

ESSAY

Toward a Motivation-Spirituality Model: Addressing the Spiritual and Motivation Needs of Black Children in High Stress Environments

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Little research addresses the relationship between spirituality and motivation in the lives of people of color. Published research addressing the needs of African American children between the ages of 11 and 18 is particularly rare. Changes in the socio-cultural makeup of the United States underscore the need for researchers to devote more energy to exploring spirituality and motivation among members of these under-served groups. Given that by the end of 2020, black children are slated to become the majority group in the under 18 demographic, the dearth of research probing the complexities of young black lives is concerning (Singletary 2020). In the absence of relevant research, it is easy to overlook or trivialize the connection between spirituality and motivation in the lives of young African Americans. Research focused on this important relationship has significant potential to help us understand the challenges facing black children as they navigate the complexities of life in America today. Furthermore, such a research program would aid in developing a motivation-spiritual model for addressing the mental health needs of black and brown youth.

A sociological model that includes dimensions of spirituality and motivation would represent a significant leap forward in understanding the lifeworlds inhabited by young African Americans. Many of the challenges facing black children are too complicated to address with conventional linear models. Contemporary black children face numerous social, economic, and cultural challenges, many of which are manifest in stress and anxiety-related disorders. Black children are more susceptible to psychological dysfunction due, arguably, to issues of social class and racial toxicity (Morsy and Rothstein 2019). PTSD is rampant in the black community, and it is well documented that black people are disproportionately impacted by heart disease, depression, diabetes, high-blood pressure, and stroke. While some of these issues may be related to lifestyle factors, to suggest that black children bear responsibility for their difficult circumstances does little more than “blame the victim.” In most cases, to be a black child is to live in poverty, under the threat of violence, under the threat of losing loved ones, and amid significant inter-generational anxiety.

Lawson and Thomas (2007) remind us that black youth, particularly those who suffer from life threatening situations, frequently develop a set of spiritual coping mechanisms which

typically take the form of regular prayer, scheduled readings of the Bible, spiritual fellowship, and a concentrated emphasis on the improvement of faith. Smith, Hunter, and Thornton (2020) add that young black men transitioning to adulthood rely heavily on religion and spirituality as a means to cope with inner city violence, poverty, and bereavement. The importance of these religious coping strategies should not be overlooked. Arguably, religious, and spiritual strategies can help black youth reduce stress, increase focus, enhance self-efficacy, and set the tone for a higher quality of life.

Research addressing the benefits of spiritual coping mechanisms is important, but it only addresses half of the problem. For black children to cope with their surroundings, they need personal motivation, which has the potential to help with issues of focus, productivity, enhanced learning, and the cultivation of a stable mindset.

Scholars in a variety of disciplines, and from a variety of vantage points, have addressed the matter of motivation. For our purposes, we will focus on “Needs” theories of motivation. Needs theories are important in that they can be essential to promoting a well-adjusted, healthy and stress-free lifestyle. More importantly, unmet needs tend to manifest into social disfunction. Black children, especially those living in poverty, frequently manifest a multitude of unmet needs. By employing a “Needs Model” framework, we can construct a process that allows us to identify and understand better which needs are not being satisfied. Consequently, we are better equipped to address unmet needs. Furthermore, spiritual perspectives can be incorporated into, or considered alongside Needs models, which can aid social workers and others in helping professions to address the needs of at-risk black children in more holistic ways.

Abraham Maslow’s well-known “Hierarchy of Needs” model (1943) offers a good example of a motivation theory. Maslow suggests that motivation is predicated upon whether an individual’s physiological, safety, social, esteem, and self-actualization needs are met. Each stage in the hierarchy is dependent upon the next. The initial stage of the hierarchy of needs model focuses on the satisfaction of physiological needs. Physiological needs are critical in that they are associated with an individual’s most elemental behaviors, aspirations, and/or necessities. They include, but are not limited to, food, air, water, and sleep. No other needs can be satisfied unless the most primitive and physical needs are met first. Physiological needs provide a foundation for all other needs and when satisfied, they can assist children in progressing up the motivation hierarchy.

In the event physiological needs are at least marginally satisfied, the child is then able to progress to safety needs. Safety needs highlight the importance of remaining free from unwanted and extraneous threats. Safety needs are particularly important in this case because they are associated with the provision of protection for children living in high-stress communities and abusive environments. The satisfaction of safety needs allows for black children to cultivate personal control over their lives, decisions, and actions.

Presuming that the physiological and safety needs are satisfied, the child may progress to love and belongingness needs. Love and belongingness needs address issues of intimacy, connection, and camaraderie. Arguably, the satisfaction of love and belongingness needs will allow for black children to cultivate positive interpersonal relationships. Failure to satisfy love and belongingness needs can lead to psychopathology, issues of self-confidence, and various other sociological problems. Esteem needs, the next stage in the Maslow model, emphasize the desire of individuals to experience a sense of social acceptance. Maslow claimed that esteem needs are essential in ensuring people can establish dignity of self and dignity of reputation.

Self-actualization needs, located at the pinnacle of the Maslow model, relate to the individual's sense of supreme contentment. Self-actualization needs lead to an individual's realization that he or she is not only worthy of self-importance. It also enables the individual to see past barriers of success by inspiring them to seek out peak experiences and opportunities for personal growth. Self-actualization needs are of particular interest as it relates to the proposed motivation-spirituality model because they have a direct effect on a child's sense of self-efficacy and the ability to reach her or his true potential.

While the popularity of the Hierarchy of Needs model is relatively high, it is important to point out that the model is far from perfect. Some scholars suggest, for example, that the model utilizes vague definitions regarding what is and what is not a need. Others posit that the model is difficult to apply to real world situations. A foundational study conducted by Keil (1999) claimed that many of the problems associated the Hierarchy of Needs model are related to the fact that it was constructed over fifty years ago. The study suggested that a more modern and open framework of the Maslow model is needed to match the realities of the modern environment. Despite the problems associated with the model, it remains an effective tool for the motivation-spirituality framework proposed here.

The development of a motivation-spirituality model should begin by following the general tenants of the Maslow framework. Applying this framework might include organizing black children into groups and encouraging a spirited dialogue that enables observers to identify the needs specified in Maslow's model. During a group session, a skilled facilitator would offer open-ended questions and thought-provoking scenarios familiar to children taking part in the discussions. Each question topic would remain aligned with individual needs as well as spiritual coping mechanisms. The children would be encouraged to discuss issues associated with their respective home environments, educational settings, and social cohorts. The children would also be encouraged to develop social relationships with peers so that they could partner throughout the session. The discussion sessions would be recorded and analyzed by session proctors and those involved with the administration of the motivation-spirituality model.

Once the children's needs were identified, the group facilitator would transition the group toward practical application, which would include helping the children develop goals and objectives associated with each need in the Maslow framework. Each child would leave the

session equipped with a set of prescribed coping mechanisms catered to meet the child's physiological, safety, social, esteem, and self-actualization related needs. The final stages of the model would involve scheduling follow-up sessions to assess goal progress, share narratives, and review limitations. Each follow up session would build upon the previous session and seek to create a planning strategy specifically catered to the needs of each child.

While it is true that no model is perfect, the proposed motivation-spirituality model consists of an effective framework constructed to help black children navigate high-stress situations. As noted by Morsy and Rothstien (2019), the development of sociological models can be especially helpful to black children because they can reduce the achievement gap, while decreasing issues germane to cognitive and behavioral stress.

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