pharmacist way to drown out what was going on.

Rachel took deep breaths as she tearfully recalled painful memories that had led her to the shelter.

He beat me inside a car, pulled a lot of my hair out, and left me on a dirt road to die.

He just left me. I don’t even think he cared if I lived or died. It was hell; it really was.

Rachel spoke candidly about her experiences in seeking to access resources for assistance with domestic violence. She felt that her identity as an uneducated, unemployed African American mother with a delinquent record discredited her. She shared, “They don’t have a lot of resources…they don’t have a lot resources for women like me.” Furthermore, the one time she had sought assistance, she had been told, “You could have gotten away.” As a result of this experience, she had felt blamed and ridiculed for seeking help.
Rachel had felt hopeless, and she continued to endure the domestic violence because she thought the relationship would eventually improve. When it did not, she reached out to family, friends, and the Black Church for solace. However, Rachel spoke with disappointment about the lack of support she received from her family, friends, and the Black Church. She felt that on the many occasions she had sought assistance from the Black Church, they either had not wanted to help or they did not know how to help. As a result, she had stayed in the abusive relationships. She noted a specific example that caused her to rethink her belief in God:

The Black Church is a joke; they pushed me out the door when they learned the abuse was a result from a same-sex relationship. This made me question God.

Rachel shared that as a result of her domestic violence experiences, her spirituality and belief in the Black Church had shifted from a stronger to a lesser belief in them. However, she spoke with assurance that her constant prayers for another chance at life had been granted by God. Rachel acknowledged that despite her childhood experiences and history of domestic violence, she was determine to find her worth, take advantage of her chance to live again, and provide more stability for her family.

Carla’s Story

“I felt if I abandoned the marriage, I abandoned God.”

Carla (age 49) was eager to share her story. She was engaged in the interview and happy to talk about her faith and spiritual upbringing. She described herself as “highly motivated and a Christian, spiritual person.” She was divorced and had sought assistance from the shelter as a result of her ex-husband stalking her: “After experiencing ten years of
abuse, get divorced and to now have him stalking me is living a nightmare again.” She spoke proudly of her own identity as a preacher’s kid (PK), and her relationship with the Black Church: “I was raised in the Church. My momma got saved when I was 7, and since I was 7, I’ve had a heart for God…I’ve been a church girl all my life.”

Carla’s spiritual values and religious upbringing led her to stay in a 10-year marriage characterized by domestic violence ranging from physical and emotional abuse to stalking. She explained that she had been taught that Christians were supposed to deal with domestic violence in a Christian way: “Calling in the unsaved for help was forbidden, so it blocked me from being able to get out and seek help.” Therefore, Carla endured not only domestic violence for years, but also constant ruminating thoughts of how leaving the marriage would disconnect her from a relationship with God. Furthermore, Carla’s association with the Black Church discouraged her from seeking assistance when the abuse first started. On the few occasions when she sought assistance from the Church, different ministers repeatedly quoted scriptures that obliged her to stay in the marriage. One such verse was, “Vengeance is God’s.”

Carla acknowledged that besides the Black Church, she knew very little about accessing resources for help with domestic violence. She said, “When I attempted to leave him the first time, I didn’t know anything…barely knew the term domestic violence or how to get started.” With the encouragement of a friend, she attended a support group at a local shelter and learned about creating a safety plan. It was this experience that helped Carla realize she had some options. She made a second attempt to leave after a near-death experience and called the police. This experience re-victimized her. At this point in the
interview, Carla took a deep breath and stated, “A white male officer asked, what did I do to him?” She further explained that, in her identity as an African American woman, her interactions with White male judges and White people at social services clearly made her feel discriminated against. Feeling defeated, Carla remained in the volatile relationship and turned to drugs and alcohol to cope with the abuse. Carla explained that during this dark period in her life, she had cried out to God for help. After failed attempts with the police and social services, her spirituality and faith had led her back to the Church for help. Surprisingly to Carla, she found support to leave the marriage from an older woman: “I left without guilt of abandoning him, this marriage or letting God down.”

Reflecting on her experiences with domestic violence and the role that spirituality had played in her decision to stay or leave, Carla appeared energized by the challenges and empowered by her own growth. She spoke with confidence and acknowledged that as a result of her domestic violence experiences, her spiritual beliefs and values had changed. She now found herself speaking of non-traditional religious views and helped other Black Christian women in domestic violence relationships to broaden their perspectives regarding the “traditional teachings” of the Black Church.

April’s Story

“My relationship with Christ sustained me and provided clarity.”

April (age 43) appeared very reserved and shy. She had arrived at the shelter with her two young sons just a few days before the interview, and she was still trying to adjust. She let her guard down as she began to describe herself as a PK. She had come from a very strict two-parent home, in which both parents were ministers. She had accepted Christ at age 5, and
her upbringing had included a strong religious foundation from which April still drew. Her parents’ involvement in the Church had shaped her decision to attend divinity school, remain celibate until marriage, and endure the domestic violence she experienced in the marriage.

When asked about her domestic violence experience, April explained that due to her religious upbringing, she had been naïve and assumed that men in the church were not abusive. She had met her husband at church. “He was the only person that I ever dated and had been with.” However, a year into the marriage, she noticed things about him that she had not seen while dating. She said there were things she did not know about him prior to marriage, and she wished she would have asked more questions. For example, his issues with pornography and gambling put a strain on their marriage. She tearfully described that the abuse started with anger during her first pregnancy, then escalated to controlling her actions, hitting her in the face with his fist, and later choking her in front of two sons. April wanted to keep her family together, but she knew that if she stayed in the marriage, her husband would eventually kill her. Thus, she researched domestic violence resources online, and she received assistance from legal aid and the women’s bar association to file a 50B restraining order for protection of herself and her sons. She said that her positive experiences with accessing resources provided a sense of hope and empowerment.

April expressed a love for the Black Church, but also disappointment in it for its lack of teaching on how to deal with domestic violence. She added, “They say God hates divorce, and they also use the scripture that women [should] submit to their husbands.” Due to April’s upbringing, she remained loyal to the Church and pastor, never questioning their decisions or interpretations of the scriptures as she stayed in the marriage.
While April acknowledged that her spirituality and upbringing in the Church were why she had endured the abuse, she proudly offered that when she had deepened her relationship with Christ, she had developed more insight into God’s way of how husbands and wives should treat each other. As a result of achieving this profound clarity, she had realized that her marriage was not a reflection of God’s desire for husbands and wives. Thus, she was finally at peace with the process of gaining control of her life and healing simultaneously. When reflecting on her domestic violence experiences, she shared, “I never thought I would be in a shelter, and I know God has me here for a reason…to bless and encourage other women.”

**Bobbi’s Story**

“If you see signs or red flags, get out.”

Bobbi (age 25) was a mother of three children and employed full-time approximately 45 minutes away from the shelter. As the interview began, she took deep, long breaths and several pauses. She initially declined to discuss a life-threatening domestic violence experience, explaining that as a result of this horrific experience, she often blanked out and her memory was severely impaired. To add to that, she seemed extremely paranoid and stated she had mood swings. Furthermore, she and her children were receiving counseling for posttraumatic stress disorder. After taking time to regroup, Bobbi tearfully recounted the details: “I was pushed off a 15-feet flight of stairs to the ground, and beaten with a glass bottle in front of my children. I had a bad life of being beaten every day, hit with stuff and criticized.”
As Bobbi reflected on the dynamics of the relationship with her partner, she acknowledged that things had once been good. She described her partner as nice, caring, and loving on one occasion. However, as the relationship had advanced, she had noticed changes in his behavior that raised some concerns. She indicated that her partner had become very insecure and controlling and had victimized her on multiple occasions. For example, he would often take her car keys and limit her contact with family and friends. In addition, she described him throwing things at her or punching her in the nose for no reason, resulting in massive swelling. Unfortunately, although she was still very young, Bobbi had endured a substantial amount of physical and emotional abuse.

Bobbi pointed out that when she had first attempted to find assistance for domestic violence, she was told that her income level was too high. Therefore, she stayed in the relationship. Her recent near-death experience and the incidents seeking support from domestic violence agencies, programs, and the legal system were disheartening. She explained, “It was miserable and depressing trying to find housing…I felt like giving up; still feel like giving up…it’s hard…very, very hard.” She shared an occasion when she and her children lived in a car while waiting on housing. Furthermore, when she went to the magistrate to file an emergency protective order, she felt dismissed, and left feeling numb. She vividly stated, “I was messed up physically…my face was like, gone…the white magistrate didn’t offer to help at all.” Because this was her first time filing a protective order, she wanted to ask more questions about the filing procedures and court hearing, but she declined due to feeling powerless. Finally, she explained that living at the shelter was depressing, and she often felt re-victimized. She recounted, “I’m safe, but on my own…they
don’t really provide options for help…then I overheard shelter staff make derogatory statements about me and why I stayed in the relationship.”

Due to fear of being judged and misunderstood, as well as her previous unaccommodating experiences with the Black Church, Bobbi did not turn to the Black Church for help with her domestic violence situation. Instead, she relied on her spirituality, making countless prayers to God to save her life. Bobbie stated that coming close to death had changed her whole life. She had lost interest in everything, did not want to date, and had trust issues. She was struggling to find herself. When asked if she wanted to add anything further to the interview, she offered, “If there is somebody in a domestic violence relationship and see signs early, go ahead and leave immediately. It’s a blessing to make it out.”

Vanessa’s Story

“I’m learning myself again and what I want.”

Vanessa (age 55), a former teacher and mother of 5 children and 6 grandchildren, was quite zestful and jolly, arriving to the interview with a handshake and smile. She described herself as the “mother” of the shelter. She shared that as the oldest woman at the shelter, she often encouraged the younger women to stay hopeful and affirmed that their decisions to leave their detrimental relationships were healthy.

Vanessa grew up witnessing domestic violence between her mother and father, and credited this volatile environment as the beginning of her domestic violence cycle. “As a result of watching them, I just kept getting into bad relationships.” She had never heard her parents say “We love you, Vanessa”; consequently, she needed to felt needed. On a quest to
find love and attention, Vanessa quit school in 10th grade to live with her children’s father, as she thought she was in love and that he loved her. After the first year of cohabitation, things began to change. She shared, “He could talk to anyone he wanted…but if he saw me laughing with classmates or speaking to someone…later at home…he would slap or hit me.” She was too afraid to talk back or ask questions about why he was angry; therefore, this cycle of abuse went on for many years. In addition, he had a habit of going to work and returning home two or three days later. He frequently engaged in sexual relationships with other women. As Vanessa finished recounting the details of this story, she shut her eyes in anguish.

When asked about her experience accessing resources, Vanessa explained that she did not want her children to grow up in the violent environment as she had, so she went to social services to improve the living situation for her and her children. She further explained that as an African American woman, she was aware of the perceptions White people could have about African American women on welfare. She stated, “I am not lazy or a ‘welfare queen’ trying to live off the system…I really need help.” Vanessa recounted details about her experiences with hostility and prejudice: “Standing with tears in my eye, the social worker said…you people always need help…I’m sorry we can’t help you at this time…have you tried the churches?” With mixed emotions of anger and disgust, Vanessa left the office in despair.

When prompted to describe her association with the Black Church and their response to domestic violence, Vanessa offered a heartfelt description. “The Black Church can do more for women, but they don’t and it is sad.” “One male pastor said, well, I understand what you’re going through…but you know that is your husband.” Another pastor said, “But
you know, once you leave your husband or your husband leaves you; “You’re twined
together until God takes one of you away,” or “Hang in there, pray, and believe that God is
going to work it out.” Vanessa understood the importance of praying, but she wished that the
Black Church, pastors, and ministers offered more than prayer. “I know I need to pray, but
what else do I do while I’m praying?”

After multiple failed attempts to find support from male pastors and ministers,
Vanessa sought a female pastor for comfort; she credited her spirituality and faith with giving
her the clarity to do so. “She was the only one that would talk to me; everybody else just
said, ‘Baby, pray.’” As a result of this positive experience with the female pastor, Vanessa
felt empowered to begin making better decisions to live a more productive life. She
unreservedly shared that domestic violence is draining and lowers one’s self-esteem. She was
now happy to be free to find herself and what she desired out of life.

Sami’s Story

“I felt like I was walking on eggshells.”

Sami (age 45), a mother of four adult children, was excited to share her story. She
hoped her narrative would encourage other African American women battling domestic
violence and provide a source of empowerment. She was leaving the shelter in a few days to
relocate to a boarding house. Prior to arriving at the current shelter, she lived in motel rooms,
boarding houses, and another shelter. When discussing her experience looking for housing,
she shared, “It’s kind of rough not having a place that you can really call home.” To add to
that, Sami was on disability for a heart condition; the combination of searching for housing
and battling a disability exacerbated her stressful circumstances.
Sami was transferred to the shelter from the hospital. Her boyfriend had choked and kicked her multiple times. When she tried to call for help, he dragged her to another room and repeatedly beat her. She suffered multiple bruises, pulled muscles, and broken ribs. She described the relationship as “scary and walking on eggshells.” “I never knew what was going to set him off.” “He was insecure and consistently accused me of flirting with people.” Sami believed her boyfriend had a mental illness, as some days he appeared happy, and other days he was very angry. For instance, hours prior to beating Sami, he brought her flowers; then, that evening, when she mentioned wanting to attend bible study, he accused her of going to meet a man at church. At times, Sami thought there was hope for the relationship, but after this most recent experience, she realized her life was spared, and she could not go back to the cycle of abuse she had endured for over 10 years.

When asked about her experiences in accessing resources, Sami explained that the help she received for housing was good and the people were uplifting and supportive. For example, due to her dangerous situation, she was placed on a priority waiting list. Also, being in a safe environment with other African American women in similar domestic violence situations provided support, encouragement, and the affirmation that her decision to leave was sound.

However, Sami’s story took a turn when she recalled an experience with the Black Church. She shared, “My boyfriend slapped me in the church parking lot because I spoke to someone and he accused me of flirting. I asked a female minister for help to calm him down and help him understand that I was being nice and felt good after hearing the sermon. Instead, she said her husband wouldn’t like her talking to anyone else.” For that reason,
Sami’s boyfriend felt his actions were justified and warranted, and she was appalled by the lack of support.

Regarding the Black Church, particularly pastors’ response to domestic violence, Sami often felt lost and confused. While she understood the importance the Black Church had for the African American community, much of the biblical teaching seemed chauvinistic. For example, she had heard pastors teach women that they should submit to their husbands and that the man is the head of the household. On the occasions that she went to a pastor or minister for help, she was asked what she had done, instead of why her boyfriend had hit her. Once more, his actions were validated, and she was condemned.

In spite of her experiences with domestic violence, the Black Church, pastors, and ministers, Sami acknowledged her spirituality as a huge source of strength, one that played a pivotal role for life after domestic violence. “I am scared about this new start, but with God I can do it.”

Sarah’s Story

“It is harder for the Black Church to deal with domestic violence when both the abused and abuser attend the Church.”

Sarah (age 27) was shy and cautious as the interview began. It is worth noting that prior to the interview, she referenced her upcoming domestic violence restraining order hearing and the extreme fear she had speaking about the situation. As a result, she was reserved, yet anxious about the interview questions. She had relocated to North Carolina from the Mid-Atlantic region approximately 10 years before. She had graduated from an Ivy League university and at the time of the interview worked full-time as a research assistant.
When asked about her domestic violence experience, she was thoughtful about her answer, describing it as tumultuous. She further added, “I was dating somebody that looking back on it now was very emotionally abusive, but I did not leave until it got physical.” “We were driving in a car and he grabbed my hair and choked me.” “I tried to get away, but he lives in close proximity to me in which he would continue to call and harass me.” “He also came to my house and threatened me with a gun.”

When asked about her experience accessing resources, she shared that receiving assistance with finding housing was an astonishing experience. “I found this shelter through a contact at my church.” “It was the first time that I realized I was in an abusive relationship.” She added that this showed her that there are various dynamics to domestic violence. Sharing her story with women at the shelter and other people had been difficult. “It’s been very hard for me to explain to people that I can’t go home.” “They’re very judgmental.” She further explained that people assumed that because she had a good job and was a homeowner, that she should not be homeless. Sara tearfully added, “When somebody is trying to kill you, you just can’t find a new place immediately.”

Sarah stated that she loved her association with her current Black church, although traditionally is had been very difficult for her to identify with them. She had been raised Catholic, but a personal experience with God had not been emphasized. Therefore, she had attended Black mega-churches to find a sense of belonging. “I felt lost in the mega church.” So she tried small Black churches: “Then I tried an older, small Baptist church, and nobody could relate to me or explain things without being condescending.” However, she eventually found her niche with the current Black church she attends.
When asked to describe her experience with receiving support with domestic violence from the Black Church, pastors, and ministers, she stated that her experience was “bittersweet.” “I am close with both my pastor and first lady, and they have very different perspectives about domestic violence.” She declined to specifically discuss the experience and stated that she was loyal to her leaders. But she shared that because her boyfriend also attended her church, she had been ridiculed for filing a restraining order and told, “The church doesn’t need the negative attention.”

Sara said that her entire sense of spirituality was based on the fact that Christ had suffered so much more than she could ever suffer. “He suffered on the cross in order for me to exist…so this has given me strength when I feel like I can’t make it.” When prompted to discuss spirituality as a barrier, she cried and shook her head with watery eyes and a distressed facial expression. When asked for additional comments to share, she stated that she did not know what her future held, but she was optimistic that God would make a way as she continued to heal.

**Tina’s Story**

“The most important decision I made was to leave.”

Tina (age 50) is a mother of seven adult children, and employed with a full-time and part-time job. She works a full-time job at night and a part-time job on the weekends in order to have extra money as she prepares to leave the shelter. She appeared well-rested and prepared for the interview.

The middle child of eight siblings, Tina had witnessed her mother getting physically beaten every day. “We had a lot domestic violence in our home. I watched my mom get beat
every day; not every other day…but every day”. She described her family as very spiritual and religious, but also dysfunctional and hypocritical. For example, her grandfather was a minister, and had physically abused her grandmother, his daughter, and grandchildren. In addition, her grandmother stayed active in the Church and told the family to follow the commandments in the Bible, yet their family is full of many abusers and heavy alcohol drinkers. As a result of this violent and chaotic environment, Tina’s cognitive dissonance between her desire to follow her family’s religious teachings and the stressors in her life was a reason that she became angry at the confusion and kept a shell around herself to detach from the distress.

When asked about her domestic violence experience, Tina explained that she had a lengthy history of domestic violence. “Well, my first marriage was very bad…black eyes, broken bones…I was physically and emotionally abused for roughly 15 to 20 years.” She paused and disclosed that due to her spiritual upbringing, she had been afraid to divorce. “I was afraid of what the Bible said about divorce.” When she finally decided to leave the first marriage, she waited 20 years to remarry because she was still afraid and felt guilty for going against biblical principles.

When she came to peace and acceptance of her decision to divorce, she decided to give love a second chance, and got remarried. Immediately after the honeymoon stage of the marriage, her second husband became very abusive. “He was just a totally different person when I met him; I didn’t see that anger until after I married him.” She added the first time he hit her, she immediately had flashbacks of mistreatment from her first marriage. To her husband’s dismay, she fought back because she did not want to get physically abused again.
As a result, the verbal abuse increased and he began to control her car, home, and finances.

“The verbal abuse became so bad that I left in the middle of the night in distress and so weary…I was hoping somebody would find me and rape or kill me or do whatever because it was just that bad.”

With a smile on her face in the interview, Tina said she was happy that she had left and reached out to the domestic violence national hotline for assistance. She explained that immediately after contacting the hotline, the resources had fallen into place. For instance, the shelter provided resources for job-hunting, and social services provided assistance with food. This experience offered her empowerment, motivation, and improved self-esteem. Even though her most recent experience had been positive, though, her first encounter seeking help had not been favorable. She shared in the interview that she had felt discriminated against due to her race and lack of young children when she went to social services for help with domestic violence during her first marriage. “I couldn’t understand why they helped the Hispanic women, and told me they didn’t have any help for women like me.” Tina admitted that she tried to downplay her sadness and thoughts about how being an African American woman could be detrimental at times when in desperate situations.

When reflecting about her association with the Black Church and her experiences with seeking assistance from pastors, she held her head down for a couple of minutes and let out a huge sigh. She explained that due to her spiritual upbringing, she felt confused by things she had heard and things she had actually seen. First, she had been confused about why her grandmother had stayed with her grandfather and endured abuse. Second, she had not understood why pastors would use scriptures to encourage women to stay in unhealthy
marriages, but she never said anything to help women move on before getting killed. She added, “It’s always just focus on the Lord, or what God put together, let no man put asunder.” She recounted details from an experience with a minister during her first marriage: “I went to my mother-in-law, because she is woman and minister…and I thought she would understand. All she said was that she would talk with her son.” Tina said she had been devastated and turned to alcohol and crack to ease the pain.

Tina added that her spirituality and trust in God had saved her from death. She hoped that her story would help African American women going through any type of violence to “step out on faith” and seek help. It was Tina’s desire to rebuild her life and one day be able to give back to the domestic violence community. She had a strong work ethic, “hustle mentality” and a lot of faith to move forward so that she would never have to return to a battered life.

**Summary**

This chapter provided an overview of the participants’ stories of domestic violence and the perceived role of spirituality in their experiences. The narratives presented provide information supporting the original purpose of this study, which was to explore the domestic violence experiences of African American women and the perceived role of spirituality in shaping those experiences. The narratives presented revealed the prevalence of spirituality for the African American community, as well as the prominence of the Black Church and influence of pastors and ministers. Finally, the narratives highlighted the intersection of race, gender, and domestic violence in the experiences of the participants. The following chapter
will present the emergent themes that both connect and distinguish the participants from each other.
CHAPTER 5: FINDINGS

This qualitative study illustrates the experiences of eight homeless African American women whose lives were shaped by domestic violence. The purpose of this study, a narrative inquiry, was to explore the domestic violence experiences of African American women and the perceived role of spirituality in shaping those experiences. An impetus for this study was the gap in the literature on African American women’s experiences of domestic violence relationships, and particularly of how spirituality figured into those experiences. The following research questions guided the study:

1. How do African American women experience domestic violence?
2. How do African American women perceive the role of spirituality in their domestic violence experience?

This study used narrative analysis to construct the primary data, which was collected in interviews with the eight participants, into stories to highlight the themes across the dataset. This analysis enabled the researcher to capture rich, descriptive stories of African American women’s experiences and their perceptions of spirituality and domestic violence. All data sources, including participant and researcher observations and field notes, were used to determine how participants described their domestic violence experiences and their perceptions of spirituality. Utilizing a priori coding, which was informed by the CRT and RCT constructs (permanence of racism, intersectionality, counter-storytelling, strategies of disconnection and relational images), and open coding, the end result was five themes and twelve subthemes.
Critical Race Theory (CRT) explores the relationships among race, racism, and power and is the overarching framework that explains the systemic obstacles that African American women in abusive relationships face. Relational Cultural Theory (RCT) provides a relational perspective to examine the impact of domestic violence among African American women. Using both frameworks as lenses through which to analyze the data, themes were extracted from women’s perceptions and their experiences as minorities in a dominantly patriarchal system. The themes capture some of the meaning of the experience of African American women in domestic violence relationships, particularly how they perceive the role of spirituality in shaping their experiences.

This chapter provides an overview of the findings. The results of the eight qualitative interviews are reported by research question, organized into overarching themes and corresponding subthemes, and supported by participants’ verbatim statements. Participants’ quotes and stories reported in this chapter emerged from primary data sources (interviews and field notes). Table 3 summarizes the five themes and their respective subthemes that emerged from the participants’ narratives.
Table 3. Findings by Research Question.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Question 1: How do AA women experience domestic violence?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Theme</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sub-theme</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accessing Resources</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Question 2: How do AA women perceive the role of spirituality in their domestic violence experiences?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Theme</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sub-theme</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Silence in the Church</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Participants were asked to define domestic violence, and while no themes emerged in their responses, seven out of eight participants defined domestic violence by describing physical manifestations of how they experienced it as opposed to abstract definitions. For instance, physical descriptors such as blackened eyes, swollen faces, and bruises were provided as responses. Four out of eight participants mentioned emotional and physical abuse in their definitions of domestic violence; two out of eight participants defined domestic violence as verbal and physical abuse; one participant mentioned emotional, physical, and financial abuse; one participant said emotional, physical and “detrimental to spiritual well-being”; and one participant defined domestic violence as control.

**Research Question One: Narrating Domestic Violence Experiences**

Research question one explored the following: “How do African American women experience domestic violence?” Three themes emerged from the responses to this question.
The first theme discussed is how women’s experiences of discrimination are a result of intersectionality, which includes experiences of how their race, gender, and socioeconomic status converge and result in harmful experiences. The second theme discussed is relational images, which includes witnessing domestic violence, experiences with injustice/racism, and encounters with the Black Church. The third theme discussed is strategies of survival, which includes various methods to cope with the abuse.

**Intersectionality-Related Discrimination**

The first theme discussed is how women’s experiences of discrimination are a result of intersectionality, which includes experiences of how their race, gender, and socioeconomic status converge and result in harmful experiences.

**Difficulty Accessing Resources**

It was clear from the interviews that all participants experienced discrimination when seeking assistance for domestic violence. Four out of eight participants reported that they experienced prejudice statements from a social service worker, policeman, or magistrate, and the remaining four participants experienced such statements from a hospital staff worker and the Black Church. When asked about an experience that made one feel discriminated against, Vanessa explained, “I already felt beneath myself going down to social services to ask for help . . . and she looked at me and said … you people always want help. . . . You people never pay your bills, do you?” Carla stated something similar when asked about discriminatory experiences she encountered while accessing resources. She stated, “Well, for me that’s something that I experience every day, all the time. Even here at the shelter, especially with the Caucasian women, they act as if their domestic violence situation is
somehow justified, whereas my story is expected, like that’s what happens in the Black community. Also, when I told the White policeman my husband tried to kill me, and he said, you women . . . what you do to him?” She stated, “Had I been White, I felt the policeman would have been nicer to me.” Sami also stated something similar: “When I went to the hospital, I felt like no one wanted to help me. . . . I overheard the hospital nurse say . . . my situation wasn’t that serious and I’m used to abuse.”

As mentioned above, some of the participants experienced discrimination from the Black Church. Participants talked about whether they were surprised or unsurprised by the treatment from the Church. Rachel, who had reached out to the Church for financial assistance, said, “I was a member and worked for the church as an office administrator for two years, paid my tithes, and when they found out the abuse was from a female, they pushed me away and out the door.” She felt that she was discriminated against because of her same-sex relationship, and the church was not pleased that an employee of the church did not live up to its beliefs and values. April’s story was similar to Rachel’s in that she sought the church for financial assistance, and felt disappointed by her experience. As April described it, “The bishop and his wife, who’ve been in my life all my life, didn’t help.” She added, “I felt they didn’t want to help because I was an unemployed Black woman and also had left my husband.”

It is noteworthy that seven participants experienced overt racism, and one experienced covert racism. Such direct prejudice exacerbated the hardship and heavy toll of leaving the volatile relationship, and subtle discrimination placed a greater psychological strain, often leaving a woman questioning her thoughts about what had happened. It is
evident that the participants in this study experienced discrimination as a result of their multiple identities. More specifically, their identities as Black women, and in some cases poor Black women, resulted in negative experiences when accessing resources. It is also clear that institutional racism and systemic barriers limited the resources available to help them leave abusive relationships.

Challenging the Welfare Queen Stereotype

In addition to the multiple oppressions the participants faced when seeking assistance, they also faced the dominant stereotype that African American women are “welfare queens.” Three of the eight participants had college degrees (Master’s, Bachelor’s, and Associate’s), and four of the eight participants were employed full-time with benefits. Two participants were unemployed but received social security disability benefits. Only one participant was unemployed and received no income. As such, the participants’ narratives challenged the stereotype that African American women are “welfare queens.” Their narratives evinced their reluctance in accessing social services, and despite their education and employment status, they still faced adversity.

Most of the participants mentioned their education and employment status and that their identities as homeless African American women countered the dominant stereotype. Sara stated, “I work at a predominantly White institution . . . [and am a] graduate of an Ivy-league school. . . . [I] own my own house, and when I mentioned I’m homeless . . . I was immediately asked, how is that possible to own a house but can’t live there?” Sara could not go to her own house because her abusive partner lived there. April expressed similar feelings in her comments regarding seeking assistance for housing. She shared that the education and
skills she obtained from her Master’s degree helped tremendously with finding online legal aid assistance. However, she noted, “When I got to the shelter, I felt staff workers were surprised [that] I was educated and homeless.” She added, “I noticed their facial expressions and interaction.” Vanessa stated that her experiences with the social service worker validated her views of how White people feel about African American women who seek assistance. She said, “When the worker said ‘you people never pay your bills’ . . . I knew then . . . she thought I was a welfare queen.” Bobbi shared that due to lack of transportation and housing, she was unable to go to social services to reinstate her children’s Medicaid. She stated, “When I told the social worker my domestic violence story that led to no transportation and housing . . . I was denied Medicaid and told . . . not to take the system for granted.” For Tina, being homeless and working two full-time jobs refuted any notion that she might be lazy. She said, “I knew I had to do something . . . knew about the department of social services and how they treat Black women . . . so I had to hustle to get back on my feet.”

However, for Rachel, her lack of education and unemployment had a lot to do with her inability to secure transitional housing. She stated, “Because of my criminal record, lack of education, and unemployment, I can’t get help. . . . They must think I’m living off the system.” Rachel’s story is different in part due to her lack of education and unemployment; however, all participants shared similar sentiments regarding the “welfare queen” stereotype.

**Relational Images of Abuse**

The second theme discussed is relational images, which includes witnessing domestic violence, experiences with injustice/racism, and encounters with the Black Church.
Witnessed Domestic Violence Growing Up

When describing their domestic violence experiences, the majority of the participants reported that witnessing domestic violence in their childhoods and families contributed to their expectations of a relationship and influenced how they would be treated in relationships. As stated earlier, Tina narrative reported in her narrative, “We had a lot of domestic violence in our home. Our mom, I watched her get beat up almost every day; not every other day, but every day. My grandmother raised me, and she was also abused by my grandfather. So when I got married, and the abuse started, I thought it was normal. . . . That’s all I know and saw.” Vanessa’s story expanded Tina’s statement on realizing the impact of witnessing domestic violence. “I grew up in domestic violence because my mom and dad fought all the time. As a result of that, I just kept getting into bad relationships. . . . It’s like I ran into domestic violence.” Rachel stated, “I’ve been in and out of domestic violence relationship for years, not just with my abuser, but with family and stuff too. I grew up watching abuse.” She added, “I’m trying to live and just trying to start over; just trying to start a new life without abuse.” Carla spoke about how witnessing her mother submit to her father provided a template for her to also submit to her husband and not fight back. “My momma did everything my father told her to do; she never questioned him or fought back. Since she is a minister, I felt she was doing the godly thing by staying with her husband, so I did the same thing in my marriage.”

Experiences With Injustice and Racism

Throughout the interviews, the participants reported how previous experiences with injustice, marginalization, and racism contributed to how they felt the legal system and various resources would treat them. Consequently, some women either failed to seek
assistance due to prior harmful experiences that resulted in them feeling mistreated, or they sought assistance but already had a strong belief about how they would be treated. When asked about an experience that made her feel discriminated against because of her race, gender, and employment status, Carla candidly stated, “Well, for me, that’s something that I experience every day, all the time. So being in a domestic violence relationship was no different. . . . I didn’t expect anything different.” While she had already experienced unfairness while seeking assistance, she still reached out for help due to a near-death experience. She discussed experiences where she was re-victimized by women at the shelter, policemen, judges, and social services. She said, “I have been mistreated by different resources—department of social services, police department, the courts, judges. . . . They aren’t sympathetic, and it’s just kind of like it’s expected of Black women to get abused, and I’m so used to it.”

For Rachel, because of prior negative experiences with the police, she did not reach out to them for assistance. While she declined to elaborate, she did report that one particular situation had led her to conclude that the police discriminated against poor, uneducated Black women with a criminal history. “I did not call, because they judge you based on past mistakes. . . . Like, I was in court for another situation . . . and a policeman said . . . ‘oh, that’s you . . . didn’t I just see you?’ . . . So now what you do?”

Bobbi described her experience with completing paperwork for a restraining order as a template for how she would be treated when she went to court for the ruling on the protective order. “My face was physically messed up in front of the magistrate, and after he
minimized my situation by rushing through the instructions and not helping me complete the paper
work . . . I knew standing before a judge with a swollen face would be more painful.”

Encounters with the Black Church

Most of the participants discussed how their experiences, along with their relationships with the Black Church, created a set of beliefs about the Church and influenced whether they sought Church assistance with domestic violence. When asked to describe her association with the Black Church, Bobbi stated, “I don’t have a relationship with them, because everyone in Black churches likes to talk about everybody’s business, and I don’t like that. Like, I went to them once for help for another situation, and someone told another member, and people started asking me questions . . . so it wasn’t an option for me to go back to them for help.” Rachel stated, “After they pushed me out the door when they found out that I was with a female . . . that enough told me not go back to them for help with anything. Then, people looked down on me and made negative comments about my children. ‘They’re going to end up like you. . . . It’s not a good role model for them that you’re in a relationship with a female.’”

Tina appreciated her experiences with the Black Church but also found them puzzling. “I’ve been a part of the African American churches for all my life, and even as a child, I was confused about my grandmother and why she would stay with my abusive grandfather for so long, and he was a minister. I would see a lot, but I was confused about why these things were happening, but then I thought in some part of my mind I wanted to say it was normal because I saw it so much, and kept going to the Church and reading the Bible.” She also said, “I’ve always been a member of a Black church, and it seems like there’s just
something about it . . . something about being around your people that feels good.” Tina’s admiration for the Church led her to them for assistance regardless of the expected conflicting statements and interactions she witnessed growing up.

Both April and Carla are preacher’s kids, and the images of watching their parents as ministers, along with being raised in the Church, persuaded them to seek the Church; however, April was disappointed. April stated, “I was raised in a predominately Black Church; there’s a bishop and his wife, people who’ve been in my life all my life . . . [but] they didn’t help. I felt more condemned, like they forgot where they came from, and it was more of them focusing on themselves than my family needing help.” Like Tina, Carla was not surprised because her early experiences with the Church—in which church members shunned people for things they didn’t agree with—shaped her beliefs on how the Church would respond to her domestic violence situation. “I didn’t turn to the Church very much going through domestic violence, because I knew what the answer was.”

**Strategies of Disconnection for Survival**

The third theme discussed is strategies of survival, which includes various methods to cope with the abuse, and the participants’ withdrawal from the Black Church.

*Maladaptive Coping*

Seven out of eight participants developed disconnection strategies to preserve themselves and manage the abuse. Two of the participants turned to drugs and alcohol as a maladaptive coping strategy. Three of the participants withdrew from the Black Church as a means to survive the abuse, and two of the participants not only turned to drugs and alcohol, but also withdrew from the Church. Only one participant took prescribed medication to
reduce anxiety and maintain normality in the relationship. Rachel shared, “I medicated myself the street pharmacist way to drown out what was going on.” Carla, who smoked cigarettes, stated that, although she wasn’t a drinker, “I found myself turning to drugs and alcohol to cope with what was happening in the relationship.” Sami said, “It was so stressful. . . . I felt like I was walking on eggshells . . . and cocaine helped take the pain away.” Tina stated, “It was very bad, and I started drinking alcohol and became addictive. . . . I still go to AA meetings and check in with my sponsor.”

Withdrawal from the Black Church

As stated above, five of the participants left the Black Church they had been attending as a result of harmful experiences with leaders in the Church, such as the pastors’ or ministers’ negative responses when the women sought assistance with domestic violence. April said, “Right now, I am kind of disappointed with their response. . . . I removed myself and my children from the Church.” For Sarah, her close relationship with her church’s pastor and first lady, and her experience with them, resulted in deep pain: “My immediate response was to retreat away from the church . . . to figure out why it was hurting me the way it was and how to address it.” Sami expressed that because her pastor and minister validated her husband’s abuse, she left because she felt tremendously hurt. “It hurts, because it gave him more ammunition to feel like he can rule over me. No one ever said [to him] ‘why don’t you try and talk about this, because you have a good wife and you should treat her better?’ Instead, I was asked, what did I do? So I left.” Rachel shared that she thought since she worked at the church, she would find support, but when the church leaders and members learned the abuse had resulted from a same-sex relationship, she was ridiculed and pushed
away. “When I was turned away from the church . . . that was the worst feeling. I stopped going to church for years. . . . I’m not even going to lie . . . I stopped going.”

As mentioned earlier, two participants turned to drugs and alcohol and also withdrew from the Church. As Tina shared, “The fact that I confided in my mother-in-law, also a minister, about the abuse, I thought she would reach out to her son and talk to him about his behavior, but it didn’t help. . . . I left the Church and turned to alcohol and drugs to ease the pain.” She also said, “Using drugs and alcohol made matters worse. . . . I thought I was in a dark place while getting abused, but it became darker when the addiction took over my life.” As Carla said, “Being raised in the Church, I wasn’t a drinker. . . . I didn’t want to turn into this person that God didn’t know. . . . I felt broke-down and low as a result.” The majority of the participants in this study developed some form of survival strategy to manage the abuse. However, the survival strategies sometimes brought a sense of increased isolation.

**Research Question Two: Perceived Role of Spirituality**

Research question two explored the following: “How do African American women perceive the role of spirituality in their domestic violence experiences?” Two themes emerged related to this question. The first theme, spirituality as an obstacle, included three subthemes: silence of pastors and church leaders, church leaders’ persuasion to remain in the relationship, and influence of religious traditions in childhood. The second theme discussed, in addition to spirituality as an obstacle, was spirituality as a source of strength. The two subthemes were prayer and faith, and relationship with Christ.
**Spirituality as an Obstacle**

The first theme, spirituality as an obstacle, included three subthemes: silence of pastors and church leaders, church leaders’ persuasion to remain in the relationship, and influence of religious traditions in childhood.

*Silence of Pastors and Leaders*

All the participants shared that one barrier for them was the pastors’ and church leaders’ silence when they sought to discuss domestic violence in the Church. All the participants identified spirituality as being significant for them, and the lack of support by the pastors and church leaders dampened or diminished their spiritual journey and religious beliefs. Rachel felt that the church leaders’ silence showed lack of concern for Black women. She reported, “They really don’t speak on it at all, even the churches . . . nothing. . . . They don’t care about us women.” “I questioned God a lot because of this.” When asked about what she heard pastors and leaders teach or discuss about domestic violence, Carla said, “In the church I grew up in, you didn’t hear a lot, and looking back now, I believe probably because some of those same behaviors were perpetrated by some of those same deacons and ministers, so of course they weren’t going to address it at all.” She further explained, “What little we did hear, though, what I walked away with was two things and I couldn’t reconcile them. Number one, vengeance is God’s, so it wasn’t up to me to get back at him or do anything to him, then number two was once you are married then you stay married to that same person for life. So if you divorce and marry again, then you’re double-married, is how I was raised. So the teachings we had then were you just stayed married and you prayed your way through it and you didn’t enact revenge. Then the flip side of that was you didn’t call the
unsaved in, so that did away with calling the police because Christians were supposed to deal in a Christian way with Christian people in their own group and then to call in the unsaved to come in was forbidden also. So that blocked you from being able to get out the relationship and seek help.”

April shared, “They don’t teach it [escape from domestic violence] at all; I hear ‘work on your marriage; God hates divorce,’ those clichés. I hear that, but I don’t hear how to get out of it. I don’t hear how to walk through those things for healing, and if you have children . . . how to deal with it.” Bobbi reported, “I haven’t really heard about domestic violence or relationships. I basically learned forgiveness. If you don’t forgive someone, you’ll never live to be happy because you’re still holding onto something. But I can’t forgive yet; I’m just not ready for that, and I’d be lying if I go to God and say I forgive him and I really haven’t. . . . I’m still trying to figure out my spiritual journey.” Sarah talked about the church leaders’ lack of awareness and the fact that they did not discuss it because they did not know how, so they discussed other issues. She stated, “I haven’t heard anything, and I think specifically at my church, we just talked about mental health issues for the first time last month, and I’ve been at that church about five years. Maybe they don’t know how to bring that topic up. At previous churches I’ve attended, I’ve heard about violence in terms of wars and in terms of murders or things like that, but never in terms of domestic violence.” Vanessa felt confused at times, because she wanted to follow the pastor’s advice, honor God, and leave the relationship. She sought advice from a female pastor and explained, “The lady I was going to said, ‘I don’t tell anybody to stay in an abusive relationship. This has to be between you and God, because I’m not there getting punched. . . . I’m not there getting abused. . . . I’m not
there being mistreated, but I will be there to come and get you if you need me.’” Vanessa added to that, saying, “The lady stayed away from telling women to leave their husbands and stuff. She said it has to be your decision, I don’t know what to do and I don’t know what to tell you.”

*Church Leaders’ Persuasion to Remain in the Relationship*

The majority of the women discussed how the church leaders’ misuse of biblical scriptures to persuade them to remain in the volatile relationship created a huge roadblock for them. When asked in what ways pastors or leaders or the Church encouraged women to stay in abusive relationships, Carla said, “They encourage it because they think that God is going to solve it. A pastor told me, ‘Don’t give up on him, don’t burn that bridge, God can do this.’ I felt that if I abandoned this marriage, it was almost like abandoning God himself. Somehow I’ve lost my faith . . . because it’s so entwined and it’s hard to separate what you’ve been told, your belief . . . the abuse, etc.” Sami reported, “One pastor said that you’re supposed to love your wife as God loves others and that you’re supposed to love your wife as yourself, but a lot of it really sounds chauvinistic because they feel like the man is the head of the household and he tells the wife what to do.” She also felt pastors and leaders encourage women to stay in abusive relationships by repeatedly quoting scriptures such as “Wives submit to your husbands” and “God hates divorce.” Thus, many of the women felt such scriptures gave power to their perpetrators and silenced their own roles and voices in the relationship. Sami mentioned, “The pastors give all authority to the man by quoting the scriptures . . . where the man feels like he can correct you, and he’ll say it’s up to him to
shape me in a way that you should be, and it’s up to him to mold you, and things like that, which I don’t agree with. They’re giving him the green light to do these things.”

Tina reported, “Pastors always want to counsel and talk about working things out or what the bible says, but not talk about divorce.” “I was told a man is supposed to love a woman as he loves God, and then the woman is supposed to submit to the man and it seems like from my experience that they stop there.” Tina also shared, “From my past experience, what stands out is hearing pastors saying to just focus on the Lord and you do what God has called you to do and your husband will come around.” “I always heard the scripture about what God put together, let no man put asunder.” “They never said anything about you may need to just kind of move on and get [out] of this before you really get hurt or dead; it’s always just focus on the Lord.” Bobbi mentioned, “I’ve heard them say it’s better to pray about the situation. Don’t give up and just try to work it out.” April stated, “They say God hates divorce, and they also use that scripture as far as women submit to their husbands to encourage women to stay in the relationship.” Similarly, Vanessa reported, “I have heard a few men and women pastors say [that] Moses wrote the law on marriage and to stay in the marriage.” In addition, she added, “I [have] heard a lot of male pastors say to stay, and I feel like the reason they said this is that some of them are abusive.”

Sarah, who is not married, has heard similar scriptures, but offered another perspective to the persuasion to stay in the relationship. She felt that there was a misconception among pastors, leaders, and the Black Church regarding marriage, thus leading to misinterpretation of scriptures. She stated, “I think there’s a stigma that every marriage that is formed was God’s doing, and leaders take a lot of things in the Bible out of
context, such as ‘you should not be divorced from your spouse.’” She added, “I’ve heard them say, ‘what God joined together let no man separate,’ but if God didn’t join you together to begin with, it’s going to fail, because God is not in it.”

*Religious Influence in Childhood*

More than half of the participants reported that early exposure to religious traditions and beliefs served as an obstacle for them as these ideas influenced their decisions to stay in the brutal relationships. Carla explained how religious traditions and beliefs were a barrier for her and contributed to her perspective on women and marriage. She stated, “Spirituality was a barrier because being raised the way that I was, there was a lot of traditions . . . a lot of things we were taught coming up that just weren’t true.” For instance, she shared, “We grew up with the ‘once married, always married to the same one’ philosophy.” Furthermore, “Women can’t wear pants; pants are going to send you to hell. . . . It was a barrier because it put a restriction on us . . . on what you could believe and how you could think.” Not only was Carla influenced by religious traditions and beliefs, but she was also influenced by her mother’s role as a minister. She stated, “I was raised in the Church, my momma got saved when I was seven, so from seven and up I was raised in the Church and had a heart for God. Since my mom is a minister, I was a preacher’s kid too and was very familiar with spirituality, Christianity, and pretty much a church girl all my life . . . so I made many decisions and did a lot of things because my mom is a minister.” Carla explained, “Like when I got married. Under normal circumstances, I would never have married the man, honestly; however, as a good Christian girl, I didn’t want to be out there fornicating and God being mad with me. So my thought process was, I’ve got to get married, please my mom, and
make this right before God.” “So literally the first person that came along and said ‘will you marry me,’ I said yes, because I wanted to have it right according to the way I was raised.”

Similar to Carla, April was a preacher’s kid, but both of her parents are pastors. She stated, “I was raised in the Church, both parents are pastors, and very protective of me.” “I met my ex-husband at church, and he was the only person I ever dated. . . . I was taught to save yourself until you get married . . . so I married him without really knowing him and to please my parents and God.” “I stayed in the marriage longer than what I probably should’ve . . . and tried to work on it several years so that my parents could see I was living up to the religious beliefs and things they told me.” Vanessa mentioned that, growing up, she [was] repeatedly instructed to take everything to God and trust he would solve it. “I always heard to pray; believe that God is going to work it out . . . and I did that and endured abuse for many years because I was taught to pray and believe God.”

Tina reflected on her childhood and how being raised by her grandmother, also a minister’s wife, had impacted her. She shared, “My grandmother stayed in the Church, and [she] kept us in the Word and reading the Bible.” “I used to love to read the red words in the bible, as my grandmother instilled that the bible is the ultimate source.” Tina shared that she had not left when the abuse started because her grandmother had taught her that the bible says “Once married, you stay with your husband.”

**Spirituality as a Source Of Strength**

The second theme discussed, in addition to spirituality as an obstacle, was spirituality as a source of strength. The two subthemes were prayer and faith, and relationship with Christ.
Prayer and Faith

As stated earlier, all the participants reported that spirituality was significant for them while enduring the abuse. Not only did spirituality serve as a barrier; it also served as protective factor. Half of the participants reported that spirituality was a source of strength for them through their use of prayer and faith, and the remaining half reported that their personal relationship with Christ served as a source of power. When asked about a time that spirituality served as source of strength, Carla stated, “Just faith, just believing that God can and will change situations and circumstances. That I can go to him in prayer and know and believe that things will change has been a source of strength for me.” She elaborated, “and if it doesn’t happen just the way I think it ought to happen at the time, then in my faith . . . I believe it’s still for my good and when a door closes . . . there’s probably something through that door that I didn’t need . . . so I’ve always leaned on my spirituality as a foundation of faith and hope.” In regard to her marriage, she explained, “I cried out to God to help me, because I turned to drugs and didn’t want to turn into this person that I really wasn’t and look up forty years later and be a broke-down drunk person.” She added, “I knew there was a better way of coping with the abuse, so I definitely stepped into my faith during that time and asked for strength to stop using and get through without turning into this person that I knew wasn’t me.”

Rachel explained that due to a hurtful experience with the Black Church, she questioned God at times, but deep down inside of her, she still had some faith that things would get better. “I was relying on God, praying . . . believing in God to spare my life.” “I am out of the situation now and believe that he answered my prayers and will continue to
help me get back on track.” While Bobbi endured the abuse, she explained that she prayed for the abuse to end, and although it did not end right away, she held on to her faith that she and her children would eventually be “okay.” “I kept praying for me and my kids . . . I was holding onto my faith for strength and courage.” Vanessa described how her prayers for relief from the abuse were answered through a member at church. “When I felt like this was the end and I couldn’t go any further, do anything else . . . take the abuse anymore . . . God sent one of the sisters in my church to help me.” “He heard my prayers and sent her to help me . . . so this gave me hope and encouragement.”

**Relationship with Christ**

As mentioned earlier, some of the women reported that their relationship with Christ served as a source of strength. When asked about a time that spirituality served as a protective factor, April stated, “My relationship with Christ and being filled with the Holy Spirit, and trusting him that he’s going to take of me and my children, gave me strength and hope.” She described a time in which she received clarity from the Holy Spirit regarding her husband’s behavior, subsequently providing her empowerment to leave the abusive marriage. She offered, “There were times when I would wake up in the middle of the night and God would reveal things to me concerning my husband. . . . For instance, one night, the Holy Spirit told me to go look in the closet . . . specifically where and when I went. . . . There was pornography and all kinds of craziness . . . so I started praying and asking the Holy Spirit how to address it. I never searched through my ex-husband’s things, so I know it was the Holy Spirit that revealed the stuff to me. I can’t really deny that God got me through because he is the only one that got me through.”
Sami stated, “When you’re with God and have a relationship with Christ . . . you feel like he can get you through things, even when it’s hard and everything you learn in Church. . . . Like, he won’t put more on you than you can bear, and sometime it feels like it, but you have to have that faith that he is going to see you through and that you’re going to come out better than what you started. I prayed about my situation . . . and was scared during the abuse . . . but I just felt like with God . . . it would get better.” “I’m still scared with this new start . . . but I know he’s with me.”

Sarah said, “My entire spirituality is based on the fact that someone suffered so much more than I could ever suffer in order for me to exist. So, that has given me so much strength during this process.” One of the women mentioned that along with her relationship with Christ, her religious upbringing provided another source of fortitude, and the combination of both gave her tenacity. Tina reported, “Because I was raised in the Church and I knew the Lord and still know him today . . . I would always talk to him. I know he saved me from death. . . . I always called on him and he’s never failed me. . . . He was always a source of strength for me, always.”

Summary

This chapter presented the findings of this qualitative study, which explored the domestic violence experiences of eight African American women and their perception of spirituality. The emergent themes were as follows: women’s experiences of discrimination as a result of intersectionality, strategies of survival, relational images, spirituality as an obstacle, and spirituality as a source of strength. The overarching themes presented, along with the subthemes, responded to the research questions, “How do African American women
experience domestic violence?” and “How do African American women perceive the role of spirituality in their domestic violence experience?” The themes also illustrate the connection between and distinctions among the participants. Chapter six will discuss the themes in relation to previous research, point out the limitations of the study, make recommendations for future research, and identify the implications for counselors, scholars, and policy makers who want or need a deeper understanding of the convergence of race, gender, and domestic violence. Finally, implications for the Black Church and pastors will be discussed.
CHAPTER 6: DISCUSSION

The goals of this study included understanding the domestic violence experiences of women who survived them, as well as exploring the perceived importance of spirituality as associated with those experiences. The following research questions guided this study:

1. How do African American women experience domestic violence?
2. How do African American women perceive the role of spirituality in their domestic violence experience?

To determine the results, I conducted a narrative analysis. Five overarching themes and twelve subthemes emerged from the participants’ narratives. These themes illuminate what the women found meaningful in their domestic violence experiences as well as the role of spirituality in those experiences. The research design allowed the participants to give power to their voices as African American women, though often marginalized, silenced, and oppressed. This research design also offered an opportunity for the participants to provide a more complex view of the convergence of race, spirituality, and domestic violence.

My findings indicated that for these African American women who had experienced domestic violence, their experiences were shaped by lack of resources, discrimination, negative stereotypes, histories of violent relationships, and vivid reflections of abuse that seemed to normalize the abuse they experienced (the themes of intersectionality-related discrimination and relational images of abuse). These women’s responses to domestic violence relationships were usually characterized by disconnection and withdrawal (the theme strategies of disconnection for survival). Although private spirituality, such as prayer, faith, and a relationship with Christ, all tended to instill a sense of strength, the institution
that represented spirituality in these women’s communities—the Black Church—tended to be an obstacle to these women’s survival (the themes *spirituality as an obstacle* and *spirituality as a source of strength*). Pastors and other members of the women’s faith communities often admonished them to stay in their abusive relationships. Every single participant reported having experienced spiritual abuse in the Black Church. In summary, the findings of the current study add to the literature by validating that spirituality continues to serve as a source of strength, but brings new information on spiritual abuse and various methods utilized by pastors, church leaders and the Black Church.

In this chapter, I highlight the key themes and relate them and their subthemes to previous research. Then, after addressing the study limitations, I discuss the implications of my findings for clinicians and helping professionals; policymakers; and faith communities and their pastors. My findings on which factors help and hinder African American women in domestic violence relationships are important not just because they give voice to women who are otherwise silenced and marginalized, but also because the findings can inform the work of clinicians, helping professionals, and domestic violence agencies. Finally, I provide recommendations for future research and reflect on the meaning of my findings in light of the theories of CRT and RCT.

**Discussion of Findings**

From the first research question in this study, three themes emerged: intersectionality-related discrimination; relational images of abuse; and strategies of disconnection for survival. Each of these themes characterized the participants’ narratives of their experiences of domestic violence. From the second research question, which asked about the perceived
role of spirituality in the women’s domestic violence experiences, two themes emerged: spirituality as an obstacle; and spirituality as a source of strength. In the previous chapter, these five themes and their subthemes were surfaced and described using both Critical Race Theory (CRT) and Relational Cultural Theory (RCT) as lenses. The data analysis provided greater understanding of the women’s perceptions of spirituality and domestic violence experiences as marginalized women in a dominantly patriarchal system. In the sections that follow, I consider how each key finding corroborates or challenges the previous literature.

**Intersectionality-Related Discrimination**

The first theme that emerged for the first research question was intersectionality-related discrimination. This means that the participants’ narratives of their domestic violence experiences were marked by their encounters with structural racism. Two subthemes under this theme were difficulty accessing resources and challenging the welfare queen stereotype. All of the participants’ responses indicated that they experienced discrimination as a result of their multiple identities. The intersection of their race, gender, and class resulted in negative experiences when accessing resources for assistance with domestic violence. The findings revealed that the women experienced discrimination that excluded them from resources such as social services, police officers, magistrates, hospital staff, and also from the Black Church. These findings corroborate the literature that African Americans have faced insurmountable struggles as a result of their multiple identities. Also consistent with previous literature (Sharma, 2001), participants were confronted with multiple oppressions when they attempted to extract themselves from the volatile relationships. For example, Sharma (2001) observed that “racist and discriminatory practices within community services, such as police
departments, government organizations, and even shelter facilities also complicate matters” for women of color (p. 1413). Consequently, the findings of my study contribute to the scholarship on domestic violence and illustrate that, while it is an obstacle for survivors of domestic violence to feel violated and silenced as result of the abuse, their race, gender and class can place them at greater risk for additional harm and oppression.

This study, which utilized a CRT perspective, focused on two tenets of that theory: the permanence of racism and intersectionality. The CRT lens provides insight into how institutional racism and systemic barriers limit resources for African American women who seek to leave abusive relationships. As previously stated, CRT asserts that racism is a permanent feature of society. From this perspective, racism cannot be eliminated, resulting in constant struggle for African American women. In this study, the African American women participants experienced both overt and covert discrimination while accessing resources; this finding supported the literature that racism persists in various structural settings in America. This finding also helped to demonstrate a basic assertion made by CRT, that racism is present in every system.

The two subthemes within intersectionality-related discrimination were difficulty accessing resources and challenging the welfare queen stereotype. Due to institutional racism and relatively low incomes, African American women do not have as many resources available to them as Caucasian women do, and they lack access to necessary support such as counseling, financial services, and housing. These examples illustrate how patterns of disadvantage intersect in African American women’s experiences with domestic violence. Furthermore, structural and institutional racism contribute to and perpetuate economic
inequality, and African American women are often blamed for their circumstances, as expressed in the term “welfare queen.” Corroborating this point, all the participants in this study were homeless and lacked the financial resources to obtain adequate housing. Four of the participants had jobs, three received social security disability benefits, and one was unemployed. Three of the participants had Bachelor’s degrees; one had a Master’s degree; three had community college education, and only one was working on her G.E.D. While all of the participants were aware of how White society views African American women who solicit federal and state assistance, due to their deleterious situations, they had no choice but to seek help. The findings are thus congruous with previous literature on the dominant views of African American women; however, these findings also challenge the literature that African American women are “welfare queens.” These findings revealed that African American women who seek assistance are not lazy and seeking to live off the system; rather, despite their education and socioeconomic status, African American women remain in a marginalized, oppressed position. The findings also add to the literature on IPV by demonstrating that social contexts in which African Americans live often provide them with different opportunities for and restrictions on leaving an abusive relationship, and that the contextual variables such as poverty, low income, and other roadblocks to resources remain a barrier to escaping IPV.

In addition to the “welfare queen” stereotype, another damaging stereotype that African American women face is being labeled a “strong Black woman.” According to Patricia Hill-Collins, a strong Black woman is one who can sustain anything, has no fear, and can easily protect herself (2008). While self-identification as a “strong Black woman” can
increase resiliency and motivation, I found that attitudes derived from this belief system can devastate the mental and emotional health of African American women. In the context of domestic violence, these attitudes keep African American women in pain and silence. Participants in this study reported feeling obligated to be strong while enduring abuse, even though they did not feel strong; rather, they felt silenced, worried, and afraid. Thus, the “strong Black woman” image can hinder the ability of African American women to acknowledge their pain and reach out to others for assistance. This sense of obligation that many African American women have to remain strong is at the core of many of their challenges when deciding whether to leave an abusive relationship.

As previously mentioned, this study utilized Relational Cultural Theory (RCT) as a framework for understanding the relational and contextual experiences of women of color. From an RCT perspective, the “welfare queen” and “strong Black woman” stereotypes can lead to internalized oppression. In other words, due to chronic racist and discriminatory experiences, women will start to believe they have characteristics that personify the negative stereotypes of “welfare queen” and “strong Black woman.” For example, African American women’s experiences with chronic racist and discriminatory practices can perpetuate negative relational and controlling images. As a result, these negative racial, gender and class stereotypes can foster self-doubt and feelings of unworthiness to be in a mutually empathic connection with others. I found that all the women in the study were aware of the “welfare queen” and “strong Black woman” stereotypes. In the context of domestic violence, some women did not want to seek assistance, because of the dominant culture’s views of African American women on public assistance. In addition, due to some prior racist
experiences some women had already internalized they were not worthy of getting assistance, and did not seek help. Instead, they internalized that being a “strong Black woman” enabled them to sustained being oppressed by racist and discriminatory practices; then they were strong enough to endure the abuse.

The findings support the literature that many African American women have an enslavement mentality, and that they continue to put the needs of others first. The participants reported that they put the perpetrators’ needs before their own safety for years before leaving the relationship. The participants also reported putting the attitudes and beliefs about pastors and the Black church before their own safety before leaving the relationship. Consequently, the intersection of being a “strong Black woman” creates another avenue of discrimination for those seeking assistance for domestic violence.

**Relational Images of Abuse**

The second theme, also under research question one, was *relational images of abuse*. All of the participants reported that certain key images of relationships heavily influenced their decision-leaving processes, including images from witnessing domestic violence in early childhood, from experiences with injustice and racism, and from encounters with the Black Church. (Each of these three types of images was a subtheme under the relational images theme.) According to Banks (2010: 2006), the destruction of relationships from witnessing abuse or experiencing abuse during childhood presents the largest obstacle to healing from abuse; these images create a set of beliefs about why the relationships are the way they are, thus determining expectations about what will occur in their relationships and profoundly shaping their sense of themselves. The findings contribute to the literature of
RCT and domestic violence by showing that African American women who witnessed domestic violence in early childhood develop inner pictures of what a relationship looks like. The participants reported that they modeled behavior that they saw their mother and sometimes both parents engage in. Such behavior included staying in abusive relationships, total submission to partners, and loyalty to pastors and the Black Church. As there is very little research on RCT in the context of domestic violence experiences of African American women, part of this study’s contribution is to provide new information on the impact of relational images on these women’s experiences.

According to the literature, experiences with racism and discriminatory practices contribute to the relational template for African American women in abusive relationships. Such experiences of injustice and marginalization contribute to how these women expect the legal system to treat them. This study, corroborating the literature, found that the participants’ previous experiences with injustice, marginalization, and racism contributed to how they felt the legal system and various resource providers would treat them. Consequently, some women either failed to seek assistance due to prior harmful experiences that resulted in them feeling mistreated, or they sought assistance but already had a strong belief that they would be mistreated. In addition, some participants reported that their expectations were shaped by the mistreatment and mistrust of White people, along with the negative stereotypes that the dominant society has of African American women. These relational templates and experiences are deeply rooted and often difficult to remove; thus, the decision to leave becomes more challenging.
This study also found that the participants’ experiences, along with their relationships with the Black Church, influenced whether they sought the Church for assistance with domestic violence. This finding is very suggestive. The Black Church is the pillar of strength for the African American community, yet it was a barrier for African American women in domestic violence relationships.

**Strategies of Disconnection for Survival**

Two strategies of disconnection that emerged from the findings were maladaptive coping and withdrawal from the Black Church. Seven out of eight participants developed disconnection strategies to preserve themselves and manage the abuse. Four of the participants turned to drugs and alcohol as a maladaptive coping strategy. Five of the participants withdrew from the Black Church as a means to survive the abuse, and two of the participants not only turned to drugs and alcohol, but also withdrew from the Church. One participant took prescribed medication to reduce anxiety and maintain normality in the abusive relationship. To examine the impact of domestic violence among African American women, this study supplemented the CRT perspective with RCT, which focuses on a relational perspective. The findings suggest that due to the shame, guilt, and marginalization the women experienced from the abusive relationships, and the discrimination they faced when seeking assistance, the participants developed strategies of disconnections. Furthermore, the findings demonstrate that living in a racist society contributes to African American women’s inability to connect, thereby decreasing their sense of worth and ability to heal.
Consistent with the literature, the findings illustrate that experiences with racial injustice, poverty, and multiple oppressions make it very challenging for African American women to establish healthy connections and leave abusive relationships. As a result, chronic disconnections hinder their capability to reason and leave abusive relationships, thereby creating a repeated pattern of cycle of abuse. Baly (2010) found that in leaving abusive situations, women were influenced by wider social and cultural discourses. Discourses such as history of injustices, police brutality, poverty, and negatives stereotypes applied to African American women make it very taxing for them to establish healthy connections and leave abusive situations.

The findings validate that the participants’ sense of being perceived as a “welfare queen” or “strong Black woman” was not only psychologically damaging, but also inhibited their decision-leaving process; as such, they suffered in silence and pain, resulting in maladaptive coping strategies. The participants reported feelings of low self-esteem, depression, isolation, shame, and guilt as a result of the abuse, and they reported having harmful experiences when seeking assistance for domestic violence. It is not surprising that the combination of the emotional and physical abuse from the volatile relationship, along with the psychological toll from the racist discriminatory experiences that the participants endured, led to strategies of disconnection such as withdrawal from the Black Church and maladaptive coping.

From a relational perspective, strategies of disconnection are critical to African American women in abusive relationships because these strategies become techniques for survival. These strategies can also become a roadmap of endurance for African American
women in abusive relationships. The findings illustrated that such detrimental experiences led the participants to utilize strategies such as isolation, withdrawing from the Black Church, and drugs and alcohol. These strategies of survival created barriers for them to build their sense of self and self-worth to establish healthy connections. According to RCT, a woman’s primary motivation in life is to build a sense of connection with others. Therefore, connection, not separation, is the guiding principle of growth. The findings demonstrate that for African American women in abusive relationships, the challenges of connecting and developing a sense of self and self-worth is magnified by the constant struggle of living in a system of White hegemony, thereby resulting in depletion of her sense of worth and her energy to fight the system.

**Spirituality as an Obstacle**

Under research question two, two themes emerged: spirituality as an obstacle and spirituality as a source of strength. The latter is the most positive of the themes. The current study found that all of the participants identified spirituality as being meaningful for them. However, in terms of the negative perceptions of the Black Church, three subthemes emerged: silence of pastors and leaders, church leaders’ persuasion to remain in the relationship, and religious influence in childhood. The participants reported that the pastors’ and Church leaders’ silence on domestic violence in the Church was a huge barrier to their escape and survival. A related barrier for the participants was the lack of support by the pastors and Church leaders. The participants reported that such lack of support dampened or diminished their spiritual journeys and religious beliefs. Some participants reported that the lack of support demonstrated the Church’s lack of concern for African American women, and
some participants reported that the lack of dialogue perpetuated the abuse and validated the men’s behavior. A key finding is that all participants reported that the pastors and Church leaders heavily pushed biblical scriptures as a way to avoid discussing domestic violence, and in so doing, they failed to provide support and information on ways to stay safe and seek assistance to leave the relationship.

Spiritual abuse is defined as using the survivor’s spiritual or religious beliefs to manipulate her (National Coalition Against Domestic Violence Statistics, 2007). This type of abuse is another form of control that not only an abusive partner can wield, but also pastors, Church leaders, and faith-based communities. Spiritual abuse tactics include preventing the partner from practicing his or her religious or spiritual beliefs; ridiculing the other person’s beliefs; forcing the children to be reared in the faith that the partner has not agreed to; the misuse of God, Jesus Christ, church doctrine, and traditions to encourage, excuse, maintain, and promote male entitlement; and misinterpretations of biblical scriptures to justify physical, sexual, and other abusive behavior (Faith Communities: Domestic Violence Protocol, 2007, Miles, 2002). Some of the participants reported spiritual abuse by their perpetrators, and all of the participants reported spiritual abuse by pastors and church leaders. All the participants expressed their disappointment, confusion, and hurt at the feedback the pastors and church leaders provided. These findings are consistent with the literature on the use of spiritual abuse by perpetrators, and they illuminate the need for more research on spiritual abuse by pastors, church leaders, and faith communities. To date, there is little known on how spirituality serves as a barrier for African American women to escape domestic violence. Therefore, the current study contributes new information to scholarship
on domestic violence and suggests how spirituality serves as barrier through pastors and
curch leaders’ perpetuation of abuse, and misinterpretation of biblical scriptures.

Previous studies have found that the Black Church, pastors, and leaders perpetuate
domestic violence in both overt and covert ways. More recently, Knickmeyer (2010) found
that battered women’s faith communities made them feel compelled not to report the
violence and to keep the violence a secret; women’s religious convictions and fear of shame
or rejection from the church may contribute to their remaining in abusive relationships. The
participants reported rejection from the church, being persuaded to stay in the relationship,
and being ridiculed for the abuse. This finding is troubling as it calls into question the
mission of the Black Church, pastors, and leaders for the African American community.
Also, the participants reported that their experiences with the church, particularly with
pastors, resulted in anger and doubt as to the role of pastors, and the women wondered
whether pastors are aware of the implications and consequences of teaching subordination of
women and headship of men.

Also worth mentioning is that more than half of the participants reported that early
exposure to religious traditions and beliefs served as an obstacle for them, as it influenced
their decisions to stay in the violent relationships. Such exposure helped shape the
participants’ framework on the role of women in marriages. The findings revealed that the
majority of the participants wanted to please God and uphold the principles of Christianity
taught by their mothers and grandmothers. Such faulty thinking enabled the participants to
clearly see that the religious traditions and beliefs added to the mental bondage they were
already in as a result of the abusive relationship. Also, the participants reported that the
religious teachings and traditions of utilizing prayer, seeking the Bible as the chief source of
deliverance and guidance, and keeping things a secret complicated their process of leaving.
As a result, the cycle of abuse was prolonged.

The findings point to the prevalence of spiritual abuse and how the Black Church,
pastors and leaders, and religious traditions play a pivotal role in the decision-making process
of African American women who are in relationships characterized by domestic violence.
This research opens the door for more dialogue on how spiritual abuse can be diminished
within the church and by church leaders and, in turn, how a church leader can become more
of an advocate for African American women in these relationships.

**Spirituality as a Source of Strength**

As mentioned earlier, the current study found that all of the participants identified
spirituality as being meaningful for them. The two subthemes related to very personal
experiences of spirituality: prayer and faith, and relationship with Christ. The participants
reported that spirituality served as a source of strength for them through their use of prayer
and faith, and their personal relationship with Christ served as a source of power. The use of
religion and spirituality has been repeatedly documented as a traditional means of coping in
the African American community (Bent-Goodley, 2013; Watlington & Murphy, 2006;
Gillum et al., 2006). Therefore, the findings are consistent with the literature on the use of
spirituality as a long-standing coping strategy. More recently, Lewis et al. (2015) found that
survivors who faced near-death experiences utilized their spirituality to begin the healing and
recovery process. Half of the participants in this study faced near-death experiences and
reported that prayer, faith, and their personal relationship with Christ helped sustain them and provided strength to leave the relationship.

The narratives provided reinforce the connection between prayer, faith, and power to endure and leave the relationship. It is their faith that sustained them during the darkest hours and provided hope and encouragement. The participants cited God as a way to gain strength in a negative situation and leave their relationships. For example, participants revealed that withdrawing from the Black Church provided an opportunity to develop their own personal relationship with Christ and not rely solely on interpretations of scriptures that were provided by pastors and leaders in the church. The participants who had turned to drugs and alcohol reported that this strategy had led them to find the strength to leave the relationship as they realized that the unhealthy coping strategy was counter-productive, and that God provided an avenue of escape. Through the use of prayer, faith, and a personal relationship with Christ, the participants started to challenge the patriarchal biblical teachings that left them feeling oppressed, and they moved toward self-respect and healing.

Limitations/Delimitations

All research studies have limitations that can impact the credibility and trustworthiness of the results (Heppner & Wampold, 2008). Therefore, some limitations should be considered when interpreting the results of the study and drawing on it for future research. The main limitation of this study was the narrow geographic region. A wider geographic region would provide information on how access to domestic violence resources differs in other regions. Another limitation was in the use of member checking. As described in chapter 3, member checking was used in the study to establish the credibility of the
interview transcripts, but due to concerns about re-victimization and the potential flaring-up of unpleasant emotions, two participants declined to review their transcripts.

In an effort to minimize the limitations of the study, the researcher took several steps. A password-protected computer was utilized to transmit the large data files (via Velocity, a secure North Carolina State University-developed product) to a transcriptionist. Doing this allowed the participants to feel more confident about the protection of their sensitive information shared with the researcher. Second, a confidentiality agreement was utilized with the transcriptionist ensuring that he would maintain the confidentiality of the data. This measure provided another layer of protection and safety of the participants’ disclosure of sensitive information as well as information about third party individuals. Third, a safe environment was secured for the participants to share their stories. By conducting the interviews in the playroom or library of the shelter, the participants were in a safe environment to share vivid details of their domestic violence experiences and the perceived role of spirituality.

**Implications for Clinicians and Helping Professionals**

It is very clear from the narratives provided that effective services for African American women survivors need to be diverse and comprehensive in order to reach a multiplicity of needs and personal references. The findings from this study have implications for helping professionals and clinical training and practice in counselor education. First, it is important for clinicians and helping professionals to understand that racial discrimination adds another barrier to resources for African American women survivors. Also, the intersection of race, gender, and socioeconomic status creates multiple oppressions for them.
Therefore, clinicians and helping professionals need to increase their awareness of race-related experiences and assess levels of racial discrimination stress. In addition, they need to consider the historical cultural context of negative stereotypes and how they hinder African American women survivors’ decision-leaving processes. Furthermore, these professionals need to ensure they understand procedures for obtaining 50B domestic violence orders, as well as logistical services such as how to obtain housing, financial support, employment, and transportation. These measures are essential for linking survivors to resources, decreasing strain and stress, and offering a source of encouragement and hope.

With regard to therapeutic interventions, providing African American women survivors with a framework such as Critical Race Theory or Relational Culture Theory in which to make sense of the psychological toll associated with exposure to racism and discrimination may also ameliorate the sense of powerlessness and shame that is often experienced by individuals who encounter various forms of race-based oppression. Consequently, the focus of counseling could include the adoption of healthy coping mechanisms and teaching strategies for empowerment and resistance. Understanding and utilizing culture-specific interventions such as knowledge of how spirituality is pivotal for the African American community can enhance the therapeutic alliance. More examples of culture-specific inventions include nonjudgmental acceptance of the use of prayer, faith, and a personal relationship with Christ as coping strategies. Also, counselors can acknowledge and understand that the Black Church and pastors are key factors for many African American women and may be the first places these women seek assistance before attending counseling. It is important for clinicians to come across as supportive, nonjudgmental, and sensitive to
the cultural needs of African American women survivors, versus encouraging women to
discredit their faith and religious beliefs. Being that women are already in a powerless state,
feeling ashamed and isolated, a lack of support from clinicians and helping professionals has
the potential to push these women away and perpetuate the cycle of abuse.

Education is an essential component of interventions for survivors of domestic
violence. None of the participants identified their relationships as domestic violence until
years later. All but one of the participants failed to mention power and control as a definition
of domestic violence. These findings suggest that counselors can help women understand that
the repetitive, controlling patterns of behavior they have experienced are indeed domestic
violence; counselors can then provide psycho-educational materials on the cycle of abuse;
signs of domestic violence; and how domestic violence impacts women of all socioeconomic
status, cultures, and ethnicities. Once women are able to make this connection, and to
identify with the millions of other women who are impacted by this global problem, they are
more able to address their own experiences and begin healing.

Increasing knowledge on spirituality and how to incorporate it into counseling can
help African American women decipher their own spiritual beliefs from patriarchal biblical
teachings that continue to oppress them. Counselors can also engage in dialogue with
churches, pastors, and religious leaders to provide training and enhance their knowledge on
the pivotal role these groups play for African American women involved in domestic
violence. Last, it is important to mention that because African Americans are a minority, it
can be inferred that there are more White counselors and helping professionals than African
American counselors and helping professionals. Consequently, White counselors and helping
professionals have to address their biases and prejudices and enhance their cultural awareness and training, in order to better serve African American women survivors of domestic violence.

**Counselor Education**

As counselor education programs adhere to the revised 2016 Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP) standards, it would be beneficial for all masters’ programs (e.g., school counseling track, clinical mental health counseling track, and college counseling track, to name a few) to incorporate learning about the intersection of race, gender, and domestic violence in various contexts. It has been established that domestic violence impacts 1.3 million women each year, and many families and children are affected as well. Therefore, it is important to teach future counselors how to work not only with women, but also with children, adolescents, and emerging adults who are exposed to domestic violence that impacts their development. Counselor education programs should include coursework for both masters’ and doctoral students on integrating spirituality in counseling. More specifically, with the newly adopted, revised American Counseling Association (ACA) and Association for Multicultural Counseling and Development (AMCD) Multicultural Social Justice Counseling Competencies, it would be helpful for counseling programs to offer courses on spirituality in counseling, race-related events, and domestic violence. These would align with the newly adopted competencies for counselors and highlight the intersection of identities, dynamics of privilege and oppression, counselor self-awareness, and social justice advocacy.
Domestic Violence Agencies

Because African American women are an oppressed racial minority, the experiences of domestic violence create a piling on of oppression that intensifies each individual trauma. To make matters worse, domestic violence agencies lack the cultural competency skills and training to help African American women with the racial and gender complexities of their situation. As a result of practitioners’ lack of knowledge and lack of racial sensitivity, the potential for secondary trauma for the women is increased. Many of the participants reported they were revictimized at the shelter. Given this finding, shelters would benefit by requiring culturally specific training for staff to prevent re-traumatizing survivors. All the participants experienced emotional abuse, and due to lack of financial resources to obtain counseling, it would help if shelters provided group counseling to help process their emotions and validate their experiences. Collaborating with community agencies such as the police department and health department would illustrate to the community the seriousness of domestic violence and also improve their chances of obtaining monetary donations and volunteers.

Implications for Policymakers

In recognition of the severity of crimes associated with domestic violence and sexual assault, the Violence Against Women Act (1994) was created to better protect women against violent crimes and hold perpetrators accountable for their actions. Under this federal legislation, programs were developed for victims and their families to ensure they are kept safe and have access to services, such as a National Domestic Violence Hotline. The narrative-based findings of this study have implications for policy. Due to the continual systemic barriers facing African American women survivors and all women of marginalized
communities, changes are needed on a federal level to better protect women. Such changes include funding for mandatory cultural sensitivity training on a biennial basis for judges, law enforcement, social service workers, and helping professionals who directly serve this population. In addition, more funding can be provided for domestic violence shelters so they are better equipped to serve survivors.

On the state level, changing the laws on how 50B domestic violence protective orders are processed and served is critical to survivors’ safety. When a survivor files a 50B domestic violence orders (and in some cases of especially severe threat, an ex-parte emergency order), the threat to her life increases drastically. Research has shown that when a survivor tries to leave a perpetrator, she is in greater danger and the chances of homicide rise. In this context, changing the law from a misdemeanor to a felony when perpetrators physically harm or threaten someone’s life has the potential to reduce homicides when 50B orders are filed. This change would serve as a deterrent, if breaches to the 50B orders carried more severe criminal punishment for perpetrators.

**Implications for Faith Communities and Pastors**

It is evident from this study that at times, the Black Church can exacerbate domestic violence situations rather than help to alleviate them. Although many participants turned to their religious communities for social support and spiritual encouragement, some of these communities minimized, denied, or enabled the abuse. All the participants reported negative encounters with the church and pastors. All the participants also reported that the silence of the church and persuasion by the pastors and leaders to stay in the relationship was a barrier for them. Therefore, it is critical for faith communities and leaders to increase their
knowledge about their role in the process of leaving for African American women survivors. This can be done by collaborating with domestic violence agencies and offering workshops on spirituality and domestic violence for clergy and people in leadership roles. It is very important for pastors and leaders to utilize biblical scriptures to empower and encourage women to leave abusive relationships for safety instead of ridiculing them. In this way, leaders can provide a source of hope and validate women’s spiritual and religious beliefs. Pastors who insist on counseling couples in active domestic violence situations should refrain from bringing the perpetrator into the counseling session and should connect women to domestic violence resources, such as shelters, agencies, and counseling. Also, pastors and leaders would benefit from assessing their biases and reluctance to discuss domestic violence at church.

Creating domestic violence ministries in the church can also be helpful, providing another resource for survivors. For example, having a “Purple Sunday” during the month of October, which is recognized as National Domestic Violence Awareness month, can demonstrate to the congregation that the church is not silent on this issue, and that it takes a stand against violence. During this “Purple Sunday,” purple ribbons can be passed out, and congregants can wear purple in solidarity with domestic violence survivors and victims. Offering domestic violence pamphlets in the church bathrooms and foyers provides another avenue for women to obtain resources. In these ways, women who are afraid to verbally ask for help can still have access to strategies for staying safe. Finally, offering programs on healthy relationships and effective communication for adolescents and adults can provide opportunities for people at church to assess whether they are currently experiencing
controlling behavior in a relationship; these resources can also improve communication skills and self-esteem.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

The current study provided rich information on the domestic violence experiences of African American women who survived these experiences, as well as on the perceived importance of spirituality as associated with those experiences. As stated earlier, there is limited research on spiritual abuse, and the current study added to the scholarship of domestic violence and the negative role of spirituality. This study shed light on the systemic barriers and multiple layers of oppression that African American women face when accessing resources to help them survive and leave violent interpersonal relationships. This study also utilized two cultural frameworks (CRT and RCT) to examine the intersection of race, gender, and domestic violence in ways not previously considered. This study challenged the dominant society’s views of African American women and provided an opportunity for participants to counter those narratives. Findings contributed to the understanding of the role of the Black Church, pastors, and faith-based community leaders on the process of leaving for African American women survivors.

As this study shows, further research is needed to examine the awareness of domestic violence among pastors, ministers, and leaders in the Black Church, all of whom are positioned to serve the African American community. In addition, research is needed on the readiness of shelter staff workers to serve this population; this research can inform efforts to provide effective support to women who seek shelter services. Research is also needed on how or whether CRT and domestic violence are taught in counselor education programs.
As previously mentioned, further research is needed to examine the awareness of domestic violence among pastors, ministers, and leaders in the Black Church. In addition, further investigation is needed to explore the awareness of domestic violence among bishops and priests of religious affiliations such as Catholic, Episcopalian, and Islam. Furthermore, in an effort to decrease the statistics of African American women that experience domestic violence, research is needed on how and whether divinity schools offer courses/training on domestic violence and pastoral counseling. It is very important to offer pastors-in-training, such as pastors in divinity schools, courses on domestic violence and pastoral care so they have knowledge about the intersection of domestic violence and spirituality. Such knowledge about the intersection of domestic violence and spirituality and the role pastors have in the process of leaving for survivors is critical.

This study demonstrates that further research is needed on the training of shelter staff. A majority of the participants were revictimized by shelter staff workers. This information can inform agencies with specific areas to increase their training. Also, this information can help them define areas to address when requesting grant funds to support staff educational enhancement. Possible training topics would include (a) microaggressions and domestic violence, (b) diversity and cultural competency, (c) non-verbal communication, and (d) intersection of spirituality and domestic violence.

Finally, because there is limited research on how counseling education integrates CRT and the domestic violence experiences of African American women, more research is needed in this area. The findings of such research can identify systemic challenges and indicate how best to effectively conduct evaluations on federal programs. The findings of
such investigation can provide programs with a way to enhance their curricula with integration of CRT and domestic violence.

This current research provides rich information on the domestic violence experiences of African American women and the perceived role of spirituality. The results of this study inform research on spirituality as a coping strategy and extend research on spirituality as a barrier. In addition, the results inform research on systematic barriers and how intersectionality serves as a means of analysis to address multiple layers of identity that create multiple layers of oppression. This research extends the conversation on ways in which gender, oppression and privileged intersect and impede African American women that experience domestic violence. Finally, this research expands research on the process of leaving for African American women in domestic violence relationships and offers alternative reasons such as experiences with discrimination that hinder women from leaving the relationship.

**Conclusion**

This qualitative study of eight African American women survivors of domestic violence was conducted to explore how these women narrate their domestic violence experiences and their perceptions of spirituality in that experience. The narratives provided rich and powerful insight on their deleterious relationships, their struggles to survive, and the huge impact that spirituality played in their process of leaving.

**Reflections on Critical Race Theory**

As the above literature review demonstrates, scholars’ research on domestic violence among African American women has been limited by the neglect of Critical Race Theory.
CRT provides approaches for working with African American survivors of domestic violence and for enhancing one’s cultural competence in general. CRT explores the relationships among race, racism, and power and is the overarching framework that explains the systemic obstacles that are faced by African American women in abusive relationships. All of the participants reported experiencing racism and discrimination when they attempted to access resources for domestic violence; each participant reported multiple oppressions due to their intersecting identities of race, gender, and socioeconomic status. The social identity of an abused woman can add another layer of oppression. One participant experienced an overlap of race, gender, socioeconomic status, and sexual orientation. Acknowledging intersectionality is essential because it helps to illuminate how systemic injustice and social inequality occur on a multidimensional basis and how African American women remain in a marginalized and oppressed position.

CRT provides researchers, counselors, policymakers, and faith-based communities with another perspective on systemic barriers and the role they play in the cycle of abuse. CRT is critical for counseling education and supports the newly adopted multicultural social justice competencies. It is essential to have courageous conversations around race, power, and privilege, as these conversations can widen the lens of future counselors and address biases that counselor educators may not know exist. Therefore, the integration of this theory provides a useful cultural lens to consider the environment, the relationships, the culture and the background of individuals from marginalized populations.
Reflections on Relational Cultural Theory

Relational Cultural Theory (RCT) provides a relational perspective on the impact of domestic violence among African American women. Similar to CRT, RCT supports the newly adopted multicultural social justice competencies; it recognizes the pain and suffering caused by social injustices and the importance of a person’s life experiences in relation to his or her well-being. Tenets of RCT such as growth-fostering relationships, mutual empathy, relational templates, and relational images provide clarity on why and how women who have been abused struggle to establish healthy connections and overcome images such as witnessing domestic violence in childhood and having experiences with racism. All of the participants reported that such experiences mentioned above created barriers for them to overcome the abuse and heal. There is little scholarship on applying RCT to African American women survivors of domestic violence, and it is a disservice to the umbrella field of intimate partner violence when cultural frameworks are not applied to marginalized populations.

The participants from this study provided compelling reasons why future research is needed to address systemic barriers and to decrease racist and discriminatory experiences when accessing resources. The narratives offered the participants an opportunity to share their experiences of seeking services for domestic violence. These vividly detailed experiences provide better understanding of the negative perceptions of law enforcement officials and representatives of the legal system, as well as the racial stereotypes that exist in various systems, all of which affect African American women’s attempts to get assistance.
This research indicated that the Black Church, pastors, and faith-based communities continue to play a pivotal role in the African American community, but that they fail to address ways to address domestic violence experiences for African American women. The narratives reveal what helped and hindered them in the healing process, thus providing key information for clinicians, helping professionals, and domestic violence agencies. The stories presented by each woman include vivid details from their lives and illustrate how their courage, strength, and pride fit collectively within the history of African American suffering in silence and pain. The participants, by sharing their stories, stood in solidarity with African American women survivors of domestic violence who continue to suffer.
REFERENCES


onsite shelter services from domestic violence programs. *Violence Against
Women, 17*(8), 1024–1045.


counselor education and practice, *Counseling and Values*, 59(2), 208–221.


Appendix A. Informed Consent

North Carolina State University
INFORMED CONSENT FORM for RESEARCH

Title of Study
Intersections of Race, Spirituality, and Domestic Violence: The Counternarratives of African American Women Survivors

Principal Investigator
Shanita S. Brown, M.Ed, LPCA, NCC

Faculty Sponsor
Dr. Sylvia Nassar-McMillan

What are some general things you should know about research studies?

You are being asked to take part in a research study. Your participation in this study is voluntary. You have the right to be a part of this study, to choose not to participate, or to stop participating at any time without penalty. Your participation or lack thereof will have no affect on your access to resources and the relationship with the shelter where you currently reside. Your participation in this study is not mandatory, nor is a part of your services at the shelter. The purpose of research studies is to gain a better understanding of a certain topic or issue. You are not guaranteed any personal benefits from participating in the study. Research studies also may pose risks to those who participate. In this consent form, you will find specific details about the research in which you are being asked to participate. If you do not understand something in this form, it is your right to ask the researcher for clarification or more information. A copy of this consent form will be provided to you. If at any time you have questions about your participation, do not hesitate to contact the researcher(s) named above.

To participate you must:

Live in a domestic violence shelter
Have experienced domestic violence for 2 years or more
Be 25 years or older
Attended or have been a member of a Black Church

What is the purpose of this study?
The purpose of this dissertation study is to explore how African American women currently residing in a shelter describe their domestic violence experiences, with an additional focus on their spirituality.

What will happen if you take part in the study?
If you agree to participate in this study, you will be asked to participate in a semi-structured interview, located at a private place convenient for you, lasting approximately 90 minutes. You will be asked to sign this informed consent and a brief demographic questionnaire. During the interview, you will be asked questions about your experiences with domestic violence and the role of spirituality. This interview will be audio-recorded on two digital recorders and will be transcribed confidentially. The interviews will take place during the summer of 2015. All participant information will remain confidential, but anonymous direct quotes (with no link to your identity) will be used in the dissertation summary.

**Risks**
The risks associated with this study are the potential for emotional distress from revisiting circumstances surrounding the abuse, and data associated with you about your experiences. To protect the confidentiality of third party information, the researcher will use a password protected computer and transmit audio recording via Velocity, a secure NC State developed product to share large files. You will be asked to share personal information about your experiences with domestic violence. If at any time you feel uncomfortable, you will be able to discontinue the interview. The PI will hold a conversation with each participant following the interview, to assess the participant’s feelings about the interview and the issues that have been discussed. If the need for counseling arises, the PI will assist the participant in securing the needed support. Your name or any other identifying information associated with you personally will not be used, only a nickname selected by the researcher.

**Benefits**
The benefits of participation in this study include being able to talk about your experience. Also, your participation will contribute to knowledge in the counseling field about the experience of domestic violence for African American women, and the role of spirituality in that experience.

**Confidentiality**
The information collected in the study will be kept confidential to the full extent allowed by the law. The data collected by the PI will not contain any identifying information or any link back to you or your participation in this study. The interviews will be audio-recorded and the PI will provide a pseudonym (nickname) so that your identity remains confidential. All notes, transcripts of interviews, and the research product will contain the assigned name rather than your real name. All sensitive information pertaining to this research, including this consent form, the recording of the interviews and transcription records will be kept under lock and key at the home office of the PI. At the end of the study, the recordings and transcriptions will be destroyed.

**Compensation**
For participating in this study you will receive a $15 Visa gift card. If you withdraw from the study prior to its completion, you will not receive any compensation.

What if you have questions about this study?
If you have questions about this study, please contact Shanita Brown at 919-604-5800, or ssbrown2@ncsu.edu, or the faculty sponsor, Dr. Sylvia Nassar-McMillan at snassar@ncsu.edu.

What if you have questions about your rights as a research participant?
If you feel you have not been treated according to the descriptions in this form, or your rights as a participant in research have been violated during the course of this project, you may contact Deb Paxton, Regulatory Compliance Administrator, at email address dapaxton@ncsu.edu or phone number (919-515-4514).

Consent To Participate
“I have read and understand the above information. I have received a copy of this form. I agree to participate in this study with the understanding that I may choose not to participate or to stop participating at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which I am otherwise entitled.”

Subject's signature ________________________________ Date _________________
Investigator's signature ____________________________ Date _________________
Appendix B. Interview Protocol

Pseudonym of Participant: ____________________

Interviewer: Shanita Brown

Time of Interview ____________ am   pm   Date of Interview ___________________

Location of Interview ___________________

Introductory Statement:

Thank you for your willingness to speak with me. As you know, this study explores AA women experiences with domestic violence and the role of spirituality. First, I’d like to ask you a few questions about your domestic violence experience.

1. Tell me about yourself?
2. What brought you to the shelter?
   a. What was the relationship like?
3. How do you define domestic violence?
4. Tell me about your experience accessing resources to help you leave an abusive relationship. For example, not just the shelter, but also programs that assist people with finding employment and housing.
   a. What made this experience stand out for you?
   b. What experience made you feel discriminated against? (Due to race, gender, SES)

For many AA women, the Black church, and ministers are often the first place they go for assistance. The next set of questions is about the Black church, pastors and minister.

5. How would you describe your association with the Black church?
6. Thinking back to your time in church, what have you heard pastors/leaders teach about violence in relationships? (i.e., between partners, siblings)
7. In what ways do pastors/ministers or the church influence or encourage women to stay in abusive relationships?
8. Think back to a time when you went to a pastor/minister or someone in the church for support for domestic violence, what was that experience like?
   a. Why did this experience stand out for you?
   b. What did you do as a result of this experience?
For many AA women, spirituality/religion serves as a source of strength and obstacle. Spirituality/religion means a set of beliefs, values, and traditions. The next set of questions will ask you to describe how spirituality has served as a source of strength and barrier?

9. Tell me about a time when spirituality served as a protective factor (source of strength)?

10. Tell me about a time when spirituality served as a barrier (obstacle)?

Closing questions

11. As you think back over your life, how has your experience with DV changed over time?

12. Is there anything else you would like to share?
Appendix C. List of Domestic Violence Resources

1. The National Domestic Violence Crisis Hotline: 1-800-799-SAFE (7233)  
   www.thehotline.org

   www.nccdacq.org

3. North Carolina Department of Social Services: 919-527-6430  
   www.ncdhhs.gov

4. Interact of Wake County: 1-866-291-0855  
   www.interactofwake.org

5. SafeSpace: 1-800-620-6120  
   www.ncsafebandspace.org

   www.unitedwaytriangle.org

7. Family Violence and Rape Crisis Services in Chatham: 919-545-0224  
   www.fvrc.org

8. Families Living Violence Free: 919-525-3579  
   www.flvf.org

9. Compass Center for Women and Families: 919-929-7122  
   www.compassctr.org
Appendix D. Recruitment Key Points

Staff will be provided a list of the participant criteria and be instructed to make sure participants understand the following key points:

- Participation is voluntary, and not mandatory or affiliated with any services provided by the shelter.

- Participation will have no effect on access to resources or their relationship with the shelter.

- Staff will provide the flyer to participants that meet the criteria and instruct participants that should they decide to participate; participants will contact the researcher directly.

- Staff will indicate to participants that if participants decide to contact the researcher, the staff will not have knowledge of their participation in the study.

- Staff will indicate that if participants do decide to participate, they have the right to withdraw from the study at any time with no consequences or loss of resources.