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# Spirituality's Role in the Interaction Between Child Welfare and Black Families

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LOMA LINDA UNIVERSITY  
School of Science and Technology  
in conjunction with the  
Faculty of Graduate Studies

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Spirituality's Role in the Interaction Between  
Child Welfare and Black Families

by

Laurel E. Brown

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A Dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of  
the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy in Social Policy and Social Research

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June 2011

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Each person whose signature appears below certifies that this dissertation in his/her opinion is adequate, in scope and quality, as a dissertation for the degree Doctor of Philosophy.

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## ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

### Spirituality's Role in the Interaction Between Child Welfare and Black Families

by

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Doctor of Philosophy, Graduate Program in Social Policy and Research  
Loma Linda University, June 2011  
Dr. Sigrid James, Chairperson

This qualitative study explored how a sample of key stakeholders, including African American parents and child welfare staff in the Moreno Valley area of Riverside County, California, jointly construct the role that spirituality/religion plays in engaging, assessing and intervening with African American families. Utilizing a constructivist paradigm, the goals were to, through the development of “hermeneutic dialectic” circles, (1) arrive at shared constructions about the role of spirituality/religion in child welfare work with African American families, and (2) to identify a participatory group of stakeholders to design and implement action utilizing the results. Nationally, African American children are disproportionately overrepresented in the child welfare system, particularly those children who are removed from their homes and placed in out of home care. The disparate and disproportionate involvement of African American families in the child welfare system continues to lead to increasingly negative outcomes for African American children, their families and communities. One of the key areas of focus in resolving this disparate treatment is to ensure that social workers are utilizing culturally competent practice. One such practice is to identify and build on family and cultural strengths. One of the strengths most consistently mentioned as characteristic of African

American families is the importance of spirituality/religion. In the public child welfare arena the acknowledgement of spirituality/religion is almost completely ignored both in the child welfare research and practice literature. It is believed that cultural competence cannot be achieved when working with African American families, without the acknowledgement and inclusion of spirituality/religion. Key findings in this study included shared constructions regarding the importance of spirituality/religion to individual and family functioning; the multiple constructs for defining spirituality/religion; the value of asking about spirituality/religion in engaging, assessing and intervening with African American families; identified necessary steps for improving practice including development of faith based services and partnerships, additional education, training and policy guidelines to assist child welfare staff and inform community stakeholders. Implications for policy and future research in this area were also discussed.

# CHAPTER ONE

## INTRODUCTION

### **Background and Significance**

#### *Child Welfare with African Americans*

Since the inclusion of African American children in the formal child welfare system (CWS) in this country, there has been a growing trend that finds African American families involved in CWS at a greater rate than any other racial or ethnic group (Derezotes, 2005; Hill, 2005). Most recently and in part as a result of federal oversight and auditing of CWS, there have been local, state and federal efforts at data collection and reporting on this phenomenon called disproportionality (CWLA, 2003; Dougherty, 2003; Needell, Brookhart & Lee, 2003). Disproportionality refers to the difference in the percentage of children of a particular ethnic or racial group involved in CWS when compared to the percentage of children of that particular ethnic or racial in the population. In the case of African American children, they are disproportionately over-represented in the child welfare system when compared to their percentage in the general population (Derezotes, 2005; Hill, 2007). According to the Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS) for 2009 (DHHS, 2010), 30% of children in foster care are African American when Census data for the year 2008 indicates that only 14% of the nation's children are African American (Hill, 2006). In California, this disproportional over-representation includes being referred to child protective services more often, being removed from the home more often, spending longer periods of time in out-of-home care, and being reunified with parents less often than other racial or ethnic groups (Courtney, et al. 1996; Needell, Brookhart & Lee, 2003).

Although concern about this issue is not new (Hill, 2006; Smith & Devore, 2004), it has moved to the forefront of the redesign or reform of the Child welfare system in California (CHHS, 2003). Fairness and Equity are major themes of the California Child Welfare redesign efforts initiated in 2000 (CHHS, 2003). Fairness and Equity is defined as “the modification of policies, procedures and practices, and expansion of the availability of community resources and supports to ensure that all children and families (including those of diverse backgrounds and those with special needs) will obtain similar benefit from child welfare interventions and attain equally positive benefit from child welfare interventions and attain equally positive outcomes regardless of the community in which they live”(CalSWEC Common Core Curriculum, 2008, p.11). Fairness and Equity is concerned with disparity which refers to the treatment of minority children and families by the child welfare system compared to the treatment of white children and families (Hill, 2006). It is also a major focus of the Casey Family Programs which sponsored the Race Matters Consortium in 1999 and the Casey-CSSP Alliance for Racial Equity in 2004.

Despite considerable attention to the disproportionate numbers of African American children in CWS, there has been little research or focus on what kinds of systematic or practice changes are necessary to impact this problem (Cross, 2008; Hill, 2007; Lemon, D’Andrade & Austin, 2005). The research regarding promising practices to address disproportionality and disparity has focused on three major areas of change: (1) societal or environmental change, often focused on poverty, lack of health care, poor housing, unemployment, lack of community resources; (2) systemic change, including laws defining abuse and neglect, safety and risk assessment practices, practice models

and frameworks developed, staff development and training, policies and procedures that guide practice; (3) and individual change, which focuses on individual worker knowledge, biases, professional work habits and conduct (U. S. GAO, 2008).

### *Cultural Competence*

One of the systemic changes proposed to address racial disproportionality in child welfare has been the increased focus on cultural competence and culturally competent practice within child welfare agencies (Casey CSSP, 2007). Cultural competence has been defined as “the process by which individuals and systems respond respectfully and effectively to people of all cultures, languages, classes, races, ethnic backgrounds, religions, and other diversity factors in a manner that recognizes, affirms, and values the worth of individuals, families, and communities and protects and preserves the dignity of each” (NASW, 2001, p.11). The National Center for Cultural Competence (2009) identifies a conceptual model for achieving cultural competence that includes organizational, practice and service, community engagement, and family/consumer values and principles. In order to practice in a culturally competent way, social workers, supervisors, administrators and the systems that they work for, must be aware of or assess their own cultural values, beliefs, and behaviors, become knowledgeable about the cultural values, beliefs and behaviors of the diverse populations they serve, and develop policies, procedures and interventions that are effective and responsive to the cultural worldview of those that they serve (NASW, 2001; Simmons, Diaz, Jackson, & Takahashi, 2008)

Culturally competent practices that have attempted to address the overrepresentation of African American children range from staff cultural awareness training, increased community engagement and partnerships, family-centered, strength based practices such as kinship placements, various Family Group Decision Making models, and culturally specific services such as home visiting or home based services (Lemon et al., 2005; Mills & Usher in Everett, Chipungu & Leashore, 2004). In a review of the intervention research on disproportionality, several practices showed promise in either improved outcomes related to specific case processes, or in client satisfaction and effectiveness. For instance, the use of Family Decision Making Meetings may result in a reduction in the number of children of color entering out-of-home care, and the use of ethnic specific services and home visiting were assessed as being more effective for families of color (Lemon, et al., 2005).

### **Strength-based Practice**

One of the key areas of culturally competent practice is to identify and build on cultural strengths. In the child welfare arena, the focus on family and community strengths has come out of the recognition that these strengths contribute to protective factors or resilience factors which in many cases can mitigate risk, and allow families to successfully provide safety and protection to their children. For instance, a report by the Casey Family Programs (2005) outlining one of the key principles for changing the child welfare system proposes that agencies must recognize and honor that parents and communities have strengths, resiliency and natural supports which are used to reduce risk. In a study by Cynthia Lietz (2006), the findings support the notion that building on

strengths not only can improve outcomes for families, but may be a more strategic intervention than focusing on reducing risks.

Several strengths have been identified as important for the African American community and for African American families. One study reported these global strengths include the ability to capitalize on neighborhood solutions, the power of the church, family networks, education valued, neighborhood pride, and youth achievement (Briscoe & Smith, 2003).

Many of the strengths in the African American community have been identified as unique to the historical and cultural perspectives of those with African heritage. This “Africentric perspective” includes the importance of kinship ties, collective identity, spirituality, the oneness of body, mind, and spirit, and harmony between nature and humanity (Everett, Chipungu, & Leashore, 2004). Jackson (1995) identifies several key elements that constitute the Afrocentric perspective. These include “a continuous process that emphasizes a strong sense of spirituality, profound respect for tradition, harmony with nature, the paramount centrality of community, life as a series of passages, the importance of elders, and the creation of self-identity and dignity” (p. 19).

Robert Hill (1998) identifies five factors that are important in understanding African American families and that are strengths in enhancing the resilience of these families. They are a strong achievement orientation, a strong work orientation, flexible family roles, strong kinship bonds, and a strong religious orientation. These strengths emphasize the role that extended family, the kinship network and the community, including the educational and religious community, have in building and sustaining families.

## *Spirituality in the African American Community*

One of the strengths most consistently mentioned as characteristic of African American families is the importance of spirituality/religion<sup>1</sup>. Spirituality is believed to be central to the African American psyche and worldview, even without an attachment to organized religion or religious affiliation (Bent-Goodley, 2005; Everett, 2004; Littlejohn-Blake & Darling, 2003). Both religion and spirituality are seen as strengths in the African American community, and while researchers and professionals have defined these two constructs as distinct, there is less known about how the African American family and community define religion or religiosity and spirituality as similar or different (Lewis, et al., 2007; Mattis, 2000).

Religious traditions, behaviors and beliefs such as prayer, meditation, reading and listening to religious material, have been linked with improved physical and mental health, recovery from substance abuse, and improved coping skills for African Americans (Chatters et al., 2008; Curtis-Boles & Jenkins-Monroe, 2000; Shorter-Gooden, 2004). Church affiliation for African Americans has historically been a place or institution that provides social support, spiritual guidance, social services, leadership development, and political activism (Billingsley, 1999; Lincoln & Mayima, 1990). Spirituality, which has been described as a more personal connection to God or a higher power or transcendence has been linked to increased well-being, improved coping, and improved mental and

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<sup>1</sup> It is recognized that spirituality and religion are defined differently although often used in the literature interchangeably. For the purposes of this study it is assumed that different people will define or construct these terms differently. Therefore part of the purpose of the study is to have a shared construct of what spirituality and religion means among the stakeholders, as well as how spirituality/religion might be effective in the interaction between child welfare workers, African American families and the formal and informal resources of the African American community. This will be referred to throughout document as spirituality/religion.

physical health for substance abusing women and women of color who are victims of domestic violence (Arnette et al.,2007; DiLorenzo, Johnson, & Bussey, 2001).

### **Problem Statement**

The disparate and disproportionate involvement of African American families in the child welfare system continues to lead to negative outcomes for African American children, their families and communities. Culturally competent practices may facilitate better engagement of African American families in the assessment and case planning processes and ultimately to improved outcomes for these children. The role of spirituality/religion as a significant strength in African American communities deserves to be explored as a resource to improving practice, and to increasing engagement and the effectiveness of services.

In the public child welfare arena the acknowledgement of spirituality/religion is almost completely ignored both in the child welfare research and practice literature. It is believed that cultural competence cannot be achieved when working with African American families, without the acknowledgement and inclusion of spirituality/religion. It is further suggested that the recognition of spirituality/religion as a strength and resource in the assessment, planning and service provision phases of the child welfare process is both culturally competent practice and most effective in engaging and assisting African American parents.

## **Study Aim**

This qualitative study will identify how a sample of African American parents and Child Welfare staff, who are key players in child welfare services, jointly construct the role that spirituality/religion plays in engaging, assessing and intervening with African American families. The goal of this joint construction is to increase the cultural competence of child welfare workers around the use of spirituality/religion. Additionally, utilizing a constructivist paradigm, the goal is, through the development of “hermeneutic dialectic” circles, to identify a participatory group of stakeholders to design and implement action that utilizes the results of this inquiry process. In arriving at this shared construction the following questions will be addressed.

1. In what ways are spirituality/religion important to African American parents?
2. Could spirituality/religion play a role in the engagement, assessment and intervention of African American families by child welfare? What would that role be?
3. What changes to practice or policy would allow for the inclusion of spirituality/religion in the interaction between child welfare and African American families?
4. Should services and interventions offered by child welfare take spirituality/religion into account? In what ways?

## **Research Approach**

This study used a constructivist approach as described by Guba and Lincoln (1989), Morris (2006) and Rodwell (1998). This approach was particularly appropriate

given the topic of spirituality/ religion and the historical, cultural and individual constructions of these concepts or experiences. This approach is also relevant because it is an empowering approach that puts the family and community participants on the same level as the agency professionals (Rodwell, 1998). The third reason that this approach was most appropriate is that it creates dialogue and seeks to develop joint constructions with the goal of arriving at changes in practice and policy on behalf of the stakeholders involved.

This research methodology assumes that reality is subjectively constructed and therefore takes into account multiple realities. The study took place in the natural setting of the agency and community where stakeholders were recruited and interviewed. This approach assumes an inductive and responsive stance to the data, so that from the data, the issues, need for additional participants and various shared and conflicting constructs or meanings will emerge. This methodology also assumes that the researcher's values and perspectives interact with the values and perspectives of each of the participants as one of many constructs to be negotiated (Guba & Lincoln, 1989; Morris, 2006; Rodwell, 1998). The goal of the establishment of joint constructions about the role of spirituality/religion in the interaction between CWS and African American families in the targeted community is accomplished through the method of hermeneutic-dialectic circles. Qualitative coding methods were used to analyze data and develop constructs. Beyond constructing a shared perspective about the role that spirituality/religion could play, a stakeholder group was created that is committed to and invested in making changes to practice that they deem effective in their community.

Increasing the cultural competence of child welfare workers and adding to the culturally specific or relevant interventions and services available to and effective with African American families is believed to be essential in beginning to address the disproportionate and disparate treatment of African American children and families in the child welfare system.

### **Definitions of Key Terminology Used in the Study**

Constructs or constructions – “created realities consisting of certain available information configured into some integrated, systematic, ‘sense-making’ formulation whose character depends on the level of information and sophistication of the constructors” (Guba & Lincoln, 1989, p.143).

Hermeneutic- dialectic process – The process described by Guba and Lincoln (1989) and others (Erlandson, 1993; Morris, 2006; Rodwell, 1998), involves comparing and contrasting divergent constructs between and among stakeholders in order to form a connection between them that allows for mutual exploration of all parties.

Spirituality/ Religion – It is recognized that spirituality and religion are defined differently although often used in the literature interchangeably. For the purposes of this study it is assumed that different people will define or construct these terms differently. Therefore part of the purpose of the study is to have a shared construct of spirituality and religion among the stakeholders, as well as how spirituality/religion might be effective in the interaction between child welfare workers and African American families.

## **CHAPTER TWO**

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

#### **Introduction**

The purpose of this study is to identify what role spirituality/religion plays in the engagement, assessment and intervention with African American families by child welfare services social workers. In reviewing the literature relevant to this topic several separate literature searches were conducted utilizing key word searches, library and online database searches, scholarly journals, publishing companies and online book database (Questia.com) searches. This literature review will focus on key findings in the areas of child welfare practice and outcomes with African American families, the role of cultural competence and the development of culturally competent practices in child welfare, relevant cultural needs and strengths for African American families, the role of spirituality/religion in research regarding factors relevant to child welfare practice, and finally the theoretical assumptions and concepts underlying the constructivist approach and methodology used in this study.

#### **Child Welfare and African American Families**

The involvement of public child welfare in the lives of African American families is a fairly recent occurrence. Prior to the 1950's public child welfare did not include services to African American families and children (Smith & Devore, 2004). Services to children and families, including public assistance, child protection, foster care, and adoption services were offered to African American children through both formal and informal networks in the African American community which included church sponsored

agencies and services, non-profit African American agencies and organizations, and formal and informal networks of family and kin (Smith & Devore, 2004).

Since their full inclusion in the public child welfare system in the 1950's, there has been a steady increase in the involvement of African American children in the child welfare system, and more disturbing, in the removal of African American children from their homes. In their book 'Children of the Storm', Billingsley and Giovanni (1972) describe this increased inclusion in the child welfare system as being the result of three contributing factors: "(1) large numbers of black families migrating to the North; (2) the civil rights movement and the national focus on integration; and (3) decreasing poverty among white children and the formal system increasingly caring for poor minority children". According to Smith and Devore (2004), by the 1970's African American children were becoming the most overrepresented group in child welfare.

Currently, African American children are among the most disproportionately overrepresented group in the child welfare system nationally. Annually, data regarding child maltreatment is collected from child welfare agencies in all 50 states, the District of Columbia (Washington, DC) and Puerto Rico as part of the National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System (NCANDS) and reported in an annual Child Maltreatment report. The Child Maltreatment 2009 report indicates that of all children with alleged and substantiated reports of maltreatment;

Eighty-seven percent of unique victims were comprised of three races or ethnicities—African-American (22.3%), Hispanic (20.7%), and White (44.0%). However, victims of African-American, American Indian or Alaska Native, and multiple racial descent had the highest rates of victimization at 15.1, 11.6, and 12.4 victims, respectively, per 1,000 children in the population of the same race or ethnicity. (U.S. Dept. of Health and Human Services, 2010, p.22)

The victim rates of other ethnicities included Hispanic children and White children had rates of 8.7 and 7.8 per 1,000 children of the same race or ethnicity, respectively. Asian children had the lowest rate of 2.0 per 1,000 children of the same race or ethnicity (USDHHS, 2010).

Another national dataset on child abuse and neglect that is often referred to in the literature is the National Incidence Study of Child Abuse and Neglect (NIS). The most recent study, NIS-4 was the fourth study in the series and for the first time in the history of the National Incidence Study of Child Abuse and Neglect, NIS-4, found race differences in maltreatment rates, with Black children experiencing maltreatment at higher rates than White children in several categories (Sedlak, McPherson & Das, 2010). The three prior studies had found no overall difference in the incidence of child maltreatment based on race. The authors of NIS-4 upon further analysis of the findings, concluded that several issues including socio-economic status (SES), family structure, and the widening gap between Black and White families in terms of income explain the current finding that race is a factor in child maltreatment (Sedlak, McPherson & Das, 2010).

Robert Hill's (2007) analysis of disproportionality on a national, state and county level found that on a national level, African American and Native American children are twice as likely to have referrals investigated and substantiated than white children. When looking at the decision to remove children from parents and place in out of home care, African American and Native American children are three and four times more likely to be placed in out of home care (also referred to as foster care) than are white children. According to the 2009 Census and the 2009 Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and

Reporting System (AFCARS) data, African American children were overrepresented in foster care where they make up 14% of the nation's child population and 30% of the nation's foster care population (American Community Survey, 2009; U.S. Dept. of Health and Human Services, 2010). The most recent AFCARS report (2010), of those children who entered foster care in 2009, African American children made up 25% of that population. Of those children who exited out of home care whether to reunification, or another permanent plan, African American children made up 27% of those children who exited care in 2009. However of those children who remain in foster care awaiting adoption, African American children represent 30% of those waiting children (U.S. Dept. of Health and Human Services, 2010)

Patricia Kohl's (2007) study of those families involved in the child welfare system who were initially left in-home, either with or without services (family maintenance), found that even when initially in home, African American families were more often reinvestigated and their children subsequently removed than were white children. Kohl (2007) and others have found that there are factors other than race that significantly impact the decisions to investigate, substantiate, remove children from and return children to their homes. Some of these factors include poverty, family size, single parent household, type of maltreatment, and substance abuse involvement (Ards, Myers & Malkis, 2003; Chibnall et al., 2003; Derezotes, Poertner & Testa, 2005; Harris & Courtney, 2003; Kohl, 2007; Stoltzfus, 2005).

In an exploratory qualitative study sponsored by the Children's Bureau (Chibnall et al., 2003), nine child welfare agencies across the country were contacted regarding their perceptions about factors contributing to disproportionate over-representation of

children of color, and strategies and or programs that were being implemented to address these disparities. They found that overwhelmingly, respondents felt that poverty was a major factor in the overrepresentation of children of color in the child welfare system. Related to poverty were issues of lack of community resources, and increased reliance and contact with public social service agencies, which tend to report abuse more often. In a study utilizing NIS-3 and NCANDS data, Ards et al. (2003) found that when comparing black and white families who receive welfare, with those who do not, the increased exposure to welfare by black families was correlated to increased maltreatment reports and substantiations for that population. What they found was that both black and white families exposure to welfare increased the rate of maltreatment reports and substantiation of allegations, with white families having a higher report and substantiation rate than black families in that population. However, since the percentage of whites receiving welfare is lower than the percentage of blacks receiving welfare, this led to exposure bias for black families.

In a study conducted in Texas (Rivaux et al., 2008) that looked at the effects of race and poverty on the assessment of risk, it was found that regardless of the case decision made, to close the case, offer in-home family based support services, or removal and out-of-home placement, those with lower incomes were given a higher risk score. This study also found that though white families were rated at a higher risk level than black families at each decision point, they were more likely than black families to have their case closed subsequent to investigation (Rivaux et al., 2008). Also significant was the finding that although black families were 12% more likely to have a case opened, they were 77% more likely to have their children removed as a result of a substantiated

allegation. This study seems to suggest that although poverty has an impact on risk factors and risk scores, higher risk scores do not directly determine the decisions made regarding case disposition. Even with lower risk scores than their white counterparts, black families were less likely to receive in home supportive services and more likely to have their children removed.

In a study conducted in California that looked at the interaction of race, ethnicity and family structure on timeliness of reunification, the authors found that while those children removed from single parent homes were slower to reunify than children removed from two parent households, African American children from single parent homes were slower to reunify than either white or Hispanic children from single parent homes (Harris & Courtney, 2003). In addition, they found that Hispanic children from two parent homes were faster to reunify than either white or African American children from two parent homes. This study and those mentioned above indicate that the over-representation of African American children is more complex than individual indicators associated with poverty, family structure, and type of maltreatment or risk assessment scores.

The over-representation of African American children in the child welfare system has been the focus of a number of studies over the last two decades, however little progress has been made in alleviating the disparate experiences of African American children. Child welfare professionals have initiated several strategies aimed at improving the outcomes and experience for African American children and families. Many of these strategies include more community and family involvement in decision making, and the use of extended family and kinship support systems.

Dougherty (2003) identified a number of child welfare practices targeted at mitigating the over- representation of African American children in child welfare. These practices include family group decision making, or similar models, which involves the family and their supports in the safety planning and decision making processes regarding the child's well being including placement; relative and kinship placements; diligent recruitment of resource families whose ethnic, racial and religious backgrounds reflect the child population; and maintaining family connections when children are not placed with family.

In a report produced for the Center for the Study of Social Policy (Jones, 2006), several child welfare agencies in various states were contacted to analyze their efforts at addressing disproportionality. The study identified several activities and strategies that these ten jurisdictions all used. They each chose to highlight the importance of prioritizing the problem of racial inequality within their system; they all used local data to analyze where their system needed improving; they included local communities in the discussion regarding the problem and in the development of action plans and strategies; they focused on expanding services and supports in the communities where their target families lived; they made some policy changes to support new practices; and they all required outside funding to support these changes.

According to the 2007 Government Accountability Office (GAO) report on African American Children in Foster Care, several strategies are being used across the country to address racial disproportionality. The most utilized strategies in the states are family inclusion in case planning, cultural competency training for staff, diligent search for fathers and paternal relatives, outreach and training to mandated reporters and

recruitment, use of neighborhood based support services, recruitment of African American adoptive families, subsidies for relative guardianship, and retention and promotion of culturally competent staff (U.S. GAO, 2007)

All of the states and jurisdictions surveyed in the reports referred to above and others (Jenkins, 2004; NAPCWA, 2006) attempt to address the issue of disproportionality through implementation of a number of strategies targeted at changes in the larger geographic and professional community, changes in the policies and practices within the child welfare system, and changes in individual workers, community partners and service providers. Among those strategies targeted at the practices, knowledge and skills of individual practitioners, community partners and service providers, cultural competence training and the development of culturally competent practices is one of the most frequently used or recommended.

### **Cultural Competence in Child Welfare Practice**

In their aim to develop knowledge and skills among social workers in the area of cultural competence, the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) developed both standards and indicators of cultural competence (NASW, 2001; NASW, 2007). NASW defines cultural competence as “the process by which individuals and systems respond respectfully and effectively to people of all cultures, languages, classes, races, ethnic backgrounds, religions, and other diversity factors in a manner that recognizes, affirms, and values the worth of individuals, families, and communities and protects and preserves the dignity of each”(NASW, 2001, p.11). Cultural competence is seen as a lifelong process rather than something that can be completely attained. Terry Cross

conceptualized cultural competence along a continuum which has at one end attitudes and practices that are culturally destructive and at the other end attitudes, behaviors and practices that are culturally proficient (Cross , Bazron, Dennis & Isaacs, 1989).

Most of the literature regarding cultural competence focuses on three criteria or components necessary for becoming culturally competent: (1) knowledge of the clients' cultural worldview, including the groups' history, values and strengths; (2) the practitioners' self awareness of their cultural assumptions, values and biases; and (3) the knowledge, skill and willingness to adapt one's practice approaches to those that are appropriate to the client ( Everett, Chipungu & Leashore, 2004; McPhatter, 1997; Samantrai, 2004; Smith & Devore, 2004; Waites, Macgowan, Pennell, Carlton-LaNey & Weil, 2004). Additionally, on an organizational level, several researchers point to the importance of administrative and supervisory commitment to changing practice and policy in order to support cultural competence (Iglehart & Becerra, 2007; McPhatter & Ganaway, 2003; Smith & Devore, 2004).

Of the knowledge and skills required to become more culturally competent, several approaches have been identified as being critical, particularly when working with minority families in child welfare. The first of these approaches is effective family engagement. Family engagement is critical to involving families in the decision making process and in providing a safe and permanent homes for their children. Family engagement is “a process of interaction between worker, client, agency and community” (Altman, 2008, p.56). In a study conducted in New York City (Altman, 2008), researchers interviewed 16 parents and 9 foster care workers who were clients or staff of a neighborhood-based family service center. They were asked to identify, based on their

perceptions and experiences, those behaviors that would enhance their engagement with the child welfare process. Several themes emerged from the parents including honest, empathetic and straightforward communication, the worker establishing a collaborative relationship with them with shared goal setting, and a non-judgmental, but firm posture. They wanted workers to be knowledgeable about their specific circumstances as well as the resources available in the community, and to convey a sense of urgency congruent with the very real time frames for reunification. Workers on the other hand felt that manageable caseloads, adequate supervision and training, adequate and appropriate community support services, parental responsibility and compliance were keys to successful family engagement.

Several studies support the idea that certain worker behaviors and attitudes enhance family engagement (Dawson & Berry, 2002; Rooney, 1992; Yatchmenoff, 2001). These behaviors include: clearly communicating agency and worker expectations; collaboratively setting goals and tasks; spending time with clients to assess strengths, skills, and gain feedback and commitment; providing service options that are relevant, helpful, and effective. In addition to effectively engaging families in the child welfare process, another approach that is critical in providing culturally competent interventions is utilizing a strength-based approach.

### ***Strength-based Perspective***

A strength-based approach or perspective is a more culturally competent approach than the more widely used and recognized deficit or problem focused approach to child welfare practice (Lee, 2003; Rockymore, 2008). Unlike the deficit approach

which focuses on the identified problem, need or deficit within the family, parent or child, a strength- based approach is concerned with identifying and building upon the strengths of the family, parent or child. According to Samantrai (2004) in the book, 'Culturally Competent Public Child Welfare Practice', the strengths perspective is based on five key beliefs and principles. First, every person has inherent power characterized as life force, life energy, spirituality, or healing power. Second, people with problems are more than just the problem. Third, people are resilient; they have the capacity to overcome the harshest experience of life. Fourth, communities like individuals and families have a wealth of strengths, skills, and assets. Fifth, a person's behavior and well being are in a large part determined by the resources available and the expectations of others toward them.

Other assumptions made by the strengths perspective are that often strengths are underutilized or forgotten and that once people identify and recognize their strengths, they can develop those strengths and produce positive changes (Bridge, Massie & Mills, 2008; Greene, Lee & Hoffpauir., 2005; Lee, 2003). The skills and knowledge required for social workers to utilize this approach include knowledge about specific cultural, family and individual strengths; curiosity about and appreciation of cultural strengths and values; knowledge and familiarity with neighborhood and community resources, assets, and strengths, the ability to collaborate with clients to identify their unique individual, family and cultural strengths, and the ability not just to recognize strengths, but to focus on strengths when engaging, assessing and planning interventions for clients (Greene et al., 2005; Lee, 2003; Rockymore, 2008).

Particular to the area of child welfare is the need to understand those cultural and individual strengths that are related to family functioning and parenting. These are often referred to as family strengths. Robert Hill defines family strengths as “those traits that facilitate the ability of the family to meet the needs of its members and the demands made upon it by systems outside the family unit. They are necessary for the survival, maintenance and advancement of family networks” (Hill, 1999, p.42). Littlejohn-Blake and Darling (1993) define family strengths as “those relationship patterns, interpersonal competencies, and social and psychological characteristics that create a sense of positive family identity” (p. 461). In identifying family strengths for African American families, many researchers and scholars indicate that practitioners must first understand the larger cultural context out of which African American family structures and strengths have developed (Akinyela, 2006; Dillon, 1994; Littlejohn-Blake & Darling, 1993; Miller & Gaston, 2003). This culture specific approach to working with African American families and individuals has been called an Africentric or Afrocentric or African centered perspective (Bent-Goodley, 2005; Everett et al., 2004; Mazama, 2001; Miller & Gaston, 2003).

### *Afrocentric or African Centered Perspective*

Central to the idea of cultural competence is the premise that certain groups share cultural norms, values and beliefs that are important for social workers to learn and understand, and that workers should adapt and develop practices that are effective and appropriate given the cultural context of the group or family. In the case of African

Americans the cultural context that has shaped many of the cultural norms, beliefs and values are based on traditional African culture.

Afrocentrism focuses on the idea that many of the theories, concepts and ideas about behavior, knowledge, values, social structures and functions in both mainstream America and other industrialized countries are from a European worldview or perspective and therefore view African Americans and others as deficient or abnormal. According to Mazama (2001), “the Afrocentric idea rests on the assertion of the primacy of the African experience for African people. Its aim is to give us our African, victorious consciousness back. In the process, it also means viewing the European voice as just one among many and not necessarily the wisest one” (p.388).

In describing the Afrocentric perspective as a paradigm, Mazama (2001) establishes a definition of Afrocentricity referencing two of the scholars who originated this concept, “Karenga correctly and cogently defined Afrocentricity as ‘essentially a quality of perspective or approach rooted in the cultural image and human interest of African people’” (p. 392). “Afrocentricity questions your approach to every conceivable human enterprise. It questions the approach you make to reading, writing, jogging, running, eating, keeping healthy, seeing, studying, loving, struggling, and working” (Asante, 1988, p. 45). “Karenga (n.d.) identifies as the core cultural African characteristics the following “shared orientations”: (a) the centrality of the community, (b) respect for tradition, (c) a high level of spirituality and ethical concern, (d) harmony with nature, (e) the sociality of selfhood, (f) veneration of ancestors, and (g) the unity of being” (Mazama, 2001, p.393-394).

Everett, Chipungu, and Leashore (1997, 2004), the editors of two books, “Child Welfare: An Africentric Perspective” and “Child Welfare Revisited: An Africentric Perspective” state that relevant to child welfare “the Africentric perspective is used to describe the social context, value base, attitudes and behaviors that shape the belief systems, coping strategies, defensive styles, help seeking behaviors, and treatment responses of African American families and children. This perspective stresses the importance of kinship ties, collective identity, spirituality, the oneness of body mind and spirit, and harmony between nature and humanity” (Everett et al., 2004, p.6).

This Africentric worldview or perspective has been used in a number of social work practice areas (i.e., substance abuse treatment, juvenile delinquency, domestic violence, and therapeutic interventions) in developing culturally specific and culturally responsive interventions (Bent-Goodley, 2005; Jackson, 1995; Jenkins, 2005; Phillips, 1990; Poitier, Niliwaambieni & Rowe, 1997; Schiele, 1996; Stewart, 2004). ). More recently, this perspective or approach has been suggested and used in the child welfare field (Akinyela, 2006; Miller & Gaston, 2003). In developing interventions based on an Africentric perspective in child welfare, several cultural and family strengths have been identified particular to African American families. They are: a strong religious orientation, including an internalized sense of spirituality; strong work and educational achievement orientation; strong and flexible kinship networks, including a sense of collective identity, interconnectedness and interdependence; and flexible coping skills, including community support and self help (Briscoe & Smith, 2003; Hill, 1998; Kane, 2000; Miller & Gaston, 2003).

For example, in one qualitative study conducted in Texas regarding how African American mothers socialized their children, researchers found several key themes were important to those mothers. The major themes were: teaching their children about their racial heritage, including spirituality/religion, historical struggles and racial pride; to teach that educational attainment was the way to overcome barriers of racism and poverty; and to value family interdependence and connection while promoting individual autonomy and self reliance (Suizzo, Robinson & Pahlke, 2008). In another qualitative study that looked at the stressors and coping strategies identified by 45 pregnant and parenting African American women, they found that family support, prayer and spirituality, and formal and informal community supports were most often used as coping strategies (Baffour, Gourdine, Domingo, & Boone, 2009).

Many of these cultural and family strengths are being considered in developing more culturally relevant and appropriate interventions by child welfare practitioners. For instance, the recognition that African American families have strong and flexible kinship bonds has influenced a number of practices including the use of Family Group Decision Making and other family teaming strategies (Dougherty, 2003). Relative placements as a priority including fictive kin, the increased use of family finding strategies and father involvement practices give recognition to the expansive and flexible kinship networks valued by African Americans (U.S. GAO, 2008). The Family to Family initiative, and other practice models that focus on community partnerships, team decision making, and continuity of family and community connections, recognizes the importance of a collective and interdependent perspective to supporting families (Jones, 2006; Roberts, n.d.).

## **Effectiveness of Culturally Specific Practices on Racial Disproportionality**

Although empirical evidence linking culturally specific or relevant practices with improved outcomes for African American children and families is very limited, there are several practices and programs that have emerged as promising.

One such study looked at the effectiveness of culturally specific substance abuse prevention programs targeted at high risk youth (Springer et al., 2004). This study surveyed a sample size of over 10,000 youth (6,031 treatment and 4,579 comparison youths at *pre and post program*) over a six year time period (1995 and 2001). The study looked at programs (treatment group) that indicated culturally specific program content for African American, Asian American, Native American and Hispanic/Latino American youth. Springer et al.(2004) found that those “Africentric or African centered” programs targeted at African American youth were significantly more effective in participant satisfaction, and that youth found those services more personally meaningful or important to them than those youth participating in non-specific services. This national cross-site evaluation study also found that the effect sizes for the reduction of alcohol and marijuana usage for youth participating in the culturally specific Africentric programs were larger than those in other culturally specific programs, and for those African American youth participating in non-culturally specific programs. This study indicated that the “comprehensive and coherent use of culturally specific content in the African American programs contributes to more effective substance use prevention, as well as contributing to stronger engagement of youth” (Springer et al., 2004, p.17).

In a systematic review of Africentric interventions across social work, psychology and other human service disciplines, Gilbert, Harvey and Belgrave (2009) looked at the level of empirical research and evidence supporting the efficacy of these culturally specific programs. Of the eight “Africentric” programs they reviewed, only one was described as reaching Level 2 (individual and multisite randomized control trials). The remaining programs were described as Level 3 (quasi-experimental or uncontrolled clinical trials). The article encouraged researchers and program developers to replicate existing interventions in order to “continue to build a strong case for evidenced based Africentric practice” (Gilbert et al., 2009, p. 19).

In research more specific to impacting disproportionality in child welfare, Richardson (2008) did a comparative analysis of two community-based programs designed to impact disproportionality in Iowa. The Minority Youth and Families Initiative (MYFI) piloted two culturally specific programs, one targeting Native American families, and one targeting African American families. The interventions used in both programs focused on increased family and community engagement and involvement including “family team meetings” (FTM), and cultural /race matching between workers and families. Results from this two year pilot project indicated that there was improved worker/participant alliance or cooperation, as measured by participant and worker feedback, and improved family functioning and better outcomes for children as measured by family and risk assessment tools used by the project (Richardson, 2008).

Several studies have focused on family and community engagement strategies that hold promise for improving outcomes for African American families (Dawson & Berry,

2002; Marts, Lee, McRoy & McCroskey, 2008). In a qualitative study conducted in Los Angeles County regarding the Point of Engagement (POE) approach, Marts et al. (2008), sought to explore what POE meant to its participants and what the key factors were for explaining why and how POE works. They found that the implementation of this model not only improved outcomes for children and families in the community, but improved the working relationship and cooperation between the child welfare agency and the formal and informal community partners. Point of Engagement is described as a collaborative, family and community centered approach designed to reduce the number of children entering foster care and to help increase reunification and permanency (Marts et al., 2008). It uses a multidisciplinary team decision making approach that includes the family in the process of selecting and planning for the delivery of needed services. In addition, it involves community- based organizations (CBO), faith-based groups, local businesses and community leaders in providing needed services and supports. “POE has demonstrated a reduction in the number of children removed from their families, an increase in the number of children returned to their families within one year, and an increase in the number of children finding legal permanency” (p.335).

In describing the improvements since the implementation of the POE approach, the author describes the impressive changes in outcomes that resulted.

Since the project began in Compton, preliminary detentions were reduced from 487 before POE to 232 in the first year of POE, and then to 188 in 2005 to 2006. Reunifications have increased from 20% to 67% of cases. In 2005 to 2006, 405 children were reunified in 12 months. The total median length of stay in care has been reduced from 777 days in 2003 before POE to 368 days in 2005. Compton now has the highest voluntary family reunification rate in the county. Also, an assessment for adoption takes 3.6 months in Compton and 8 months in other parts of Los Angeles County.

About eight adoptions are completed each month in Compton compared to four per month before the project. (Marts et al., 2008, p.355)

Finally, in terms of those aspects or components of POE that workers and community members found most effective were those practices that are foundational to social work, “focusing on the family’s needs, immediate provision of services, and engaging the community to assist families in developing their own strengths to maintain safe homes for their children” (Marts et al.,2008, p.356).

### **Spirituality/Religion**

One of the areas identified as a cultural and family strength for African American families that has not been applied to any strategic practice model or initiative, is their strong religious orientation and internalized spirituality. Although some states and jurisdictions have contracted with religious organizations or specific churches to assist in recruiting resource families, or to be involved as community partners (U.S. GAO,2008; Marts, et al., 2008; Tally, 2008), the inclusion of spirituality/religion has been generally ignored in the development of culturally specific or relevant practices or interventions by child welfare workers.

There is a general consensus that although spirituality/religion has been used in both scholarly and popular writings almost synonymously, they are different constructs with different meanings. Edward Canda (2008) defines spirituality

as an aspect refers to the human search for a sense of meaning, purpose, and morally fulfilling relations with oneself, other people, the universe, and the ground of being. Spirituality involves centrally important life-orienting beliefs, values, and practices that may be expressed in religious and/or nonreligious ways. Spirituality is a larger concept that can be

expressed in religious or nonreligious ways. Spirituality may be considered private or it may be shared with others, in fact, in some ways it must be shared, because it impacts our relationships and our connectedness with others even in individualistically oriented cultures. (p.27)

He defines religion

as an institutionalized pattern of centrally important values, beliefs, and practices that relate to spirituality. Religious communities can provide material supports, counseling, advice, social activist organizing, and all sorts of things that interweave with their interest in spirituality. So, not everything in a religion is explicitly or only about spirituality. Religion is shared by a community. By definition, there is no religion with only one member. (p.28)

Hodge and McGrew (2005) make a similar distinction when they surveyed social work students who overwhelmingly (73%) defined spirituality as “a belief in or connection to God or a higher power”, while the predominant themes (61%) for defining religion were “the method or practice of spirituality or faith and/or including organized or structured beliefs or doctrines”.

However, given the unique place that religion and spirituality hold in the African American community, several recent researchers and scholars have examined how the aforementioned definitions may or may not fit with an African American worldview, both within the social work profession and from a client perspective (Banks-Wallace & Parks, 2004; Lewis, Hankin, Reynolds, & Ogedegbe, 2007; Martin & Martin, 2002; Mattis, 2000). Martin and Martin (2002) in their book, “Spirituality and the Black Helping Tradition in Social Work” look at the historical connection between spirituality and social work in the black professional community, as well as make a case for the renewal of a spiritual centered practice model particularly when working with African

Americans. The authors define spirituality as “the sense of the sacred and divine, expressed in the way people lived their lives and in the reverence and respect they had for life” (p.1). In addition, according to Martin and Martin (2002), black people often do not make a distinction between spirituality and religion, as both are concerned with the sacred, eternal and divine. If such a distinction is made then religion is connected to a religious organization such as the church, and spirituality is associated with one’s personal relationship or communal tie to an invisible supernatural realm, whether connected to a religious institution or not (p.4).

In a two phase qualitative study (Mattis, 2000), 128 African American women were asked to define spirituality. Subsequently, a smaller sample of those women was asked to distinguish between spirituality and religiousness. Over half of the respondents in the first phase of the study defined spirituality in more than one way, the most frequent response (53%) however was a belief in and connection to a higher external power. Other definitions included awareness of spiritual or transcendent forces, understanding and acceptance of self, and a sense of direction and guidance in life (Mattis, 2000). In the second phase of the study three key themes emerged distinguishing spirituality from religiousness. They were “spirituality refers to the internalization and consistent expression of key values, religiousness is an individual’s embrace of prescribed beliefs and ritual practices related to God. Second, that religious values and practices serve as conduits for achieving spirituality. That is, religiosity is a tool, whereas spirituality is a desired outcome. Finally, although religion was associated with doctrines and rituals, spirituality was defined as a relational phenomenon” (Mattis, 2000, p.114). A similar study involving African American women conducted by health care researchers (Lewis,

et al., 2007) found that focus group participants described three categories of spirituality: love in action, relationships and connections and unconditional love. The first category of love in action emphasizes that people who are spiritual are givers and doers. They demonstrate their love through acts of kindness and giving of themselves and their resources. The second category of spirituality focuses on relationships and connectedness with God or a higher power, with others and with self. The third category of spirituality, unconditional love, is where respondents made a clear distinction between spirituality and religion. They described spiritual persons as being able to love and express love unconditionally whereas religion added conditions and criteria to the expression of love (Lewis et al., 2007).

### *Spirituality/Religion in African American Culture*

Recognizing that spirituality and religion have different definitions and interpretations both in the academic and non-academic setting, research indicates that both religion or religious behaviors and spirituality are considered strengths and resources in the African American community. Historically the role of organized religion in the African American community, also referred to as the “black church” has been to provide socialization, social support, concrete supports and community activism (Billingsley, 1999; Ellison, 1993; Lincoln & Mayima, 1990; Taylor, Chatters, Jayakody & Levin, 2001; Thompson & McRae, 2001). More recently, religious activities such as church attendance and participation, prayer, worship, and reading and viewing religious materials have been found to positively affect physical health, mental health, and family functioning in the African American community (Brown, 2006; Chatters, Taylor, Lincoln

& Jackson, 2008; Giger, Appel, Davidhizar & Davis, 2008; Haight, 2002; Lee & Sharpe, 2007). Taylor et al. (2001) found that African Americans demonstrated higher levels of both public and private religious behaviors regardless of sample or measures. Chatters et al. (2008) found that compared to non-Hispanic whites, African Americans and Black Caribbean's utilized and endorsed religious coping methods such as prayer, and reliance on God for strength and support.

### ***Spirituality/Religion and Health***

In a review of relevant research regarding the relationship between church attendance and health benefits Giger et al., (2008) found that church attendance correlates with beneficial health practices, especially for the most at-risk groups (i.e., the uninsured and those with chronic illness), and with reduced mortality rates. Research also indicates that the church has taken a major role in providing information on health and health care, and in providing health practitioners and researchers access to these at-risk populations. Though the health care field has been one of the most active in including spirituality/religion into practitioners training, research and practice, other human service fields have discovered that spirituality/religion are relevant, particularly when serving African American clients.

### ***Spirituality/Religion and Mental Health***

Researchers in the mental health field have found that spirituality/religion not only impact their client's mental health, but also influence clients' help-seeking behaviors and should be addressed in the intervention and treatment approaches used by clinicians.

Thompson and McRae (2001) found that the black church provided several therapeutic benefits including a place of belonging, of social and spiritual support and of shared experience to its members. One article suggested that one way to address racial disparities in the mental health field is for clinicians to include spirituality as a clinical tool for the assessment and treatment of mental health problems with African Americans (Perdue, Johnson, Singley & Jackson, 2006). Queerer and Martin (2001) developed a model of collaboration between mental health providers and the African American church where they established a working relationship between several congregations and professional mental health clinicians who provided mental health treatment and interventions in the church and with the support and recommendation of the pastors and elders. This model represents an expansion of the traditional role of the church, as well as an opportunity to legitimize and normalize mental health services for the African American community.

In addition, spirituality has been found by a number of researchers to be a source of resilience, to impact life satisfaction, and to improve overall coping, particularly for African Americans (Banerjee & Pyles, 2004; Brown, 2006; Ghorpade, Lackritz, & Singh, 2006; Starks & Hughey, 2003). One such study found that spirituality was a significant factor in the resilience of African American women coping with poverty, as well as the pressure and stigma of welfare (Banerjee & Pyles, 2004). Another study (Shorter-Gooden, 2004) found that prayer and spirituality were key strategies used by African American women to help them cope with the stresses that racism and sexism caused in their daily lives. Harris-Robinson (2006) found that for African American women of the three types of coping strategies used; cognitive focused coping, emotion focused coping

and spiritual focused coping, the women found spiritual focused coping, which included prayer and reliance on God, as the most helpful.

### *Spirituality/Religion and Domestic Violence*

Other areas where spirituality/religion has been found to have a positive impact on outcomes that are relevant to child welfare are domestic violence and substance abuse. Fowler and Hill (2004) found that for African American women who had been the victims of intimate partner abuse, religious social support and spirituality were relevant coping strategies. Although these strategies were found to alleviate depression often associated with trauma of partner abuse, they did not alleviate symptoms of PTSD associated with being a victim of partner abuse. Another study that looked at the relationship between spirituality, religious coping, religious involvement, social support and depression and PTSD associated with being a victim of domestic violence, found similar results (Watlington & Murphy, 2006). While spirituality was associated with decreased depression, it was not associated with decreased PTSD symptoms. And although a majority of the women in the study utilized religious coping strategies including religious involvement and social support, these were not associated with decreased depression or PTSD. Several other studies seem to indicate that although spirituality/ religious coping strategies were strengths that assisted women in leaving abusive relationships, or in maintaining distance from past abusers, the church leaders or clergy may not provide support or assistance in leaving an abusive marriage (Potter, 2007; Yick, 2008).

### *Spirituality/Religion and Substance Abuse*

Several recent studies have looked at the role of spirituality/religion in recovery and treatment of substance abuse (Brome, Owens, Allen & Vevaina, 2000; Brown, 2006; DiLorenzo, Johnson & Bussey, 2001; Gubrium, 2008). In one such study of 146 African American women who had been in drug recovery for about two years, women who indicated a high level of spirituality, as measured by the Spiritual Well Being Scale, “demonstrated a more positive self concept, a more active coping style, more positive attitudes toward parenting, more positive perceptions of their family climate, and more satisfaction with their social support” (Brome et al., 2000, p. 482). Another study involved rural African American women who used cocaine (Brown, 2006). Of the 30 respondents interviewed, all had a religious Christian upbringing which they maintained to some degree during their drug use. The majority of respondents who attempted to quit drug or alcohol use credited their sobriety, even intermittent sobriety, to their belief and reliance on God rather than any drug treatment they may have attended, and finally all found individual or personal spiritual and religious behavior more helpful to recovery than public or socially dependent religious behaviors.

Similar studies have pointed to spirituality and religious participation as protective factors against substance abuse and other risky behaviors (Curtis-Boles & Jenkins-Monroe, 2000; DiLorenzo, et al., 2001), finding that those who regularly participate in spiritual and religious behaviors are less likely to abuse substances. The use of spirituality in the treatment approach to substance abuse has also been found to be effective in a number of studies (Arnold, Avants, Margolis & Marcotte, 2002; Green, Ball, Belcher & McAlpine, 2003; MacMaster et al., 2007). One such study was

conducted in a faith-based program in a metropolitan area (MacMaster et al., 2007). This study found that a faith-based approach that emphasized spirituality was both culturally relevant for the population of chronic substance abusers and beneficial in reducing substance use and high-risk sexual behaviors among this population.

### *Spirituality/Religion and Family Functioning*

Most significant to the area of child welfare is the impact that spirituality/religion may have on family functioning. Not only do child welfare professionals strive to understand those issues that may positively or negatively impact effective and safe parenting, but they must be concerned with the children that they intervene with and the relative and resource families they depend on for caregiving. Research indicates that for many families, religious beliefs, values, and practices including spirituality, shape the roles and expectations regarding family functions and responsibilities, and the nature of family relationships (Ellison, 1997; Marks, 2006; Mosley-Howard & Evans, 2000; Shor, 1998; Suizzo et al., 2008). In a review of research about how religious beliefs, practices and religious community involvement effects the marital, mother-child, and father-child relationships, Marks (2006) found that religious practices were beneficial to marital relationships and parent child relationships; religious beliefs were beneficial to promoting long term marital relationships and marital satisfaction, as well as maternal religiosity seemed to decrease childhood depression; religious community involvement was related to marital quality when both partners attended. One limitation of this review was that the research did not include families of color, non-nuclear families, or non-Christian families. Studies that focus on African American families indicate that religious participation,

beliefs and practices may affirm and support family roles and enhance family life (Cain, 2007; Ellison, 1997; Evans, Boustead & Owens, 2008; Mattis, 2005; Mosley-Howard & Evans, 2000). Cain (2007) conducted a longitudinal study interviewing 93 African American women from the time they gave birth through the child's first birthday regarding the effects of religious beliefs and practices on parenting practices and parenting stress. The results of the study indicated that religious beliefs and practices of private worship (prayer, meditation, Bible study) and spirituality positively influenced their parenting practices meaning they were "more responsive, involved, and provided more quality learning materials for their infants" (p.269).

In looking at key aspects of parental socialization for African American mothers, Suizzo et al. (2006) found that for these middle class parents spirituality/religion/faith was mentioned as a socialization goal for 8 of the 12 mothers interviewed. These mothers talked about the importance of teaching spirituality/religion/faith to their children to help guide values. Mosley-Howard and Evans (2000), in an ethnographic study involving four African American families found that spirituality was a key element of African American family relationships. More recently, Evans et al. (2008) in an article describing the Family Strengths Institute, a training Institute for behavioral health professionals and project clients, reported that family members who planned and participated in the Family Strengths Institute expressed their need and desire to honor the importance of spirituality in their daily lives, as well as its importance as a component in treatment. They demonstrated this with the selection of speakers and themes they planned, and by including prayer and meditation from a variety of religious perspectives as a way to open each day of the Institute. Two themes and their relation to spirituality could be observed

in the conference. The first was that of resiliency and spirituality. The second theme was spirituality as a component in recovery.

Spirituality/religion are not only important to African American parents, but several studies involving African American youth, both in the child welfare system and outside of that system indicate that spiritual/religious practices are important to young people. In a review of current research on religion among African American youth, Moore-Thomas and Day-Vines (2008) report that a majority of African American junior and senior high school students believe that religion is important and either attend services or pray regularly. Additionally, the researchers report that for those students who have higher levels of religious involvement, that involvement is related to pro-social behavior, well-being, resiliency and increased coping and inversely related to substance abuse, early sexual activity and stress. One study specifically related to foster children sought to explore those factors that led to resilience for transitioning and parenting African American teen mothers, they found that all of the young women interviewed saw their spirituality as a source of strength (Haight, Finet, Bamba, & Helton, 2009).

As mentioned earlier, one of the child welfare practices that recognizes the cultural strengths and traditions of African American families is the policy and practice of kinship or relative placements. In many cases, these family members are older female relatives, grandmothers or aunts (Smith & Devore, 2004). Several studies have found that spirituality/religion play a significant role in the lives of older adults, particularly older African American women (Klemmack et al., 2007; Lee & Sharpe, 2007; Pickard, 2006). In a study of older adults and the use of religious and spiritual coping, Lee and Sharpe (2007) found that older African Americans are more likely to have higher levels of

religiosity and spirituality and to use spiritual/religious resources as coping and in providing social support than their white counterparts, who were more likely to utilize family and friends as primary supports. Another study that focused on African American grandmothers who were raising their grandchildren after losing their parent to AIDS found that their spirituality/religion not only helped them to cope with the grief and loss of a child, but also assisted them in coping with the stresses of caregiving (Winston, 2006). As a result of their research with African American kin caregivers regarding the importance of spirituality/religion in providing not only personal strength and resources, but in socializing their children, and seeking and receiving services, Lawrence-Webb and Okundaye (2007) make several recommendations to child welfare practitioners and policy makers. These recommendations include that (1) social workers should be open to exploring and assessing with caregivers the significance and role that spirituality/religion play in their lives; (2) social workers should ensure that interventions and services are available that allow caregivers to safely express and incorporate their spiritual/religious beliefs and practices; (3) social workers affirm the role that spirituality/religion may play in the problem solving and decision making processes of caregivers; and (4) social workers should become competent in integrating spiritual/religious worldviews in their work with caregivers.

Finally, not only has spirituality/religion been found to be an important factor for relative or kinship placements, but in a study of the role of faith for adoptive parents, Belanger, Copeland and Cheung (2008) found that faith or religiosity was essential in families making the decision to adopt.

### *Spirituality/Religion and Social Work*

Given the recognition that cultural competence is critical for all social workers to develop, especially when working in a multicultural environment, what are the barriers to achieving cultural competence around the issue of spirituality/religion? In tracing the history of the connection between spirituality and social work, Edward Canda (1997) establishes the origins of social work in the United States to its connections with sectarian institutions and values, especially Christian and Jewish institutions. According to Canda (1997; 1998) and other's (Martin & Martin, 2002), as a result of the desire to professionalize social work, it distanced itself from spiritual/religious values and sectarian institutions, setting up secular institutions instead, and looking to a more scientific and empirical practice model, including psychoanalysis and other psychological traditions that rejected and devalued spirituality/religion. Not until the late 1970's to mid-1980's was there a resurgence of interest in spirituality/religion as an issue of diversity and culture.

Several researchers point to a lack of knowledge, understanding, ethical guidelines and professional education about spirituality/religion as a barrier to incorporating spirituality into their social work practice (Cascio, 1998; Furman, Benson, & Canda, 2004; Krieglstein, 2006). In a national study of social workers regional similarities and differences regarding spirituality/religion, Furman, Benson and Canda (2004) asked a series of questions about social workers personal and professional use of spirituality/religion. As part of that study,

respondents were also asked whether or not social work practitioners possessed the knowledge and skills to assist clients in religious and spiritual matters and whether or not they were sophisticated in these matters. Only 18% of the social

workers in the North (n=83) and West (n=99) felt that they possessed the knowledge and skills necessary to assist clients in these matters. Social workers in the Midwest (24.6%, n=131) felt more confident than the others. However, their confidence, like the other respondents, was far below the fifty percent level. Over two-thirds of the social workers in each region felt that social workers should become more sophisticated when dealing with spiritual matters with their clients. As a whole, the fact that only 27% of the respondents had received content on spirituality/religion in their social work education sheds light on why the responses of the social workers indicated a lack of belief in their knowledge and skills in this area. (p.288)

In connecting spirituality/religion with social work values and ethics, it has been noted that the Council for Social Work Education (CSWE) and the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) have included standards that recognize the need for social worker education and skill development about spirituality/religion. However, they do not provide ethical guidelines or boundaries to assist social workers in how to integrate this knowledge into practice (Canda, Nakashima & Furman, 2004; Lee & Barrett, 2007). In almost every national or regional survey of social workers there is consensus that the majority of social workers not only value spirituality/religion in their own lives, but believe that they should assess and utilize spiritual/religious strengths in their work with clients (Canda, 2008; Constantine, Lewis, Conner & Sanchez, 2000; Graff, 2007). However, social workers generally feel unsure about how to integrate spirituality/religion into their practice, and are unaware or unskilled about the tools and principles available that may guide their practice (Canda, Nakashima & Furman, 2004; Cascio, 1998; Lee & Barrett, 2007).

Integrating spirituality/religion into practice requires more than just a course or training on the importance of spiritual/religious values and beliefs as strengths and resources for families and individuals. Social workers require awareness and information

about their own spiritual/religious beliefs, heritage and upbringing; knowledge about spiritual and religious traditions other than their own; information about specific tools and techniques available to assess spirituality; information about spiritual/religious resources in the community; and information about the policies, practice guidelines and administrative procedures of their employing organization or agency (Cascio, 1998; Constantine et al., 2000; Gilbert, 2000; Svare, Hylton & Albers, 2007). Cascio (1998) and Constantine et al.(2000) point to the practitioners' need and ability to self reflect and be self aware about their own values, beliefs and biases about spirituality/religion as a first step. It is not necessary that the practitioner consider themselves as religious or spiritual as long as they can maintain openness, respect and a non-judgmental attitude toward the religious and spiritual beliefs of their clients (Cascio, 1998; Hoyt, 2008).

Including spirituality/religion into assessment or information gathering is another area where social workers need specific knowledge. Several researchers including David Hodge (2003) have developed spiritual assessment tools to assist social workers and other practitioners to include spirituality/religion into their routine assessment processes. Spiritual genograms, ecomaps, and timelines are tools developed by several scholars that have been helpful in integrating spiritual histories and connections into the assessment process (Bullis, 1996; Cascio, 1998; Hodge, 2003).

Other skills necessary include adequate knowledge about spiritual/religious interventions, which are appropriate to use when, and about what spiritual and religious resources are available in the community. Spiritual/religious interventions include, referrals to spiritual/religious community resources, the use of prayer or meditation, using religious rituals and symbols, use of spiritual/religious narratives and dialogue, use of

inspirational readings, recommending spiritual activities, and the use of touch for healing purposes (Canda, Nakashima & Furman, 2004). There have, however, been concerns about the use of several of these activities depending on the agency or context and the skill of the practitioner (Canda, et al., 2004; Lee & Barrett, 2007; Svare et al., 2007). For example in the Canda et al. (2004) survey, they found that those social workers who oppose the use of prayer or healing touch are concerned that professional boundaries and ethics are being crossed, even if these activities are part of the clients spiritual/religious worldview, whereas both practices when used in the medical field have been found to be helpful or effective.

Finally, organizational and agency context are important factors in whether social workers include spirituality/religion in their practice and to what extent they include it in their practice (Canda, 2008). Several studies indicate that in certain fields or organizations the inclusion of spirituality/religion is either overtly or covertly discouraged or banned, and there are particular fields of practice or populations where the inclusion of spirituality/religion seemed more appropriate, such as hospice, medical social work, and substance abuse recovery (Lee & Barrett, 2007; Svare et al., 2007). Even when agencies or organizations do not prohibit the use of spirituality/religion in the assessment and intervention with clients, Svare et al. (2007) found that without specific policies and guidelines for workers, workers were forced to develop their own personal policies and guidelines. This created confusion for both the staff and the clients. Staff who did include spirituality/religion in their assessment were not clear in these cases how to use the information they gathered, and because there was no explicit policy, were reluctant to share what they are doing with other workers and supervisors. Those who

worked for the government or agencies that receive federal funds were also concerned about crossing the lines between church and state, despite CSWE and NASW's inclusion of spirituality/religion as an issue of diversity to be assessed by social workers (Cascio, 1998; Gilbert, 2000; Lee & Barrett, 2007; Svare et al., 2007).

As a result of their study about organizational context, and its role in incorporating spirituality/religion into social work practice, Svare et al.(2007) recommends that organizations and agencies not only set out to define spirituality/religion for their workers, but also develop tools and expectations around the use of spiritual assessments and interventions, and have the resources and funds that allow social workers to take the time needed to expand their practice to include spirituality/religion. "Until the organizational context is taken into account, spiritually-sensitive practice will be found to be practiced unevenly and in response to the personal beliefs and ethics of individual social workers" (Svare et al., 2007, p.111). Such uneven practice is not only contrary to culturally competent practice, but can be harmful to clients and families.

### **Conceptual and Theoretical Framework**

The goal of this study is explore how a sample of African American parents and child welfare (CWS) staff, including administrators, supervisors and line staff, jointly construct the role that spirituality/religion could play in engaging, assessing and intervening with African American families. One of the assumptions underlying this research is that cultural differences and misunderstandings play an important role in the overrepresentation of African American children and families involved in the child

welfare system. Another assumption is that in the attempts made by CWS to be more culturally competent the spiritual/religious dimension of culture has been excluded. This may be in part due to the lack of clarity about spirituality/religion and their place in child welfare practice; due to lack of professional social work education and training about spirituality/religion; due to the lack of organizational policy and practice guidelines, but even more significantly, due to a lack of dialogue and communication about spirituality/religion with the communities and families that child welfare serves. Because of these underlying assumptions and the emphasis on a strength- based, culturally competent approach to research which will empower all the participants, a constructivist theoretical and methodological framework will be used.

### ***Constructivist Approach and Social Work.***

Although the constructivist approach was not developed by social workers, this approach does reflect a number of values that are congruent with social work's core values and practice principles. According to Rodwell (1998), several social work principles demonstrate this congruence including social work's reliance on the person in environment perspective which emphasizes the interaction between individuals and their environments including family, culture, social groups and institutions that help shape their reality and behavior; social work's recognition of multiple and equally valuable realities, including starting where the client is, from their perspective of their reality; the interactive and relational nature of the helping relationship; and the belief that through learning and negotiation of alternative constructions, change can happen.

Specific to the issues of culture, diversity, spiritual/religious values and beliefs, constructivism acknowledges the importance of diversity, dignity, equality, empowerment and the social context including power relationships that influence the shaping of experience and individual constructs of reality (McAuliffe & Eriksen, 1999; Rodwell, 1998). Constructivism gives voice to those who have been the “subjects” of research on an equal footing with those who have been the researchers, the theorists and the policy makers. Several recent studies point to the utility of a constructivist approach to clinical and casework practice in social work (D’Cruz, Gillingham & Melendez, 2009; Freeman & Couchonnal, 2006; Furman et al., 2003; McAuliffe & Eriksen, 1999).

Lee and Greene (1999) suggest that constructivist theory and approach is most helpful in teaching social workers how to work effectively in cross cultural clinical practice, and in developing culturally competent interventions. Dietz (2000) calls for the addition of feminist, constructivist, and postmodern theories as additions to social work curriculum when training students to challenge oppressive and discriminatory practices and systems. McAuliffe and Eriksen (1999), acknowledge that in counseling, constructivist and developmental meta-theories are helpful in embracing strength-based approaches. The constructivist approach has also been found to support culturally based approaches to working with youth, with women, and with families (Freeman & Couchonnal, 2006; Furman et al., 2003).

D’Cruz et al. (2009) conducted a constructivist study in Australia where he interviewed CPS workers about using a constructivist approach to assess child abuse and neglect in addition to the risk assessment tool they were using. They found that despite a shared organizational context, social workers had varied interpretations of formal

concepts and application to actual practice. They also found that the dialogue brought about by the study's methodology, expanded openness to ongoing learning and the addition of a more flexible and responsive approach to assessing abuse offered greater opportunity for professional discretion that leads to effective practice.

### **Summary**

The literature supports the assumption that the overrepresentation of African American children and families in the child welfare system is the result of a complex set of environmental, interactional and systemic circumstances. Poverty, household composition, substance abuse, and racism all appear to impact child welfare involvement, but don't totally explain the disparities apparent in the system.

One of the ways that the child welfare system has responded to these racial disparities is to develop culturally competent practices and train their staff to respond in culturally competent ways. One such practice approach is to focus on strengths rather than problems or deficits. This strength-based approach has led to practices that focus on involvement of family and community in decision making, on the use of formal and informal supports in the family and their community, and on assessing and utilizing cultural and family strengths and supports.

One cultural strength that is significant for the African American family and community that has largely been ignored by child welfare systems and practitioners has been spirituality/religion. The literature defines these two constructs in many ways, as spirituality/religion are culturally and socially experienced and perceived differently.

As social work's interest in spirituality/religion has been rekindled, social work education and training has been slow to provide social workers with the knowledge and tools to address spiritual issues with clients. In addition, there are no ethical guidelines with regard to the use of spirituality/religion in practice. The literature also suggests that although most social workers value spirituality/religion in their own lives, and recognize it may have value for clients, they feel ill prepared and unsupported to include spirituality/religion into their practice.

This qualitative study seeks to develop a collaborative, empowering and culturally competent approach to exploring the role that spirituality/religion could play in engaging, assessing and intervening with African American families by child welfare workers. This constructivist approach will involve key stakeholders including child welfare administrators, supervisors, social workers and African American parents in a hermeneutic dialogue that will explore and encourage the development of shared understandings and the identification and implementation of policies and practices that include spirituality/religion in the interaction between CWS staff and African American families. It is believed that the inclusion of spirituality/religion in the practice of engaging and assessing African American families and in providing culturally specific and relevant interventions and services by child welfare services will increase the effectiveness of those services targeted at enhancing the safety and well being of African American children and families.

## **CHAPTER THREE**

### **METHODOLOGY**

#### **Introduction**

This constructivist qualitative study identified how a sample of African American parents and child welfare staff, who are key players in child welfare services, jointly construct the role that spirituality/religion plays in engaging, assessing and intervening with African American families. The development of this joint construction aimed to increase the cultural competence of child welfare workers to include an understanding of the use of spirituality/religion in client interventions. Additionally, utilizing a constructivist paradigm, a “hermeneutic dialectic” was used to identify a participatory group of stakeholders to design and implement action that utilizes the results of this inquiry process. The hermeneutic dialectic discussion carried out during this study addressed the following questions.

1. In what ways are spirituality/religion important to African American parents?
2. Could spirituality/religion play a role in the engagement, assessment and intervention of African American families by child welfare? What would that role be?
3. What changes in practice or policy would allow for the inclusion of spirituality/religion in the interaction between child welfare and African American families?
4. Should services and interventions offered by child welfare take spirituality/religion into account? In what ways?

This chapter provides a rationale for the choice of paradigm as it relates to the purpose of this qualitative study. Also, a description of the research design, including the agency and community setting, the research sample, data collection methods, data analysis methods, ethical issues including issues of trustworthiness, and study limitations, are discussed.

## **Study Paradigm and Rationale**

### ***Constructivist Paradigm***

The constructivist paradigm, or set of basic beliefs and assumptions, also called the naturalist, hermeneutic and interpretive paradigm is guided by three basic beliefs or assumptions (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). The first is that there exists multiple, socially constructed realities, or a relativist ontology (Erlandson, Harris, Skipper & Allen, 1993; Guba & Lincoln, 1989; Rodwell, 1998). This means that individuals actively create or construct their own ideas and interpretations about what they experience or their reality. These constructs or ideas can be shared and are often developed or negotiated out of dialogue and interaction with others.

The second set of assumptions is that the interaction between the researcher or “the inquirer” and the participants or “respondents” directly influences the research process and outcomes. It is understood that the values and experiences of the researcher will interact with the participants and that the inquiry process cannot be objective. This is referred to by Guba and Lincoln (1989) as a “monistic, subjective epistemology” (p, 84). This assumption makes it imperative that the researcher is transparent and authentic in

their interactions and recognizes the influence they have in the interactions with participants, and with the research process.

The third assumption regards the way the inquiry is carried out or the methodology. According to Guba and Lincoln (1989), a hermeneutic methodology, one aimed toward developing joint constructions among concerned and involved participants through dialogue, challenge and critique of individual and often conflicting constructs, guides constructivist inquiry. Rodwell (1998) describes the process this way,

Reality construction... is central to the methodological process of constructivism. True reality construction, one built on consensual language of an emerging shared perspective, then becomes possible in a hermeneutic process where all have equal voice about what is consented to and subsequently constructed. Multiple perspectives are articulated, understood, and moved to a more sophisticated whole in a sense making hermeneutic circle. (p.28)

Other assumptions that are basic to the constructivist approach are that research is conducted in the natural setting and context of the participants, including the agency or community context relevant to the study. Given the assumption that multiple realities exist, this approach, as well as other qualitative approaches, are not concerned with the generalizability of its findings or understanding beyond the participants and context in which the study takes place but rather the trustworthiness and authenticity of the data.

## **Issues of Rigor**

### ***Trustworthiness and Authenticity***

This study addressed scientific rigor by attending to issues of trustworthiness and authenticity. According to Guba and Lincoln (1985) the trustworthiness of qualitative research is comprised of four criteria; credibility, transferability, dependability and

confirmability. These are the four criteria that qualitative research should strive to meet in order to demonstrate rigor or excellence in quality. Trustworthiness refers to the ability to show that the research has taken the steps necessary to give the reader confidence in the fidelity of the findings. This study addressed trustworthiness utilizing those strategies specified in the following paragraphs.

Credibility refers to the ability to demonstrate that the findings portray an accurate account of the data or information actually obtained from the participants. In order to address credibility of the data, peer debriefing, reflexive and methodological journaling and ongoing member checks were conducted. In addition, the constructivist approach assumes that the researcher's interaction with the participant, interpretation of data and participation as the research instrument, will play a part in the shaping of the data. The researcher utilized a reflexive journal to overtly document this interaction. This journal documented the perspective and intention of the researcher going into the research study, including; impressions gained in engaging the study site and study participants; impressions or reactions to the data as it was being collected; the reasons and intentions involved in adjusting the study design or plan. Finally, it documented reflections about the learning and understanding or insight gained throughout the research process, including termination or completion of the project. In addition, the researchers constructions related to the study topic was shared and challenged as one of many constructions considered in the hermeneutic circle.

The other of these journals, the methodological journal documented the data collection and analysis process including the aim of the research, the sampling and recruitment strategy, the informed consent and debriefing documents, the IRB approval,

recruitment flyers or scripts, engagement strategies, changes to research plan, specific observations of the study site or group process, all of the raw data, including audio tapes, verbatim transcripts, documents, as well as the coding categories and definitions, demographic data, axial coding categories and relationships, coding matrices, etc.

Dependability refers to the ability to demonstrate the consistent use of appropriate methods and procedures throughout the study. Dependability or transparency of the research process will be addressed again through the use of field notes and methodological journaling. This detailed documentation allows for an audit trail, allowing an objective third party auditor to review how decisions were made, and the consistent application of those decision rules (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). Additionally, peer debriefing assisted in demonstrating dependability.

Confirmability refers to the ability to provide enough specific detail regarding the methods and procedures used that although others cannot replicate your exact findings given a different set of participants, environment and context, others can follow or confirm your account of what the methods and procedures were. The same strategies used to demonstrate dependability also demonstrate confirmability.

Transferability refers to providing enough detail and description about the contextual or environmental aspect of the study, that other researchers can decide in what ways their target population may be similar or different and to what extent they can transfer the findings of one study to their own situation. The specific and detailed description of the participants, the study context, including agency and community demographics, and the thick descriptions of the content of constructions shared and

created as documented in the methodological and reflexive journals will address this dimension of trustworthiness.

### *Authenticity*

In constructivist research, the researcher must not only be able to demonstrate the quality of the research product or findings, but perhaps more importantly, must demonstrate the quality of the research process. Rodwell (1998) and Guba and Lincoln (1989), refer to the demonstration of rigor and quality in the constructivist process as authenticity. Authenticity criteria or dimensions include; fairness, ontological authenticity, educative authenticity, catalytic authenticity, and tactical authenticity.

Fairness involves “evenhanded representation of all viewpoints” (Rodwell, 1998, p.107). Guba and Lincoln (1989, p.245), refer to fairness as “the extent to which different constructions and their underlying value structures are solicited and honored within the evaluation process”. Fairness requires that the researcher manage the dialectical conversation so that all persons involved have the power to have an equal voice. Strategies to ensure fairness included fully informed consent processes and completing a full comprehensive member check at the end of the data collection process. This allowed all participants to have equal voice in clarifying and verifying the co-constructions that emerged.

Ontological authenticity attends to the constructing and reconstructing that occurs when constructions are shared and participants become more sophisticated in their ability to learn from and understand the reality of others. This requires that the researcher ensure that the conversations are dialectical and therefore create education for those involved.

One strategy for ensuring this is to model this dialectical style of conversation, encouraging mutual teaching and learning in each interaction. Another strategy for demonstrating ontological authenticity is through expanded field notes and journaling.

Educative authenticity involves appreciation and respect for others' constructions. Strategies to achieve a valuing of others perspectives may include not only the sharing of divergent constructions but the stories or experiences that influenced those constructions. Another strategy includes the respectful articulation of various perspectives in the final case report.

Catalytic authenticity refers to the "documents relevant knowledge that actively affects the lives of the participants and their shared contextual experience" (Rodwell, 1998, p.109). This links the focus of constructivist research with action or a change process. Rodwell refers to this as "praxis". The strategies used to demonstrate catalytic authenticity will include the description of the purpose of the research to participants in the engagement phase of the process, and the comprehensive member check and final case report. This document will be given to the stakeholder group as a tool to document results and encourage continued planning for action.

The final criterion for authenticity is tactical authenticity, which is linked to catalytic authenticity and "holds the inquirer and the constructivist process not just to a change standard, but the change must be effective from the point of view of the stakeholders" (Rodwell, 1998, p. 110). This standard requires that the researcher has some contact subsequent to the inquiry process in order to demonstrate that change was effective. Follow up contact and interaction with the research site and study focus is anticipated.

A constructivist paradigm was selected for this qualitative study as it best serves the purpose and aims of the study. The joint construction developed by families and workers about the role of spirituality in child welfare interventions would best increase the cultural competence of child welfare workers around the use of spirituality/religion. It is important to understand how individuals and groups of individuals (social workers and African American parents) perceive what spirituality/religion is, the value of spirituality/religion in individual and family functioning particularly around parenting and child rearing, the value of spirituality/religion in the helping relationship, and its value in help seeking behaviors.

Another goal of this study is to have a direct impact on social work practice, intervention, and policy. Rodwell (1998) explicitly sees constructivist inquiry or research as “a political undertaking which empowers participants and facilitates social change” (p.43). Constructivist research is an interventionist paradigm, designed to empower participants to collaborate in developing an action plan. This is described by Rodwell (1998) as “Praxis”. Out of the hermeneutic-dialectic process among an emergent stakeholder group, commitment and leadership develops that is needed to move practice changes forward (Guba & Lincoln, 1989; Morris, 2006; Rodwell, 1998).

### **Research Design**

The remainder of this chapter describes how this study was conducted. Presupposing that every participant and setting is unique, this constructivist research assumes an emerging design that is responsive and adaptable based on the data collected and concurrently analyzed during the research process (Erlandson et al., 1993; Guba &

Lincoln, 1989; Rodwell, 1998). The study design includes the study site selection and process of engagement, research sampling strategy, methods of data collection, including relevant consents and protections, methods of data analysis, addressing issues of rigor including trustworthiness and authenticity, and termination and follow up, including the final member checks, written product and plans for follow up. This agency joined in this research by contracting with this researcher as a partner in research, allowing access to both the staff and former client contact information.

### *Study Site*

Riverside County Children's Services Division (CWS) was chosen as the research site, due to the researcher's familiarity with the agency and the current policies and practices of that agency, including their current participation in the California Racial Disproportionality and Disparity (RDD) Project. Their involvement in this project and this agency's interest in the overrepresentation of African American children and families indicate their openness to both exploration and change in practice and policy related to cultural competence and family and community involvement.

Riverside County Children's Services Division is part of the larger Department of Public Social Services which includes; Cal Works (Temporary Assistance, MediCal, and Welfare to Work Programs), Adult Services (Adult Protective Services and In Home Supportive Services), Child Care and Homeless programs. (Riverside County DPSS website, <http://dpss.co.riverside.ca.us/>, retrieved 4/17/11). Riverside County is the 4<sup>th</sup> largest county in California with just above 2.1 million people. The ethnic population in Riverside County as of 2009 is reported as 43.9% Hispanic, 42% White, 5.8% Black,

5.3% Asian,.6% Native American, .3% Pacific Islander and 2.1% other (Riv. Co. DPSS, Children's Services 2009 Fact Sheet, County website, retrieved 4/17/11).

The Children's Services Division received over 23,000 reports of alleged child abuse and neglect in 2009. 67% of these allegations were for child neglect, 18% alleged physical abuse, 7% risk to child/sibling, 4% alleged sexual abuse, 1% alleged emotional abuse and 3% were classified as other. Of those over 18,000 families were investigated and of those investigated over 3,000 children came into the child welfare system as a case. In 2009, Riverside County had 3,666 children in out-of-home care. Of those children in out-of-home care 46% are Hispanic, 32% White, 19% Black, 1.6% Native American, .7% Asian and .6% Pacific Islander (Riv. Co. DPSS, Children's Services 2009 Fact Sheet, County website, retrieved 4/17/11).

Moreno Valley is a city in Riverside County that has been identified as having an overrepresentation of African American children and families in the child welfare system. The estimated population in Moreno Valley in 2009 was 186, 301 (Riv. Co. Center for Demographic Research, 2009). It is the second largest city in Riverside County. The racial and ethnic makeup of the community is 21.3% white, 16.7% black, 4.4% Asian/Pacific Islander, and 55.4% Hispanic. Moreno Valley has the highest percentage of blacks of all of the Riverside County municipalities. The median age in the community is 26.7 years, and the median household income is \$55,613. The city has a 16.1% unemployment rate, and 13.9% of families live below poverty level.

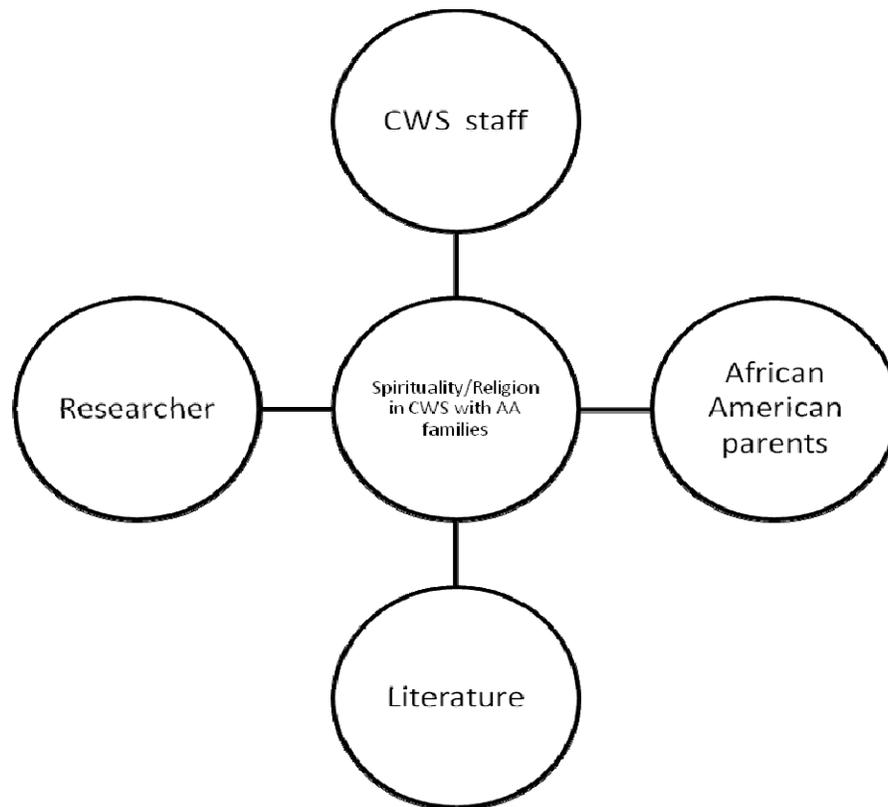
Although African Americans make up only 17% of the population, they made up over 33% of child abuse and neglect referrals to CWS in Moreno Valley in 2007. Of those children removed from their homes and placed in out of home care, either with a

relative or in foster care in Moreno Valley in 2007, 33% of the 265 children removed, or 88 children were African American. And of the 256 children continuing in out of home care after 30 days, 80 of those children (or 31%) were African American. The numbers of African American families in Moreno Valley involved with child welfare, and the disproportionate number of children removed from home and placed in out of home care in this community indicates that there is an increased need for cultural competency and practices that are effective with this large African American population. For this reason, many of the stakeholders were recruited and selected from the Moreno Valley community.

### *The Research Sample*

This study used a purposive sampling strategy called maximum variation sampling (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). Maximum variation sampling allows for the broadest scope or widest variation of constructions (Rodwell, 1998) regarding spirituality/religion's role in the interaction between African American families and child welfare social workers. Though the dialectic nature of the constructivist paradigm requires that the participants or stakeholder group may expand and change throughout the inquiry process, the initial stakeholder group or categories of participants are those who will either implement (agents), become the recipient or beneficiary of, or contribute to the practice or policy changes that this research seeks to initiate (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). The initial stakeholder groups for this study included Riverside County Children's Services staff including administrators, supervisors, and social workers and African American parents. Though community service providers were initially thought to be a key

stakeholder, as data collection and cursory coding occurred, it was determined that community members would not be able to add to the questions most relevant to the study (See Figure 1).



*Figure 1. Stakeholders in Hermeneutic Circle*

Selection of participants was conducted serially, meaning that new participants were not nominated or selected until the previous participant had been interviewed and an initial analysis of their data had occurred (Rodwell, 1998). In this way participant nomination and selection was more focused to provide the widest variation of constructs. Additional participants were selected and interviewed until no further variations in constructions were emerging, or in other words, until saturation was achieved.

The first interview was scheduled with the Assistant Director of Children's Services as the identified agency gatekeeper. The Assistant Director was asked to recommend other members of the CSW stakeholder group who may have a divergent construct. Those recommended individuals were then be asked to participate as stakeholders in this research and once consented and interviewed, were asked to provide a referral to another participant or stakeholder who may add a different perspective or view point regarding spirituality/religion and its role in child welfare practice with African American families. This sampling strategy though similar to snowball sampling, has as its focus to provide divergent rather than similar perspectives. Participant recruitment continued until the data revealed no new stakeholders or additional constructs, also known as redundancy or saturation (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). Though there was no maximum number of participants targeted, it was expected that the number of child welfare staff and African American parents interviewed would be balanced to provide an equal voice to the major stakeholder groups. There were 26 participants, 16 CWS staff and 10 African American parents.

The child welfare staff interviewed included the Assistant Director, two Deputy Directors, five Regional Managers, one Assistant Regional Manager, two Supervisors and five line level Children's Social Service Workers. The ethnic makeup of the staff was seven African American/Black Americans, one Latino American, and eight European Americans.

African American parents were recruited to participate in this study through a list of contacts provided by the child welfare agency. That list initially included only those African American parents who have been involved with CWS, had their case or

investigated referral closed within the last 12 months, and who lived in Moreno Valley. The contact list was expanded to include a larger geographic area within Riverside County in order to gather a larger sample of parents. Though it was expected that those parents who agreed to participate would provide referrals to other African American parents that might have a different perspective although not necessarily prior involvement with child welfare services, that did not occur. Parents with open cases were not selected due to the potential fear of retribution and/or the effects of the perceived and real power differential.

Of the ten parents interviewed, three were European Americans who were either married to an African American parent, or had a child with an African American partner when involved with the child welfare system. These parents were interested in participating in the study with the understanding that the focus of the study was on African American families. Nine of the ten parents were women. Parent interviews occurred either in the parent's home or in a neutral setting of their choosing. Parents who attended the final group meeting were compensated for their time and participation with a \$25.00 gift card.

### ***Data Collection***

All interviews took place over a six month period. Once selected or recruited, participants were provided with a written consent form which this researcher verbally reviewed with them prior to obtaining their signature (see Appendix A & B). This comprehensive informed consent addressed the intent and nature of the study and efforts to maintain confidentiality. Because the process of the hermeneutic-dialectic circle

required the challenging and reconstructing of various and multiple realities, and participation in a comprehensive group member check, the informed consent document covered issues of confidentiality in detail. Each stakeholder was interviewed using broad open ended questions related to their understanding of spirituality/religion, and its role in engaging, assessing and intervening with African American families (see Appendix C & D). Prior to completion of the interview, those constructions found in the literature, the constructions of the researcher and those of others previously interviewed were shared with the respondent. The respondent was then asked if and how this divergent construct affected or changed their own thinking or understanding. The respondent was then asked for the names of other stakeholders who may have a different or divergent view. Interviews continued until saturation occurred and no new constructions were emerging from the stakeholder group. Most interviews were audio-taped and then transcribed verbatim. Two parent interviews were not audio-taped, one at the parent's request, and the other because of equipment failure. The transcription was then coded and analyzed for major ideas, issues or general constructs; those were summarized and shared with the participant for accuracy, verification and clarification (member check).

Once all interviews were conducted and verified, a comprehensive analysis of all of the data was conducted utilizing the constant comparison method and emerging co-constructions were documented in a draft report. This draft report was provided to the stakeholders at a forum for a group member check. At this forum stakeholders were encouraged to negotiate their joint constructions until consensus was reached and initial plans to develop and implement action regarding changes in practice and policy were made. Those constructions where consensus was not reached were also documented and

may become issues for further investigation or dialectic discussion. This termination phase also included encouraging the stakeholders to develop policies or procedures for how they plan to continue their work together. This researcher also provided contact information as a resource for future consultation if needed. The outcome of this final phase was that the stakeholder group was given charge of their own process and ongoing development.

### *Data Analysis*

This study utilized qualitative analysis procedures appropriate for a constructivist study where a joint construction is built from individual units. Transcribed interviews were reviewed and coded using NVIVO computer assisted software to do the line by line open coding. NVIVO software allowed the researcher to import the individual transcripts, do the line by line coding, compare, add or delete open codes while providing continued access to the raw data. Once an individual interview was coded, it was analyzed for the major constructions or meanings, then summarized and presented to the respondent for verification and individual member check. These summaries were also imported into NVIVO for analysis and comparison once all of the interviews were completed. Several of these member checks were conducted in person, however due to time constraints several were done by email and telephone. All respondents who were contacted in person or by telephone were verbally read their summaries and asked to verify or edit the content of their interview summaries. They each verified that the summaries accurately represented their thoughts and responses from the interview. One respondent indicated editing of her summary was needed and once that edit was made, verified the summary.

Those respondents who were emailed their summaries and responded stated that the summary was an accurate portrayal of their thoughts and responses. Three of the parents interviewed could not be reached for the member check, as their telephone contact numbers were no longer in service.

At the conclusion of initial open coding of all 26 interviews there were 243 open codes that were identified. Those codes were reviewed and duplicate codes were combined resulting in 236 open codes. Those open codes were then categorized using the process referred to by Rodwell (1998) as sorting and lumping. Coded units were grouped together in categories that seemed to describe them. This process of constant comparison between the open codes, the confirmed constructions, and the larger categories continued with the objective of having distinct categories or themes with limited redundancy or overlap. NVIVO allowed the researcher to move back and forth between the codes, the categories, the constructions and the transcribed interview data in a seamless way. Several initial categories were removed or combined as a result of this analysis of the data, eleven major categories were identified. The resulting co-constructions that emerged from this inductive analysis process were presented to the stakeholders in the group member check forum, where consensus was negotiated.

### **Study Limitations**

One of the limitations of this study was that a single researcher limited number of participants based on the logistics of collecting and analyzing data. This also limited triangulation to the triangulation of sources, since multiple investigators were not possible. Though data collection and cursory initial analysis revealed no new constructs

emerging, maximum variation was not achieved, as none of the participants interviewed were particularly negative about the inclusion of spirituality/religion in their lives or in their practice. It was believed that those staff members existed, but they were not identified in this study. The inability to get referrals to other parents who may have very different perspectives was also a limitation.

Another limitation was the transitory nature of some of the respondents. A large number of potential parents were unavailable due to inactive, unlisted or changed phone numbers. In addition, three of the parents interviewed could not be reached subsequently because of changes in phone number and location. Because this is a qualitative study which can only be applied to the local context and participants involved, understanding the criteria for decisions about implementing findings of the study may be a difficult adjustment for child welfare administrators.

### **Summary**

This chapter outlined the constructivist paradigm and hermeneutic methodology that will be followed in carrying out this research. A constructivist paradigm assumes that reality is subjectively created based on the perspectives, experiences and socially constructed “truths” that individuals hold. It also assumes that through the process of sharing these constructions, new insights, perspectives and ultimately changes in ways of interacting, including policy and practice changes, can occur. Though the constructivist methodology relies on an emerging research design, this chapter has set the framework for how issues of scientific rigor including trustworthiness and authenticity, the study site

selection, sample selection, data collection, and data analysis occurred. In addition, possible study limitations were addressed.

The goal of this research was to determine if the negotiated constructions of key stakeholders (child welfare staff and African American parents), indicated that the inclusion of spirituality/religion might increase the effectiveness of the engagement, assessment and intervention practices of child welfare workers with African American families. It was also anticipated that the participants in the stakeholder group will take the lead in designing and implementing those practice and policy changes that are indicated by the results of the research.

## **CHAPTER FOUR**

### **RESULTS**

#### **Introduction**

The purpose of this study was to identify the role that spirituality/religion plays in child welfare services provided to African American families. It is believed that the engagement, assessment and intervention processes, which include case planning, service provision, monitoring and evaluation must be carried out in a culturally relevant, culturally competent way in order for parents to be open to and receive those supports and services that are most effective. In this qualitative constructivist study two key player groups were interviewed: parents with previous experience with child welfare services in Riverside County, and Riverside County child welfare services staff. Ten parents and 16 child welfare staff were interviewed over a period of six months. The results of this inquiry process are reported in this chapter. Major categories and key constructions relevant to how these stakeholders define spirituality and religion, the function of spirituality/religion in their lives, the relevance of spirituality/ religion in the engagement, assessment and intervention particularly for African American parents are reported. Finally, the concerns about including spirituality/religion into child welfare practice, and the skills and supports needed by CWS staff, are reported.

Eleven major categories were identified; Personal spiritual/religious experience; Spirituality/Religion and parenting; Defining Spirituality/Religion; Functions of Spirituality/Religion; Spirituality/Religion for African Americans; Engagement; Assessment of Spirituality/Religion; Placement; Services; Concerns; and Social Work skills. Each major category and the open codes that are grouped in the category are

presented in Table 1. Examples of interview content related to each category will further help describe the major constructions within the categories. Because the goal of this study is to understand joint constructions related to the topic, rather than to compare stakeholder groups, all categories include the perspectives of all respondents, both parents and CWS staff. In those cases where a particular construction was predominantly held by the parent group or the CWS staff, that is identified.

## **Major Categories**

### ***Personal Spiritual/Religious Experience***

One of the major factors related to cultural competence is the ability to acknowledge and understand one's own values, beliefs and worldview. One of the questions asked of each respondent addressed their own personal experience with spirituality/religion. Several constructions emerged. The first related to how the respondents were socialized or raised in a spiritual/religious context, the next construction related to their current spiritual/religious experience and a third that emerged was how they socialize or raise their own children regarding spiritual/religious values and beliefs. A separate category was created for the role that spirituality/religion played in parenting and child rearing. The category of personal spiritual/religious experience is defined as those codes related to the respondents personal upbringing and current experience with religion and spirituality (see Table 1).

Most of the respondents interviewed had some experience growing up in a religious tradition. Almost all reported growing up in a Christian tradition. The degree to which they continued those religious practices however varied widely. For example, one

Table 1

*Major Categories and Open Codes*

Personal Spiritual/Religious Experience	Spirituality/Religion and Parenting	Defining Spirituality/Religion	Functions of Spirituality/Religion and Belief
<p>Personal experience. Religious upbringing. Spirituality lived out. Spirituality part of my identity.</p>	<p>CWS needs to know client and child's religious background. Important for CWS to know values, beliefs on child rearing Important to ask families and youth about religious beliefs. Religion and parenting. Religious practices encouraged for children in foster care.</p>	<p>Belief in greater/higher power. Definition of religion spirituality. Definition of religion depends on the religion you practice. No distinction between religion and spirituality. Religion institutional. Religion involves practices. Religion is an organization. Religion is formal. Religion is manmade. Religion is structure. Spirituality and energy humanness. Spirituality and reconciling good and evil. Spirituality and religion connected. Spirituality and religion go hand in hand. Spirituality beliefs without doctrines, regulations. Spirituality deeper than religion. Spirituality had depth, interactive. Spirituality internal, religion external. Spirituality is personal. Spirituality is relationship to creator. Spirituality is relationship with God. Spirituality part of my identity. Spirituality provides moral support. Spirituality undisciplined belief. We are spiritual beings.</p>	<p>Attributed recovery to Gods intervention. Belief changes behavior. Belief gave discernment, wisdom. Belief gives peace. Belief in Christ gives insight into others. Belief increased sense of responsibility. Belief provides guidance. Belief provides purpose. Belief provides security. Belief provides strength. Church provides caring community. Church provides energy and help. Church provides social support system. Church provides support, valued rituals. Church providing programs and tools. Empower through religion. God equips us for service. God is a problem solver. Pray for guidance in my work. Prayer and faith for protection on job. Pray for protection in my work. Religion as a source of comfort. Religion gives direction. Religion guides decision making. Religion keeps me grounded. Religion provides social support. Religious beliefs as motivation for CWS. Spirituality as a compass. Spirituality is a resource. Spirituality part of my identity. Spirituality provides moral support. Use of my spirituality in encouraging clients.</p>

Table 1. *Continued.*

Spirituality/Religion and African American Culture	Spirituality/Religion and Engagement	Spirituality/Religion and Assessment	Spirituality/Religion and Placement
<p>African American families bring up religious beliefs.                      African Americans often spiritual, not religious.                      Importance of church to African American families.                      Most African American families deeply religious.                      Reasons for misconceptions about religion for African Americans.                      Religion highly important to African American families.                      Spirituality a source of identity for African Americans.</p>	<p>Asking about spirituality would increase sense of concern for client.                      Asking about spirituality would increase trust and comfort.                      Assessment of religious spiritual beliefs may help establish connection.                      Building rapport talking about client's religion.                      Christian families need Christian SW.                      Connection between social worker and client increases motivation.                      Fuller understanding of client as a person.                      Help through building trust.                      Impact of CWS asking about spirituality.                      Importance of engagement.                      Importance of tapping into clients support, strength.                      Knowing and building on families strengths.                      Religious conversation opens up to other supports.                      SW who did ask about spirituality effected respect.                      Spiritual beliefs in family engagement.                      Taking families religious beliefs into account.                      Use of my spirituality in encouraging clients.                      Workers need to know clients and situation.</p>	<p>Asking about religion helps establish community partners or supports.                      Asking about spirituality would increase sense of concern for client.                      Asking about support connection in assessment.                      Asking about spirituality would increase trust and comfort.                      Assessing for religion not offensive.                      Assessing for spirituality/religion at ER.                      Assessing for religion/spirituality clients right.                      Assessing for spirituality is positive.                      Assessing religion for placement of youth.                      Assessment includes questions about supports.                      Assessment of religious/spiritual beliefs may help establish connection.                      CWS did not ask about religious/spiritual beliefs or upbringing.                      CWS needs to know about persons religious beliefs                      CWS didn't really assess fully.                      Expectation to ask or assess about religion.                      Holistic assessment.                      Impact of CWS asking about spirituality.                      Important to ask families and youth about religious beliefs.                      Inclusion of religious assessment part of assessing family.                      Relevance of religious questions for CWS.                      Religion/spirituality in assessment.                      Religious assessment increases social worker effectiveness.                      Social work experience impacts religious assessment.                      Spirituality assessment impact on placement.                      Spirituality questions would have improved assessment.                      Time barrier to asking additional questions about support.</p>	<p>Assessing religion for placement of youth.                      Church as a placement resource.                      Concern with religious/spiritual values of foster parents.                      Concerns about placement with non-believer.                      CWS staff didn't consider placement appropriateness.                      Foster parent's religious beliefs different from youth.                      Knowing religious beliefs of children's family and foster family.                      Matching children with same religion foster care.                      Religious practices encouraged for children in foster care.</p>

Table 1. *Continued.*

Spirituality/Religion and Services	Concerns	Social Worker Skills
Agency flexibility in providing non-traditional services. Church partners at TDM changing attitudes. Church providing programs and tools. Concern that faith community services don't meet standards. Culturally relevant, culturally specific services. Faith based or spiritually driven service providers. Faith based organizations as a resource. Faith based services would increase level of trust. Faith community providing concrete supports. Finding out religious beliefs aid in service provision. Found own faith based services. Importance of praying in counseling. Knowledge of religious beliefs to refer to religious support groups. Minister can't provide counseling unless licensed. Offer of faith based services. Referral to faith based services. Religious based counseling would have helped. Spiritual based services found effective. Work and support needed by faith based organizations.	Bad idea to include religion in social work practice. Concern some workers may find inappropriate to discuss spirituality. Barriers to prevent change in practice. Client complaints. Resistance to including spirituality in CWS practice. Careful not to put spirituality on others. Concern about liability as a barrier. Concern about assessing religious beliefs at ER. Concern about client' reaction to bringing up faith, spirituality. Concern for worker bias. Concern about religious beliefs that are against personal beliefs. Clients beliefs against workers beliefs. Concern of closing opportunities to faith partners. Concern religious assessment questions might open can of worms. Concern that many CWS workers don't have social work education. Concern that social workers not trained in spiritual assessment. Concern that social workers will use religion as a weapon. Concerns in incorporating religion or spirituality into CW practice. Don't bring up religion to clients. Proselytizing.	Comfort in talking about religion. CWS staff didn't consider placement appropriateness. CWS staff didn't really assess fully. Education/ knowledge about various religions needed. Effective use of spirituality/religion in SW practice. Impact of SW beliefs and values. Importance of tapping into clients support strengths. Knowing and building on families strengths. Need for guidelines. Relevance of religious questions for CWS. Role of social work education. Social work experience impacts religious assessment. Social workers lack of spiritual sensitivity impacts case outcome. System perspective to family should include spirituality. Ways to incorporate religion or /spirituality in practice. What social workers need.

African American parent stated, *“I was raised in the church, my mother loved the Lord and I don't think there was a day in the week that I wasn't at the church house. She was a very spiritual woman, but my daddy, he didn't too much care for it but my mother, she kept us in church. I was raised in the church, we went to bible study, we went to choir practice we went to church on Sundays, twice.”* About her current religious practice, this parent stated *“I know that sometimes I need to congregare with other members of the*

*church, but not all the time.” (BP02) One of the child welfare staff had a similar outlook. “I was raised very Catholic. I went to Catholic school, Catholic high school. Confession every Saturday, church every Sunday, the priest was over for dinner every Sunday; a very, very Catholic family... So I remember starting to question, you know, like this isn’t making sense... I was done with my Catholicism. But I still have a spiritual belief.”(CWS05)*

Other respondents indicated that they had a rich religious experience growing up that they continue to live by the religious beliefs and values they were raised with. *“I am a Christian... I’m non-denominational; I’ve been a believer since I was a child.” (BP10) “Yes, I am a practicing Catholic. I raised my children Catholic. My oldest is in catechism, meaning church preparation to receive communion. So she has to have special education to understand what that sacrament means and I have to have some periphery education to remind me of what that sacrament means. And I attend mass regularly.” (CWS03)*

Several respondents reported that their spirituality or spiritual beliefs and values were important in defining who they were and how they lived their lives, including how they do their work. *“[I am] still a very spiritual person. I definitely believe that all things come through a higher power. That really plays an important role in my life and what keeps me going.” (CWS07) “I don’t know that I could do this job without relying on my spiritual walk with Jesus Christ.” (CWS06) “I think it ended up being the core of who I am and the core of how I think and the decisions I’ve made and the priorities I’ve set.” (CWS08)*

### *Spirituality/Religion and Parenting*

This category is defined as those comments that describe the role that spirituality/religion plays in raising children (see Table 1). One consistent theme with a majority of the respondents who were parents, whether they were CWS staff or former clients was the importance of imparting religious or spiritual values to their children. This category was particularly important to include because the work of child welfare is to assist parents in improving their parenting capacity and responsibility. Tapping into the particular values and beliefs that are important for parents in raising their children may assist in understanding inconsistencies and motivating families to change. For many parents instilling spiritual/religious beliefs and values was a priority. One parent stated *“I taught my kids about God and how to read the Bible, they go to church every Sunday still. And they know pretty much a lot about the Bible, they understand it pretty well. That’s one thing that I do recommend that all parents should teach their children.”*(BP04) Another parent said *“It is extremely important in my life and in how I raise my kids. It is the number one priority. We’ve got to have Jesus. The number two priority is education. They’ve got to have Jesus and they’ve got to have an education. It is very important to me.”* (BP06) *“And in raising my own kids, it was important for me, for them to have that. Cause for me it set a core foundation for values, beliefs, traditions and customs that will be their strength, regardless of whether they are a Catholic or a Baptist, or a Christian or whatever they want to call themselves they still have those core values and core strength that they can always rely on and feel that sense of security.”* (CWS010)

Even for those parents who did not participate in a particular religious community or practice, the values and beliefs generated from their spiritual or religious background were important to communicate to their children. *“I don’t make it a point to really teach my kids the religion aspect of it, what I do is try and teach them right from wrong and to teach them follow their own conscience,”*(CWS14)

Several of the parents who had been involved with child welfare services indicated that knowing the religious beliefs and practices of the children or youth involved in the case is also important for child welfare workers. *“They need to know about what their backgrounds are, what type of religion they came from”* (BP01) *“I think they should ask because say you detain some children out of a Christian home and you put them in a home where there is a totally different belief.”* (BP02)

### ***Defining Religion and Spirituality***

One of the objectives of this study was to clarify how religion and spirituality were defined by the respondents. There was discussion in the literature that though these terms are often used interchangeably they may be seen as very distinct from one another or very much the same. In order to fully understand what the inclusion of spirituality or religion might look like in practice, each respondent was asked to define religion and spirituality, and to describe whether they saw them as different or the same. This category is defined as including those codes defining religion or spirituality and how they are the same or different (see Table 1).

One of the three constructions that emerged in this category was that there was no difference between religion and spirituality. For several respondents it was the same. *“To*

*me they are one and the same” (BP02) “I see them as the same. I know I have friends that see them differently.”(BP08)*

For those who described them as different but connected the terms were described as married, going hand in hand, or to a deeper or lesser degree than the other. *“They are close, but a little different. Religion could refer to denominations, but I don’t define it by that. Spirituality is about am I really connected to Jesus. It is about a connection to God, what some would call a higher power, but who I call God or Jesus. You can be religious and not have a connection with God or you can be like Oprah, who has some spirituality, but says she has no religion.”(BP06) “I guess when I think of spirituality I think of someone who is maybe in a little bit deeper place in their religion. So I guess I do see them more married then two separate things, but maybe a deeper level of commitment.”(CWS02)*

For those respondent’s who saw religion and spirituality as distinct, they defined religion as formal, structured, manmade, institutional and about rules and regulations. Spirituality was defined as a personal and private connection with God, with the creator, with others or with the universal spiritual aspect of humanity. *“I think religion, to me religion symbolizes an organized structure. Religion to me means structure a type of, when I think of the word religion it makes me think of either you’re a Baptist or you’re a Catholic or you’re a Lutheran or you’re a Mormon, it provides structure. It’s more institutional, where spirituality is more of a personal thing where what you believe, how you worship, how you pray, how you internalize that is more personal.” (CWS010)*  
*“Spirituality is my relationship with the creator and everyone else on the planet; that for*

*me is spirituality, so...meditation, connection to the earth, being a listener not a judge.”*  
(CWS04)

### ***Function of Religion, Spirituality and Belief***

Relevant to the inclusion of spirituality/religion in the engagement, assessment and intervention with African American families was what respondents constructed as the function of religion, spirituality and belief systems both for their own lives, and from a CWS staff perspective, for their clients. More than how these concepts are defined, this category indicates those comments about the role or function that religion, spirituality or belief plays for an individual or group. The function of religion included organized religion and the “church” which had several functions. Some of the functions of the church or faith community described by respondents was that it provides community, social support, a place where major life events occur, relief, love, nurturance, understanding, a sense of family, a social network, standards for living, energy, motivation, accountability, and concrete services like parenting, counseling, food and mentoring (see Table 1). *“We go to the parks and stuff and help feed the homeless and stuff and my kids they like helping like that and so they are like really, really caring.”*(BP07) *“Usually, they’ll say well I’ll talk to my minister, this is what they say to me, or I have a church friend, or a member. The church is helping me, they are providing me with extra food or support.”*(CWS10) *“I’d like to see workers using the religious connection; to tie the family into, not only services, but a sense of support in the community.”*(CWS07)

This category also includes a major construction that emerged regarding how religion allows others to find and maintain connections with others. Though this fits with social support, the sense of connection went beyond social support to relationship. *“To explore with them what kind of connections they have at church, with the congregation, with the minister.”*(CWS02) *“Religion could be a tool for them to feel connected, open, trusting and allow them to get beyond this place where they need government intervention in their life.”*(CWS04) *“We can go all the way back and I don’t think the message has changed in terms of what people get from that connection. I don’t think that will ever go away. I think that it will always be needed, and I think that it will always be something that African-American people will connect to.”*(CWS08)

Separate from the church, religion was seen as providing purpose, motivation, guidance, direction, power and protection to believers. *“I mean I think that is the highest guide that I use for my life and in making decisions whether it be personal or work related.”*(CWS02) *“I feel that if people have problems they need to go through God because he’s the only one who is going to fix it for you.”*(BP08) *“Most of the workers who do this job have some belief or faith that if I help you this day, somebody will be touched and somebody will be changed.”*(CWS10)

For respondents who defined spirituality as different from religion, they indicated that spirituality provided them with a sense of identity, a personal or internal resource and source of direction for right and wrong, an internal compass, and the external strength needed for recovery. *“So me and spirituality, I believe in the Lord, I know there’s a God, I really do, I mean cause, somebody drug me back from the gates of hell. I was a drug addict so I know there’s somebody bigger than me out there.”*(BP02) *“When CPS gets*

*into your life that's serious and the first thing we do is reach out for help. And spirituality that would be the first.”(BP04) “My spiritual development plays a key role in who I am, my identity.”(CWS15)*

Related to both religion and spirituality many respondents talked about faith, belief in God or Christ, rather than a particular religion, church or behavior. Belief in God or Christ or a higher power according to respondents provided strength, security, motivation and ability to change behavior and lifestyle, guidance, purpose and assistance or help. *“What I think did not change was my belief in probably a higher power that has the ability to provide strength.”(CWS010) “I believe in Jesus Christ. It gave me more of a peace and it also gave me to have discernment of choices, by me receiving Christ, it taught me how to be responsible.”(BP01)*

### ***Spirituality/Religion in the African American Culture***

A second skill or knowledge area related to cultural competence is having some understanding of the cultural beliefs and values of the groups of people that you are working with. In this case CWS staff was asked about their understanding of the role spirituality/religion plays in the African American culture. This category was defined as including codes related to perceptions about African Americans and their spirituality or religious beliefs or values (see Table 1).

There were two main constructions expressed about the role of religion and spirituality for African Americans. One was that religion in the African American community is unique in terms of their connection to the church, the mode of worship and expectation to share their faith. The other was that African Americans are spiritual or

have a strong belief in God even if they are not connected to organized religion or church.

Several respondents described their belief or perhaps assumption that African Americans were deeply religious and spiritual. Even if they had no direct knowledge of this, respondents indicated that this seemed to be a generalization they understood from the media. Others reported their belief that church affiliation and participation was important to African Americans particularly. Another idea was that for African Americans the sharing of their religious values and beliefs was important. *“I don’t believe a lot of African Americans have a connection with organized religion, but they might be spiritual in the sense that they believe in God and they pray and they have certain superstitions, and certain traditions and customs...Spirituality is very prevalent and I believe that it is a source of identity for a lot of African Americans.”*(CWS15) *“I view the African American community as much more; the religion aspect to be the; institutional piece of religion is much more ingrained and much more important to the AA community. Not that their not spiritual, cause they are very spiritual, but the need to attach that to an institution seems to be much more important. There’s much more, I think the AA community is much more, I think their perspective on sharing with others their spirituality or their affiliation to religion is different than mine.”*(CWS010) *“The role religion plays among blacks is very important. The churches, religion or spirituality, was and is the basis of the stability in the black community. There is a measure of respect demonstrated whenever the black community is in trouble, the church or the pastors or the leaders of our spiritual organizations are the ones who sued, they marry our kids,*

*they bury our love ones, they appear at court with us. They do the dirty work between us and law enforcement.”(CWS06)*

### ***Engagement***

One of the major aims of this study was to find out what role spirituality/religion could play in engaging African American families in the child welfare process. This category includes those codes referring to engagement, connection, trust, or comfort between worker and family (see Table 1). Many of the CWS staff interviewed talked about the importance of engaging with clients, of getting to know who their clients are and what they value and need. Other staff members indicated that asking about religion and spirituality is assessing for strengths. *“I think the social worker really needs to be in tune with their client, and their needs, and who they are, and who (they’re) connected to. I think it’s incumbent upon the social worker best case practice to know your families that you would know what is important to your moms, and your dads, and your kids. And knowing that, build upon that strength.”(CWS13)* *“The actual practice of social work and where that touches with religion, spirituality, beliefs, is really around engagement.”(CWS04)* *“That’s where their church body is. That’s where their family is, that’s where their strength is going to come from. If they’re truly grounded in their religion, it’s important for them to have that support for them to know that they’re not being failed; they’re going through a test.”(CWS16)*

For the parents, several of them indicated that if a CWS worker would have asked about their religion or spirituality it would have helped them to feel more comfortable with or trusting of their worker. *“I think they would have been more concerned about the*

*situation. I know that they are concerned about their job, but I feel they would have took it personally more concerned about our welfare instead of them just doing their job.”(BP05) “But if they would have I would have probably trusted them a little bit more and I would have felt comfortable and I wouldn’t have went through the whole thing that I went through just like being depressed because my kids were gone.”(BP07)*

Both groups indicated that gaining knowledge, connection and trust is key to engaging with and being effective with families. *“Because I think that would make it easier for parents and I think they would have a better connection and if they have a good connection with the social worker then they would probably be motivated to get their stuff done.” (BP07) “I think it would make a big impact cause if they asked they would know how to help. They would know what services that they can offer to this family to bring them together or help them out or figure out what the problem is.”(BP08) “I would like to think that that is my approach to ultimately gain trust with families so that you can help them... important that ultimately we get the information that we need and there is trust and that we are there to help... When we gain that trust, we get them to get the services they need.”(CWS09) “I try to make it a point to establish that connection from the very beginning because it makes my job easier and if addressing their spiritual, their religious beliefs and values, to me that’s part of it. Even though I’m not really religious, it doesn’t mean other people aren’t and it doesn’t mean that it’s not okay to be. So, I think it would be a good thing.”(CWS14)*

### *Assessment of Spiritual/Religious Beliefs*

Another major aim of this research was to explore the role that spirituality/religion could play in the process of assessment (asking the questions and collecting the data that will assist in with effective decision making) for African American families, especially in terms of demonstrating cultural competence and a strength based practice approach. This category is defined by those codes that refer to asking families about their spiritual/religious beliefs, whether positive or negative (see Table 1).

There were several constructions that emerged regarding the assessment of spiritual/religious values and beliefs. There was agreement among all of the parents interviewed that asking about spiritual/religious values or belief was a good idea, and most parents said that it would have made the social worker more effective. Other parents indicated that if the social worker had asked about their spirituality/religion, it would have helped the worker know or understand the parent in a fuller, more human way. *“I think they should ask parents about their religious and spiritual beliefs and values and I think it would make them more effective.”*(BP06) *“Social workers would be more effective if they did ask families about their spiritual or religious beliefs as it would give them a better understanding of who the person is they are working with.”*(BP09) *“It would have changed a lot of things. It would have changed my feelings about them about the system the social service system.”*(BP08) *“I would think it would be helpful because you would know more about the person.”*(BP01)

Several parents brought up the importance of knowing the spiritual/religious values and beliefs of the family in making placement decisions. Others felt it was

important in providing or referring to effective services. Both constructions about placement and services related to spirituality/religion are treated as major categories and will be addressed more fully later in the chapter. *“I would have felt more comfortable, because if I would have really had a chance to put in a request that they go to a Christian home, because I know that they wouldn’t be mistreating them and because they think that they would get in trouble for that. But there are some people who like to, who would mistreat the kids.”*(BP07) “

Although none of the parents said that they would be offended by this assessment, some parents were wary about how a worker would use this information, especially if they did not indicate how they would use it or why it was relevant. *“I don’t see any problem with them asking, I don’t think its offensive. They are asking, they need to know. I don’t think its offensive cause if a person doesn’t want that type of help they can state that they don’t want that type of help then there is other options that they can choose. Then those people who want to should be able to and should have those options, it’s kind of fair.”*(BP08) *“I really don’t think it wouldn’t have made a difference to me. It wouldn’t compute, why are you asking me that, if I am Catholic are you going to put my kids in a Catholic home, or whatever my spirituality is are you going to place my kids in that type of setting. And I knew that wasn’t going to happen.”*(BP02) *“And so I wouldn’t want them to know my religious preference and then use that against me because they didn’t like those kind of people, and then take it out on my case.”*(BP07)

Many of the staff interviewed thought that questions about spiritual/religious values and beliefs should be part of a complete or holistic assessment. Some staff said that to ask a family about their supports systems, their coping strategies, or their

community connections as a good way to get at whether spirituality/religion is important to them. *“I think that’s an area that needs to be explored as part of your psycho-social.”*(CWS02) *“I don’t think you can do a holistic assessment on anybody without exploring those avenues.”*(CWS010) *“They could just ask directly as part of assessment. Everything we do is dependent upon a good assessment. So I think one of the things they could ask is do you practice a particular religion or do you have a spiritual orientation.”*(CWS03) *“During my assessment, I ask about any type of support systems.”*(CWS15)

For some CWS workers asking about religious or spiritual beliefs or values was not seen as appropriate or comfortable. These workers talked about the importance of how those questions were asked and at what point in the CPS process they were asked. Some stated that adding questions about religion or spiritual values at the initial ER phase was not appropriate as it is a time of maximum intrusion, of crisis and is not yet related to services or supports they may want to offer. *“I think if social workers ask what church you belong to or what’s your religion, I think I could get you hooked up. I think it could be offensive, it could backfire... I’m still a little cautious in my social work practice I have talked to clients about if you have a support system, do you go to church, do you have strength there, do you have connections that you can lean on, but I would always be very cautious about getting into discussions about religion or spiritual beliefs. I would always be cautious about that.”*(CWS05) *“No. I don’t want to. It’s a slippery slope. I think especially for social workers, it kinda begs to the separation of church and state. You never know how clients are going to take it if you go out there and you talk about your faith, or your spirituality, or what have you. And they maybe don’t see eye to eye,*

*they can report back, they can make a complaint about you, it's just easier not to. I think we're kinda sublimely told not to.”(CWS13) “I think once the ER worker starts shifting more from the investigation to services and support, and then I think it goes into that. I just think we're that cold knock at the door, there's just so much, people get defensive, and sometimes the ER workers are with law enforcement or Department of Public Health, there's just a lot of folks that could be there, it would be a tough time at that point. But then as the referral gets older, and say we're closing it out, then I think there would be that opportunity at the end of it.”(CWS11) “As far as time management goes, though, having the time to really delve into all of that and where they go and who their support is, is sometimes difficult. And I think that's something that we don't always have the time to do.”(CWS12)*

A final piece about asking about spirituality/religion that several CWS staff brought up was being able to educate social work staff that these questions were relevant to assessing the family and are not taboo. *“I think it's important for social workers to feel free to pose the question about religion and spirituality without feeling that that is taboo, because if it is part of your life, you take it for granted. If social workers have the permission and the training to say if someone isn't coming up with strengths to say, here are some of the avenues you can check – what's your extended family like, what are your spiritual beliefs? Not making that something that's taboo or you can't ask.”(CWS04) “I think they would have to know the purpose; to understand how to engage the conversation and be consistent.”(CWS05) “I feel that is important to ask because that is establishing a community partner in the way the county view this, so I don't feel like I'm*

*blurring any boundaries when I'm asking because that is a community partner and we do reach out to churches and things like that because that's important.”(CWS16)*

### ***Placement***

One of the categories that emerged initially from parents was the importance of understanding or asking about spirituality/religion for purposes of placement and particularly for parents, for purposes of reunification. This category is defined as those codes related to foster care, placement of children, religion or spirituality in making placement decisions (see Table 1).

As indicated, several parents stated that knowing the spiritual/religious values and practices of the family would be an important part of deciding an appropriate placement for their children. *“Placing kids in a home some people have their different beliefs, and some people don't want their kids to eat certain meats, they need to know.”(BP01)* *“I think they should ask because say you detain some children out of a Christian home and you put them in a home where there is a totally different belief.”(BP02)* *“Social workers should ask parents what is important to them and if religion is important, they should match the kids with foster families with like religious beliefs.”(BP06)* *“I would have felt more comfortable, because if I would have really had a chance to put in a request that they go to a Christian home, because I know that they wouldn't be mistreating them and because they think that they would get in trouble for that... I wouldn't think that they would be abusive and cause I think like Christians, they care more. And they're really sensitive and they don't believe in abusiveness. Like when I go to church everybody there*

*they're like so nice and quiet, they talk real soft and their sweet. People who don't have any religious preference they are like mean and they don't care about anything.”(BP07)*

Additionally, some parents mentioned how a change in spiritual/religious beliefs and practices might impact their children upon returning home. *“With all these spirituality's people have different ways of living. I think they should ask. You might have a child that comes up in a home is a certain way. They have been raised a certain way when it comes to spirituality and then you put them in a home where it's totally different. And that's confusing you know. And then when you get them back it's extra hard. Not only do you have to build a relationship with the kids, but now you have to deprogram them.”(BP02)* *“Because we go to church and he loves church, he loves gospel music. And of course, I would want him in a home, if he had gotten removed, that pretty much thought like I did... Yes, not an atheist and not believing at all and then, I get him back and he's a different child.”(BP10)*

Some CWS staff stated that it would be important to ask both the parents and the children or youth especially when considering out of home placement. *“You know, because there are some that are Catholic, some that are Seventh Day Adventist, and it's important to know where you're placing if the practices are going to be different. There are some that are Jewish that have different eating habits, different beliefs, different cultures.”(CWS16)* *“I think it important that we talk to families about religion or other practices, but I think it's important to talk to older children, also to ask them as well. Because they may not believe the same or want to be involved, or they may have a different belief system. I've found that sometimes foster parents may be of a different religion, and not force it on a child but ask them if they want to go. And I've talked to*

*some kids and teenagers, too, that it's not that they have to change their beliefs or religion, but it's interesting to watch that they have an interest in learning about different religions, and some kids it helps really helps them a lot. I think that's important."*(CWS12).

### ***Services***

The role of spirituality/religion in the intervention process includes the provision of services that are culturally specific or appropriate. The constructions that emerged around the issue of how faith or religious based services could, should, or should not be used or referred to as a resource were grouped into the category of services (see Table 1).

Several of the parents indicated that referral to services that were religiously based or from their church would have been helpful. *"Them finding out about whether I was religious or not, it would kind of help them give me services...by them knowing most religions have different support groups, they could be able to send them or refer them to a religious support groups."*(BP01) *"I called and found somewhere to go. Because I wanted to go through a religious counseling because you pray, you need to pray together, your family your coming back together and you need to pray together and they didn't offer[that]. If the family chooses to go through a religious person, they should let them do marriage and family counseling through a religious organization, because that helps."*(BP08)

Several staff indicated that when the family is able to go to services that they can connect to culturally or in their religious community it is often most effective. *"Services that the church offers to particular members that could serve as a support to*

*them.”(CWS02) “I think that the services have to be relevant to the African American community and that they have to be culturally appropriate so that you can teach parents how to get the same message across to their kids but in a different way.”(CWS010) “The only times I really saw people change and grow accept responsibility and move forward is if it really fit with their belief system. Things that really fit with peoples’ culture, belief system, families, what they bring into the world and what means something to them, that’s what is important to them.”(CWS04)*

CWS staff indicated that support services and concrete services were among those that the church or faith community offers and can provide. They also stated that the use of the faith community and religious leaders in TDM's has opened the door for more of these partnerships. *“Resources, food and bedding, counseling, it depends what the church offers, what their religion offers. There’s financial assistance there. If someone has a home that isn’t appropriate, someone can come help them clean, if they can’t pay a utility bill, the church will help you know, there’s resources.”(CWS16) “We have some churches that want to provide the service in their own facilities, not only engaging in helping with the support of the family, but they want to engage in support of the community. And, from a child welfare standpoint, we need to allow that.”(CWS08) “Now with TDM’s community, it’s kind of like the curtain’s been raised and also with the spirituality, that was been lifted because we have made church’s one of our number one community members, and that’s also changing the views.”(CWS11) “We’re very very active about going out to the churches and getting the churches involved in their community and I thought that was a great resource for families, it still remains a good resource for families. I think that’s a valuable.”(CWS13)*

With regard to some of the changes that need to occur within the system, CWS staff talked about the need for the agency and the court to be more flexible about what services are suitable for families when they are not standard contracted services. *“Most times they would like to see their minister, but their minister is not a licensed therapist, then I have to explain because they’re not licensed therapists we can’t use them.”*(CWS10) *“Sometimes when churches offer service- I think sometimes there’s a thought that it’s not going to be comparable to maybe a service that’s provided by a private agency or maybe a vendor or what have you. And then in some cases it might not be, but maybe we can share with that local church or someone at the facility that this is what we need to meet our court mandates.”*(CWS08) *“We have to learn to accept that that’s going to get them further and that’s going to make their kids safer in the long run than any contracted service that we can come up with. So being open and flexible in letting the family have a role in what’s going to help them.”*(CWS04)

CWS staff identified other work that needed to be done in this area including the need to inform staff of options and resources available in the faith community, and to provide those faith communities with support. These issues are addressed in the concerns and social work skills categories.

### ***Concerns***

In addressing the practice and policy implications of this research it was important to explore what stakeholders would identify as concerns or barriers to including questions about or the discussion of spirituality/religion into child welfare practice particularly with African Americans. The major category called concerns is defined as those codes that

refer to concerns or possible barriers to having workers ask families about their religious or spiritual beliefs or values (see Table 1).

Several major constructions emerged in this category, particularly from CWS staff as they thought about including questions about spirituality/religion into their practice. These constructs included concerns about boundaries, either personal/professional boundaries or church/state boundaries; concerns about appropriate guidelines, accountability and administrative direction and support; concerns about worker bias and concerns about readiness to work with community partners.

In the area of personal and professional boundaries, staff were concerned that there may be workers who would cross the line in terms of proselytizing clients. *“The other side of that is now being in charge of people, you have to make sure that their not pushing upon the clients their beliefs of how God and religion enters both. And so it was a learning experience, you know the difference between proselytizing and meeting the clients where they are at.”*(CWS03) *“I do know some people who feel so strongly about their religion that maybe they would cross that boundary.”*(CWS16) *“I belong to some organization that I want you, for the help that I’m going to give you, to come to church this week-end. And that implication is broad. When you come to church, somebody is going to appeal to you.”*(CWS06)

Several CWS workers voiced a concern that discussion about religion or spiritual values might cross church and state boundaries. *“Back then, I would have been deathly afraid to engage in that conversation. I think the overlay for us in CW, being a governmental organization, is that never shall that conversation be stated, whether it’s an elephant in the room and stomping all on top of you or not. I think that it was just a*

*way too politically touchy or something like that for just a lowly social worker trying to learn the trade at that time to be bold enough to assess for that at the time. To me it was very taboo.”(CWS03) “I think it was always drilled into our heads that you separate government and religion, you know, if you were in the private sector, you could maybe mix the two, but there has to be separation between the two. It was always the way it was taught to me.”(CWS05) “The same argument that says you are mixing church and state.”(CWS06) “And another point, I think some people on our staff do believe that there needs to be a clear delineation between government and religion and so I’m sure that, I don’t know how prevalent it is, but I’m sure that belief is out there as well.”(CWS02)*

Some CWS staff were concerned that some clients might be offended and complain about being asked about their religion or spirituality. *“My concerns would be on the staff’s ability to do that and to be comfortable and then how they would handle any kind of negative reaction about a question that they’d be asked about that. Especially if it’s negative to the point that it rises to a complaint that goes all the way. Because you know you can try it once and it rises all the way up to a complaint that goes to administration and then you’ll never try it again.”(CWS010) “You never know how clients are going to take it if you go out there and you talk about your faith, or your spirituality, or what have you. And they maybe don’t see eye to eye, they can report back, they can make a complaint about you, it’s just easier not to. I think we’re kind of sublimely told not to.”(CWS13)*

Another area of concern was CWS workers religious bias and how that might impact the work with the family. This was a concern regarding workers who were not religious or didn't value religion, and for workers who were religious and couldn't value

religious or spiritual beliefs or values different from their own. Parent concerns indicated that this bias might negatively impact their case. *“And so I wouldn’t want them to know my religious preference and then use that against me because they didn’t like those kind of people, and then take it out on my case and make it harder for me so in a way it’s kind of good for them to keep their confidentiality, but if it’s something in common and it can be brought out that’s good too .”*(BP07) *“Sometimes you could see that the social worker, who you know has a strong religious commitment would have a very negative view about a client particularly around sexual mores and such things, and you start to wonder can this client be successful even when they do all the right things.”*(CWS03) *“Someone will make a comment or roll their eyes, or question someone’s integrity to their faith. ‘you’re a devout Muslim, you’re getting high, I’ve got your positive results right here’.”*(CWS07) *“Bias is a reality. I think that that would be my biggest concern in just making sure that we constantly educate our line workers that when they are operating particularly in some form of bias. I think that if we don’t deal with the bias and acknowledge that it’s there, I don’t think we’re going to be able to bridge that gap, without dealing with that part of it. We’ve barely scratched the surface when it comes to racial barriers and biases. So, I don’t think we’ve even got to spiritual or religious biases. We haven’t even got to that point yet. So I think that that would be a barrier.”*(CWS08) *“There is going to be a percentage of social workers who from their own beliefs, their own experiences, who anything that has religious, spiritual, they’re going to push back and they’re not going to want to be involved with it.”*(CWS11)

Some CWS staff voiced the concern that both the faith community and the department would need to be ready to work together as partners. *“You know, you tap into*

*these folks and they have a wealth of ideas and a wealth of experience so they ask a lot of questions and they have a lot of great ideas. Most of which I have to say no to, because my system can't support their interests. So when you create a partnership that's not just about what they can do for us it's also about what we can do for them, creating that balance is hard and it takes a lot of extra energy. The faith based community wants to help and they have ideas too, and we need to be very respectful of their ideas and we need to say yes to some of them even if it's inconvenient to us.”(CWS03) “Again if we're talking about a bunch of different churches, another barrier would be how do you manage it? It's not like a licensed therapist, who has to have their license and you know that they are legit. How do you kind of know that they're not going to do anything damaging.” (CWS05) “If we trench back from these partners, I think it would take us a generation. That's one of my biggest fears that if we open all these doors and then if we go back to kind of closing it up, those guys are not going to forget.”(CWS11)*

Finally, there was concern that staff does not have the time, training, education or cultural knowledge to have those discussions. These concerns were more fully captured in the social worker skills category. *“I think the other piece that social workers aren't prepared, absolutely their not prepared. And at an agency level, we can do all we can at an agency level to try to say it ok to do this and to build it into the work we do and train our social workers and model it for them and work with our community partners and develop resources that are specific to the AA community.”(CWS010) “That a lot of Social Workers are not trained in that realm.”(CWS15) “So I'm concerned not only with their comfort in asking the questions but then what to do with it, how to follow up with*

*that information. Going beyond the simple, you should go to church or, or something superficial like that.”(CWS02) “So the barrier is time.”(CWS04)*

### ***Social Work Skills***

This final major category is defined as including those comments referring to skills, training, education or perspective needed or desired for CWS workers to be more culturally competent in regard to spiritual/religious issues for families. Parents and CWS staff identified areas that they felt were lacking based on their own experience or observation. They identified the knowledge and skills that would need to be developed or addressed in order to effectively change practice. They also identified several systemic changes that were needed (see Table 1).

Several parents identified that CWS workers needed to conduct a full assessment of the family situation, including being open to spiritual/religious values and beliefs, and CWS workers needed to make sure they had the information necessary to make the most appropriate placements.. *“They used what other people said, you know instead of really looking in the situation.”(BP01) “I don’t know why the social worker doesn’t believe that. I don’t even know what religion she is, but I don’t think we’re on the same page, cause she should know what spirit is, but she didn’t, now she thinks I’m crazy so now my case is a whole lot harder.” (BP07) “They didn’t put my children in homes where the people were stable.”(BP01)*

From the CWS staff, some of the skills identified include education and training about various religions and spiritual beliefs as an aspect of cultural competence and knowledge. *“Just like you would get more information to understand a culture or to*

*understand the dynamics of an ethnic group, I think the same holds true for the spiritual or religious realm. Getting more information to understand it and then that way you can be able to assist better, having more knowledge about it. So I think addressing the bias, getting more understanding and education about it would be our current barriers.”(CWS08) “The education part is a big thing, because when you meet a family, like the other day I met with Jehovah Witness’ and because I don’t know anything about that religion, only what I’ve seen on TV or those coming to my door, I don’t know what questions to ask. You don’t know what is respectful and what isn’t. And that’s something that education would be good for. Then now you feel more comfortable about how to address them. Then there are a lot of Asian families and different religions, so part of that is being comfortable because you know the boundaries and what to ask and not be disrespectful to people because then they’ll shut it all down.”(CWS12)*

Getting support and experience in becoming comfortable and competent in assessing client spiritual/religious strengths and needs was another need expressed. *“If social workers have the permission and the training to say if someone isn’t coming up with strengths to say, here are some of the avenues you can check – what’s your extended family like, what are your spiritual beliefs. Not making that something that’s taboo or you can’t ask.”(CWS04) “When I was a line worker, it really wasn’t encouraged to have a lot of conversation about religious beliefs and really dig in and explore to see what the support might be there. It really wasn’t taken advantage of the way that it could be...It is a sensitive and difficult conversation. So there needs to be the support and an investment in training.”(CWS07) “Then ask them about when things go wrong when you don’t feel that there’s anyone there for you, what you draw on, how you cope. Are you religious,*

*are you spiritual, what are some of the things that you do as a family to basically keep you intact.”(CWS10) “It starts with the social worker, it starts with having a true curiosity about who you’re with and then a true like for them and a desire for them to be the best that they can be and do the best that they can do; and that’s not something we teach.”(CWS13)*

Information about what supports and services are available and clear guidelines around boundaries, the purpose of assessment and the use of those faith-based services was another need identified by CWS staff. *“The faith based community wants to help. It is part of their defining mission, at least the ones that I’m working with. Helping fellow man to better their lives is part of their defining mission... But then they can sort of surround the family, our families are isolated, they’re in terrible neighborhoods, they are dysfunctional and they love their children and most of them want to get better. When the faith based group can come around them and offer support and invite them to dinner, or take them to church and they can be around other people that have been successful... they can get their heads going in the right direction and start being successful again, raise those children well. They don’t feel so isolated, they have support, there’s somebody to call at 10 o’clock at night if they don’t call their sponsor, they can call another person and get that support. That’s how I see it, little things that add up, little things that keep people sober, whatever it takes to break up the cycle. Sometimes they give them cribs cause poverty and child welfare, we can’t get the two unhitched, baby clothes, maybe they pay for the kid to be involved in summer soccer.”(CWS03) “To have those services, though not the traditional services, but services that are within the church and to maybe have a liaison from the church to us rather than us calling the parenting*

*class about how are they doing, but somehow having more of a friendly connection and maybe it doesn't have to be a licensed therapist doing this, it doesn't have to be a five week parenting class, but getting some of those services in the community in the church and being flexible and non-traditional services and they can be on our case plan.”(CWS05) “My concern would be that social workers would really have to understand this. I think they would have to know the purpose; to understand how to engage the conversation and be consistent. I just think there needs to be some understanding of what, how and why we need to do this. So I think it would have to be a gradual, thoughtful kind of a roll-out, if it became division wide that we were doing this.”(CWS05) “Well I think we'll definitely need some guidelines. Maybe this is what's appropriate, this is what's inappropriate. When you meet with the family, kind of like Social Work 101, be where the client is and it can help the client say this is saying this is a part of my life, that's the time to tap into it”(CWS11)*

Finally, several staff stated that social workers would need help in removing systemic barriers in order to provide what will work best for families. *“Social workers need all those other barriers removed. First they need to be ready to do it and then they need to have the barriers removed so they can do the job.”(CWS04) “So when we meet these people who come here for our help, remember where you came from... People come in here at different times when things go wrong. If you see there is something they need and you have it, don't wait for them to ask you.”(CWS06) “The biggest barrier is just having a lack of guidance and support in just taking our first step because it's such a difficult conversation to initiate for some people.”(CWS07)*

## **Comprehensive Group Member Check**

As part of the constructivist methodology, the final comprehensive group member check was held to share the draft of major constructions, determine and negotiate joint constructions and establish a plan for action based on major findings. It is referred to as a comprehensive group member check because the results of all of the constructions from all of the participants are shared with the group for the first time. Individual member checks had previously occurred with participants confirming their constructions as accurate. Major constructions were presented with information about those where there was agreement and those where there was not agreement (see Table 2). All 26 study participants were mailed invitations to the group member check. The group meeting was held at a church in the Moreno Valley community, as that was the community the focus of the study was on. One parent and six CWS staff attended the group member check. The major constructions were described with examples of each shared. The group was presented with areas where there was agreement or shared constructs, as well as the categories where there were different or conflicting perspectives. Though there was no further negotiation of constructions where there was not agreement at the group member check, the discussion that occurred during the meeting indicated that sharing the constructions with the group led to increased understanding and appreciation of differing perspectives and the group confirmed that the research presented an accurate portrayal of participant constructions.

Table 2

*Joint Constructions presented at Group Member Check*

Major Categories	Agreed Upon Constructs	Disagreements
Spiritual/Religious Experience	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>⊙ Almost all those interviewed had some spiritual/religious upbringing.</li> <li>⊙ That spiritual/religious upbringing impacted current spiritual/religious expression.</li> <li>⊙ How that upbringing impacted current spiritual/religious expression varied by person.</li> </ul>	
Spirituality/Religion and Parenting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>⊙ Spiritual/religious values, beliefs and practices were seen as important in raising children.</li> <li>⊙ These spiritual/religious values, beliefs and practices were seen as important in parenting in that they gave children ;( Stability, security, strength, moral guidelines, sense of thankfulness.)</li> </ul>	
Defining Spirituality/Religion		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>⊙ 3 major constructs               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Spirituality/religion the same</li> <li>▪ Spirituality/religion connected</li> <li>▪ Spirituality/religion distinct</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
Functions of Spirituality/Religion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>⊙ Organized religion or the church serves several functions;</li> <li>⊙ Social support (connection, mentoring, nurturance), soft and concrete services (counseling, education, food, clothing, etc.) rules and expectations regarding lifestyle.</li> <li>⊙ Faith or Belief;               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ strength, security, purpose, motivation, hope.</li> </ul> </li> <li>⊙ Spirituality;               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ identity, internal resource, guidance, moral compass.</li> </ul> </li> <li>⊙ Religion;               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ guides decision making, purpose, power and protection.</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	

Table 2. *Continued.*

Spirituality/Religion and African Americans	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>⦿ The African American community is unique in terms of connection to the church(organized religion)</li> <li>⦿ African Americans even when not connected to organized religion tend to be spiritual or have a strong belief in God.</li> </ul>	
Engagement and Spirituality/Religion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>⦿ Key to engaging families in CWS process includes gaining knowledge about the family, their strengths/needs, connecting with the family and building trust with the family.</li> <li>⦿ Asking the family about strengths, supports, values, which may include spirituality/religion, are some ways to engage the family.</li> </ul>	
Assessment and Spirituality/Religion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>⦿ Asking about supports, strengths is important in making a good assessment.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>⦿ Asking about spirituality/religion should be part of a holistic assessment of the family.</li> <li>⦿ Asking about spirituality/religion crosses church/state and or personal/professional boundaries.</li> </ul>
Placement and Spirituality/Religion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>⦿ Asking about the spiritual/religious beliefs and practices of the family of origin, youth and foster family may be important in making placement decisions.</li> </ul>	
Services and Spirituality/Religion		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>⦿ Church or faith based services are preferred as these services are based on a similar belief system and established trusting relationships.</li> <li>⦿ Church or faith based services may not be appropriate to provide formal services such as counseling, parenting, drug treatment.</li> <li>⦿ Work needs to be done to develop and maintain understanding and communication between CWS and faith based community.</li> </ul>

Table 2. *Continued*

Concerns	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>⊙ No concerns about CWS including spirituality/religion in their practice.</li> <li>⊙ Concerns about professional/personal and church/state boundaries.</li> <li>⊙ Concerns about worker bias.</li> <li>⊙ Concerns about system barriers(guidelines, policies, Court, admin support, liability)</li> </ul>
Social Work Skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>⊙ Additional education, training and support needed.</li> <li>⊙ Buy in regarding rationale, expectations, within and outside CWS.</li> <li>⊙ Clear guidelines, procedures, direction.</li> <li>⊙ Knowledge about available resources.</li> <li>⊙ Administrative support and flexibility.</li> </ul>

With regard to action planning, which is one of the major aims of this study and this methodology, the participants determined at that meeting that they will move forward in several ways. They agreed to continue and intensify work with members of an ongoing faith based collaborative which the child welfare agency is already a part of. Intensified work includes encouraging members of the African American faith organizations to join the collaborative. It also includes developing a resource list of services that the faith organizations currently provide and the group determined that additional services may need to be developed that would meet the needs of the families served by CWS, including the credentialed services necessary for Court mandated services. The group also agreed that further discussion, training and work with staff around engaging families in identifying strengths and supports including spirituality/religion needed to occur in the

agency. They are anticipating structural changes that they hope will allow CWS workers more time and opportunity to engage families in these types of discussions.

### **Summary**

This chapter presented the eleven major categories of constructions that emerged from the data. Findings were organized according to the interview questions and responses from the participants. Another way to organize these findings is to compare parent constructions with CWS staff constructions. Table 3 presents these major findings showing the overlap or difference between the two stakeholder groups.

The first finding indicated that most of the respondents interviewed had some experience growing up in a religious tradition. Almost all reported growing up in a Christian tradition. The degree to which they continued those religious practices however varied widely. The major constructions that emerged in this category was that religious upbringing impacted their current spiritual/religious experience, either positively such that they continue similar practices, values and beliefs currently, or negatively such that they have discovered alternative ways to express their spiritual/religious values or beliefs. For the vast majority of respondents their spiritual/religious values and beliefs continue to be important for them.

Table 3

*Parent/Staff construct comparison*

Major Categories	Parents	CWS Staff
Spiritual/Religious Experience	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>⊙ Almost all those interviewed had some spiritual/religious upbringing.</li> <li>⊙ That spiritual/religious upbringing impacted current spiritual/religious expression.</li> <li>⊙ How that upbringing impacted current spiritual/religious expression varied by person.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>⊙ Almost all those interviewed had some spiritual/religious upbringing.</li> <li>⊙ That spiritual/religious upbringing impacted current spiritual/religious expression.</li> <li>⊙ How that upbringing impacted current spiritual/religious expression varied by person.</li> </ul>
Spirituality/Religion and Parenting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>⊙ Spiritual/religious values, beliefs and practices were seen as important in raising children.</li> <li>⊙ These spiritual/religious values, beliefs and practices were seen as important in parenting in that they gave children ;( Stability, security, strength, moral guidelines, sense of thankfulness.)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>⊙ Spiritual/religious values, beliefs and practices were seen as important in raising children.</li> <li>⊙ These spiritual/religious values, beliefs and practices were seen as important in parenting in that they gave children ;(Stability, security, strength, moral guidelines.)</li> </ul>
Defining Spirituality/Religion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>⊙ 2 major constructs                             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Spirituality/religion the same</li> <li>▪ Spirituality/religion connected</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>⊙ 3 major constructs                             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Spirituality/religion the same</li> <li>▪ Spirituality/religion connected</li> <li>▪ Spirituality/religion distinct</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
Functions of Spirituality/Religion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>⊙ Organized religion or the church serves several functions;                             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Social support (connection, nurturance), counseling, rules and expectations regarding lifestyle.</li> </ul> </li> <li>⊙ Faith or Belief;                             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Strength, purpose, motivation, hope.</li> </ul> </li> <li>⊙ Religion;                             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Guides decision making, purpose, power and protection.</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>⊙ Organized religion or the church serves several functions;                             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Social support (connection, mentoring, nurturance), soft and concrete services (counseling, education, food, clothing, etc.) rules and expectations regarding lifestyle.</li> </ul> </li> <li>⊙ Faith or Belief;                             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ strength, security, purpose, motivation.</li> </ul> </li> <li>⊙ Spirituality;                             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Identity, internal resource, guidance, moral compass.</li> </ul> </li> <li>⊙ Religion;                             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Guides decision making, purpose, power and protection.</li> </ul> </li> </ul>

Table 3. *Continued.*

<p>Spirituality/Religion and African Americans</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● The African American community is unique in terms of connection to the church(organized religion)</li> <li>● African Americans even when not connected to organized religion tend to be spiritual or have a strong belief in God.</li> </ul>
<p>Engagement and Spirituality/Religion</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Key to engaging families in CWS process includes gaining knowledge about the family, their strengths/needs, connecting with the family and building trust with the family.</li> <li>● Asking the family about strengths, supports, values, which may include spirituality/religion, are some ways to engage the family.</li> </ul>
<p>Assessment and Spirituality/Religion</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Key to engaging families in CWS process includes gaining knowledge about the family, their strengths/needs, connecting with the family and building trust with the family.</li> <li>● Asking the family about strengths, supports, values, which may include spirituality/religion, are some ways to engage the family.</li> </ul>
<p>Placement and Spirituality/Religion</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Asking about spirituality/religion should be part of a holistic assessment of the family.</li> <li>● Asking about spirituality/religion crosses church/state and or personal/professional boundaries.</li> </ul>
<p>Services and Spirituality/Religion</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Asking about the spiritual/religious beliefs and practices of the family of origin, youth and foster family may be important in making placement decisions.</li> </ul>
<p>Services and Spirituality/Religion</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Church or faith based services are preferred as these services are based on a similar belief system and established trusting relationships.</li> <li>● Church or faith based services are preferred as these services are based on a similar belief system and established trusting relationships.</li> <li>● Church or faith based services may not be appropriate to provide formal services such as counseling, parenting, drug treatment.</li> <li>● Work needs to be done to develop and maintain understanding and communication between CWS and faith based community.</li> </ul>

Table 3. *Continued.*

Concerns	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>⦿ No concerns about CWS including spirituality/religion in their practice.</li> <li>⦿ Concerns about worker bias.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>⦿ Concerns about professional/personal and church/state boundaries.</li> <li>⦿ Concerns about worker bias.</li> <li>⦿ Concerns about system barriers(guidelines, policies, Court, admin support, liability)</li> </ul>
Social Work Skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>⦿ Additional education, training and support needed.</li> <li>⦿ Buy in regarding rationale, expectations, within and outside CWS.</li> <li>⦿ Clear guidelines, procedures, direction.</li> <li>⦿ Knowledge about available resources.</li> <li>⦿ Administrative support and flexibility.</li> </ul>	

The second major finding, directly related to the first, was that for many of the respondents who were themselves parents, their own spiritual/religious values and beliefs were important for them to instill in their children. Those parents who were not connected to a specific religion expressed that it was important to teach their children values about what was right and wrong. Several of the parents who were former clients indicated that continuity of spiritual/religious values, beliefs and practices would not only be important in placement decisions made for their children, but also in how their children would adjust to returning home.

Another finding addressed how respondents defined spirituality and religion. Three major constructions emerged. The first was that for several of the respondents, there was no distinction between religion and spirituality. They saw the two terms as the same. The second construction that emerged was that for some spirituality and religion

were closely related, that they were connected and interrelated concepts. The third construction that emerged in this category was that there were a group of respondents that saw the two terms as very distinct. This group defined religion as manmade, institutional, structured, practices or behaviors, and constructed spirituality as a more personal, private, relational connection to God, a higher power, the environment, or others.

The next finding though related to the definition of spirituality/religion, was regarding how respondents constructed the functions that religion, spirituality and belief or faith play in their lives or the lives of the families they work with. The functions that religion, spirituality and belief played according to the respondents included social support, a caring community, concrete and soft services, connection with others, purpose, direction, guidance, strength and motivation.

The fifth finding was that CWS staff saw African Americans as unique in terms of the role spirituality/religion played in their culture. There were two main constructions expressed about the role of religion and spirituality for African Americans. One was that religion in the African American community is unique in terms of their connection to the church, the mode of worship and expectation to share their faith. The other was that African Americans are spiritual or have a strong belief in God even if they are not connected to organized religion or church.

Another important finding was regarding the role that spirituality/religious assessment had in engaging families. Respondents agreed about the importance of engaging with clients, of getting to know who their clients are and what they value what their strengths are and what they need. Several parents indicated that asking about their

spirituality/religion would have made them feel like CWS was more interested in knowing, valuing and respecting them and would have increased their trust in the worker.

Another major finding was that asking about spirituality/religion as part of assessing the family could be valuable in identifying strengths, supports and services. Those constructions that emerged from the parents was that they all thought it was a good thing and might have been useful in making more appropriate placement decisions, service referrals and developing a trusting relationship. For CWS staff the constructions regarding assessment of spirituality/religion was not as similar. Many staff indicated that assessing spirituality/religion should be part of a holistic, strength based assessment. Other staff indicated that the appropriateness of such an assessment depended on the skill and openness of the CWS worker, and on the phase and function of the CWS case management process where the assessment occurred.

Related to assessment was the construction that asking about spirituality/religion was felt to be important in making placement decisions. This construction initially emerged from parents, who expressed concern that their children were placed in homes with no consideration of the spiritual/religious practices of the resource family or how they may be incompatible with the spiritual/religious beliefs or practices of the family of origin or of the youth themselves.

The ninth finding was regarding services that were offered by the faith based or religious community. The constructions that emerged included the idea that for most of the parents, the opportunity to be referred to counseling or other services in their own church or religious community would have been helpful and preferred. CWS staff were open to referring clients to religious or faith based services in the areas of supportive or

concrete services. Several staff questioned the appropriateness of utilizing the church or religious community for more formal services such as counseling. Finally that partnerships would need to be developed and maintained with the faith based community.

This category, most related to implementation indicated that there were a number of concerns and barriers identified that needed to be addressed prior to implementation of including spirituality/religion into CWS practice. Major constructions in this category were concern for worker bias, concern for blurred and unclear boundaries and guidelines including workers who would try to convert or influence clients, and crossing the church/state boundary, concern for increased liability and the strengthening of community partnerships.

The last major finding was that additional training, education, support and buy in needed to occur for CWS staff to feel comfortable implementing the inclusion of spirituality/religion in their practice. Major constructions that emerged included the need for additional formal education, need for additional training on spirituality/religion to increase knowledge and comfort, additional information about resources, services, and increase support and flexibility within the CWS system.

## **CHAPTER FIVE**

### **DISCUSSION**

#### **Introduction**

This study was motivated by findings from multiple studies which have documented the disproportionate involvement of African American families in the child welfare system and the disparate negative outcomes for African American children, their families and communities. It is believed that culturally competent practices may facilitate better engagement of African American families, and improved assessment, case planning and service provision processes and ultimately lead to improved outcomes for these children. It is further suggested that the recognition of spirituality/religion as a strength and resource to be included in all phases of the child welfare process is both culturally competent practice and most effective in engaging and assisting African American parents and families.

In the public child welfare arena the acknowledgement of spirituality/religion is almost completely ignored both in the child welfare research and practice literature. The role of spirituality/religion as a significant strength in African American communities deserves to be explored as a resource to improving practice, to increasing engagement and to increasing the effectiveness of services. It is believed that cultural competence cannot be achieved when working with African American families, without the acknowledgement and inclusion of spirituality/religion.

The aim of this qualitative study was to explore how a sample of African American parents and Child Welfare staff, who are key players in child welfare services, jointly construct the role that spirituality/religion plays in engaging, assessing and

intervening with African American families. The constructivist process of jointly constructing the role that spirituality/religion could have in the area of Child Welfare practice with African American families addressed several goals.

The first goal was to increase the cultural competence of child welfare workers around the use of spirituality/religion. A second goal was to identify a participatory group of stakeholders to design and implement action that utilized the results of this inquiry process. In arriving at this shared construction the following questions were addressed.

1. In what ways are spirituality/religion important to African American parents?
2. Could spirituality/religion play a role in the engagement, assessment and intervention of African American families by child welfare? What would that role be?
3. What changes in practice or policy would allow for the inclusion of spirituality/religion in the interaction between child welfare and African American families?
4. Should services and interventions offered by child welfare take spirituality/religion into account? In what ways?

Increasing the cultural competence of child welfare workers and adding to the culturally specific or relevant interventions and services available to and effective with African American families is believed to be essential in beginning to address the disproportionate and disparate treatment of African American children and families in the child welfare system.

The constructions developed during this study indicate that the inclusion of spirituality/religion in the practice of engaging and assessing African American families and in providing culturally specific and relevant interventions and services by child welfare services are perceived by workers and family members as likely to increase the effectiveness of those practices and services targeted at enhancing the safety and well being of African American children and families.

In this chapter, the major joint constructions that emerged from interviews with key stakeholders are reviewed in light of their relevance to the overall aim of the inquiry, namely the role spirituality/religion could play in engaging, assessing and intervening with African American families by child welfare services. This chapter also discusses how the constructions of this sample of parents and child welfare staff relate to the literature about culturally competent practice when engaging families, when assessing for needs, strengths and resilience, and when providing services and interventions which make a difference for children and families. Finally, policy implications and implications for future research will be discussed.

## **Major Constructions and Cultural Competence**

### ***Spiritual/Religious Experience***

Much of the literature regarding cultural competence focuses on three criteria or components necessary for becoming culturally competent: (1) knowledge of the clients' cultural worldview, including the groups' history, values and strengths; (2) the practitioners' self awareness of their cultural assumptions, values and biases; and (3) the knowledge, skill and willingness to adapt one's practice approaches to those that are

appropriate to the client ( Everett et al., 2004; McPhatter, 1997; Samantrai, 2004; Smith & Devore, 2004; Waites et al.,2004).

In exploring these criteria, respondents were asked about their own experience with spirituality/religion and for CWS staff, their knowledge or understanding about the worldview of African Americans regarding spirituality/religion. Several constructions emerged as a result of these questions. An overwhelming majority of the respondents indicated that they had been brought up or raised in some religious tradition. This religious upbringing influenced their current spiritual/religious beliefs and practices in various ways. Many of the respondents indicated that although they did not continue the same religious traditions they were raised with in terms of religious affiliation or church attendance, they did have a strong spiritual/religious belief system. Several indicated that their religious upbringing influenced them to be open to a number of spiritual/religious beliefs and practices. According to the respondents these spiritual/religious beliefs were very important to them in how they lived their lives and in shaping their identity. This acknowledgement of the importance of spirituality/religion in their own lives is important to developing cultural awareness which is a necessary first step to developing cultural competence.

### ***Spirituality/Religion and Parenting***

One of the constructs that emerged as CWS staff and African American parents shared their own spiritual/religious experiences and upbringing was the importance of spiritual/religious values, beliefs and practices in raising their children. Particular to the area of child welfare is the need to understand those cultural and individual strengths that

are related to family functioning and parenting. Respondents were clear that these spiritual/religious values and beliefs helped establish a sense of security, stability, moral direction and strength for their children. Certainly this is in line with the literature as research indicates that for many families, religious beliefs, values, and practices including spirituality, shape the roles and expectations regarding family functions and responsibilities, and the nature of family relationships (Ellison, 1997; Marks, 2006; Mosley-Howard & Evans, 2000; Shor, 1998; Suizzo et al., 2008).

Discovering whether a parent's spiritual/religious values or beliefs are important in how they raise their children may be relevant to culturally competent practice in a number of ways. Acknowledging these spiritual/religious values or beliefs might be important or helpful in motivating the parent to make changes necessary to provide a safe and stable home for their children. It may provide information that can assist workers in understanding the intentions behind neglectful or abusive behavior, for instance, physical abuse may be the result of unrestrained physical discipline that parents may feel are supported by religious teachings such as "spare the rod, spoil the child". It could also provide an opportunity to explore the possible disconnect between, the parents' neglectful or abusive behavior, and the desire for their child to have the strength, moral direction, security and stability that they intend those spiritual/religious values or beliefs and practices to achieve.

### *Spirituality/Religion for African Americans*

With regard to the knowledge and understanding of how spirituality/religion influences African American culture, another major component of culturally competent

practice, two main constructions were expressed. One was that religion in the African American community is unique in terms of their connection to the church, the mode of worship and the expectation to share their faith. The other was that African Americans are spiritual or have a strong belief in God even if they are not connected to organized religion or church. Although several respondents indicated that this knowledge may be due to stereotypes or assumptions promoted by mass media, these assumptions are well supported by the literature (Brown, 2006; Chatters, Taylor, Lincoln & Jackson, 2008; Giger, Appel, Davidhizar & Davis, 2008; Haight, 2002; Lee & Sharpe, 2007).

Given this acknowledgement by CWS staff and the verification by the parent sample interviewed, it should be an aspect of culture that is both recognized and addressed in practice. Though the respondents agreed that spirituality/religion were important particularly to African American families that understanding has not resulted in including spirituality/religion into their practice with African American families. A recent study discussed a similar gap that exists between cultural knowledge and sensitivity and changes in practice (Wells, Merritt, & Briggs, 2009). While that study was concerned with the gap between this cultural knowledge and research to promote evidence based practices, the concern regarding the gap between knowledge and action in this case is relevant. Again, a critical aspect of cultural competence requires that organizations develop the knowledge, the skill and the willingness to adapt their practice approaches to those that are appropriate for the client. In this case, devising ways to adapt child welfare practice to include the discussion of spirituality/religion, particularly with African American families would move toward culturally competent practice.

### *Defining Spirituality/Religion*

As identified in the introductory chapter, part of the purpose of the study was to have a shared construct of what spirituality and religion means among the stakeholders. Three general constructs emerged regarding the definition of spirituality and religion. The first was the construct that spirituality and religion are the same. These respondents saw no distinction between the two terms. The second construct was that spirituality and religion are interconnected and closely related to each other. That the combination of being spiritual and practicing a religion went “hand in hand”. The third general construct was that spirituality and religion were distinct and separate, with religion representing a man-made social institution with its rules, regulations, practices and traditions, and spirituality representing a more private, personal and relational connection to an entity, to others or to the environment. For those who saw them as distinct they tended to value one more highly than the other. These general constructs are congruent with the literature on spirituality and religion, which indicates that these two terms, though often used interchangeably may have different meanings for different individuals or groups (Canda, 2008; Hodge & McGrew, 2005; Martin & Martin, 2002; Mattis, 2000).

One of the ways this finding has particular relevance to the inclusion of spirituality/religion in child welfare practice is that while talking about spirituality/religion may be uncomfortable for some workers because they consider it to be a private or personal matter, it may not be perceived in the same way by their clients. For some African American families, the expectation may be that spiritual/religious beliefs and practices are to be discussed and shared openly. For example, a report conducted by the PEW Research Center (Sahgal & Smith, 2009) found that for 50% of

African Americans there were too few expressions of religious faith by political leaders. For social workers the definition of spirituality/religion may be especially relevant in that according to Praglin (2004) many social workers “equate ‘religion’ with a narrow, rigid religious traditions, personal pathology, or an underlying coercive religio-political agenda” and for those social workers the idea of asking about a family’s religion might contradict their social work values (p.72). Similarly, if CWS staff only asks a client about church attendance or religious affiliation, they may be missing an assessment of how spiritual beliefs and values add to a family’s resilience, strengths or coping skills, regardless of church affiliation or attendance. This finding indicates that part of the assessment process needs to determine how individuals are defining spirituality or religion, what their openness is to discussing their beliefs and which spiritual/religious beliefs they value, if any.

### ***Functions of Spirituality/Religion***

More relevant to understanding the role that spirituality/religion plays in the lives of African American families than how the terms are defined, is what the function or value of spirituality/religion is in the lives of families. This more clearly answers the question; what makes spirituality/religion and belief important? The major constructions that emerged related to the role or function that spirituality/religion and belief played for the respondents included providing social support, caring networks and connections, motivation, purpose, a sense of identity, moral guidance, direction, strength and resources including soft and concrete services.

Respondents indicated that the church or religious community was a place where people received social supports or connections and concrete supports, including informal mentoring, prayer and encouragement, as well as more concrete supports including pastoral counseling, assistance with food and clothing, and kinship networks that could be a resource for placement. These were functions that CWS staff recognized as important to their clients and seemed comfortable in addressing with clients. The results of this study not only support the literature related to the role of religion, the formal church, and religious practices such as prayer, but point to other ways that religious belief and spirituality add to the resilience of individuals and families (Banerjee & Pyles, 2004; Brown, 2006; Ghorpade, Lackritz, & Singh, 2006; Starks & Hughey, 2003). One of the constructions that emerged was that religious beliefs help to guide individuals in decision making and problem solving. Tapping into those beliefs may assist social workers in both understanding how parents are making decisions and in helping them to learn how to make better decisions.

Another construction that emerged regarding the function of spirituality/religion or religious beliefs was that several parents and staff identified spiritual/religious beliefs as a source of strength. Several parents indicated that their spiritual/religious beliefs empowered them to recover from their drug addiction, sustained them while in prison, and strengthened them while going through the child welfare system. This is directly related to the whole notion of strength based practice. Identifying whether spiritual/religious beliefs and values provide an individual with strength, goes beyond just asking about a connection with a church or religious affiliation or social support. This would require assessing what those values and beliefs are and how they might be

developed in order to add to the strength and resilience of the individual or family. As noted by Lietz (2006) and others building on these strengths as protective factors may contribute more to keeping children safely in their homes than identifying and focusing on risk factors (Brown, 2008; Kim, 2008).

### *Engagement*

Understanding the role that the inclusion of spirituality/religion could play in CWS workers engaging African American families was central to the purpose or aim of this study. Family engagement is critical to involving families in the decision making process and in providing safe and permanent homes for their children. Engaging clients in the helping process is also a major knowledge and skill area in becoming culturally competent.

In this study, the category of engagement included those constructs that related to CWS workers getting to know the families that they worked with, including those families in the decision-making, and creating an atmosphere of openness, trust and respect. Several of the parents interviewed indicated that asking about their spiritual/religious values or beliefs would have conveyed that the worker was interested in them as a person, would have increased their ability to trust the worker, and would have conveyed a sense of respect for them and what is important to them. The issue of trust and respect is critical for true family engagement. According to a study by Yatchmenoff (2001), mistrust or the lack of a trusting relationship with the worker or the agency in general is the one negative component of five important components in successful family engagement. For several of the CWS staff interviewed, engaging with

parents was viewed as important, and they saw the discussion about spirituality/religion as a way to engage families in identifying supports, resources and services. The capacity to approach families with warmth, genuineness, and empathy is key in establishing a working relationship that will benefit parents and their children. Asking about those things that are important to the family and have value for the family, in this case spirituality/religion is, according to these respondents, one way to do that.

### *Assessment of Spirituality/Religion*

Assessment is a major skill required in child welfare practice. The ability to clearly and accurately assess the needs, strengths, risks and functioning of a family is critical to child safety and to case planning. Strength based practices require that workers not only assess or gather pertinent data regarding parental behaviors that create harm and risk of harm to children, but also gather information or data about those values, attitudes, behaviors or supports that create protection and strength for children.

One of the skills of a good assessment is making sure that all of the information needed to make a good decision is collected and considered. All information that is pertinent to child safety, family functioning or parental behaviors that create or maintain risks for maltreatment or protect against maltreatment, should be included. In the practice area of child welfare, information about the spiritual/religious values, beliefs and behaviors which might either act as a protection against child maltreatment or a risk for maltreatment is not currently being included in the family assessment.

As noted in the literature review, other practice areas have come to recognize the value of assessing the spiritual/religious beliefs, values and practices of client

populations. In the medical field, assessing the spiritual/religious beliefs and practices has been included in recognition of the health benefits that are associated with church attendance, prayer, and belief (Anandarajah & Hight, 2001; Giger et al., 2008). In the mental health and substance abuse practice areas, spiritual assessment and interventions are becoming more common based on the recognition that spirituality is a source of resilience, impacts life satisfaction, and can improve overall coping, particularly for African Americans (Banerjee & Pyles, 2004; Brown, 2006; Ghorpade, Lackritz, & Singh, 2006; Starks & Hughey, 2003).

Though studies regarding the assessment of an individual's spirituality/religion often point to the positive impact that spirituality/religion has, there has also been an acknowledgement that for some groups and for some issues, for instance HIV/AIDS patients, LGBT individuals, victims of clergy abuse, or victims of domestic violence, spirituality/religion and especially religious doctrines and beliefs can have a negative impact (Brown, Macintyre & Trujillo, 2003; Beckley & Jerome, 2002). It would still however be important for a worker to assess how these negative experiences may impact parenting, family functioning, social support, placement or service provision for the family.

Results from this inquiry indicate that although the majority of respondents value the role spirituality/religion plays in their own lives as well as in the lives of others, very few of the CWS staff had either experience or comfort with asking about the spiritual/religious beliefs or practices of their clients, and only one of the ten parents interviewed said that they had experienced a CWS worker asking them about their spiritual/religious beliefs or practices.

Again, this finding indicates the disconnect between having the knowledge and putting that knowledge into practice. Some of the barriers to asking about spirituality/religion that were identified included personal discomfort, feeling ill equipped to respond to questions or issues that might arise, concerns about crossing personal and professional boundaries, including church/state boundaries, and fear of liability and reprisals. This finding suggests that the agency would need to clearly articulate the expectations, rationale and guidelines for including questions about spirituality/religion through policy, training and supervision in order for CWS staff to both feel comfortable and competent to asking these kinds of questions.

### *Placement*

The study findings indicate that it is not only important to assess the spirituality/religion of African American parents, but it may also be important to ask children and youth about their spirituality/religion. Several studies involving African American youth, both in the child welfare system and outside of that system indicate that spirituality and religious practices are important to young people, and can add to their resilience and ability to cope with the trauma of their abuse as well as the trauma of removal and placement (Kim, 2008; Moore-Thomas & Day-Vines, 2008)

One construct that emerged was the need to consider the child or families spiritual/religious beliefs and practices when placing children in out-of-home care, especially when that placement was with a non-related caregiver. This was seen as important because it may provide some cultural consistency for the child and assist in their ability to cope with the stress and trauma of placement. It was also seen as important

in transitioning home when reunification occurs and the children have to readjust to the parent's spiritual/religious values, beliefs and behavioral expectations.

Religious freedoms and rights of both parents and youth seem to require that CWS consider spirituality/religion when removing children from their home. In an article by Kelsey Corkran (2005) regarding the religious rights of foster children, their parents and foster parents she indicates that

three general principles should guide the state and courts in mediating religious conflict in foster care. First, legal parents are constitutionally entitled to reasonable efforts by foster parents to accommodate their religious preferences with regard to their children. Second, foster children are also constitutionally entitled to reasonable efforts to accommodate their religious interests, and their preferences, when voluntarily expressed and reasonably articulated, should take priority over the preferences of their legal parents. Third, the state cannot constitutionally require foster parents to make more than reasonable efforts to accommodate the religious preferences of legal parents and/or foster children if doing so infringes upon their own religious exercise (p.326)

Placement decisions and practices regarding spiritual/religious freedoms and rights for youth are not a new area, however in responding effectively to the cultural needs of African Americans and other groups (LBGTQ youth for example), the value and importance of spirituality/religion for the parents, youth and resource family needs to be addressed.

### *Services*

The findings indicate that for those parents for whom spirituality/religion is important, referrals to or services provided by their faith community or providers that share their belief system is seen as most helpful. CWS staff indicated that though the inclusion of the faith community as a partner in providing supports, both social and

concrete, is becoming more a part of normal practice, and is something they agree is needed, more work needs to be done in this area. Several constructs that emerged included the need for guidelines for interacting with faith communities, an increased understanding about what services are available and appropriate, flexibility regarding services that meet the requirements of the Court, and how these decisions would be made.

The current practice of involving church leaders in Team Decision Making (TDM - a core strategy in the Family to Family initiative in child welfare) meetings as a support to the family has increased agency and worker comfort with seeing the faith community as a partner. The use of the church or faith community in providing resources such as food, clothing, temporary housing assistance and even resource families, is well established. The role of the faith community in providing more formal services such as parenting education, drug counseling and individual or family pastoral counseling is less established, and may not be offered or considered acceptable, even when available or culturally appropriate. This is often due to the professional credentials expected by the Juvenile Court when offering mandatory services designed to address protection issues. In line with this, the last two major categories or constructions point most specifically to the organizational and systemic issues that need to be addressed in order to facilitate changes in policy and practice.

### *Concerns*

This finding indicates that although respondents identified many benefits to including spirituality/religion in discussions with African American families, there are perceived barriers and concerns that must be addressed and resolved before policy or

practice changes can occur. Central to these concerns was the idea that a significant amount of discussion, training and guideline development would need to occur around issues of professional/personal boundaries, including church/state boundaries. This included the perception that a significant amount of education or training would need to occur regarding the purpose of and need for culturally competent practice particular to spirituality/religion, in order to secure buy in, particularly from those who believe that discussion would violate their personal boundaries or values. Several studies indicate that these apprehensions on the part of social workers may stem from the concern that these matters are private, or cross professional and ethical boundaries (Canda, 2004; Heyman, Buchanan, Marlowe & Sealy, 2006; Hoyt, 2008). A second major concern involved addressing system barriers in two areas; working with faith communities and working within the public child welfare system itself. As indicated in the services section above, the involvement of the churches or faith communities in providing more formal services to families is not an established or accepted practice. Work would need to be done to establish these partnerships with churches and communities of faith; including setting parameters for service requirements and identifying shared expectations regarding communication, roles and responsibilities. In addition, work would need to be done with staff regarding the services that are available, when they are appropriate and how to include them in a case plan as they do with other services and service providers.

The concern regarding working within the public child welfare system reflected the open and public nature of the agency and the scrutiny and accountability that is a part of that system. Brohl (2004) in a chapter on preventing workplace problems in the child welfare system talks about how workers and supervisors are more cautious given the

climate of lawsuits, false allegations, and other liability issues that confront them. This supports CWS staffs' concerns about receiving adequate support from administration and the Juvenile Court especially if clients, foster parents or the general public made a complaint, either about the type of questions being asked, or about the type of services being provided. This issue would need to be addressed and resolved prior to any practice change so that CWS workers would receive appropriate support and guidance from those that ultimately have case authority and responsibility.

### *Social Work Skills*

The last major finding indicates that CWS workers will need additional education, training, practice principles and skill sets in order to increase cultural competence in the area of spirituality/religion. This finding addresses the last aspect of becoming culturally competent; that workers must develop the knowledge, skill and willingness to adapt one's practice approaches to those that are appropriate to the client (Everett et al., 2004; McPhatter, 1997; Samantrai, 2004; Smith & Devore, 2004; Waites et al., 2004). Much of the literature supports the fact that many social workers do not receive education on spirituality/religion in their social work programs and do not feel equipped to include spirituality/religion in their practice despite the fact that such education is encouraged by CSWE and NASW (Cascio, 1998; Furman, Benson, & Canda, 2004; Krieglstein, 2006).

The majority of CWS staff in this sample indicated that they did not have practice experience asking about a client's spirituality/religion, and several did not feel prepared or comfortable in doing so. Staff needs sufficient knowledge about those spiritual/religious faiths and practices found in Riverside County as a foundation for

practice and to be able to appropriately respond to parents and youth who may desire connections to those faith communities, or who may have particular practices or beliefs other than mainstream. This was seen by respondents as particularly critical when considering out-of-home placement for children.

CWS staff also indicated that they need information about resources and services available and appropriate in the faith communities in order to make culturally appropriate referrals to resources and supports. This will require both a list of resources or services, and more importantly, some comfort with and knowledge of these faith communities and what the roles and expectations are for communication and responsibility between the faith communities and CWS.

The last construct related to this finding was that CWS staff needs the support and flexibility of CWS administration and the Juvenile Court in order to feel comfortable and confident about changing their practice to include spirituality/religion. Guidelines, policies and procedures are needed to clarify roles, boundaries and expectations, but within those guidelines they need flexibility to be responsive to the specific cultural and individual needs of their clients. Support from administration is crucial so that there is no fear of reprisals when workers begin this practice. Also, the support and buy in from the Juvenile Court is necessary so that services provided by the faith community are accepted as meeting the case plan and needs of the clients.

Each of the major findings that emerged in this study directly impacts the ability of CWS social workers to be more culturally competent and more strength based in their practice. Barriers to including spirituality/religion in child welfare practice is not just the responsibility of individual workers or even the CWS agency, but must be addressed by

the larger network of community and agency partners. As such, action planning regarding this change in practice must include those partners to be successful.

### **Policy Implications**

As indicated in the findings, there is often a disconnect or gap between cultural knowledge and culturally competent practice. Therefore, changing practice in a public child welfare agency is not possible without exploring and addressing implications to agency policy. Furthermore, there is often a disconnect between agency policy and social work practice, however policy and procedural guidelines are seen as the first area of change in bringing about practice change. One of the major goals of the constructivist paradigm is that the results of the shared constructions emerging from the inquiry will result in local action as the stakeholders involved become more focused and sophisticated in their understanding of this topic. This process of looking at what changes need to occur and what action items the stakeholders will commit to began with the group member check.

### ***Culturally Competence and Policy***

The findings of this study point to a number of policy issues for the agency to address in developing practices that acknowledge the importance of including spirituality/religion particularly when interacting with African American families. One of the first areas that need to be addressed from a policy perspective would be the need to arrive at guidelines regarding the inclusion of questions about spirituality/religion as a component of culture and culturally responsive practice. The Indian Child Welfare Act

(ICWA) has set precedence for this by making the assessment of Indian heritage a mandatory part of CWS practice. That legislation is grounded in the historical and cultural experience of the Native Americans and their children at the hands of a child welfare system that ignored and devalued that cultural heritage. This legislation has changed child welfare practice to include questions about culture and ancestry at every point in the child welfare process. Recognizing that this was federal legislation and mandatory for the states, it is believed that in a similar way, policy and procedural guidelines on a local level would make it clear to workers that spirituality/religion is an aspect of culture that is highly valued for African Americans and must be both included in their assessment and addressed in their practice.

### ***Placement and Policy***

The addition of policy guidelines and expectations regarding questions about spirituality/religion related to placement practices is also needed. According to the article by Corkran (2005) several states have laws regarding religious matching in foster homes that require reasonable efforts to place children in foster homes that meet the religious preference of the parent and youth. The Second Circuit Court of Appeals ruling regarding *Wilder v Bernstein* held that “religious matching is permissible but not required by the First Amendment” (Corkran, 2005, p. 328). According to Corkran (2005) parents, children and foster parents share the legal right to religious freedom, and though this may result in conflicts, it seems clear that CWS workers should be not only asking about religious preferences of the parents and youth, but should be responsive to those preferences. California Child Welfare Policy Manual, Division 31-420.12 states that

foster care placement shall be based on the following needs of the child including, but not limited to the child's age, sex and cultural background, including racial or ethnic and religious identification (<http://www.cdss.ca.gov/ord/entres/getinfo/pdf/cws3.pdf>). So while California does not have religious matching laws, the policy regulations seem to indicate that some discussion around religious preferences should occur when considering out of home placement. Addressing this disconnect between current state policy, agency policy and social work practice should be included in the work by the local agency. Some of the ways to link policy to day to day practice includes training that addresses knowledge, skills and attitudes or values; linking supervisory oversight to policy implementation and including demonstration of practice change in worker and unit evaluations (CSSP, 2009).

### ***Faith-based Services and Policy***

In encouraging increased utilization and collaboration with faith communities around the development of services and resources for African American families, the findings suggest that additional structure, guidelines and formalized expectations are needed. While workers were familiar and comfortable with the more informal supports and concrete services provided by faith communities, there was a lack of confidence or clarity about the use of more formal services that may be offered by faith communities. The establishment of more formalized expectations regarding those services authorized to meet Court and professional guidelines in terms of credentialed providers, evidence supported practices, etc. need to be developed in collaboration with the faith community.

Additionally, those guidelines and expectations about what services are authorized to meet case plan requirements, what services are acceptable for more informal referrals, and what services or resources offered by faith communities fall outside of what is acceptable, all need to be clearly articulated for staff and for families. This is one of the issues that emerged out of the stakeholder group meeting. The agency needs to make clear what services are acceptable before developing a faith based resource list for workers to use with families, otherwise once those services or referrals are called into question either by the Court, by other community partners, or by family members, workers will no longer use the resources for fear of liability.

One of the issues that may need to be addressed by policy makers when looking at including those services offered by faith communities as part of Court ordered and county sponsored services is the issue of the use of government funds. While there is no question that the issue of utilizing services and resources that meet the cultural needs of the client is appropriate, paying for those services with public funds may bring up other considerations. The Charitable Choice Clause of the 1996 Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act and the more recent 2001 Faith-based and Community Initiative Act has made public funds available to religious organizations providing social services, however as an article by Tangenberg (2005) reminds us, “public funding cannot be used for inherently religious activities such as worship, religious instruction, or proselytization” (p. 197). This may not be fully understood by some faith communities that the CWS agency would want to partner with (Kennedy, 2005), and would need to be explicitly stated and understood.

For those faith communities and organizations which do understand that limitation, some may be hesitant to accept federal funds and the strings that go along with accepting those funds. An article by Lewis and Trulear (2008) describes how African American churches though committed to providing social services have been slow or hesitant to access government funding made possible by these faith based initiatives. One of the reasons cited in the article for this hesitance was fear that they would lose the ‘prophetic voice’ associated with those services. For other faith communities the mission of their service program encourages them to keep significant religious elements as part of their program design, including prayer, use of sacred texts and invitations to a personal faith commitment (Unruh, 2004).

A related concern regarding this policy implication might be public or staff concerns about paying for and/or referring families to services where significant religious elements such as prayer or service attendance or religious worship is an integral part of the program design. So in addition to funding issues when referring families to faith communities for services, policy guidelines need to address perceived ethical challenges posed by staff and by community partners. It will be important for the agency to convey to staff and to the public how referrals to religious or faith communities reflect cultural competence by providing culturally appropriate and culturally specific services.

### ***Personal and Professional Boundaries and Policy***

As the study findings indicate, guidelines and practice expectations regarding professional boundaries surrounding the inclusion of spirituality/religion are needed in order to address concerns related to both religious bias and inappropriate self-disclosure

or imposition of personal spiritual/religious values and beliefs by CWS workers. Agency policies often contain a code of ethics or professional conduct sections that addresses these ethical and professional/personal boundaries however; there may be a need to add clarity to these policies as they relate to asking about client spirituality/religion, encouraging the development of spirituality/religion as a strength, and referring clients to spiritual/religious resources for services. In addition to clear guidelines, the NASW indicators of cultural competence (2006) recommend “consultation with supervisors and colleagues for feedback and monitoring of performance and to identify features of their own professional style that impede or enhance their culturally competent practice” as a way to ensure ethical and responsible practice (p. 26). This supervision will require that guidelines address the expectation that supervisors will have these kinds of dialogue in their work to develop staff and ensure culturally competent practice.

### ***Community Partners and Policy***

Policy and practice changes in CWS must involve and include agencies, partners and community members who share and have a stake in the safety, permanence and well being of children and families. As a direct result of the California Child Welfare Outcomes and Accountability Act of 2001(AB636) and the Outcomes and Accountability system that has been put in place in California to improve outcomes for all children and families in our child welfare system, community stakeholders need to be aware of and included in system changes and issues.

Changes in policy related to including questions and discussion about client spirituality/religion would need to be presented to community stakeholders giving both

the rationale and the guidelines and expectations for how spirituality/religion would be addressed by CWS. These stakeholders may include other government agencies (Mental Health, Public Health, Probation, Board of Education, etc.), faith-based (including congregations) and secular based organizations and service providers, parent and foster parent groups, and the Juvenile Court. One of the policy issues that the community will need to grapple with will be the inclusion of other ethnic groups and non-Christian or mainstream spiritual/religious traditions. This will be an issue not only for the community, but for the Juvenile Court system, which has a major stake in providing equitable access to services.

### **Implications for Future Research**

#### ***Spirituality/Religion and Other Cultural Groups***

This research focused on spirituality/religion as an important factor in culture for African American families interacting with CWS. However, there is a need for additional research on how other ethnic groups may perceive spirituality/religion and its importance in the family, in how they raise their children and as a strength and resource in their lives. There has been some research in this area regarding Native American families, largely in response to the Indian Child Welfare Act and to this population's over-representation in the CWS and the out-of-home care system (Hodge, Limb & Cross, 2009; Limb & Hodge, 2008). However, the Hispanic community is the largest ethnic population in California and represents the majority of children that come into the system, though not at a disproportional rate. Little research regarding the importance of spirituality/religion in CWS has been done with this group and needs to be done.

***Research to Identify Effectiveness of Inclusion of  
Spirituality/Religion in CWS***

If the agency does make the policy and practice changes that this research has suggested, then additional research on whether these changes have been effective will need to be conducted. This follow up research should include both qualitative and quantitative measures. Qualitative measures should include whether parents, children and CWS staff felt they were more engaged and involved in the CWS process as a result of a more strength based and culturally competent approach. Research regarding whether CWS staff perceive themselves as being more knowledgeable, comfortable and competent when asking questions about spirituality/religion, and whether this broadened their ability to ask about other values or cultural issues that might impact a family's resilience or protective capacity. If CWS staff felt they had increased their cultural competence, it would be important to know what most impacted this increased competence, training, clear policy guidelines and expectations, supervision around these issues, increased community resources, or some combination of the aforementioned factors. Some quantitative measures might include increases in service utilization, increased customer satisfaction as measured by satisfaction surveys, and increased availability and utilization of faith community resources.

***Research on Impact of Culturally Competent Practice on Improved  
Outcomes for African American Children***

Another area where research needs to be done would be on the impact of culturally competent practice on improving outcomes for this group. Many of the

practices geared at providing culturally responsive practices and services in child welfare have not shown a direct link to improved outcomes for these children. With the understanding that evidence based research tends to take many years to establish, little research regarding cultural approaches to child welfare practice and the link to improved outcomes has been attempted. The Casey (2009) Breakthrough Series on reducing racial disproportionality engages child welfare agencies in a strategy of small plan-do-study-act (PDSA) cycles is one research strategy that is being attempted in several states and jurisdictions, but more research linking changes specifically focusing on culturally competent practices need to be conducted.

### ***Research Using More Quantitative Methods***

Lastly, the findings of this qualitative study indicates the need for additional quantitative or mixed method studies that could include larger, more diverse samples (geographically, regionally, or spiritually/religiously) so that more generalized knowledge about this phenomenon could be generated and policy and practice strategies could be developed in other places.

## **Summary**

### ***Strengths and Weaknesses***

This method of inquiry had both strengths and weaknesses that are important to note. One of the strengths of this research process was that it focused on giving CWS staff and former CWS clients an equal voice in constructing the role that spirituality/religion could play in CWS practice Another strength was that CWS staff had

an opportunity to hear not only what other staff had to say, but what former clients had to say, either in person at the group member check or in aggregate as part of the summary report shared at that meeting. Each person interviewed had an opportunity to hear and learn from what other participants had to say, what the literature had to say and what the researchers take on the topic was. This tended to either validate for each individual their own perspective, or give them another perspective to ponder. Though most participants did not have additional thoughts or change their thoughts when new constructions were shared, this process did impact the interview questions and shared constructs with each new participant.

Another strength of this method of inquiry has to do with its valuing of diversity, equality and empowerment that allows for change to take place based on the perceptions, ideas, values and capacity of the local group or context within which the study takes place. The stakeholders in this study have the opportunity to continue to develop shared knowledge and understanding about how and in what ways they want to address this aspect of culturally competent, strength based practice, given their community needs and capacity.

One of the weaknesses of this study was the inability to ensure maximum variation of constructions regarding spirituality/religion in child welfare practice. The reliance on a purposive sample of parents from a list of former African American clients to the CWS agency did not result in referrals to other parents who may have had a very different perspective. It is possible that those parents that agreed to participate in this study were more open to talking about their spiritual/religious beliefs and values and to having CWS workers ask about those beliefs than other parents would be. Though the

method relies on the assumption that the maximum variation sampling strategy will result in the greatest divergence of perspective, this did not seem to occur even with CWS staff who did refer to other staff members. Several of the CWS staff interviewed indicated that they thought there were staff members who would be strongly opposed to the inclusion of spirituality/religion in their practice with families, however no one provided a referral to those staff members. It may be that this is not an issue that workers talk about except with those who have common beliefs. Though maximum variation was a goal of the sampling strategy, the staff that may be very opposed to including spirituality/religion into CWS practice were not interviewed and those constructions were not represented. This may be an area where the agency needs to do additional work as part of their developing strategy. Ensuring that all voices including dissenting voices are heard and understood will assist in effective planning and implementation.

Lastly, many participants were not able to maintain the commitment and involvement that this kind of study required. As was mentioned in the results section, several of the parents contact numbers were no longer working by the end of the study. In addition, the parents and CWS staff that were invited but did not attend the group member check seems to indicate that they found the time commitment excessive.

### ***Conclusions and Recommendations***

Spirituality/religion is a valued and important part of the American culture, but has special significance for African American parents and families. For those involved in the child welfare system, asking about spirituality/religion can be helpful in engaging parents as full participants in the assessment, case planning, service provision and

placement aspects of the CWS process. For those families who consider themselves spiritual/religious, it often functions as an aspect of resilience in that it may provide social supports and connections, soft and concrete services, as well as a sense of identity, purpose, motivation, guidance, security and strength.

The inclusion of questions and discussion about the spiritual/religious beliefs, values and practices of a family should be part of a more culturally competent, strength-based child welfare practice, particularly for those groups or populations for whom spirituality/religion is recognized as an important aspect of their culture. These questions should include topics such as; whether spirituality/religion is a strength or important to the family and how; how are spiritual/religious values, beliefs or practices incorporated into their childrearing/parenting practices; what spiritual/religious beliefs or practices are important for children to continue in placement; are there particular services or service providers who would be more congruent with the families spiritual/religious belief system, and could assist in making the family safer and stronger.

The ability to build on strengths and protective factors is critical to reducing or mitigating risk of abuse or neglect to children. Stronger and safer families that can provide permanent and stable homes for their children, supported by nurturing and invested communities is the main goal of the child welfare system. Utilizing the strengths and supports that spirituality/religion does provide for some families may go a long way in making this goal a reality, both for this overrepresented group and for other ethnic groups.

It is recommended that further research focusing on the importance of spirituality/religion for other ethnic/racial groups involved with child welfare be

conducted, as it may benefit in the culturally competent engagement of those groups. It is further recommended that any further action research on this topic ensure the involvement and voice of the youth and families who are the consumers of the child welfare system.

It is recommended that action that develops from this research include the establishment of policies and guidelines that make clear both the intent and purpose of this practice change, and the boundaries and expectations for implementation. Beyond policies and guidelines, it is recommended that continued education and training, supervision around culturally competent practices, and social work evaluations reflect how important the implementation of culturally competent practice is for the agency to be able to respond both respectfully and effectively to the diverse populations it serves. And finally, it is recommended that commitment to practicing in a culturally competent, strength-based way is something that is both espoused and demonstrated from the top administrators down to and including the social work and support staff.

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## APPENDIX A

### INFORMED CONSENT PARENT

#### *“Spirituality’s Role in the Interaction Between Child Welfare and Black Families”*

##### **Purpose**

You are invited to participate in a doctoral student research study because you are an African American parent who was previously involved with the child welfare system, or is believed to have an opinion about this topic. The purpose of this study, which is part of a doctoral research project, is to find out what the role or importance of spirituality/religion is in your life and to find out how you think talking about spirituality/religion may or may not improve the way child welfare workers work with African American families.

##### **Procedures**

Your participation in this study will require three separate meeting times. You will first be asked to participate in an initial interview which will take about 45-60 minutes. This interview will be audio taped so that I can get all of your answers in your words. At the end of our interview, you will also be asked to nominate another African American parent who lives in the Moreno Valley community, who may have a different perspective or viewpoint about this topic. A second brief follow up meeting (10-15 minutes), will be scheduled to make sure I accurately represented your thoughts and words.

Finally, you will be asked to attend a meeting with others who I have interviewed, including other African American parents, and child welfare staff, some of whom you may have worked with previously, to come to some agreement about what spirituality/religion means and what role it could have in the work between child welfare staff and African American families. This meeting will be held once all individual interviews have been completed and may take one to two hours of your time. This meeting will take place in Moreno Valley and will be scheduled at a time convenient for the majority of the participants.

##### **Risks**

The risks to you for participating in this study are minimal; however we understand that the possibility of future involvement with child welfare services might cause you to be concerned about answering honestly. Therefore, there are a number of steps that have been put in place to protect your privacy. These steps are described in the section below called confidentiality. Participation in this study will not affect any future services you might receive from the child welfare system. You do need to know that if current incidents of child abuse are reported to me by you I would need to report those to Child Protective Services in order to make sure your children are safe. There is also the risk that you may become emotionally upset in recalling your experience with the child welfare

system. If this occurs, you may ask to stop the interview at any time and can be referred to speak to a counselor at Loma Linda's Psychological Services Clinic (Phone Number: (909) 558-8576).

### **Confidentiality**

Your name will not be used in any written report or presentation of this study or its results. The information you give will be analyzed in a way that protects your identity. That means that in written reports and transcribed interviews a code name will be used, and in the participant group meeting, **only your first name** will be used. Only the person who nominated you for the study and this researcher will have knowledge of your full name and other personal information such as address, phone number, age, etc. Your information, including your written and taped answers to the interview questions will be locked up in a file cabinet in the doctoral suite offices at Loma Linda University. Information will be entered in a password protected computer and only members of the research team (L. Brown and Dr. James) will be able to view that data. If there are concerns about current child abuse, we will have to follow mandated legal procedures and report these concerns to child welfare.

### **Benefits**

While you may not benefit personally from this study, it is our hope that future research in this area may lead to better outcomes for African American families and children who come into contact with Child Welfare Services.

### **Participant Rights**

Participation in this study is entirely voluntary, and you can refuse to answer any question and/or stop the interview at any time. Should you choose to stop the interview, your answers and information will not be used in this study.

### **Compensation**

As a thank you for your time in participating in answering interview questions, and in the additional group meeting, you will receive a \$25.00 gift card upon completion of all parts of the study, including the participant group meeting.

### **Impartial Third Party Contact**

If you wish to contact someone not associated with this study regarding any questions or complaint you may have about the study, you may contact the Office of Patient Relations, Loma Linda University Medical Center, Loma Linda, CA 92354, phone (909) 558-4647 or [patientrelations@llu.edu](mailto:patientrelations@llu.edu) for information and assistance.

### **Informed Consent Statement**

I have read the consent form and have listened to the verbal explanation given by the investigator. My questions concerning this study have been answered to my satisfaction. I

hereby give voluntary consent to participate in this study. Signing this consent document does not mean that I give up my rights nor does it release the investigators, institution or sponsors from their responsibilities. I may call or email Dr. Sigrid James during routine office hours at (909) 379 – 7591 or ssjames@llu.edu if I have additional questions or concerns.

I have been given a copy of this consent form.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Participant Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

I have reviewed the contents of this consent form with the person signed above. I have explained potential risks and benefits of the study.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Investigator Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

## APPENDIX B

### INFORMED CONSENT STAFF

#### *“Spirituality’s Role in the Interaction Between Child Welfare and Black Families”*

##### **Purpose**

You are invited to participate in a research study because you are a child welfare agency staff person, or community agency service provider. The purpose of this study, which is part of a doctoral research project, is to find out what the role or importance of spirituality/religion is in your life and to ask what role, if any, you think spirituality/religion could have in the interaction between child welfare workers and African American families involved with that system.

##### **Procedures**

Your participation in this study will require three separate meeting times. You will first be asked to participate in an initial interview which will take about 45-60 minutes. This interview will be audio taped so that I can get all of your answers in your words. At the end of our interview, you will also be asked to nominate another social service professional who may have a different perspective or viewpoint about this topic. A second brief follow up meeting (10-15 minutes), will be scheduled to make sure I accurately represented your thoughts and words. We can either meet at your work place during office hours or off site during your lunch hour.

Finally, you will be asked to attend a meeting with others who I have interviewed, including other child welfare staff, and African American parents, some of whom may be former clients, to come to some agreement about what spirituality/religion means and what role it could have in the work between child welfare staff and African American families. This meeting will be held once all individual interviews have been completed and may take one to two hours of your time. This meeting will take place in Moreno Valley and will be scheduled at a time convenient for the majority of the participants.

##### **Risks**

The risks to you for participating in this study are minimal; however we understand that your personal views may be different than agency or County policy, and this might cause you to be concerned about answering honestly. Therefore, there are a number of steps that have been put in place to protect your privacy. These steps are described in the section below called confidentiality.

##### **Confidentiality**

Your name will not be used in any written report or presentation of this study or its results. The information you give will be analyzed in a way that protects your identity.

That means that in written reports a pseudonym or code name will be used, and in the participant group meeting, only your first name will be used. Only the person who nominated you for the study and this researcher will have knowledge of your full name. Your information, including your written and taped answers to the interview questions will be locked up in a file cabinet in the researcher's office at Loma Linda University. Information will be entered in a password protected computer and only members of the research team (L. Brown and Dr. James) will be able to view that data.

### **Benefits**

While you may not benefit personally from this study, it is our hope that future research in this area may lead to better outcomes for African American families and children who come into contact with Child Welfare Services.

### **Participant Rights**

Participation in this study is entirely voluntary, and you can refuse to answer any question and/or stop the interview at any time. Should you choose to stop the interview, your answers and information will not be used in this study. There are no negative consequences if you choose not to participate in this study.

### **Compensation**

As an agency representative there will be no compensation for your participation.

### **Impartial Third Party Contact**

If you wish to contact someone not associated with this study regarding any questions or complaint you may have about the study, you may contact the Office of Patient Relations, Loma Linda University Medical Center, Loma Linda, CA 92354, via email ([patientrelations@llu.edu](mailto:patientrelations@llu.edu)) or phone (909) 558-4647 for information and assistance.

### **Informed Consent Statement**

I have read the consent form and have listened to the verbal explanation given by the investigator. My questions concerning this study have been answered to my satisfaction. I hereby give voluntary consent to participate in this study. Signing this consent document does not mean that I give up my rights nor does it release the investigators, institution or sponsors from their responsibilities. I may call Dr. Sigrid James during routine office hours at (909) 379 – 7591 or email [ssjames@llu.edu](mailto:ssjames@llu.edu), if I have additional questions or concerns.

I have been given a copy of this consent form.

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Participant Signature

---

Date

I have reviewed the contents of this consent form with the person signed above. I have explained potential risks and benefits of the study.

---

Investigator Signature

---

Date

## APPENDIX C

### CHILD WELFARE STAFF INTERVIEW GUIDE

Each participant will be asked to state their name, how long they have worked in child welfare, and what role they play in the organization (supervisor, manager, court officer, or line staff).

#### Engagement Questions;

1. Can you tell me, what drew you to the field of child welfare?
2. What do you enjoy most about your work?

#### Topic Questions

3. Given the topic of this research, can you tell me what has been your experience with spirituality or religion?
4. What do the terms “spirituality” and “religion” mean to you?
5. Have you had experience including spirituality or religion in your social work practice?
6. What is your understanding of the importance of spirituality or religion for African American families?
7. If spirituality or religion is important to a family, what do you think are some of the ways that child welfare social workers might use this information to assist families?
8. What would the inclusion of spirituality or religion sound like in order to be effective in engaging and assessing African American families?  
  
Do you feel there are some benefits that might occur as a result of including spirituality and religion in the conversation between child

welfare social workers and African American family members? Are there some negative consequences you can think of?

9. What might be some of the barriers or challenges to including spirituality/religion in your social work practice in this agency?

#### Termination Questions

10. Are there any questions or concerns regarding this issue that I have overlooked or that you want to add?
11. Is there someone else that you know who may have something different to say about this topic that you think I might talk to?

Each interview would end by summarizing the content of the interview to check for understanding.

## **APPENDIX D**

### **AFRICAN AMERICAN PARENT INTERVIEW GUIDE**

Each parent participant will be asked to state their name, if previously involved with CWS, when, and where, if they currently have their children living with them, and if they identify as African American or Black.

#### **Engagement Questions**

1. How long have you lived in the Moreno Valley area? What do you enjoy most about living in this area? What do you least enjoy about this area?
2. What about this topic caused you to agree to participate in this study?

#### **Topic Questions**

3. Given the topic of this research, can you tell me what has been your experience with spirituality or religion? (all groups)
4. What do the terms “spirituality” and “religion” mean to you? (all groups)
5. What has been your experience with child welfare workers asking about your spiritual or religious beliefs and values?
6. What do you think about child welfare social workers asking about spirituality or religion as an aspect of family life?
7. If spirituality or religion is important to a family, what do you think are some of the ways that child welfare social workers might use this information to assist families?

8. What would the inclusion of spirituality or religion sound like in order to be effective in engaging and assessing African American families?
9. Do you feel there are some benefits that might occur as a result of including spirituality and religion in the conversation between child welfare social workers and African American family members? Are there some negative consequences you can think of?

#### Termination Questions

10. Are there any questions or concerns regarding this issue that I have overlooked or that you want to add?
11. Is there someone else that you know who may have something different to say about this topic that you think I might talk to?

Each interview would end by summarizing the content of the interview to check for understanding.