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A Grounded Theory Exploration Of The Connection Between Stressful Life Events And Spiritual Identity For Women Leaders

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A Grounded Theory Exploration of the Connection between Stressful Life Events and Spiritual

Identity for Women Leaders

Margaret A. Brunson

North Carolina A&T State University

A dissertation submitted to the graduate faculty

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

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Department: Leadership Studies

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This is to certify that the Doctoral Dissertation of

Margaret A. Brunson

has met the dissertation requirements of
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Biographical Sketch

Margaret A. Brunson is a native of North Carolina and resides in the Raleigh-Durham area. She is a daughter, sister, aunt, friend, and mentor. Margaret earned a Bachelor of Arts in Psychology from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and a Master of Public Administration from North Carolina Central University. She is a member of Pi Alpha Alpha, the national honor society for public affairs and administration, The Honor Society of Phi Kappa Phi, and Zeta Phi Beta Sorority, Inc. Margaret serves as a health administrator at Duke University Health System. She leads the operations of a community health network focused on providing patient-centered care management services to underserved populations.

Margaret has over ten years of professional leadership experience in the public, non-profit and education sectors. She has committed her life to leadership and purpose. She is motivated to help others learn how to realize their leadership potential by tapping into purpose and passion. Her research and practice interests are women in leadership, spiritual identity, and leadership development. Margaret is also a published author, gifted speaker and seminar facilitator and an effective organizational development consultant.

Dedication

I dedicate this dissertation to women who have experienced tragedy, loss, disappointment, and periods of hopelessness, and found the strength to share their stories and continue their journeys.

"The wound is the place where the Light enters you." — Rumi

Acknowledgements

The Gye Nyame symbol in the West African Adinkra is translated as, "except for God." This symbol has become representative of my life. Except for God, I am nothing. Except for God, my life is meaningless. I acknowledge the power of God in my life; and it is through that power and energy that I embrace my purpose and pursue my passion for illuminating the importance of spiritual identity.

The journey that led to the completion of this dissertation process has included a series of conversations, connections and relationships that encouraged me to continue with this passionate work. I acknowledge that I am here, at this very point in my life, as a result of many individuals who saw something in me worthy of supporting, encouraging and inspiring. First, I thank my parents, Dr. Jesse and Mrs. Doris Brunson, for their love and support. You have always encouraged me to rely on God to help me find my way and to be comfortable in my own skin. I am grateful for two parents who have taught me how to give and receive love and how to walk in faith. I appreciate my brother, Wayne, who taught me to be confident enough to wait for good things and who has always been genuinely excited about my successes. Thank you for continuing to be my "big bro." To my sister-in-love, Marvella: thank you for your openness to accepting me as a sister, even when you already had three of your own. I am so blessed to be an aunt to three wonderful children: my niece Zari and nephews, Elias and Ethan. Throughout this process, their innocent laughs and genuine spirits served as inspiration for me to continue. I hope to be an example for their generation and inspire them to follow their dreams and pursue academic excellence.

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Abstract

Much of the research related to the leadership of women relates to development through mentorship and the gaps or disparities that exists throughout various fields and disciplines. In the United States, women continue to be underrepresented in leadership, and those in leadership continue to struggle to find the balance between their work and lives. Not only are women having different leadership experiences from their male counterparts, they are also experiencing various life events that impact their experiences as leaders, as well as the spiritual and psycho-social dimensions of their lives. The spiritual identity of women leaders who work outside of a religious context has not been explored, thus creating a gap, not only in the research, but also in the leadership practice and development of women. This dissertation examines, through a constructivist lens, the meaning that women leaders in academic medicine ascribe to their stressful life events and spiritual identity and how they connected to impact their leadership experiences. The use of constructivist grounded theory methodology resulted in the conceptualization of the Illumined Leadership Spirit. The Illumined Leadership Spirit (ILS) is a framework for understanding (a) the connection between stressful life events and spiritual identity and (b) its influences on the leadership experience and journey. ILS applies to women leaders who have embraced the impact of their spiritual identity within the milieu of their lives and leadership experiences.

CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Every person has a spiritual consciousness that either lies dormant within, or manifests through the daily navigation of life. The awakening of one's spiritual consciousness and subsequent spiritual development often occurs as a result of significant life events, positive or negative. Based on an individual's experiences and spiritual development, s/he ascribes specific meanings to and makes connections about those experiences. While the construct of spiritual identity is one that is not widely present in the literature, there is literature that supports the idea that spiritual identity may be an integral part of an individual's identity (Poll & Smith, 2003) and spiritual journey (Janki, 1999). An individual often makes meaning of one's spiritual identity through the lens of life experiences or events (Poll & Smith, 2003). The focus of this research study was to explore how women leaders connect their spiritual identity to their life experiences, specifically, stressful life events.

The increased visibility of women in governmental, corporate, and educational leadership roles has necessitated the development of more resources to support women throughout their leadership journeys and promote leadership development for girls. Universities and institutions throughout the United States and world are beginning to offer leadership development programs specifically for women, as well as house centers that are dedicated to the advancement of women in leadership. Women like Valerie Jarrett, the Senior Advisor to the President of the United States, have publicly stated the importance of "doing all we can to ensure that women and girls have every opportunity to reach their greatest potential" (2014); while women like Sheryl Sandberg, the chief operating officer of Facebook, have inspired a generation of young professional women to "lean in" to their leadership potential (2013).

Nonetheless, the messages that are widely spread in promotion and support of the leadership development of women are overshadowed by the continued disparity of women in leadership positions across various fields. Women continue to be underrepresented in leadership, and those in leadership continue to struggle to find the balance between their work and lives. As much as I desire to add to the general body of knowledge related to women and leadership, my goal is to add new insight to a specific area of research that does not fully explore the multidimensional nature of the leadership development of women. The spiritual identity of women leaders who work outside of a religious context has not been explored, thus creating a gap, not only in the research, but also in the leadership practice and development of women.

In the next section, I will frame the problem that created the need for this study, by explaining the context of women leaders in academic medicine, the constructs of spiritual identity, and stressful life events and the purpose of this study.

Statement of the Problem

In 2002, the Association of American Medical Colleges' Increasing Women's Leadership Project Implementation Committee published a report that focused on the need to increase the presence of women in leadership roles within academic medicine (Bickel et al., 2002). The report examined four years of data related to the advancement of women in academic medicine. The report resulted in the formulation of recommendations with specific ways to increase the presence and prevalence of women in leadership positions in the field of academic medicine. These recommendations were closely aligned with the focus of previous and existing research related to the existing state of women in leadership (Noe, 1988; Scandura, 1992; Vinnicombe & Singh, 2003; Stroope & Hagemann, 2011). The foci included evaluations of department chairs on their development of women faculty, increasing professional

development opportunities for women in leadership, promoting changes to institutional practices that favor men over women as leaders, and increasing financial support of institutional programs that promote and monitor the advancement of women in medicine (Bickel et al., 2002). While these recommendations are insightful and specifically outline strategies to increase the presence of women leaders in academic medicine, they do not consider the psychosocial factors present in the lives of women leaders. There continue to be challenges for women to advance to leadership roles within various fields and the situation in academic medicine is representative of the overall challenge (Bickel et al., 2002; Stroope & Hagemann, 2011).

Currently, a gap exists in the research that connects the challenges facing women in leadership to psychosocial factors that might potentially impact and influence the leadership careers of women, such as spiritual identity and stressful life events (Caffarella & Barnett, 1997). As the review of the literature will elucidate, the research related to women leaders, specifically in academic medicine, and the barriers they face when moving into leadership roles does not give much attention to factors such as psychosocial support, the role of spiritual identity, and self-concept. While these factors are present in research related to the overall psychosocial development of women (Caffarella & Barnett, 1997), they are not specific to the plight that women face in their leadership journeys.

Spiritual identity is a concept not widely discussed in research literature. Existing literature strongly focuses on spiritual and identity development as two separate processes or as mediators of each other (Chae et al., 2004; Kiesling et al., 2008; Pedersen et al., 2000; Watt, 2003). As a result, delineation of spiritual identity as a single concept is limited in the research. Poll and Smith (2003) introduced a model for understanding spiritual identity development. Based on consideration of psychodynamic and cognitive theories, as well as faith and spirituality

development theories, the researchers posited a framework for examining how an individual might move from an unconscious spiritual identity to a fully aware and integrated spiritual identity. The model conceptualizes the process by which individuals develop spiritual identity, but there is still little research about how individuals make meaning of their spiritual identity in connection with their life experiences.

Throughout the course of one's life, significant life events serve as turning points or transitions in the life trajectory (Elder, 1998). Based upon Poll and Smith's (2003) spiritual identity development theory, individuals develop spiritual identity as a result of life experiences that are recognized as spiritual experiences. One categorization of these life events or experiences are stressful life events introduced by Holmes and Rahe (1967) in their Social Readjustment Rating Scale. Over the past ten years, the studies conducted on stressful life events have been widespread. The research addresses relationship between stressful life events and psychological status, including happiness (Ballas & Dorling, 2007), stressful life events and depression (Cutrona, Russell, Brown, Clark, Hessling, Gardner, 2005) and stressful life events and coping and mental health (Simpson & Thompson, 2009). The research, both qualitative and quantitative in nature, is numerous as it relates to stressful life events and health outcomes. As it relates to women, existing research highlights the relationship between certain stressful life events such as pregnancy (Honnor, Zubrick, & Stanley, 1994) and breast cancer (Kornblith et al., 2001), but lack specific inquiry into the spiritual outcomes of women. While there are numerous studies that highlight the relationship between stressful life events and key sociological outcomes for individuals, much of the extant research is lacking as it relates to women, stressful life events and spiritual identity. Studies that highlight important findings

related to the role of religion in coping with stressful life events (Harris et al., 2012) are present, but do not make the connection between spirituality, spiritual identity and stressful life events.

Central to the understanding of the gaps in research related to this problem is the understanding that there are distinct differences between religion and spirituality. These two terms are not interchangeable in that both may exist exclusive from the other. In the general sense of the word, religion is an organized system of beliefs, rules and ceremonies that are enacted upon to worship a god or group of gods. As a concept, spirituality involves the understanding of meaning and purpose. It is related to the spirit of a person which is thought to give life, energy and power. Spiritualty is described as an experience, whereas religion is the movement of that experience into a concept or set of guidelines (Benjamin & Looby, 1998). As it relates to the human experience, this understanding of spirituality allows for a relationship with a higher power or being in the absence of an organized and structured set of beliefs, or religion. While religion has place in the context of spirituality and vice versa, the two have the potential to be mutually exclusive, dependent upon the individual's practice and perspective.

The deficiencies in the current research to present an understanding of the connection between stressful life events and spiritual identity for specific groups created a need for research. The research will lead to a better understanding, conceptually, of the connection between stressful life events and spiritual identity, specifically for women leaders. Additionally, the need exists to understand the how women leaders make meaning of this connection in their leadership practice. The extant research related to women leaders in academic medicine discusses how the presence of certain factors, such as job satisfaction, stereotype threat, mentoring and the glass ceiling effect, all serve as barriers to leadership advancement or affect the leadership experiences of women leaders in academic medicine ((Ash, Carr, Goldstein, & Friedman, 2004; D. J.

Burgess, Joseph, van Ryn, & Carnes, 2012; Carnes, Morrissey, & Geller, 2008; Conrad et al., 2010; Marušić, 2012). What is lacking in the research is a discussion that focuses on the connection between stressful life events and spiritual identity and how it affects the leadership experiences of women in academic medicine.

Conceptual Framework

The two main constructs that define the framework that undergirds this research are spiritual identity and stressful life events. The conceptual framework encompasses Poll and Smith's (2003) work on spiritual identity development and the concept of stressful life events originally presented by Holmes and Rahe (1967) in the Social Readjustment Rating Scale.

Poll and Smith (2003) used early cognitive and psychological theories of identity to develop a framework for understanding spiritual identity development. One such early identity development theory was based on William James' original work, *The Self* (Gordon & Gergen, 1968) and examined the connection between one's relationship with self and one's relationships and interactions with others. In his early writings, James described two distinct facets of an individual's identity. He suggested that the individual is comprised of the "me" and the "I;" the self as known and the self as knower, respectively (James, 1890). The "spiritual me" is the abstract way of understanding our personal consciousness and is a reflective process. In the process of understanding the "spiritual me" there is an "abandoning of the outward looking point of view" and thinking of the self as a thinker (James, 1890). In addition to the early work of James, Poll and Smith (2003) researchers explored other psychodynamic and cognitive theories of identity development, including Erikson, Mahler, Pine & Bergman, Kohut, Markus, and Kegan (p. 130), as well as theories related to the development of spirituality and faith, including Fowler and Richards & Bergin (p. 129) to create a model for spiritual identity development.

Their inquiry led them to an understanding of spiritual identity development as a process which includes four main phases: pre-awareness, awakening, recognition, and integration (Poll & Smith, 2003). The pre-awareness phase is characterized by a non-conscious regard of self in spiritual terms (p. 133). During this phase, individuals have not had or recognized their experiences as spiritual. In the awakening phase, an individual is moving into an "awareness of self in relation to God (p. 134). This awareness is most often the result of a single crisis or series of crises or events that create intensity or conflict that prompts a spiritual awareness. As the individual moves into a consistent awareness of events or experiences as spiritual, s/he will transition into the recognition phase. There is a recognition or recollection of previous life experiences as spiritual ones and spiritual themes begin to emerge for the individual (p. 134). From awareness to recognition, individuals are making spiritual meaning from their life experiences and events. Upon recognition, individuals begin to integrate these spiritual experiences with their self-concept. Essential to the integration phase is the idea that individuals begin to engage the meaning of their spiritual experiences by developing "spiritual relationships" person to person and person to God (p. 134).

The authors posit that spiritual identity develops best when individuals' image of God is relevant to their own lives, through interacting with God and recognizing the divine within themselves (Poll & Smith, 2003). The spiritual identity development framework provides an understanding of where stressful life events might fit into the spiritual identity development process in order to explain the connection between spiritual identity and stressful life events for women leaders. Specifically, the phases provide a means to frame the conversations with women leaders about spiritual identity and stressful life events over a period of time.

In the late 1940s, research of life events, to determine the onset of illness, gained recognition at the Conference on Life Stress and Bodily Disease. The recognition was for William B. Cannon's work on bodily changes related to emotions and Adolph Meyer's use of the life chart to diagnose medical problems (Rabkin & Struening, 1976). Life events research became a means by which to associate the onset of illness with life events that required some level of "adaptive response" from the person experiencing the event (p. 1014).

Holmes and Rahe (1967) reintroduced the concept of stressful life events through the development of the Social Readjustment Rating Scale (SRRS). This scale was developed to determine the relationship between life events and the onset of illness or disease and presented 42 different stressful life or social events. The events on the scale represent "fairly common situations" (Rabkin & Struening, 1976, p. 1014) that arise in a person's family, occupational, personal, and financial life. A sample of judges were given the responsibility of assigning weight to each event according to the event's degree of adjustment and the amount of time and intensity required for the adjustment. The work of Holmes and Rahe led to additional research that focused on the effects of stressful life events on mental health outcomes, which will be explored in the review of the literature, as well as psychological meaning related to stressful life events (Ritzer, 2007). As it relates to the conceptual framework, the intent of using stressful life events is to connect the concept to spiritual identity as a spiritual experience for the woman leader.

Based on Poll and Smith's (2003) spiritual identity development phases, Figure 1 provides a framework that provides a lens through which to view spiritual identity and stressful life events in connection to women leaders. The framework emphasizes spiritual identity as a

process and identifies where stressful life events might occur in the process of developing a

spiritual identity.
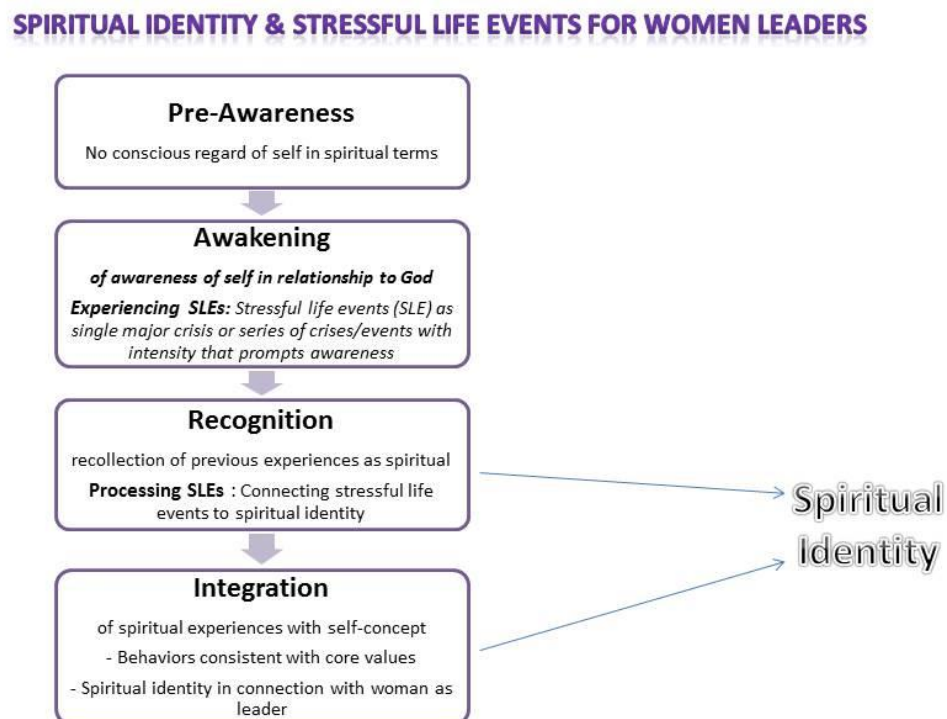
Figure 1. Conceptual Framework

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this constructivist grounded theory research study was to explore the

spiritual identity of women leaders in academic medical centers. Specifically, this study sought

to generate an explanation of the connection between stressful life events and spiritual identity

for women leaders and how this connection has influenced their leadership experience. This

study focused on seven stressful life events; six of which come from the Social Readjustment

Rating Scale, including death of a spouse, divorce, marital separation, death of a close family

member, personal injury or illness, dismissal from work or long-term unemployment (Holmes &

Rahe, 1967), excluding imprisonment and including infertility. The research participants are women leaders in academic medical centers throughout the southeastern United States.

Research Questions

The central research question for this study is: How do the women leaders in academic medical centers connect their spiritual identity to their stressful life events?

The guiding questions are:

1. How do the women leaders describe their stressful life events?

2. How do the women leaders describe their spiritual identity?

3. How do the women leaders explain the relationship between stressful life events and spiritual identity?

4. How do the women leaders explain the influence of this relationship on their experiences as leaders?

Definition of Key Terms

To understand the overall scope of the research study, clarification on key terms is necessary. These four terms, academic medical centers, spiritual identity, stressful life events, and women leaders, are the foundation of this grounded theory study.

Academic medical centers (also referred to as academic health centers) consist of an allopathic or osteopathic medical school, one or more other health profession schools or programs (such as allied health, dentistry, graduate studies, nursing, pharmacy, public health, veterinary medicine), and one or more owned or affiliated teaching hospitals or health systems (Centers, 2013).

Spiritual Identity has been defined as a persistent sense of self, identity and worth in relationship to God (Poll & Smith, 2003; Richards & Bergin, 1997) that addresses ultimate questions about the nature, purpose, and meaning of life, resulting in behaviors that are

consonant with the individual's core values (Kiesling, Sorell, Montgomery, & Colwell, 2008). Spiritual identity addresses one's perception of self as a spiritual being and the ways in which s/he chooses to live as a spiritual being. Reimer and Dueck (2012) stated, "spiritual identity is dependent on a narrative" (p. 252). Important to the definition of spiritual identity is an understanding that individuals make meaning of their lives in different ways based on their own narrative of experiences. The meaning leads to a spiritual perspective related to their identity.

The early work of Holmes and Rahe related to life events and social stress determined that stressful life events are those "discrete social experiences or life changes that require individual adjustment or manifest themselves in emotional arousal or physical reactions" (Ritzer, 2007). Their work led them to develop the Social Readjustment Rating Scale (SRRS) which was discussed in the conceptual framework. The SRRS consisted of 42 life events, such as, death of spouse, divorce, marital separation, death of close family member, fired at work, personal injury or illness, and change in health of family member, to name a few. However, it not only contained negative stressful life events, but also life events that might bring on positive stress, or eustress, including marriage, pregnancy, gain of new family member, retirement, marital reconciliation and outstanding personal achievement. The focus of the Scale was readjustment to these life events. This study focused on negative stressful life events, as opposed to the positive stressful life events.

The study highlights women leaders in academic medical centers. Leader, in the context of this study, will be defined as one in a senior position of leadership within any aspect of the academic medical center. This will include, but is not limited to deans, department chairs, senior-level hospital administrators, attending physicians and medical directors (Bickel et al., 2002).

Delimitations of the Study

This study was delimited to women leaders who hold mid-senior level positions as faculty, physicians and/or administrators in an academic medical center in the southeastern United States. The women leaders must have experienced at least one of the following seven stressful life events: death of a spouse, divorce, marital separation, death of a close family member, personal injury or illness, dismissal from work or long-term unemployment (Holmes & Rahe, 1967), and/or infertility.

Significance of the Study

The significance of the study encompasses aspects of sociology, psychology, and anthropology and has the potential to add to the body of knowledge, inform leadership practice and shape policy in each of these respective fields of study.

Sociologists have been interested in the impact of stressful life events to the health and well-being of various populations of people for years. Much of the literature that will be reviewed in chapter two includes studies based on related studies and outcomes. The results of this study will add to the understanding of stressful life events and spiritual identity with a population whose experiences have not been specifically studied in depth; women leaders. Prospectively, the process by which women leaders develop a spiritual identity after stressful life events might inform research at the intersection of sociology and psychology related to stressful life events, women and mental health outcomes.

As it relates to anthropology, determining the process by which some women leaders develop a spiritual identity after stressful life events assists with understanding how women leaders make meaning of their experiences. One might question the significance of understanding how women make meaning of their experiences to the larger society. This

transferrable knowledge informs the role of spiritual identity in the leadership practices of women in, not only academic medicine, but other fields.   As women make meaning of their own experiences, there is an implied learning from their experiences and applying the lessons learned to their leadership practices; hence developing a higher capacity to lead oneself and others (Couto, 2010). For example, if the women leaders articulate that as a result of their experiences, they developed a greater sense of their spiritual identity through self-reflection that led them to better navigate systems barriers, this will inform the self-reflection processes of other women leaders who have experienced similar life events.

One very significant aspect of the study is its potential impact on the field of women's leadership development. It is widely known that women account for only 3% of Fortune 500 CEOs and women are still disproportionately misrepresented in positions of leadership across all disciplines (Stroope & Hagemann, 2011). There are a number of articles that explain the long-term lack of women in leadership. Focus on the problem and how to recruit and retain women leaders across various disciplines and fields of study is widely prevalent in the narrative. Many of these articles fail to examine and explain the role of spiritual identity in the development of women leaders. The study does not specifically focus on leadership development; yet, there are anticipated implications and opportunities for future research in this area. Leadership development experts who focus on using personal strengths to develop leadership capacity might be interested in the process by which women leaders develop a spiritual identity. The process has the potential to enlighten the broader conversation about how women develop leadership acuity and effectiveness.

The outcomes from this study point to some of the affective challenges that women leaders face. As a result, this study has the potential to impose a shift in culture for how women

leaders are supported within organizations. For the women who have experienced stressful life

events and continue to work in leadership positions, this research will provide a framework by

which to understand and share their own experiences. Future implications for this research will

be discussed further in chapter five.

CHAPTER 2

Literature Review

Chapter one delved into the purpose of this study and the questions that guided the development and implementation of the research study. The following literature review encompasses empirical studies, scholarly journal articles and books that focus on four strands that are relevant to and provide the foundational context for the current research study: (a) women and stressful life events, (b) spiritual identity development, (c) spirituality and women leaders and (d) women leaders in academic medicine. Notably, these strands present the existing scholarly literature related to the problem and demonstrate the lack of scholarship that explains the connection between women leaders, stressful life events, and spiritual identity. In addition to a high level overview of the research in each strand, it was also important to the justification for this research study to delve into specific studies to demonstrate the limitations of the extant research to adequately address the problem presented in this research study.

Women and Stressful Life Events

There are past and current research studies that focus on the impact of major or stressful life events on the lives of women. Specifically, researchers in the fields of psychology, sociology, epidemiology and medicine have, for a long time, focused on the impact of chronic disease and mental health challenges on the lives and health outcomes of women in general. Research indicates that women report higher numbers of stressful life events and rate them more negatively than their male counterparts (Almeida & Kessler, 1998; Matud, 2004; Plunkett, Radmacher, & Moll-Phanara, 2000). The early argument that gender plays a role in the onset and coping of negative or stressful life events (Edwards, Nazroo, & Brown, 1998; Gove & Tudor, 1973) has been advanced in the research related to stressful life events. Three common

themes across this body of scholarship that add to the foundational research for the current study are: (a) psychological status, (b) social support and (c) coping.

   Psychological status. The body of research related to psychological status and stressful life events has explained and demonstrated that there is a consistent relationship between stressful life events and psychological distress (McLean & Link, 1994). Related to the affective outcomes of stressful life events, researchers have focused on the outcomes of stressful life events, specifically negative, on women related to happiness, depression (K. S. Kendler, Thornton, & Gardner, 2000), distress (Mertz et al., 2012) and other psychological outcomes, such as impaired life satisfaction (Marum, Clench-Aas, Nes, & Raanaas, 2014). In addition, researchers have found a link between religious attendance and spirituality and how people, including women, experience negative life events (Kidwai, Mancha, Brown, & Eaton, 2014). Generally, it is found that there is a relationship between women, negative stressful life events and psychological status.

   In their longitudinal quantitative research study, Ballas & Dorling (2007) built upon previous work that sought to estimate happiness regressions based on major life events and happiness. Participants were asked to state up to four events that occurred in the past year that stood out as important. These events were recorded up to four occasions in four consecutive years.   Based on participants' responses from a previous survey about those events determined the regression of subjective happiness. The researchers found that events such as starting a new relationship, buying a new house, and becoming pregnant revealed higher than average levels of subjective happiness. In addition, events such as ending a relationship or death of a parent had the highest negative impact on happiness. The research data suggests that what matters the most

in people's lives in Britain is to "have good dynamic interpersonal relationships," (p. 1250) and the constant renewal of respect and appreciation at work (Ballas & Dorling, 2007).

In contrast to studies about happiness, the research related to women and stressful life events, as it relates to psychological status, also examines the relationship between stressful life events and depression and depressive symptoms. Cutrona et al. (2005) focused on the onset of major depression and tested neighborhood context, negative life events and negative affectivity as predictors of that onset for 720 African-American women. Particularly, this quantitative study determined that women who lived in neighborhoods consisting of poverty and social disorder had significantly higher rates of recent onset of major depression than those who lived in better quality neighborhoods. When negative life events occur in the context of neighborhoods high on social disorder, women lacked social support and experienced negative consequences (Cutrona et al, 2005). The 720 participants were selected from a larger sample of 897 individuals who previously participated in a large-scale study of African- American families; the Family and Community Health Study. By examining the impact of neighborhood context and negative life events on major depression, this adds another layer of research to the discussion of stressful life events and how they impact women. The context of neighborhood social disorder incorporates the environmental impact on mental and spiritual well-being. This type of research informs my research by providing a framework for understanding other factors that might be introduced as women leaders make meaning of their stressful life events.

Clarke (2012) stakes claim as having conducted the first reported study to statistically test for the moderating effect of a personality trait on the relationship between stressful life events and depressive symptoms (Clarke, 2012, p. 157). The study determined that impulsivity functioned as a moderating variable between stressful life events and depression as an outcome;

the relationship was statistically significant only for the group of participants with higher impulsivity. This quantitative research study was conducted to determine the moderating effect of impulsivity on the relationship between stressful life events and depression among freshmen college women. Participants were administered three instruments that measured stressful life events, depression via self-reported depressive symptoms, and impulsivity. The moderating effect of impulsivity was tested by the significance of the interaction between stressful life events and impulsivity on depression.

Social support. Stressful life events often result in psychological distress and require women to secure social support. Some of the existing literature focuses on these aspects of stressful life events as they relate to health issues such as chronic illnesses or stressful pregnancies. Harris et al. (2012) conducted a longitudinal quantitative study to determine whether religious strain would mediate the relationship between stress symptoms at baseline and stress symptoms one year later. Among the 79 participants (55 women, 23 men, one unknown gender) who had previously participated in a study of religious functioning and stressful life events and agreed to followup one year later, it was determined that religious strain based on several factors including negative religious coping, religious fear and guilt and alienation, mediated the severity of PTSD symptoms over time (Harris et al., 2012). In addition, over time, conflict and distress over faith was a predictor of poorer mental health status after stressful life events. Those who lose faith, often also lose sources of spiritual support through prayer and interaction with a faith community. This study was methodologically strong. Participants were asked to self-identify as having experienced very stressful situations such as being physically or sexually assaulted or abused, serving in a war or natural disaster, being in an accident, being diagnosed with a serious illness, or having someone close to you unexpectedly die or develop a

serious illness (Harris et al., 2012). There are examples of research studies that also connect stressful life events to women experiencing premature births. One such early quantitative study sought to determine whether mothers reporting more life events experience preterm births following both complicated and uncomplicated pregnancies (Honnor et al., 1994). The longitudinal study was conducted with 1176 women at risk for poor pregnancy and neonatal outcomes. The women were placed into two groups: women with complicated pregnancies and women with uncomplicated pregnancies. Life events were measured using the Women's Interview Schedule for Life Events and was administered to participants during a 45- minute interview session. The researchers found that women in the complicated group reported five or more life events; however, they did not categorize the life events as severe. It was found that neither social support nor stressful life events influenced preterm birth in either group of women. Life events were not shown to be a predictor to preterm birth in the high risk group of women who had complicated pregnancies. These studies focus on the spiritual impact of stressful life events (Harris et al., 2012) and incorporates measures of religion. This is often present in research studies related to spirituality and coping. It is important, for understanding the current study, to note that religion and spirituality are often used interchangeably in the research and in the everyday communication of people. The focus on a health and wellness outcomes related to stressful life events is present in the sociological research (Honnor et al., 1994). Studies focused on women often reflect issues related to pregnancy or depression. The current dissertation research draws upon the sociological perspective and incorporates spiritual identity theories to broaden the research.

As it relates to the scholarship related to stressful life events, women and health, researchers connect the impact of stressful life events, social support and chronic or terminal

illnesses. Kornblith et al. (2001) conducted a quantitative study to test the impact of stressful life events on cancer patients' psychological state. One hundred seventy-nine participants were interviewed by telephone and administered several measures or instruments including the Medical Outcome Study Social Support Survey, Life Experience Survey, and the Systems of Belief Inventory. The dependent variable was psychological state and the independent variables that were hypothesized to be predictors of psychological state are stressful life events, social support, socio-demographic, medical characteristics, and physical status. The study found that the level of social support necessary to reduce the likelihood of severe psychological distress was very high. In addition, both stressful life events and social support significantly affected patients' emotional state. The significant predictors of greater psychological distress included personal illness or injury and negative life events in the past year (Kornblith et al., 2001). This research, like other studies related to stressful life events, focuses on emotional and psychological states after illness or disease. This study informs my research by honing in on the data collected regarding psychological distress to make connections to the spiritual identity development process. As I focus on interviewing women leaders who have experienced stressful life events, it is possible that some of the participants have experienced personal health challenges. There might be some overlap between what is perceived as psychological and spiritual and my study will need to address this distinction.

The existing research related to stressful life events encompasses the sociological and psychological effects related to chronic illnesses, but also in connection to life changes. Simpson and Thompson (2009) conducted a quantitative survey to investigate what life events postmenopausal women reported as stressful and how their psychological appraisal of the events, menopausal symptoms and general stress mediate their coping style. The study found that the

most commonly reported stressful life events reported by the participants were family problems, menopausal symptoms, work problems, daily hassles, and other health problems. Psychological appraisal was an important factor in mediating coping in this sample of post-menopausal women. Socio-demographic variables, menopausal symptoms and general stress levels were not associated with choice of coping style and this contradicts earlier studies that suggest otherwise (Simpson & Thompson, 2009). This research study provides information on the specific types of events that women consider stressful. It includes research about coping styles and the use of religion and social support to cope, but lacks discussion about spirituality. This research and literature related to stressful life events and women, further justifies the gaps that currently exist in research related to spiritual identity.

Lorenz, Simons, Rand, Elder, Johnson, and Chao (1997) highlighted distress and change over time after a stressful life event. The researchers documented stressful events in the women's lives over a three- year period and calculated scores for the stressful life events. The outcome variable of psychological distress was measured by the characteristic depressive symptoms (Lorenz et al., 1997). This study determined that divorced mothers had a higher level of depressive symptoms at the beginning of the study and experienced significant declines over the next three years. After three years, differences between married and divorced women remained relatively large in terms of depression. The level of stressful life events significantly predicts the initial level of depressive symptoms.

The focus on stressful life events and depression in women which is representative of much of the research in this field related to women. The research about depression and depressive symptoms in women lends itself to also looking at the spiritual impact of these same stressful life events. This perspective changes the focus from the psychological to the spiritual.

Coping. In addition to psychological status and social support, coping also plays a role in how women experience stressful life events. However, women who have experienced the terminal illness, traumatic stress, life-threatening situations or other stressful life events often depend on other coping mechanisms to endure and mediate the negative life events. Women enduring stressful life events might use certain types of coping such as avoidance coping, emotional support seeking, religious coping, reflective coping, and strategic planning coping (Khan & Rafique, 2009) to moderate and mediate their stressful life events.

Religious coping and spirituality has been known to have positive effects on women experiencing stressful life events (Tix & Frazier, 1998). Religious practices, such as, reading the Bible (Hamilton, Moore, Johnson, & Koenig, 2013) or singing religious songs (Hamilton, Sandelowski, Moore, Agarwal, & Koenig, 2013) have been shown to provide positive coping for stressful life events. Researchers have also found negative aspects of religious coping and that for some people experiencing stressful life events, their relationship with God might be tenuous and cause additional stress (Bjorck, 2007).

Nonreligious coping strategies are also used by women who encounter stressful life events (van Uden, Pieper, van Eersel, Smeets, & van Laarhoven, 2009). Social and emotional support is a way in which the woman is able to manage the negative life event and move forward. Those who are less inclined to seek religious coping strategies are still likely to find other ways of coping with their stressful life events, such as humor, that are just as productive and successful for them (Abel, 2002).

Upon review of various studies relating to stressful life events and, specifically, to coping and spirituality, a gap exists in the research related to how coping strategies impact the connection between the stressful life events and spiritual identity, in particular.

Spiritual Identity Development

An early study conducted in the 1970s by Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Tarule (1986) explored the various ways in which women view reality and "draw conclusions about truth, knowledge, and authority" (p. 3). The authors present a framework for understanding how women find their inner strength and voice through received and subjective knowledge. It is posited that once women begin to understand and rely more on their inner resources, they learn to listen to the "still small voice" inside of them (Belenky et al., 1986, p. 54). The reference to a still small voice is originally situated in a biblical context referencing the voice of God.

Upon review of the literature related to spiritual identity development, it is clear that specific studies relevant to this strand are limited. Many of the presented studies explore identity and spiritual development as two separate processes with similar components. The research focuses on the experiences of developing spirituality and/or identity development within racial-ethnic groups and college-aged women. Identity in relationship to spirituality is presented in the context of religious practice or studied in a way that differentiates identity development between the religious and non-religious. This is vastly different from the construct of spiritual identity. Such distinctions further justify the need for the current research study.

Early studies. One of the early studies related to identity development was conducted in 1981 by Hodgson and Fischer. The purpose of their quantitative study was to identify patterns of identity development in late adolescent women. The participants in the study were 50 female and 50 male undergraduate students between the ages of 18 to 21 at the Pennsylvania State University. They were interviewed using the Identity Status and Intimacy Status Interviews and the Self-Esteem Scale to determine their specific pathway of identity development: male, female or androgynous. Four undergraduate students conducted the interviews and recorded each

interview. The instruments were scored by the senior author and statistical analysis was conducted based upon the results and discussion presented.

The results of this study showed that women in the traditional female pathway (more interpersonal in nature) had higher self-esteem than those following the male pathway (more focus on ideology and occupation). Also, males were more advanced in intrapersonal settings related to knowledge while females were more advanced in settings where "the evolving sense of self rests on the success with which she can resolve issues of getting along with others" (Hodgson & Fischer, 1981, p. 685).

Although this study is more than 30 years old, it still has relevance today. This early research informs the current research study, because of the ways in which it describes identity development and the related constructs. The spiritual aspect of identity was absent from early research studies, as studies were focused on adding and expanding to the work of Erik Erikson and other cognitive and psychological theories of identity.

Another early study focused on the identity development of adolescent females (Lytle, Linda, & Charles, 1997). The purpose of this quantitative study was to determine whether a gender- specific pattern of identity formation is evident in females during their early and middle adolescent years. A total of 703 students (317 males and 332 females, and 54 who did not mark their gender) in sixth, eighth, tenth, and 12th grades were given the Measures of Psychosocial Development (MPD). This instrument was used, because it focuses on identity as a developmental process, and not a status. Out of the total sample size, 590 students completed the instrument. This was the first data set of a longitudinal project that extended over eight years. The researchers found that the pattern of the female is to depart from the traditional pattern of identity development that Erikson proposed. Females tend to integrate the interpersonal with the

intrapersonal to develop their own identity. Also, the results from the research showed that men are most likely threatened in situations that involve affiliation or connectedness.

As stated previously, the concept of spiritual identity is not a widely researched topic. Along with the ambiguity in defining spirituality and spiritual identity, there are numerous theories of identity that may or may not include elements of spirituality. As an example, this study represents one that focuses on the developmental process of identity, but does not specify areas of spirituality. However, some of the measures on the instrument might be interpreted as spiritual constructs and could be used to measure spiritual identity within the appropriate conceptual framework.

Identity and spirituality. Chae et al. (2004) conducted an exploratory quantitative study that examined the relationship between ethnic identity development and spirituality. The participants were selected from a Catholic university located in the northeastern part of the United States. Of the 198 participants, there were 42 Latino Americans, 44 African Americans, 47 Asian Americans and 65 White Americans in the age range of 18 to 23 years. There were 108 women and 90 men who were divided based on the participant's indication of "ethnicity" on a demographics measure (Chae et al., 2004). The participants were administered three instruments, Multi-group Ethnic Identity Measure, Spirituality Means Measure and the Spirituality Ends Measure, as well as a demographics sheet. The data were analyzed using a general linear model multivariate analysis to determine the "influence of ethnic group membership on ethnic identity, spirituality means, and spirituality ends" (Chae et al., 2004, p. 21). The researchers found that there is a positive correlation between ethnic identity and spirituality ends and spirituality means. In addition, ethnic identity was positively related to a

spiritual means orientation and negatively correlated with a spiritual ends orientation. The researchers were not able to account for the result.

This study uses extensive literature to explain the research problem and hypotheses. It examines the relationship between ethnic identity and spirituality. It informs the current research by adding to the overall framework for research on spiritual identity. The positive relationship between ethnic identity and spirituality will add to the review of the literature of identity and spirituality topics that justify the need for continued research.

In recent years, researchers have moved closer to exploring the closer relationship and interconnectedness of identity and spirituality. Kiesling et al. (2008) set out to explore the sense of the spiritual self. The spiritual self was part of the early theoretical work of psychologist William James (1890). The purpose of the qualitative study was to examine the structure and content of adults' sense of spiritual identity. The participants included 13 male and 15 male adults who were chosen based on their reputation for being spiritually devout. Also, participants were selected based on their capacity to articulate the significance and influence of spirituality in their lives (Kiesling et al., 2008). The researchers categorized participants as either spiritually foreclosed, achieved, or in moratorium. The rich introspective accounts of the respondents confirm that role-related spiritual identity is important in constructing ego identity. Many of the respondents attributed their changes in spiritual identity to painful experiences or adversity. Individuals were highly reflective and demonstrated the human capacity to draw from spiritual resources to make meaning out of personal struggles (Kiesling et al., 2008)

This study examined the structure and content of an individual's spiritual identity and the researchers determined various states that an individual's spiritual identity might currently reside. This study provides a framework for considering spiritual identity as an individual

process that is often affected by extrinsic, social factors. In analysis of spirituality and identity, Patton and McClure (2009) focused on the role of spirituality as a source of strength for Black college women. The qualitative phenomenological research study included 14 undergraduate African- American women. Seven of the women were attending a large research institution and the other seven were from a mid-size religiously affiliated institution. Both schools were located in the Midwest United States. Participants were recruited via an email that was sent to various student groups on campus. The participants self-identified as Christian, and believed in a higher power being reference as God. The participants took part in a one-hour, semi-structured interview that was audio-recorded. The data analysis was conducted by both researchers and included reviewing the transcripts and bracketing and grouping central phrases that aligned with the research questions. The researchers used member-checking to ensure trustworthiness.

Six major themes emerged from the study: (a) the realities of race, (b) coping strategies, (c) the presence of something more, (d) consensus and confusion, (e) thought transitions and (f) perceived lack of support. As a result of their college experiences, participants realized that they began to see their spirituality differently. Results from the study indicated that spirituality does not exist in a vacuum and that it is a major factor in how the participants understood their own life experiences. This study examines the role of spirituality for African- American college women. In this study, the participants had experienced both positive and challenging experiences and associated their ability to understand those situations through the lens of their spirituality. The researchers found that spirituality serves as a source of strength for the students who were going through various experiences in college; which could be perceived as stressful or challenging life events.

Pedersen, Richard, and Kristoffer (2000) conducted a quantitative study focused on spiritual self-identity and how it relates to religious orientation (means, ends, and quest). The study included 315 undergraduate students from four participating universities, three of which were church affiliated. The participants were administered three measuring instruments: The Who Am I? scale, the Religious Life Inventory and the Religious Attitude Questionnaire. The data analysis included scoring the instruments to determine the measurements of each instrument. For example, the Who Am I? instrument measures the relative centrality of spirituality. Statistical analysis provided the means and standard deviations for each instrument and data are presented in tables.

The researchers found that participants who have a high spiritual self-identity also reflect an ends orientation as being central to their religiosity" (Pedersen et al., 2000). Based on the research, it appears that the centrality of spiritual self-identity moves an individual closer to an intrinsic religious orientation and away from more utilitarian approaches. This study provides more data that examines spiritual self-identity; however, it makes an association to religious affiliation. There are many definitions of spirituality, so it is important to review literature that incorporates religion, because there are similarities between religious experiences and the sociological construct of stressful life events.

Watt (2003) conducted a qualitative research study to examine how African- American college women use spiritual understanding to cope, to resist, and to develop their identities. The researcher facilitated four focus-group interviews with 48 African -American female participants. The researcher conducted an analysis of the participants' responses and placed them into themes that reflected the components of the research question, coping, resistance, and identity development. Watt found that the experiences shared demonstrated that the African-

American women see the importance of controlling their own destiny (2003). The participating women have developed ways to resist negative societal messages (Watt, 2003). The participants have shaped their identity through various life events such as milestones, achievements, and their college experiences. This research study is reflective of the importance of researching spiritual identity. The study examines the spirituality of the participants and how it is used to develop an identity. The framework used in this research study contributes to the spiritual identity development framework for this study.

Spiritual identity. While limited, there exists research specifically related to spiritual identity as a single construct. Kirmani and Kirmani (2009) conducted a qualitative research study with three groups of people totaling 125 participants. The purpose of the study was to examine the individual and collective spiritual experiences of the participants and identify any similarities and differences in those spiritual experiences. Of the 125 participants, 29 were males and 96 were females and represented different religious affiliations, including atheist and unaffiliated. The participants formed three different groups, including undergraduate students who attended a diversity course taught by the first author, faculty and students who attended annual seminars on 'spirituality and children' conducted at the same university by both authors, and volunteer participants who attended diversity meetings and conferences.

The researchers administered an open-ended set of three questions for participants to answer in narrative form. After participants spent 30 minutes responding to the questions, the researchers conducted focus group discussions. The focus groups were conducted to give participants the opportunity to explain their narratives in greater detail.

The data collected revealed seven spiritual identities that describe the various ways that participants experience spirituality. Spiritual identity cuts across religious affiliations and

indicates that spirituality is not bound by religion or a specific one. There are implications for professionals working with children that include addressing spiritual development from the seven spiritual identities. The purpose of this study to identify and understand spiritual experiences aligns with the current research study of exploring the spiritual identity of women leaders. The seven spiritual identities shed light on the varied nature of spirituality (Kirmani & Kirmani, 2009). This research study is also relevant because it included participants of different self-identified religious backgrounds, which is present when viewing spirituality as a construct separate from religion. This research will contribute to the discussion of research on spirituality that encompasses and cuts across religious backgrounds.

Van Dover and Pfeiffer (2012) conducted a qualitative grounded theory study with 20 patients who lived in the Midwest and Southwest USA. These 20 patients, six men and 14 women aged 28-84 years, received care from ten parish nurses who participated in a previous study conducted by the researchers. Each of the participants self-identified as Christian and had experienced various types of health issues, including acute and chronic challenges. The research was conducted at two separate time periods; half of the patients were interviewed during the previous study in 1999-2001 and the other half were interviewed in 2005. The researchers used Glaser and Strauss's method of constant comparison to code the interviews and based on their data analysis, 297 codes and 12 conceptual categories emerged (Van Dover & Pfeiffer, 2012). The researchers stated in the article that data was collected and analyzed until saturation of concepts and categories was reached (Van Dover & Pfeiffer, 2012) as is customary in grounded theory research.

The researchers found that the experiences of patients who receive spiritual care provided by Christian Parish Nurses are described as 'renewed spiritual identity' (Van Dover & Pfeiffer,

2012, p. 1828). The renewed spiritual identity demonstrates "practice-based outcomes of care" for patients receiving spiritual care within the Christian faith community (Van Dover & Pfeiffer, 2012, p. 1830). The process of the patients consisted of four phases: finding a safe place, releasing burdens, changing perspectives, and joining/rejoining the family of faith. This study explores the spiritual identity of patients enduring the stressful life events of acute and chronic illness and demonstrated a focus on renewed spiritual identity for patients who received spiritual care within their Christian faith community. While the current research study does not focus on a specific faith community, this study is among the many studies that points to the gaps in the extant research to explore conversation of spirituality that are not specific to religious practice.

Dent, Higgins, and Wharff (2005) conducted a qualitative narrative analysis to analyze academic articles and determine how they characterize workplace spirituality, and discover factors and conditions for promoting a theory of spiritual leadership within the context of the workplace. In the empirical review of current literature relating to spirituality and leadership, the authors sought to determine and analyze common threads amongst the literature. The final sample consisted of 87 scholarly articles which were coded for each of the eight thematic categories (Dent, Higgins, & Wharff, 2005).

During analysis, it was found that of the articles coded, most either hypothesized or found a correlation between spirituality and productivity. The authors determined that there were eight main areas of difference in the literature related to workplace spirituality: (a) definition, (b) connected to religion, (c) marked by epiphany, (d) teachable, (e) individual development, (f) measurable, (g) profitable/productive, and (h) nature of the phenomenon. Important to this study was the empirical review that pointed to the fact that it is difficult to determine a common definition of spirituality. In addition, it was noted that some researchers of workplace spirituality

associate spirituality with religion and some do not. One of the eight areas was how to determine or define the development of the individual within the context of workplace spirituality. This study provided additional insight for the varying definitions of spirituality and identity that helped to shape my dissertation research.

Spirituality and Women Leaders

There is very little research that exists to demonstrate women leaders' experiences with spirituality. Much of the extant literature regarding women and spirituality focuses on the broader experiences of all women or specific racial/ethnic groups. Therefore, this a specific gap in an area of research that the current dissertation research addresses.

Bass (2009) conducted a qualitative, exploratory, multi-case study that examined the leadership of five female educational administrators and teachers and addressed questions related to how intersectionality informs an ethic of care and how African- American women define caring. The participants were chosen through purposeful sampling and included five African-American women who "actively practice an ethic of care in their educational practice" (Bass, 2009, p. 622). The participants were chosen based on their reputation for demonstrating ethic of care in their leadership and this purposeful selection provided a better opportunity to address the research questions. The data collection method for this study included email interviews, a focus group and some follow-up telephone calls. The constant comparison method was used to analyze the data and telephone calls were made to clarify information given in the email interview responses. From the emails and clarification telephone calls, questions were formulated for the focus group session. The interviews revealed the themes of mothering and other mothering that has been historically prevalent in the African- American community in the form of Mammy and other maternal and self-sacrificing women. There was a strong connection

to spirituality as the participants related their spirituality to their understanding about the intersectionality of African- American women.

Bass' study (2009) focuses on the experiences of women leaders who use an ethic of care approach in their leadership. The women participants were selected based on their use of this paradigm, which implied, to the reader, some level of spirituality or understanding of spirituality in their personal and professional lives. As leaders and as African- American women, they referred to the importance of spirituality in navigating the stress and challenges of their daily experiences related to intersectionality.

Banks-Wallace and Parks (2004) conducted a qualitative focus group study and found that the critical intersections between spirituality and well-being were weaved throughout many of the stories and 21% of the stories directly related to spirituality. Women used stories to explain their meaning of spirituality and all agreed that maintaining spiritual development was essential to maintaining their health and well-being. The spirituality of the women provided an opportunity to "look within themselves, toward God, and to loved ones for wisdom, nurturing, and other resources to carry them through life's journey" (Banks-Wallace & Parks, 2004, p. 34).

The study aimed to explore the meaning and function of spirituality for African-American women. The participants included 25 women who represented either mother-daughter or sister-sister relationships. Their study provides insight into the meaning of spirituality for women, which is important in understanding the spiritual identity of women as a result of stressful life events. Some of the themes that emerged from this research point to the notion that the meaning of spirituality varies for different people, but that it is often a major part of their lives. The women in this study expressed that their connection to God served as a source of strength and helped them go through various challenges and crises.

Relevant to the discussion of women leaders and spirituality is the idea of exploring the voices and experiences of women. The purpose of one qualitative phenomenological study was to explore the contributions, voices and experiences of female leaders in the counseling profession (Black & Magnuson, 2005). The researchers identified ten female leaders in the counseling profession. The research study included eight participating female leaders and biographical reviews of two deceased female leaders. In addition, there were 20 total protégés, two per female leader, interviewed to capture the role of mentoring and role modeling in the leadership of the female leaders. The elements of data collection included semi-structured telephone interviews with the participants, telephone interviews with two protégés of each leader, and contributions documented on each participants' curriculum vitae. Black and Magnuson (2005) found that the attributes of the leaders were demonstrated within the interaction of personal, interpersonal and professional domains of their individual lives. The women collectively stated that leadership "is not a skill set, position, power, or personal acclaim" (Black & Magnuson, 2005, p.341). Women leaders communicated that familial relationships, emotional and physical health and other influences illuminated the importance of hard work, personal support and spirituality. The protégés stated that their view of the women's leadership was based on their reputations for excellence; but noted that cost of leadership was unbalanced lives.

There is little research about spirituality and women leaders. However, there are studies, like this one, that have explored characteristics of women leadership that are categorically relevant to spirituality. The data contained in this study point to the relevance of interpersonal and personal attributes such as, authenticity, tenacity, and compassion that influence the

leadership of these women in the counseling field. Based on the results of this study, it was also

determined that these factors are also relevant to the spirituality of women leaders.

Women Leaders in Academic Medicine

Similar to other fields, women in academic medicine face challenges with upward

mobility, promotion and leadership opportunities. There are studies that focus on the leadership

dilemma for women in academic medicine. The focus of the existing research related to women

leaders in academic medicine is their lack of representation in senior faculty and leadership

positions and the barriers to advancement that exist.

In 2000, women represented only 8% of medical school chair positions (Ash et al., 2004).

A little over a decade later, in 2011, women still only represented 13% of medical school chair

positions. This fact points to the continued prevalence of the underrepresentation of women in

leadership positions within academic medicine. While women represent 48% of students

admitted to medical school, as you move up the leadership ladder, the percentages decrease. The

current research, related to women leaders in academic medicine, centers around a couple of

important themes: historical context of an ongoing problem and barriers to advancement and

upward mobility.

Historical context. The early research related to women in academic medicine focused

on the prevalence of women in medical schools, but their lack of representation in leadership

positions the barriers and threats to their advancement, and inequities of pay compared to male

counterparts. Not unlike the current research studies, early studies involved research methods

used to determine ways to address the leadership challenge among women in academic medicine.

In 1988, there were two women medical school deans (Bartuska, 1988). The narrative

surrounding women leaders in academic medicine, at that time, focused on the lack of

representation of women in leadership positions. The recommendations from the research and scholarship focused on the need for women to be encouraged to seek advancement in the field of academic medicine. Recognition, mentorship, support and financial assistance were ways in which Bartuska (1988) and other scholars sought to equalize the opportunities for women as leaders in academic medicine (DeAngelis & Johns, 1995; Levinson, Tolle, & Lewis, 1989; Weisse, 1994). Cydulka (2000) reported from a study of women in academic emergency medicine, that they were less likely to reach senior academic ranks than their male counterparts. At the time of the research (and today) this finding was consistent with trends in other specialties within medicine. Between 1995 and 2000, many specialties, including emergency medicine and orthopaedic surgery, reported declines in the percentage of women who reach the rank of full professors (Ash et al., 2004).

Barriers to advancement. Women in academic medicine face obstacles and barriers when striving to move into leadership positions. Research has been conducted by researchers interested in determining the specific barriers and their causes. The structure and hierarchy of specific organizations within academic medicine and women's perceptions of that structure and hierarchy have been shown to affect the leadership advancement of women (Conrad et al., 2010). Women who perceived the organizational hierarchy and structure to be non-inclusive and less transparent were less likely to advance into leadership roles because of their associated work experiences. Conrad et al. (2010) suggested that organizations restructure departments and leadership roles to be more inclusive.

Stereotype threat within academic medicine has also been examined as a contribution to the slow pace of women's leadership advancement. Women experience stereotype threat as a result of the descriptive and prescriptive stereotypes that are associated with leadership in the

academic medicine setting (D. J. Burgess et al., 2012). Often, female gender stereotypes are inconsistent with the job requirements for the leader. For example, the expectations for specific job requirements are framed using male gender stereotypes, such as aggressive. Women were less successful in such situations as opposed to situations where the job was framed using female gender stereotypes such as nurturing (D. J. Burgess et al., 2012). Lack of effective mentoring relationships, pay inequities, the glass ceiling effect and the continued influence of childbirth and family also contribute to the slow pace of women's advancement in leadership positions within academic medicine ((Ash et al., 2004; Carnes et al., 2008; Levinson et al., 1989; Marušić, 2012).

CHAPTER 3

Methodology

Chapter 2 presented the gaps in the current research related to stressful life events, spiritual identity and women leaders. These gaps justify the need for new knowledge related to this topic. Therefore, this research study employed the use of constructivist grounded theory research design. This chapter will explain how I collected and analyzed the data an explanation of the connection between stressful life events and spiritual identity.

Assumptions and Rationale for Qualitative Research

The construct of spiritual identity is complex. There are numerous theories that attempt to explain the psychological and cognitive components of both spirituality and identity. Many of those theories try to explain the connection between the two individual constructs, but no one theory captures the multiple meanings placed upon spiritual identity by individuals.

I approached the study using the ontology, epistemology and methodology associated with constructivism. The constructivist (or interpretivist) paradigm seeks to gain understanding by interpreting subject perceptions (Lincoln, Lynham, & Guba, 2011). The ontological premise is based upon individual personal reality and that it is self-created (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). I am responsible for conducting the research process in a way that produces knowledge reflective of the participants' reality(Lincoln et al., 2011). An epistemological assumption that is prevalent in the constructivist worldview is that "we cannot separate ourselves from what we know" (Lincoln et al., 2011, p. 104) and that a central part of how we understand the world is a central part of how we understand ourselves. Individuals also create subjective meanings of their life experiences and the constructivist researcher focuses on the complexity of meanings as opposed to narrowing those meanings to a few broad categories or ideas (Creswell, 2014).

Methodologically, according to Creswell (2014), the qualitative approach uses constructivist knowledge claims and employs several strategies of inquiry, including grounded theory. In addition, qualitative researchers position self in the research, collect participant meanings and make interpretations of the collected data (Creswell, 2014). My aim was to shed light on the multiple realities that exist for each individual woman leader and make sense of those meanings. The life events and experiences of women leaders elicit multiple meanings and this study sought to explore those multiple realities to construct knowledge in the area of spiritual identity. The nature of knowledge for the constructivist/interpretivist researcher is that the constructed meaning of actors is the foundation of knowledge (Lincoln et al., 2011). From the constructivist worldview perspective, "the goal of the research is to rely as much as possible on the participants' views of the situation being studied" (Creswell, 2014, p. 8). The qualitative paradigm and constructivist philosophical worldview were appropriate for this study, because both emphasize multiple realities and meanings that exists when individuals shares similar experiences.

Strategy of Inquiry: Constructivist Grounded Theory

Glaser and Straus (1967) describe grounded theory as a research method in which theory emerges from, and is grounded in, the data. Although broad, the methodological design of grounded theory seeks to explain a process through the development of a theory (Creswell, 2012). Specifically, the constructivist grounded theory design is explained by Charmaz (as cited in Creswell, 2012) as a means to develop a theory by focusing on the meanings that participants ascribe to an experience or process. Grounded theory research is a method of social scientific theory construction. Central to grounded theory research is the identification of the basic social process to be studied. Once the process is identified, the strategy involves collecting and

analyzing data in the field setting to generate a theory that explains the process (Bryant &

Charmaz, 2007).

In the late 1960s, Glaser and Strauss initiated grounded theory research as a response to

the current work in the field of sociology that focused more on verifying and testing existing

theories. The two researchers determined that developing theories based on actual data from

participants produced better explanations of specific processes and situations than existing

theories (Creswell, 2012). The researchers used systematic approaches for data collection and

analysis and this was embraced by several other researchers who adopted this strategy of inquiry.

One such researcher, Charmaz (2000), embraced the grounded theory methods identified and

implemented by Glaser and Strauss, but also thought that the two researchers were too rigid in

their approach (Creswell, 2012). Therefore, she developed an approach to grounded theory

research that emphasized the meaning that participants ascribed to situations and acknowledged

the role of the researcher. This approach is considered the constructivist grounded theory (CGT)

approach.

Grounded theory is an iterative process and allows the researcher to go back and forth

between data collection and analysis (Charmaz, 2011). Charmaz describes the analysis process

in this way: "By asking analytic questions during each step in the iterative process, the researcher

raises the abstract level of the analysis and intensifies its power" (2011, p. 361).   The foundation

of grounded theory involves collecting empirical data, fragmenting that data, then coding it in

abstract categories that can be fit together to develop a conceptual analysis and theory (Bryant &

Charmaz, 2007) According to Charmaz (2000), the CGT approach "fosters the development of

qualitative traditions through study of experience from the standpoint of those who live it"

(2000, p. 522). In addition, she explains that CGT does not adhere to the discovery of a basic

process or core category (Charmaz, 2000) and that by using the CGT approach, the researcher places emphasis on both data collection and analysis and focuses on the meanings ascribed by participants to their experiences without the assumption of one-dimensional external reality.

Use of the constructivist grounded theory research design was appropriate for this study for several reasons. First, the review of the literature demonstrated a lack of existing research, specifically qualitative research, related to the construct of spiritual identity and the connection or relationship between spiritual identity and stressful life events. Secondly, there is an absence of one specific theory that could be used as the framework by which to research how women leaders describe spiritual identity in connection to their stressful life events. Thirdly, because constructivist grounded theory employs a constant comparison method during analysis that breaks down the data into abstract categories, it enhanced the analysis of the expanse of abstract concepts, varying stories and unique situations that arise from the collected data.

I sought to explain the connection between spiritual identity and stressful life events specifically for women leaders. Previous and current leadership-related theories focus on psychological theories. There is a need in leadership research to generate theories and not simply test them (Parry, 1998). Parry (1998) identifies change as an essential aspect of the leadership process. He notes that change incidents may often be the basis of investigation of the leadership process. In line with the research on stressful life events as turning points or transitions in the lives of women, there is reason to suggest that stressful life events might also serve as change incidents for women leaders during their leadership process. Theory generation using the grounded theory method "helps to integrate the descriptive data, as well to begin to explain and interpret those descriptive data" (Parry, 1998). Consequently, the grounded theory method is appropriate to study the leadership experiences of women leaders.

The use of the grounded theory approach is not an attempt to generate a widely applied theory (i.e. grand theory),, rather it is to generate an explanation of something that is not currently present in the research. Specifically, I employed a grounded theory strategy of inquiry to explain the connection between stressful life events and spiritual identity for women leaders and explore how this connection informs their leadership experiences. The use of constructivist grounded theory assisted with developing theoretical ideas and concepts related to the descriptive data collected from participants. One key distinction between the grounded theory approach and other qualitative research approaches is the idea of the conceptualization of data as opposed to the analysis of data.   As the researcher moves through the grounded theory data collection and analysis process, s/he focuses on conceptualizing the data into new meaning or understanding. The concepts that emerge from the data are the foundation of developing the framework for new theory.

Role of Researcher

The late Maya Angelou once stated, "There is no greater agony than bearing an untold story inside of you" (Stephens, 2014). I have a personal and anecdotal connection to my research topic and a general interest in how people cope with stressful life events. As a result of experiencing my own tumultuous stressful life event, I gained perspective about my spiritual identity and the changes that were occurring throughout that experience. During the experience, I kept a journal, blogged, and eventually published a book, *New Growth: How My Hair Saved My Life*, which focused on my personal spiritual identity development and growth during my experience. I identify myself as a leader and believe that by sharing my story, I help others who are experiencing some type of spiritual transformation as a result of their life events. I sought to explore and learn more about how women leaders create meaning from life experiences, such as

stressful life events, that might be considered transformative. As a result, I am invested in

continuing the work of understanding the many interpretations, experiences and definitions of

spiritual identity. I desire to lead women to increased consciousness of spiritual identity that will

enhance their professional careers and personal lives.

The experiences of women leaders and their stressful life events vary. For the purposes of

this research study and as an ethical researcher, it was important that I maintain a bias-free

perspective on their experiences and interpret their multiple meanings accurately and honestly.

There were several measures taken to address potential bias and ethical issues or considerations

addressed prior to initiation of data collection and analysis. Upon committee approval of the

research study, I applied to the Institutional Review Board (IRB) and obtained approval to move

forward with the study. The informed consent form outlined the purpose, procedures, risks,

benefits and confidentiality of the study. Since the study explored the stressful life events of

participants, I provided, on the consent form, information about counseling services that would

be available should they experience any emotional or psychological discomfort.

One potential bias that required consideration was the acknowledgment of my own

preconceived notions as it relates to women and spiritual identity. I think that women who

experience stressful life events also experience some change in and/or an increased awareness of

their spiritual identity. However, as I conducted the research study, it was important to identify

and articulate the complexity of multiple meanings and realities and convey the women's

connections between their stressful life events and spiritual identity. Crystallization is one

technique that assisted me with controlling for this bias. Crystallization involves telling the same

tale from different points of view (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011), and this perspective was helpful in

telling the stories of women leaders from their perspectives and developing a conceptual theory based on the core categories and themes that emerged from their stories.

During the interview process, it was important for me to maintain objectivity. Many of the women's experiences were relatable, however, to avoid displaying any bias, I avoided asking leading questions or sharing personal impressions of their stories (Creswell, 2014). I used the questions and prompts on the interview protocol and asked follow-up questions for clarification. In addition, I viewed the participants as collaborators in this research process and used their expertise about their own stories by using their language to tell the stories that formed the grounded theory for this study (Creswell, 2014). As I report and explain the results of the study, in order to protect the privacy and identity of participants, I used pseudonyms for each participant.

Participants

I decided to use convenience sampling for this research study because it was important to find women leaders who had already experienced a stressful life event and would be available to participate (Morse, 2007). To recruit and select these participants, I sent out an IRB-approved informational email and a recruitment flyer about the study to individuals in my personal and professional network who either qualified for the study or who knew eligible individuals for the study. Individuals were asked to share the informational email and recruitment flyer with their networks and if women were interested in participating, they were informed to contact me directly. See Appendix A and Appendix B for a copy of the recruitment documents.

Moving beyond convenience to purposeful sampling, I specifically narrowed the participants to women leaders in academic medicine. Since the stressful life events were broadly defined under the seven events or categories, the purposeful sampling involved selecting women

who would be considered the same socio-economic status and level of employment. Participants and sites were chosen in a way that helped me understand the research problem and the connection that I sought to explain (Creswell, 2014). Participants were associated with one of four large academic medical centers in North Carolina. The participants for the study included 12 women leaders from academic medical centers. This sample is a representation of women leaders in academic medicine, where women continue to be underrepresented in leadership roles. Upon sending the approved flyer to individuals, there were 15 women interested in participating who met the participant criteria. Of the 15 women, two declined participation because of the time commitment involved in the interview process. The remaining one had continuous scheduling conflicts that prevented her from scheduling the individual interview and participating in the group interview.

The 12 women leaders in this study included five senior- level administrators, one associate dean in a health sciences professional school, two senior administrators with a faculty appointment, and four medical directors with faculty appointments. Each woman leader had experienced at least one of the seven stressful life events and most had experienced more than one stressful life events. The ages and races of the women varied.

Data Collection Procedures

I utilized unstructured and semi-structured interviews, and a group interview to gather empirical data. This constructivist grounded theory strategy of inquiry involves the use of theoretical sampling, which means that as a researcher, I chose the forms of data collection that would yield text and images useful in generating a theory. Each interview was recorded (with signed consent from the participants) and transcribed (Creswell, 2014).

Individual interview. Between April 1, 2014 and June 5, 2014, I conducted an

individual unstructured interview with each participant using the approved interview protocol

*(*Appendix C*)*. The interviews were conducted either inperson or via teleconference and lasted

between 50-60 minutes. The interviews were unstructured, which is described as a

"conversation with purpose" (R. G. Burgess, 1984) and allows participants to tell their stories.

During the early stages of grounded theory research, Glaser and Strauss stressed the importance

of listening to the respondents and the unstructured interviews support this priority (Lincoln &

Guba, 2013). While I originally proposed to conduct two interviews, the purpose of the second

interview was to ask each participant about her experiences as a woman leader (in academic

medicine). However, in each initial interview, this topic arose as each participant described her

past and current experiences as a leader and in the context of her stressful life event and spiritual

identity.

    Group interview. The group interview was designed as a theoretical group interview

(Morse, 2007). The purpose of a theoretical group interview in grounded theory is to "provide

final missing pieces of the puzzle, polish data collection, and complete processes of saturation"

(Morse, 2007, p. 241). Upon completion of the individual interviews, emerging core categories

and themes were developed. Those emerging core categories were then placed into theoretical

codes and constructs (Milliken, 2010). The theoretical codes and constructs developed after the

interviews were examined further by participants in a group setting using the group interview

protocol (Appendix B). Therefore, the group interview questions were based on the emerging

model that I began to develop as a result of the individual interview data. Once those questions

were developed, the group interview protocol *(*Appendix D*)* was sent to the IRB for approval as

an addendum to the original application.

Participants were sent an email inviting them to provide available dates and times for the group interview. Consensus was reached for the best available date, June 5, 2014, and the group interview was conducted blindly via telephone and recorded on a conference call line with eight of the 12 participants. The blind interview provided participants with additional confidentiality. There were four participants unable to participate, due to last minute scheduling conflicts. The structured group interview lasted for 60 minutes and involved three questions developed based on the theoretical codes and constructs that emerged from the individual interview data. The three questions were developed with the purpose of addressing unanswered questions from analysis of the individual interview data, to test emerging categories and to determine any additional core categories and themes. I encouraged each participant to respond to each question and by calling on them (using their initials) to make sure each participant had the opportunity to address each question, if she so desired.

Theoretical saturation. It is important to discuss the concept of theoretical saturation in grounded theory methodology to justify the use of one individual interview. In grounded theory research, it is critical to reach theoretical saturation. Theoretical saturation is reached when the researcher no longer hears any new ideas emerge from the interviews. This concept is not contingent upon the number of interviews conducted per participant, rather to the amount of data that should be collected to reach the goal of consistency of expressed ideas and themes. As Stern points out, "it's unnecessary and perhaps defeating to collect huge amounts of data"(2007, p. 117); this statement applies to the number of participants and the data collected from those participants. Therefore, as I moved through the individual interviews of each participant, I employed the constant comparison method (which will be discussed later in the data analysis procedure section) for each construct (stressful life events, spiritual identity, and leadership

experiences) and pulled themes from each interview. I continued with the interviews and constant comparison method until there were no new properties or dimensions presented that forced the development of new properties of the emerging categories (Charmaz, 2006; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Holton, 2007; Stern, 2007), including the explanation of spiritual identity and the experiences as women leaders. During each interview, I listened for new emerging concepts and for concepts that would fit with the existing emerging categories.

As a result of this ongoing comparative analysis, I reached saturation as it related to their experiences with stressful life events, spiritual identity, and as leaders by the tenth participant interview. To check the emerging ideas, I conducted two additional interviews to collect focused data and ensure saturation, and still no new themes emerged, resulting in theoretical saturation.

Data Analysis Procedures

As grounded theory researchers and scholars explain, grounded theory research data analysis process occurs simultaneously as the data collection process (Bryant & Charmaz, 2007; Creswell, 2014; Milliken, 2010). It is difficult, in grounded theory, to discuss data collection separate from data analysis since the two go hand-in-hand. The iterative process of grounded theory analysis is a major aspect of theory formation. As it relates to my study, data analysis consisted of two primary processes that included (a) ongoing organization of the data and (b) employment of the constant comparison method to generate a theory.

Data organization.   Each audiotaped interview was transcribed by an outside transcriber and I organized my personal field notes. The field notes and transcriptions served as the foundation for memos. Memos are an integral part of the data analysis procedure for constructivist grounded theory research. For this study, I used memo writing to organize and prepare the data (after each set of interviews), including transcripts and notes, to determine

emerging codes and constructs. All notes were either typed or handwritten, and organized and arranged according to the source of information (Creswell, 2014). During this step in the data analysis process, I read all of the interview data and used memo writing as a way to begin and continue the iterative process of analysis throughout the data collection process. On each set of memos, I recorded additional notes on emerging ideas and commonalities. In addition, memos were used to define the theoretical constructs that emerged from the individual interviews that were used to guide the questions for the structured group interview. Finally, memos served as a method of analysis to develop an "ongoing dialogue" with myself about the emerging theory (Creswell, 2012) in addition to personal reflections about the data collection and analysis. Figure 2 is a sample memo completed after one individual interview.

MEMO: Dr. Sarah Kimbrough

Interview Prompt: How do these two (stressful life events and spiritual identity) connect for you?

"So since his diagnosis I think that the crucible of tribulation, trying times, you learn more about God in those situations than you do in happy times. For sure I don't think that God creates the terrible times but my personal view...I think God is way more concerned with our character than our comfort."
Memo: In thinking about this statement, the participant introduces the notion that SLEs teach and build character and are recognized as part of the spiritual journey.

"It really gives you a picture of how much God loves you that he prepares you. When you get to a hard time He knew you were gonna get there, so the time was constructed in a way to provide for your needs."
Memo: This statement reflects that the recognition and an understanding of God's love that are present at points during the SLE and proved to be helpful in the process of coping with SLE.

"You couldn't prepare yourself for that. The path was laid out for you and all you can do is look back on it kind of in awe and go "Wow." ...it didn't feel as bad to us as the story sounds because we were really carried through it. We really felt spiritually, physically, emotionally carried through the whole thing."
Memo: There was a presence (God's) during the SLE that helped to prepare her for the experience, carry her through the experience, and make difficult decisions while understanding God's purpose for the SLE.

"...my walk with God really moved to a new level. It became very, very personal. I know your spirituality can take on many different/ it's not religion...It's really what is your interaction with the supernatural and my belief is that there is a creator God who has parted heaven and earth to interact with His creatures by becoming man...I really believe we are not just physical beings."
Memo: There was recognition that the SLE had brought about growth in her spiritual journey/process, personal relationship with God and how she sees herself (spiritual identity) as a spiritual being. SLE brings about deeper or greater awareness of the personality of God in an individual's life.

Figure 2. Sample Memo

Constant comparison method. I employed the constant comparison method to fragment and code the interview data and memos into prevalent categories that correspond with the language used by the participants. During the constant comparison method of analysis, I utilized the following questions to engage me in the analysis process:

- What is this data a study of? What is the basic social psychological process or social structural process in the action scene? (Charmaz, 2006; Glaser & Strauss, 1967)

- What does the data suggest?

- What theoretical category does the data indicate?

By posing these questions, I was able to establish emerging and core categories and themes of the data collected (Creswell, 2014). I used a three-step approach to conduct the comparison of the data: (a) comparison within a single interview, (b) comparison between interviews within the group, and (c) comparison of group interview to the individual interview codes (Boeije, 2002). During this three-step process, emerging categories and themes led to the development of core categories that served as the basis for theory development (Creswell, 2012).

The constant comparison method follows a specific process of isolating higher order categories from lower order categories that are present within the phenomenon or process being studied; thus, the categories are then utilized to develop the working theory (Charmaz, 2006). As aforementioned in the data collection section, the grounded theory strategy of inquiry involves simultaneous collection and analysis of the data. Therefore, as the initial interviews were conducted, I compared each one to others in order to determine the emerging core categories. The immediate comparison allowed me to determine which categories were discrete, part of an existing category or representative of a category at a higher level of abstraction (Parry, 2004). The discrete categories were analyzed for incorporation into the process as either an existing core category or as an additional core category.

Upon completion of the individual interviews, analysis of the interview data was completed to establish core categories from which to continue with subsequent individual and group interviews. Again, this was a simultaneous process not occurring in sequential order. The process of finalizing core categories as part of the constant comparison method is considered visual coding. Once the final core categories were selected, other categories were placed in relationship to those core categories and the development of the theory was initiated (Creswell, 2012). During the data analysis phase, I used a visual coding paradigm to represent the

relationship between the core categories and other emerging categories (Creswell, 2012). Figure 3 provides a visual representation of the data analysis process. Figure 4 provides one example of how I transitioned emerging codes into a core category.
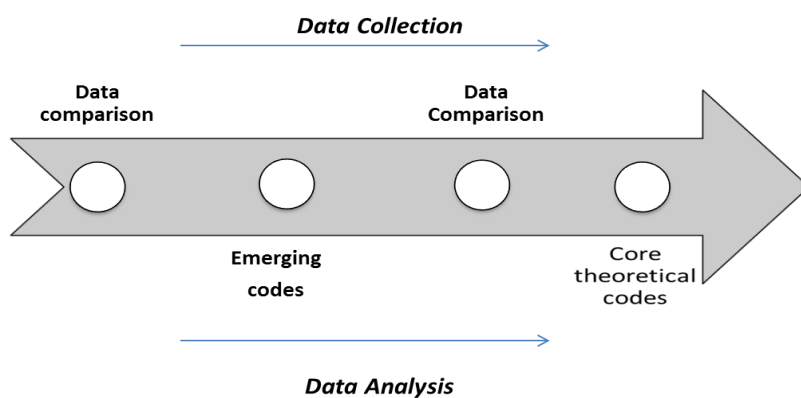

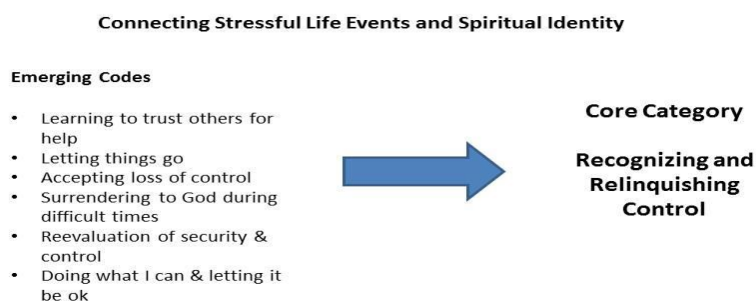*Figure 3*. Data Analysis Process (Constant Comparison Method)

Figure 4. Emerging codes to Core Category

Trustworthiness and Limitations of the Study

As is expected with qualitative research methods, it was important for me to focus on naturalistic methods of inquiry to demonstrate trustworthiness, authenticity and credibility

(Creswell, 2014) within the study and to build trust among participants and develop the relationships needed to provide the safe place for the women to share their stories (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). Establishing trustworthiness in qualitative research required me to employ methods that considered the accuracy of my data. Such methods, including member-checking and crystallization, provide a foundation of trustworthiness between the participants and me. In addition to those strategies, I employed formal and informal debriefing sessions with my committee members to review the empirical data, and resulting categories and to ensure the accuracy of the accounts (Creswell, 2014).

In addition to confirming accuracy of the data, the methods for trustworthiness also address my biases as the researcher. My bias, as it relates to my personal experiences with stressful life events and spiritual identity was a potential limitation. As a result, I employed strategies to eliminate bias during the research and writing process, as mentioned in the role of the researcher section. In addition to the aforementioned strategies, Mruck and Mey offered reflection as a useful strategy to avoid biases associated with conducting grounded theory research (2007). As I collected and analyzed data, I utilized the reflection of process, context, and self, through personal journaling, to maintain perspective as it relates to my own positionality.

One major limitation of qualitative research, and constructivist grounded theory in particular, is transferability. Similar to the expectation of generalizability in quantitative research, the outcome of qualitative research is expected to transfer to populations in a broader context than those studied. However, my goal was not to produce a study that would transfer to broad populations, but rather, to convey themes that produce a deeper meaning of a social process and lived experience for a particular group of people. Therefore, the expected outcome

of the research study is the generation of a theory that explains the process by which women leaders develop spiritual identity. The theory does not widely apply or transfer to all women and specifically all women leaders. This is due to the fact that the theory is very close to this particular set of data collected with these specific participants. This limits the transferability of it as a useful theory in other situations with other groups (Creswell, 2012). However, it is not simply a minor working hypothesis (Creswell, 2012) and attempts to provide an explanation of a basic social process that applies to women and leadership (Parry, 1998).

CHAPTER 4

Results

The women leaders shared, poignantly and openly, their experiences with stressful life events, as well as perceptions and meanings of spiritual identity. This chapter begins with profiles of each participant that provides descriptive information about their individual stressful life events and spiritual identity. Next, I present the three core categories that undergird the theory formation for the connection between stressful life events and spiritual identity for women leaders. Finally, I will elucidate the constructivist grounded theory that emerged from the data collection and analysis.

Profiles of the Women Leaders

Sarah. Sarah is a medical doctor and serves as a section chief at a children's hospital within an academic medical center. She is a wife and mother of three children. Sarah reflected on her spiritual identity by discussing her spiritual journey. She professed her faith at the age of 11 and described a change in her heart that created a desire to know God. Sarah's relationship with God is what guides her understanding of her spiritual identity. She identifies as a Christian and "a child of God."

Sarah describes her stressful life event as her husband's diagnosis with cancer at the age of 38. At the time, they had been married for 11 years, he had recently started working as a junior associate at a law firm after being home with their two small children for one year, and she was working in her residency program. As time and her husband's situation progressed, Sarah discovered that she was pregnant. As she described the tumultuous time period, she expressed, "I never felt alone."

Sarah gained understanding about several aspects of her spirituality and faith as a result of this stressful life event. She believed that this situation was a process that served as the beginning of finding clarity on God's love for her. Sarah shared that there were instances in which she received signs from God that she should trust and believe. She shared that the birth of her son during that time was a blessing, as it was something happy going on in her life to distract her from the difficulties. She also concluded through this situation that God was more concerned with her character than her comfort and God was using this experience to build her character.

Suni. Suni is an associate dean of social and behavioral sciences in a private university, and a mother. She described her spiritual identity as part of her spiritual and faith development. She identifies as a Christian whose spirituality often overrides religious doctrine. Suni resonated with the idea that her spirituality is about unconditional love, generosity and acceptance. She designated her decision to end a marriage as a stressful life event. Suni was a doctoral candidate and found out two weeks prior to her dissertation defense that she would be without a job. She found herself jobless, pregnant and "without a real partner" based on her husband's response to her pregnancy. Suni described the difficulty she endured trying to decide whether to remain in a marriage to someone who did not live up to her expectations of a partner. Her faith is a major part of her life and it was also something that she considered in her decision-making process for ending her marriage. In reflecting on the decision to divorce her husband, she asserted that the situation helped her grow more spiritually. She used the word surrender to describe a need to totally rely on God to understand how to provide for her daughter and overcome the hurt from her divorce. Suni also reflected that she gained a greater appreciation for God's role in her life's progress.

Olivia. Olivia is a speech pathologist by training and a clinical assistant professor in a school of allied health at a large academic medical center. She is a wife and mother of two adult sons. She identifies herself as a Christian woman of faith and someone who is very grounded and spiritual. Olivia shared that her spiritual journey has been one of discovery. She explained that she grew up as a pastor's daughter, but when she left her home state to attend graduate school, she explained being at a crossroads, spiritually, and needing to soul search to discover who she really was.

Olivia has experienced several stressful life events, including the death of her parents within one year of each other, a difficult divorce, juggling work responsibilities with life, and caring for a special needs child. As she reflected on each event, she discussed how her spirituality helped her cope with each situation. She described the death of her parents and their preceding period of illness, as an extremely difficult time in her life, during which she relied on her close- knit family to cope. Her parents lived in another state and she and her older brother took turns going to care for them on weekends. Olivia explained that her stressful life events have all occurred in the midst of her being a very busy professional woman. There were challenges as she attempted to manage her career and her life. She credits her faith and spirituality with helping her cope with life's stressful events.

Maxine. Maxine is a physician assistant and assistant professor in a school of medicine at a large academic medical center. She is a single mother of two adult children. Maxine explained that she grew up in church and in a family with women of great faith. However, she admitted that she did not know how to describe her spiritual identity. Eventually, she shared a line from a poem, by author Marianne Williamson, to explain what her spiritual identity means to her; "We were born to make manifest the glory of God that is within us."

Maxine expressed that her life has been one stressful life event. Specifically, she shared that her exposure to stressful life events included losing her mother in her 30s, enduring two difficult divorces, including the first which resulted in her becoming a single mother, and managing a life with chronic illnesses. Her first marriage was to her college sweetheart, who decided he did not want to be married anymore and left. They had two children and she was left alone to raise them on her own without much interaction from him. She lives with chronic pain and fatigue, but provides care as a physician assistant to patients in a family medicine clinic. She also teaches physician assistant students. Throughout her challenges, she credits her spirituality for her strength and the reason she has survived.

Elizabeth. Elizabeth is a senior level director of quality improvement at a community hospital that is part of a large academic medical center. Elizabeth is a Christian and stated that she has seen God's hand in her life many times. When asked to describe her spiritual identity, she expressed that she did not know if she had an identity, because things happen that disrupt that identity, so she has not held on to one identity.

Elizabeth endured an unexpected cardiac event (heart attack) that resulted in a major surgery and a subsequent extended period of recovery. Having previously worked as a nurse in an intensive care unit, she had experience caring for cardiac patients, but this time was on the receiving end of that care. As she shared about her sickness, she described other stressful life events that she had experienced, such as the loss of her mom or loss of employment, but noted that the heart attack was scarier, because she recognized the lack of control that she had over the situation. Prior to her heart attack, Elizabeth was going through increased stress at work and managing two large units within the hospital. She reflected on that time period as one that lacked balance and she neglected herself and her relationships. She had made the decision to

release herself from responsibilities of one department prior to her illness. Elizabeth explained

that her illness and faith in God has provided an opportunity to shift her focus back to what was

important.

Maya. Maya is a practicing family medicine physician, an associate professor, and the

director of a center for health equity in a large academic medical center. She is also a mother.

Maya explained that her spiritual identity is connected to her inner strength, perseverance, and

moral bearings. Her spirituality, not religion, has provided the context for her spiritual identity

and it serves as a guide for how she should treat others and deal with difficult situations.

Citing the juggle and balance of work responsibilities and the death of her mother as

significant stressful life events, Maya also shared how she learned to manage life's challenges.

Her mother became ill with congestive heart failure and was living in another state. Against her

mother's wishes, Maya moved her to reside with her so that she could take better care of her. A

little over a month after her relocation, Maya's mother ended up on a ventilator in the intensive

care unit for three months. Eventually, her mother passed away. During that time of caring for

her mother, Maya explained that she did not feel supported by the people in her workplace.

Because she was in a position of leadership, she felt that there were people who wanted control

and power and did not share the same priorities. Her desire was for supporting students, as an

assistant dean for student diversity, and some of her colleagues did not share this same desire.

The situation at work coupled with caring for a dying mother caused much angst and discomfort

in Maya's life. Yet, she explained that her way to manage her frustration and anger was to

understand that it was not about her; she did not control everything, and that ultimately, she

needed to release the responsibility of her mother's health improving.

Muffin. Muffin is the executive director of a community- based non-profit organization focused on improving the overall health and wellness of a surrounding community. She is an administrator and a practitioner of holistic and integrative health and wellness alternatives to traditional medicine. Muffin proclaimed that her spiritual identity consists of the belief that she is enough and that because there is a higher power, she has everything she needs to be who she needs to be.

Muffin has endured a number of stressful life events that she credits her spirituality with her survival. Her daughter passed away at the age of 29, she lost a best friend in a very tragic way, and she survived a marriage that involved domestic violence. She had been a victim of domestic violence within that marriage for years, but it was a nearly tragic episode of torture and violence that landed her in the hospital with major physical damage, which led her to end the marriage. Equally as devastating, her 29 year old daughter went into the hospital for a common surgical procedure, and a medication error in the hospital caused her to die. She and her daughter were very close and even shared a birthday. This tragedy, in addition to losing her best friend to a tragic shooting, created years of turmoil and pain for Muffin. However, she describes that through those experiences, she developed a spiritual life that promoted her healing and now supports who she is; which includes Christianity, Buddhism, therapy, mindfulness and a holistic view to managing her health and well-being. She also supports and serves women and individuals who have experienced similar traumatic events.

Believer 101. Believer 101 is a pediatrician, associate professor and a vice-chair for diversity at a large academic medical center. She is a wife and mother of two children. She identifies as a believer and a Christian who was raised in the church and learned about God at an early age.

Her stressful life events included the death of her father and giving birth to a stillborn baby after 38 weeks. Believer 101 reflected on the time period before her still birth as a stressful time at work that she believes led to the death of her baby. She shared that the responsibilities and expectations of her job, at that time, were causing difficulties in her life and within her family. She explained that her marriage and children suffered as a result of her not creating balance and boundaries between her work and life. Upon experiencing the death of her father and the stillbirth, Believer 101 decided to leave one position of leadership to take on another position (of leadership) that provided more flexibility and support for her lifestyle and priorities.

Grace. Grace is a nurse by training and a senior level director of a non-profit health care organization that has a relationship with a large academic medical center. She is a mother and describes her spiritual identity as believer in the word of God and a Christian with a personal relationship with God. As she shared her understanding of her spiritual identity, she related it to the many lessons that her mother taught her. Many of those life lessons were in the form of scriptures from the Bible. She now uses those same scriptures as ways to cope with her life challenges.

Grace's stressful life events center on the theme of loss. She has lost close family members to death, including her mother and maternal grandparents, all with whom she shared a close relationship. Her story entailed detailed descriptions of these relationships and how they served as the foundation for her spiritual identity and foundation. Her mother and grandmother were both ministers and her mother was a missionary and traveled the world teaching and preaching from the Holy Bible. Grace described going through bouts of extreme loneliness after losing her family members and after her son left for college. She was embraced into a new family as she discovered and met family members from her father's side that she never knew.

She shared ways that she coped with her loss and relied on the scriptures that once provided life lessons for comfort and peace.

Noula. Noula is a senior level health administrator in a large academic medical center. She serves as the practice administrator for a pediatric practice within the health system. She is a single mother of a daughter and describes her spiritual identity as trying to figure out who she wants to be through structured and unstructured spiritual practices. Religion is embedded within her culture and while she identifies with that religion, she also professed that her spirituality is less formal and is about creating a peaceful space and doing the things that make her feel peaceful.

Noula experienced a stressful life event when the father of her child and life partner participated in an affair outside of their committed relationship. She described this as a devastating situation that has caused and continues to cause frustration and disappointment. She described that at the onset of the relationship with her partner, she had intentions of only being friends. Eventually, after a few years of friendship, she explained that she "let her guard down" and began dating him. Ultimately, the details of Noula's relationship with her partner and dynamics of his story are what cause great angst for her. She expressed disappointment with some of the decisions she made to be with him, although she has no regrets for having her daughter. As part of her continued struggles to cope with this situation, she described the challenge of finding the balance between caring for her daughter and caring for her own emotions. Noula expressed the emotional difficulty of managing and navigating her relationship with her daughter's father.

Esperanza. Esperanza is an oncologist, as well as medical director and vice-chair in a large academic medical center. She is a wife and mother and identifies her spiritual identity as

Catholic. She explained that her spiritual identity has evolved. She shared that she has always been a Christian but did not attend church much. In reflection, she communicated how her lack of spiritual foundation in the past created some issues with her personal life. She dealt with issues when she was younger, but did not have the spiritual foundation to pay attention to how they were affecting her. She stated that her spiritual identity has given her a certain amount of peace in the last decade.

Esperanza, as an oncologist, spends her time diagnosing, treating and caring for patients with cancer and their families. She also has personal experience with cancer as both her father and mother were diagnosed with it. Her father has been diagnosed three times and continues to live, however, her mother died from cancer. These stressful life events have led her to new ways of coping with stressors, including therapy, exercise, attending church and spending time with family.

Alice. Alice is a senior level administrator and clinical leader within a large academic medical center and hospital. She is a wife and mother of three children and states that she is a Christian. She aligned her spiritual identity with the activities that she does regularly to strengthen her spirituality, including devotion at 4:30a.m., reading her Bible daily, seeking God to help her set priorities and remaining connected to her faith throughout the day.

Alice explained that her stressful life event was balancing her time, responsibilities and expectations of work and home life. She describes being fortunate to never have experienced any traumatic stressful life events, however, she feels that the challenge to balance is a stressful one. She stated that her faith is connected to everything she does on a daily basis, and at times it does not alleviate her stress. She expressed having to work at creating and maintaining balance on a daily basis.

Core Categories

      After employing the constant comparison method throughout the data collection and analysis phases, the following core categories surfaced and will undergird the theory in this study. These categories, collectively, represent every other concept or category present in the data related to the connection between stressful life events and spiritual identity.

      Recognizing and relinquishing control. Throughout the discussion of stressful life events and the connection to their spiritual identity, the participants expressed an understanding that they were not in control of the events happening in their lives. They were confronted with this lack of control and there were two prominent ideas related to control that emerged: recognition and relinquishment. Because there were aspects of their stressful life events that were beyond their control, the women recognized and acknowledged the lack of personal control and accepted the need to relinquish (or surrender) their perceived control to their higher power, ultimately ascertaining the need for assistance.

      Recognition and relinquishment of control occurred at various stages of the stressful life events for each woman. Most participants acknowledged their revelation of this construct at varied points throughout the events, while one participant acknowledged her continued challenge to accept this lack of control.

      Elizabeth described having gone through other devastating circumstances and explained that the distinguishing factor between her cardiac event and other stressful life events was her recognition of her lack of control:

> …this one was a little bit scarier because I was completely out of control. I couldn't control any of the steps or the journey" (Individual Interview, April 10, 2014).

Similarly, Suni explained how she recognized the need to relinquish control during her decision-making process about her divorce:

> …having to just completely abandon any idea about what I could do in a situation and recognize the only one that could do anything is God, just meant that I had to totally surrender to him. That was a critical point for me in my faith development as well as my spiritual development, because I became someone who completely understood that every bit of progress I was making was all due to God (Individual Interview, May 13, 2014).

Noula described her current struggle with accepting the challenges and dealing with the results of the stressful life events:

> Now fast forward five years and it is still stressful. Getting to a place of acceptance, because I'm still not there yet and it's stressful for me because it's frustrating (Individual Interview, May 30, 2014).

Yet, she also expressed an understanding of the realization that there are aspects of her situation beyond her control.

As Sarah expressed coming to terms with her lack of control (even over the good things happening in her life), she connected this to her ability to trust God through her situations:

> We learn to trust Him through those situations because we may feel like we're in control, because again, we live in a country with a lot of blessings and we think it all comes from us (Individual Interview, April 21, 2014).

As the women leaders endured difficult situations, they expressed this recognition of control by God through their faith.

Maya discussed, in detail, her process of yielding and surrendering her worries about the things happening in her life, professionally and personally:

> I just have to leave it in God's hands. And I kept saying, I'm leaving it at the altar. Whenever it would come back to me and I would start to get upset, stressed or feel bad I would say, OK, I've prayed about it. I've left it at the altar and it will be taken care of. So that strength, and knowing that there is someone greater than me, and someone else that could handle things much better than I could, really helped me get through that period. (Group Interview, June 5, 2014).

Alice explained:

> I think a big part of my faith is recognizing that the circumstances I'm in are the circumstances I'm supposed to be in and that they're by design. So that helps me to be a little bit more constructive with how I respond to things. (Individual Interview, June 3, 2014).

By recognizing and relinquishing control, there was a sentiment of strength, release and healing from the pain associated with the stressful life events.

Maxine expressed that because of her recognition of God's control and her faith, she gained strength for survival:

> I think that's the reason I have survived. I think that's the reason I survived everything. "God just gives you the strength to deal with everything" (Individual Interview, April 4, 2014).

Noula explained that the faith of her family helped her when she felt like she did not have enough for herself. She was able to release her worries with a sense that the faith of her family would carry her:

Their ability to pray and speak truth and say, "You may not have faith in the

moment, but you can lean on mine.'' (Group Interview, June 5, 2014).

Believer 101 stated that she reminded herself daily that God was in ultimate control of

the things happening in her life:

My daily belief was that everything happens for a reason…I'd say, 'Lord let it

be.' (Individual Interview, April 28, 2014).

Muffin acknowledged a certain level of control as a response to increased emotional

wellness:

There are a lot of things in your life that you can't control, but you are enough,

and you can control certain things to make yourself feel better. That's how God

created us to heal ourselves (Individual Interview, April 22, 2014).

Several of the participants reflected on the impact of relinquishing their control on the

leadership experience. Elizabeth stated:

I have become a little bit less responsible for things that I can't directly impact.

Does that make sense? Things that you have no control over. That's the way I

look at it. It's like I don't have control over that, so I'm not going to worry about

it, and I won't try to fix it, whereas, before I would try to spend a lot of time

trying to make things happen that weren't going to happen (Group Interview, June

5, 2014).

Maya shared:

There's something so much bigger than me and I think that when you/people in

leadership positions sometimes think that they control stuff, you need to

understand that you control some things, but not everything (Individual Interview,

April 21, 2014).

Esperanza stated:

So it's helped me in one sense to give up a certain amount of control. I'm not in

control of what happens, and all I can do is the best I can do (Individual

Interview, June 5, 2014).

The women are pointing to the notion that they realized the importance of understanding

their locus of control in the scope of their leadership.

Grace discussed her stressful life events related to the death of her loved ones and how

those situations led her to understand something that her mother had taught her about God being

in control:

But there's a difference in just looking at God's will and looking at His sovereign

will. I think sovereignty is an area of spirituality that some people don't

understand, and that there's not really a definite term. Some of it I feel is based on

faith. (Individual Interview, April 29, 2014). My pastor would say, when I was

younger, 'It's not always just God's will, it's His sovereign will and that may not

be something you ever understand, but within His sovereign will He's still God.'

(Group Interview, June 5, 2014).

Additionally, Olivia reflected on the realization that she needed to not only recognize her

lack of control, but also to equip her team with the necessary tools to take on responsibilities:

I would just add that it made me realize the importance of mentoring your team so

that you realize that the world doesn't end because you can't be there to do certain

things, so it helps you to value the skills of people around you and allow them to

blossom, and just realizing that you can't control it all (Group Interview, June 5, 2014).

Mahatma Gandhi once said, "I do not want to foresee the future. I am concerned with taking care of the present. God has given me no control over the moment following" ("Essential Quotes of Mahatma Gandhi," 2014). The recognition and relinquishment of control, based on the experiences of these women, resulted from their reflections on their stressful life events through the lens of their spiritual identity and served as a key factor in defining the connection to their leadership experiences.

Adopting a new perspective. The women leaders expressed new perspectives on leadership that were based on how they used their spiritual identity to cope and overcome the hardships associated with their stressful life event. This core category consists of three dimensions that emerged from the data: (a) compassion and caring at the interpersonal and intrapersonal levels, (b) approach to leadership, and (c) stress management.

Each woman articulated a unique perspective that they embraced as part of their stressful life event connected to their spiritual identity. The women acknowledged that they adopted attitudes of compassion and their ability to care for others from a different perspective.

Noula shared how her experience led her to a place of compassion in the context of her interactions with people in her life and community:

> …when I move around in the community and see people struggle, it helps me to be a more understanding and compassionate person; it helps me to be a less judgmental person and be more open-minded. It helps me to serve my community better and it's gonna serve my daughter better if I can teach her to also have that same view (Individual Interview, May 30, 2014).

Esperanza reflected on her life prior to her spiritual journey and the peace that her spirituality has brought her, even during the time period of her stressful life event:

> Because I think that the stress and the lack of spiritual foundation created some issues in my personal life, and I feel like becoming a member of a church/ I don't know if it has to be Catholic, but my husband was Catholic and my children were Catholic, so that was a natural thing for me to try to learn about that, to strengthen my faith and it was very helpful in me feeling comfortable enough to do that and exploring that. I just feel like it's given me a certain amount of peace in the last decade (Individual Interview, June 5, 2014).

Maxine shared that her perspective on how to care for and interact with people has been shaped by her "stressful life:"

> I feel like my ability to take care of people is sort of what God wants me to do when I try to take care of every person I see in a way that would be pleasing to Him. I try to live my life that way and I hope that when I interact with people that that's what they see (Individual Interview, April 4, 2014).

Suni also shared her lesson learned and how it applies to caring about people:

> It takes really being careful and caring about people and applying different approaches to one situation and all of those things are things that I have learned and internalized through my spirituality (Individual Interview, May 13, 2014).

As the women leaders shared their reflections, they emphasized the increased importance on their own self-care as a result of their experiences.

Grace shared:

But I do feel like I have learned to give myself the self-care that is needed in my

position of leadership in my profession and family (Individual Interview, April

29, 2014).

Elizabeth stated:

It allows me to take care of myself better, to walk out of here and not carry as

much home and it frees me up to focus on some things within my home and

personal life better. I would totally have to say my experience really helped me to

not forget to replenish my well because that's the only way I'll be able to serve.

That sounds simple, but that's what I took away from that experience (Group

Interview, June 5, 2014).

Similarly, Muffin spoke about her newly adopted self-care practices that focus on the

importance of holistic wellness:

I have formal and informal meditation mindfulness sessions every day and that's

what really fosters my spirit, strengthens me, and allows me to honor my

uniqueness and my individuality that everybody has, and teaches me how to take

care of my body (Individual Interview, April 22, 2014).

Olivia discussed her realization of the importance of self-care as a way to meet and

balance the demands of her professional leadership responsibilities, home life and being a full-

time doctoral student:

It comes down to prioritizing things, being structured, but trying not to be too

rigid; but being as structured as possible. Taking time for me was also important

so I could give more time to the other things. My "me" time could just be a walk.

So I would carve out 15-20 minutes where I'd go for a brisk walk in my

neighborhood by myself with my earphones or just looking at nature, and that

would give me the ability to come back and sit down and focus (Individual

Interview, April 1, 2014).

Interestingly, Believer 101 pointed to the lack of protection that she felt as a leader and how her spirituality served as that protection and a requisite for her increased strength and new perspective:

Whereas I felt like when I took the time off, people did say things, and did send

me emails, and didn't protect me. Thank God I did have my spirituality to grab

onto, though. For me, it's been making me a stronger person, and helping others

with that" (Individual Interview, April 28, 2014). I had to hit the reset button. It

helped me to refocus on what was really important in my life. (Group Interview,

June 5, 2014).

One particular perspective that resonated with the majority of the women leaders was that their stressful life event did not change much about their approach to leadership, but instead changed their approach to life and their perspective on God.

Olivia stated:

If anything, it's made me more sensitive, more introspective, to be sure that I

achieve that work-life balance (Group Interview, June 5, 2014).

Muffin expressed the importance of being present:

So, it's living every moment the way it's supposed to be lived, and it was my faith

that took me through my difficult situations (Group Interview, June 5, 2014).

Sarah also cited the newfound perspective on balance:

> I don't want it to sound like I don't take my job seriously. It's more of an internal approach to try to achieve a balanced life (Group Interview, June 5, 2014).

Her sentiment about taking her job seriously, points back to the pressure that many of them face as women leaders to focus greatly on their positions of leadership and the difficulty of finding balance.

Sarah discussed how her stressful life events caused her to learn about and relate to God in a new way:

> So, since his diagnosis, I think that the crucible of tribulation, trying times, you learn more about God in those situations than you do in happy times. For sure, I don't think that God creates the terrible times, but my personal view…I think God is way more concerned with our character than our comfort (Individual Interview, April 21, 2014).

The women also expressed that they now experience less stress from their current or new stressful life events because of their past experiences and their deeper connection to their spiritual identity or spirituality. As it relates to recognizing and managing stress, there was a connection made between the stressful life event and spirituality that created a perspective of trust and faith in God.

Maya shared:

> My stressful life events are not as stressful now, because of my faith. I don't worry about my job, because I know God's got me (Individual Interview, April 21, 2014).

Alice reflected on the perspective that resulted from her experiencing her stressful life events and connecting it to her spiritual identity and faith:

I think a big part of my faith is recognizing that the circumstances I'm in are the circumstances I'm supposed to be in, and that they're by design. So, that helps me to be a little bit more constructive with how I respond to things. So, I think as a leader, that's an example of how I view complicated situations as part of the fabric of my life; that is the purpose and opportunity to play a role and just do the best to show up and do the best I can and try and help the team that I work with be successful and productive, and get along and as a team, to reflect the character that I think is important developmentally for us to grow (Individual Interview, June 3, 2014).

Finding purpose through pain. One category that quickly emerged and remained consistent throughout the women leaders' stories, and the meaning ascribed to them, was the expression of a sense of purpose resulting from the experienced stressful life events. For each woman, this purpose was expressed in unique ways, yet each woman felt strongly connected to that purpose and how it manifested in their lives. The women leaders shared how they questioned and sought God for purpose and that they found, through the pain induced by their stressful life events, a purpose to continue in life and leadership.

Muffin discussed going through her stressful life events and asking questions that would bring her to the answers about how to fulfill her purpose as a servant leader:

What can I do to serve myself and others better? What do I need to be the person I need to be? (Individual Interview, April 22, 2014).

Maya expressed the sentiment that God provided a sense of renewed purpose by using her stressful life events to show her that she could turn to her spiritual identity for her leadership:

"It was just a place that I knew I could go to" (Group Interview, June 5, 2014).

Maxine described the beginning of her understanding of God's purpose for her stressful life events in this way:

> I think God has a purpose and maybe that was an awakening too, sort of. Maybe I've had not awakenings, but refinements (Individual Interview, April 4, 2014).

As I pondered her use of the word 'refinement', as opposed to awakening, I thought about the strength of each woman leader and how they each possess a distinct set of gifts and talents. Each woman leader has qualities that distinctively set her apart from the others. Yet, as I listened to each woman's story, I heard each one describe a period of refinement, in her own way. These women leaders were refined, through pain, disappointment, and heartache, and were guided to another dimension of purpose in their personal and professional lives as leaders. Finding purpose meant coming to the realization that their experiences promoted growth and helped them to develop their leadership abilities.

Alice expressed:

> But I think a big part of my faith is recognizing that the circumstances I'm in are the circumstances I'm supposed to be in, and that they're by design. So, that helps me to be a little bit more constructive with how I respond to things. So, I think as a leader, that's an example of how I view complicated situations as part of the fabric of my life that is the purpose and opportunity to play a role and just do the best to show up and do the best I can, and try and help the team that I work with be successful and productive, and get along and as a team, to reflect the character that I think is important developmentally for us to grow (Individual Interview, June 3, 2014).

Suni expressed an understanding of how her purpose as leader was shaped and formed through her stressful life events and spiritual identity:

> I can tell you that being broken myself and having to create a spiritual identity as an adult, not one that I adopted from someone, not one that I was an expression of what somebody else's beliefs were, but one that I adopted for myself that I integrate in my life every minute and every day has made me such a better leader. I would say that I am a transformational leader because I have the ability to impact change…it's really my ability to encourage people's heart…encourage change and make someone else's life better (Individual Interview, May 13, 2014).

Believer 101 indicated:

> I found my voice through my stressful event, and that's helped to shape my leadership style (Group Interview, June 5, 2014).

She went on to discuss how that voice led her to understand more about who she is and wants to be as a leader.

Maxine shared:

> I'll never forget something he (my pastor) said: "Sometimes God will put you through something for ten years so in five minutes you can be a testimony for something else. God has a purpose for me; to have a voice." (Individual Interview, April 4, 2014). Maxine continued to discuss her desire to help girls and women who find themselves in difficult situations as single mothers and how they can continue with life even in the midst of hardship.

Connecting to a sense of purpose provided a means of coping with difficult situations.

Olivia acknowledged seeing a greater purpose for her stressful life events that involved

serving others. Her statement reflected her belief that serving others helped her to cope and find

her own strength and healing. It also provided a connection between her stressful life events and

spiritual identity. Olivia shared:

> I guess I would say that I realized that at some point in all of our lives we are
>
> going to go through stressful situations, and to whom much is required, much is
>
> given. So when we're in a leadership role, a lot is expected of us as leaders and
>
> spiritual women. Therefore, I made that connection that once I've gone through or
>
> while I'm going through as I deposit into other people to help them go through
>
> things the sting is a lot less for me...I'm receiving my healing while I'm
>
> depositing into someone else (Group Interview, June 5, 2014).

Finding purpose helped bring clarity to difficult and challenging stressful life events for

the women leaders. They shared that by reflecting on their painful experiences they were led to a

place and space of peace and focus on what is important in their lives.

Elizabeth expressed that her experiences set her focus and attention on her personal

relationships and the purpose they serve in her life:

> Life is short and we're only on this earth for a certain period of time. Let's make
>
> the best of the family and relationships and gifts that we have (Individual
>
> Interview, April 10, 2014).

Noula describes making sense of her experiences by connecting it to a greater sense of

purpose:

> And as I transfer that to a leadership role, most of the work I'm trying to do as a
>
> health professional is with communities that struggle, and individuals who

struggle, and my event has made me a more compassionate and understanding

person toward people who struggle, due to mental health issues" (Group

Interview, June 5, 2014).

Grace shared that her stressful life events brought confirmation of the purpose that she'd

adopted from her childhood lessons and experiences:

I think that going through those things at an early point in my leadership, it

reaffirmed what those before me had already poured into me, which was "To seek

ye first the kingdom and His righteousness and all things shall be added onto

thee." So, Matthew 6:33. That really resonated with me and also to do my very

best, because a lot of times you start off really excited as a leader and then you

take on so many other people's problems (Group Interview, June 5, 2014).

Understanding the greater purpose for enduring hardships and negative experiences was

expressed by Esperanza as she discussed how she connected her stressful life events with her

spiritual identity:

That it's not all random, but it does help you not to feel like that you're the most

important thing in the world or the world revolves around your issues. There are a

lot of different things going on." (Individual Interview, June 5, 2014).

She found that her stressful life events were applicable to her specific purpose and how

she related to others' experiences as a cancer physician.

Ultimately, the women leaders experienced a greater sense of purpose and increased

capacity to lead as a result of their experiences. Sarah summarized this sentiment in her

reflection:

You grow a lot more in difficult times than you do in easy times and I can

definitely say that the path that I have had to walk has helped me see what's

important. I think it comes to bear on every area of your life so instead of having

your spiritual life in one place, your home life in another and your work life in

another; they start to spiral together, but then you have the freedom to let them do

that and let people see who you are. I think that makes you a more real person

which allows you to be a better leader (Group Interview, June 5, 2014).

The Grounded Theory: Illumined Leadership Spirit

The previous section detailed the core categories and placed them in the context of the

women leaders' experiences and lives. In constructivist grounded theory, the core categories are

used to conceptualize a process or theory that focuses on an interpretive understanding of what is

occurring in the data (Charmaz, 2011). In CGT methodology, the generalizations remain

"partial, conditional and situated" (Charmaz, 2011, p. 366). As a result of understanding what

occurred in the data and the meaning-making process of the women leaders to connect their

stressful life events and spiritual identity, I developed a theory that explains this process in the

context of the leadership experience and journey.

For the women leaders in this study, their stressful life events created emotional, mental,

spiritual, and even physical wounds that led them to a space that allowed them to recognize and

relinquish control, adopt new and different perspectives, and find purpose through their painful

experiences. For this constructivist grounded theory, each of the core categories is summarized

into the following elements: yielded serenity (recognizing and relinquishing control), new

perspective (adopting new and different perspectives) and renewed purpose (finding purpose

through pain). These are the three elements of the Illumined Leadership Spirit (ILS).

The poet and author, Rumi, once stated, "The wound is the place where the light enters you" (Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī, 1995). ILS is the portion of the woman leaders' individual self-concept that has been enlightened by the confluence of stressful life events, spiritual identity, and its application to her leadership experiences and journey. Webster's dictionary defines spirit as, "an immaterial force within a human being thought to give the body life, energy, and power" ("spirit," 2014). I will explain the three elements, yielded serenity, new perspective, and renewed purpose, in addition to the three stages, awakened, confirmed, and refined, that provide the framework for understanding ILS. The three stages are developed from my construction of the emerging core categories. As a constructivist grounded theory researcher, I employed reflexivity and understanding to see the phenomenon "from the inside" (Charmaz, 2011, p. 366) and arrived at the three stages of ILS.

Figure 5. Illumined Leadership Spirit (ILS) grounded theory

Yielded serenity. As women leaders transition through their stressful life events and reflect upon them through the lens of their spiritual identity, they learn to recognize and yield their perceived control. The result of the yielding is a sense of serenity with life's circumstances. While the term serenity denotes a level of peace and calmness, it does not imply that all of their

circumstances and situations are now serene and peaceful. The presence of serenity and equanimity of spirit and mind encourages an attitude of acceptance for the things within and beyond their control.

Yielded serenity, in the context of her leadership, guides the woman leader to an awareness and acknowledgment that there is a force (spirit, God, higher power) bigger than her that provides life, energy and power for her leadership journey. This was evident as the women leaders in this study discussed the way they learned to rely on and trust God for things outside of their control. One palpable example of how this manifest in the realm of leadership practice is the realization of the importance of mentoring and equipping team members to help. The equipping and mentoring of team members provides the woman leader an opportunity to hand over certain responsibilities of her leadership position to others and accept help in an effort to remain in a place of serenity. The woman leader demonstrates yielded serenity throughout her daily navigation of leadership by remembering her locus of control, recognizing that God is with her and allowing that to bring her calm and peace in the midst of difficult situations.

New perspective. When individuals experience stressful life events it is common to arrive at a new perspective about their lives. Because of their experiences, they view life and situations in life differently. This is not always the result of new information, but rather, the result of seeing current information in a different light. Similar is the case for the women leaders in this study who developed new perspective about their lives and leadership. The new perspectives that define the development of the Illumined Leadership Spirit are specific to the reflection of stressful life events in the context of spiritual identity and leadership. Increased focus on self-care, greater compassion, finding and maintaining balance, and increased trust and faith for future stressful life events is incorporated into the context of leadership.

Individuals with an ILS identify the need to transfer their new perspective into their leadership practice. As the women leaders reflected, they expressed the notion that their leadership perspective had not changed significantly, but they acknowledged a level of personal growth that ultimately had an impact on their leadership experiences.

Renewed purpose. As a coping mechanism and way to heal from stressful life events, individuals often find a new sense of purpose to help them make sense of painful experiences. Often, this renewed purpose leads to a greater sense of belonging in the world and a desire to find new ways of navigating their lives. In the context of ILS, individuals incorporate their renewed sense of purpose into their leadership practices by motivating others toward vision and purpose, and use their spiritual grounding to confirm and affirm their followers. In addition, a renewed purpose in the context of ILS is reflected in the interaction between the leader and followers. The leader becomes more transparent with and accepting of those they lead and serve, ultimately creating and establishing a greater sense of trust.

Stages of ILS

There are three stages of ILS, awakened, confirmed, and refined, that emerged from the elements of ILS. The elements of ILS emerged and led to the stages of ILS as the women leaders in this study negotiated the ways in which the elements presented in the context of their individual leadership experiences. In each element, it was the stressful life event and its connection to their spiritual identity that led to the specific ways in which meaning was assigned to the leadership experience. The stage represents how those elements appeared in their life and leadership journeys. The stages may co-exist or stand alone at any given point in time based on the individual. The stages of ILS have unique characteristics and pathways to attainment that serve the individual and others in distinct ways.

Awakened ILS. As it relates to ILS, to be awakened applies to a heightened or enlightened state of consciousness. In order to be awakened, one must have been asleep, spiritually, at some point. As it relates to the connection between stressful life events and spiritual identity for women leaders, the awakened ILS represents those who are not aware of the levels of imbalance and stress that they are under prior to their stressful life events. These women do not recognize the impact of their over-commitment to their respective careers until they are faced with hardships that cause them to awaken to their current condition. As a result, the women leaders find their voices and their truths. They look within and seek to understand, at a higher level, who they are and who they want to be, in life and leadership. They discover and express being enough or possessing everything they need in order to be who God wants them to be. In other words, their Illumined Leadership Spirit is awakened.

There are certain spiritual aspects to this as it connects and relates to leadership and how it serves the woman leader and others.   The awakened ILS serves women leaders by providing a new lens through which to view their practice and those they lead. Among those who experience an awakening, they find that as they move into this new state of consciousness, they begin to see their role and their followers in a different light. The awakened ILS brings into consciousness and light the need to understand their pain, hardships and hurts in the context of their spiritual identity. They become conscious of the need to make that connection and use it to serve them in their leadership roles, resulting in greater awareness of their leadership practices. In addition, the awakened ILS leads to an understanding of the need to protect and take care of the spiritual self and others in a way that incorporates an understanding of who God wants them to be, including greater compassion and focus on the whole person.

Confirmed ILS. Certain values, beliefs and truths are established during our upbringing by those who raise and teach us. People will provide principles and guidelines for aspects of our lives that we maintain as we go through life. Those principles and guidelines often apply to our spirituality, spiritual identity and spiritual self. We adopt them as our beliefs and truths and continue to move through life with those as the foundation of our spiritual identity. Nevertheless, often, situations occur that challenge those beliefs and truths, and cause us to closely examine who we are and what we believe. Our reflection upon those situations or events determines whether we continue with the same beliefs, adopt new beliefs to add to the current set, or totally reject or forsake what we believe, and find or discover new truth.

The confirmed ILS occurs as a result of a woman leader reflecting upon her stressful life events and in the context of her current framework for spiritual identity, determining that her beliefs about herself and leadership continue to apply to her life and leadership experiences. The connection between stressful life events and spiritual identity establishes the truth of what the woman leader previously believed. The previously held set of beliefs that were established during her childhood or a previous spiritual journey were confirmed.

The woman leader with a confirmed ILS exhibits greater confidence in her leadership ability. She notices that she is more aware of her gifts and talents and how they might serve those whom she leads. The confirmed ILS acknowledges that previously held values and beliefs were sufficient for her leadership journey, however, through their stressful life events, their values were brought to the forefront and strengthened within the spiritual identity of the individual. In other words, their dependence on their set of beliefs and spiritual identity was deepened and new perspectives about the same values and beliefs were brought into greater consciousness. For example, a woman leader participant expressed that her experiences and how

they connect to her spiritual identity confirmed what had already been instilled, yet, she still found new revelation based on new experiences. Confirmed ILS involves new revelation of what is already known to be true and a greater application of that truth in the leadership experience. In the context of leadership, the woman leader applies her new understanding of current beliefs to her interactions with others. Her new confidence in what she knows to be true may lead her to think about ways that God wants to work through her in other aspects of her leadership within an organization. She might engage in new levels of service to others in ways that confirm what she believes about herself. A confirmed ILS manifests in leadership by shining light on what is and creating confidence for the woman leader about what could be.

Refined ILS. Women leaders shared experiences of having lost their way at some point as it relates to whom they are and what they believe about themselves. Often, the feeling of being lost is experienced due to neglecting aspects of the self. They are aware of their truths, but not considering those truths as they journey through life. Consequently, they move through life and leadership without much reflection and ultimately burn out from neglect and fatigue. Their relationships begin to suffer and their physical health declines. They are tired and experiencing spiritual and emotional decline. Often, this is when they experience stressful life events that eventually serve as a force that leads them to acknowledge their core being and refine the truth about who they are and who they want to be.

Refined ILS is what results from this process. As the woman leader connects her stressful life events and her spiritual identity, she recharges and refines her life based on that connection. She seeks greater understanding of the reasons that caused her to neglect her spiritual self and develops a plan of action to change her reality. The plan may involve small changes that slowly improve her spiritual and emotional well-being, such as leaving work earlier

or not taking work home, or major changes that involve ending unhealthy relationships or leaving positions that do not allow her to be truthful to her refined ILS. For example, instead of sacrificing family time to complete work-related tasks at home, the women leaders in this study stated that they now leave their work at the office unless it is necessary to work from home or late. They acknowledged the need to be flexible with their time commitments and expressed continued struggles with managing their work-life balance. Nevertheless, as they experienced refinement, their priorities shifted more toward their personal well-being.

As the woman leader engages her refined ILS, similarly to the awakened and confirmed ILS, she considers her perspective as she practices her leadership. Not only is her individual leadership spirit refined, but also her perspective of those that she leads and serves. She begins to support others through leadership in ways that demonstrate her refined ILS. The refined ILS guides the woman leader to negotiate interactions and leadership experiences in a way that promotes the characteristics of her refined spirit. This negotiation leads to new priorities for her leadership journey and new ways of seeing her role as a leader. For example, the woman leader who once practiced medicine in a clinic daily and taught several courses per semester because she felt obligated to work that much, decides to cut back her days in the clinic and teach fewer courses per year in order to focus more on her own personal interests. She engages her faith and spiritual identity to reshape her leadership context. She redefines the scope of her leadership to expand her locus of influence. She may take on additional responsibilities with a refined perspective to lead and serve in ways that align with her refined ILS.

Summary

Illumined Leadership Spirit (ILS) provides a framework for understanding (a) the connection between stressful life events and spiritual identity and (b) its influences on the

leadership experience and journey. The three elements of ILS lead to the three stages of ILS that exist to explain how the elements appear in the leadership experience. The stages may co-exist simultaneously with the same people at different points in their lives and leadership journeys and each stage consists of each of the three elements of the ILS. ILS is demonstrable in women leaders who have experienced stressful life events and have reflected upon those events in relationship to their spiritual identity. It applies to women leaders who have embraced the impact of their spiritual identity and the elements of ILS within the milieu of their lives and leadership experiences.

CHAPTER 5

Discussion

Consciousness often finds its way into the lives of individuals through unique avenues. The women leaders in this study were no exception; they experienced an awakening, confirmation or refinement of their consciousness resulting in the manifestation of the Illumined Leadership Spirit in their leadership journeys. I set out to explain the connection between stressful life events and spiritual identity for women leaders through the use of grounded theory methodology. Throughout the process, the research questions undergirded the inquiry and set the foundation for exploring and understanding the meaning related to this process for the women leaders in this study.

Alignment of Findings with Research Questions

My central research question was: How do the women leaders in academic medical centers connect their spiritual identity to their stressful life events?

The following related questions guided this study:

1. How do the women leaders describe their stressful life events?

2. How do the women leaders describe their spiritual identity?

3. How do the women leaders explain the relationship between stressful life events and spiritual identity?

4. How do the women leaders explain the influence of this relationship on their experiences as leaders?

Research Question 1: Description of Stressful Life Events

The stressful life events of the women leaders covered a range of difficult and challenging experiences: divorce, single motherhood, loss of parents, close friends, and children;

domestic violence, cancer diagnoses, childhood trauma, sudden personal illness, chronic illness, difficult pregnancy, strained family relationships, partner infidelity, and caring for special needs children. The women leaders provided descriptions of these events in the form of story-telling. They were open and shared their negative life experiences including their lives' journeys that led up to the stressful life events, how they coped with the events, and the impact of those events on their lives. The stressful life events occurred during different time periods of their lives. Some of the women leaders were early in their respective careers while others were in their current positions. Several women had experienced recent stressful life events and disclosed that their participation in this research study was part of their continuous healing process from the event(s). Other women leaders had experienced difficulty and challenges in the distant past and rehashed the details of their stressful life events. They, in contrast, expressed that their participation allowed them to see their emotional and spiritual growth related to the experience.

The women described their emotional response to the events and their interactions with others during that time. They explained the impact that their stressful life events had on their personal relationships and careers. The women leaders candidly expressed the distress related to their stressful life events. The stress of juggling work and home responsibilities, coping with loss and grief, adjusting to chronic illness or new situations, such as single motherhood, the challenge of maintaining personal relationships and finding support systems are themes that emerged from the discussion of stressful life events.

The emergence of the importance of interpersonal relationships, psychological status and work environment during stressful life events is consistent with the research and literature related to women and stressful life events (Ballas & Dorling, 2007; Cutrona et al., 2005; McLean & Link, 1994). As it relates to the contrast between this study with previous studies on women and

stressful life events, the qualitative nature of this study distinguished it from many of the previous studies. Studies involving the collection of data to determine the relationship between stressful life events and psychological status, do not delve into the deeper meaning that women place on their stressful life events. There were elements from the existing research studies that emerged during this study. Elements related to social support, psychological status and coping mechanisms each emerged from the interview data. However, these elements were connected to a broader view of how the women leaders in this study connected their stressful life events with their spiritual identity. While this study did not delve deeply into a measure of social support, similar to the relate research, social support was noted to be a buffer against the stressful life events or reduced the severity of the stressors (Kornblith et al., 2001; Swift & Wright, 2000). Participants discussed in some detail how social support served as a tool for coping with life stressors and events.

The descriptive nature of the emerging elements related to stressful life events served as the foundation for the conceptualization of a larger context and meaning for these events in relationship to their leadership experiences. From the extant research related to women and stressful life events, this study expands the discussion from women in general to women leaders, in academic medicine, and from psychological aspects to spiritual aspects.

Research Question 2: Description of Spiritual Identity

Similar to other findings in the research related to spirituality and spiritual identity (Kirmani & Kirmani, 2009; Patton & McClure, 2009), the women leaders generally provided different meanings of these constructs and used the two terms interchangeably throughout the interviews. When prompted to discuss their spiritual identity, the women articulated their personal perspective and understanding of their spiritual identity. In line with the early work of

Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Tarule (1986), the women expressed their spiritual identity in terms that identified their understanding of their personal "truth, knowledge, and authority" (p.3). In addition, several of the women leaders in this study framed their spiritual identity in the context of their religious practice. Several mentioned being a Christian and shared their experiences of growing up in church and their spiritual journey through their religious affiliation. Phrases like "Christian woman" and "woman of faith" described who they are in terms of their spiritual identity. Others that did not identify a specific religious affiliation associated their spiritual identity with specific character traits such as peace, love, honesty, kindness, generosity, humility, and inner strength. A couple of participants used phrases such as "being enough," "an expression of my being," having everything within me to be who I need to be," and "it is who I am and what I do" to articulate their spiritual identity.

As Reimer (2012) stated, "spiritual identity is dependent on a narrative" (p. 252). The majority of the women leaders discussed their spiritual journeys by sharing childhood stories related to spirituality and religion. Several of them elucidated their early development of spiritual identity through their childhood involvement with church, religion and family who taught them religious values; while others explained that they came into an understanding of their spiritual identity at later points in life. Some of the women leaders expressed their spiritual identity in relationship to their cultural or racial identity, as well; connecting to cultural and family values.

Spiritual identity was defined uniquely by each of the women leaders and contributes to the extant research related to defining spirituality and spiritual identity. The reflective nature of the participants in this study and the ways in which they drew from their painful experiences to define their spiritual identity and how spirituality and spiritual identity served as a source of

strength to endure those experiences parallels studies related to spiritual identity (Kiesling et al., 2008; Patton & McClure, 2009). Similar to the Kirmani & Kirmani (2009) study that explained spirituality outside of the context of religion; this study resulted in several of the women leaders identifying their spiritual identity in terms unaffiliated with religion. A couple of the women leaders who identified a specific religious practice chose not to define their spiritual identity in terms of that religion. The core category, renewed purpose, from this study, expands the idea of renewed spiritual identity presented by Van Dover & Pfeiffer (2012) beyond a concept that resulted from a specific religious focus of coping with pain and illness to an overall sense of connection spiritual identity through stressful and negative life events.

Research Question 3: Relationship Between Stressful Life Events and Spiritual Identity

The women leaders described the relationship between their stressful life events and spiritual identity in a myriad of ways. However, their descriptions of this relationship fit into the three core categories presented in Chapter four: recognizing and relinquishing control, adopting new perspectives, and finding purpose through pain. The emerging themes were usually describing ways in which their spiritual identity served as a protector, mediator and/or coping mechanism for their stressful life events. Their perspectives included connecting their stressful life events to spiritual identity as God's hand of protection, a means of learning to let go, recognition of God's miracles, and peace and healing. They each reflected upon their use of spiritual identity to focus on the manifestation of their faith, listening to their voice within, learning to receive, and recognition that they have what they need for every situation. The common sentiment, from each woman leader, was that there was a connection between stressful life events and their spiritual identity. Each expressed an awareness of this connection at different points during their experiences.

Previous research studies (Kiesling et al., 2008; Ngunjiri, 2010; Patton & McClure, 2009; Pedersen, 1998; Reimer & Dueck, 2012) asserted that spirituality is directly linked to coping mechanisms after distressful or difficult life situations. The meaning and connection made by the women leaders in this study reflect the connection between their spiritual identity (descriptive traits, characteristics, concepts) and their overall coping and perspective of their stressful life events. This study carves out a new area of focus for spiritual identity and stressful life events, as the extant research related to the connection of these two constructs is not present. However, there is research present that explores the nature of spirituality in coping with stressful life events (Banks-Wallace & Parks, 2004) and the use of spirituality in developing an identity for women (Watt, 2003).

The constructivist nature of this study works to expands the previous research by taking a closer and more conceptual look at how stressful life events and spiritual identity are connected and how this connection is used by women (leaders) to not only cope with painful experiences, but to move beyond those experiences to continue their leadership journeys.

Research Question 4: Influence on Experiences as Leaders

Upon consideration of the connection between stressful life events and spiritual identity, the women leaders in this study discussed the influence of this connection on their experience as leaders. The influence of the connection was encompassed by the foundational elements of the Illumined Leadership Spirit. An overall sense of growth in their leadership, new perspectives on stress, finding purpose, learning to trust others, and learning to invest in and motivate people were the result of making the connection. The women leaders in this study articulated that their spiritual identity and its connection to their stressful life events served as a compass and guide for their leadership practice. The expression of their increased awareness, sense of confirmation,

and refinement of their personal and professional journeys related to their spiritual identity served as the foundation for the Illumined Leadership Spirit. The women leaders in this study discussed the demands and challenges of being a woman in leadership, and through the telling of their leadership experiences, voiced their growth as a result of the connection between their stressful life events and spiritual identity.

The women leaders in this study had experiences consistent with the research related to women in leadership, within academic medicine, in terms of promotion and advancement (Benderly, 2014; Conrad et al., 2010; DeAngelis & Johns, 1995), stereotypes (D. J. Burgess et al., 2012) and experiences with career development (Hamel, Ingelfinger, Phimister, & Solomon, 2006; Marušić, 2012). Each of the women leaders conveyed that they experienced stress within the work place prior to their negative stressful life events, however, after their stressful life events gained greater perspective about their leadership experiences as a result of the role of spiritual identity.   This is directly connected with the research related to women and stressful life events, yet takes it a step further by delving into the impact of the stressful life events on their leadership experiences.

The women leaders expressed psychological statuses and coping mechanisms similar to those discussed in the research, (Abel, 2002; Harkness et al., 2002; Harris et al., 2012; Jackson & Finney, 2002; Kenneth S. Kendler, Karkowski, & Prescott, 1999; Kornblith et al., 2001; Palesh et al., 2006); however, they were used to expand a conceptual understanding of their role in the impact on their leadership experiences. In addition, this study expands the research related to spirituality and how it impacts the leadership of women. As the women leaders adopted new perspectives, they gained compassion for those that they led. This parallels findings of the research that discusses how women leaders use an ethic of care approach to their leadership

(Bass, 2009) and research related to women leaders who look to spirituality to find well-being and better health (Banks-Wallace & Parks, 2004).

In addition, the construct of personal mastery was evident in the discussion of the connection between stressful life events and spiritual identity and its influence on the leadership experiences of the women leaders in this study. The research related to personal mastery in the context of leadership posits that individuals who seek to lead from a place of authenticity often experience personal mastery within their leadership practice (Cashman, 2008; Dhiman, 2011; Koehle, Bird, & Bonney, 2008; Peeler, 2012). The women leaders adopted new perspective and discovered yielded serenity within the context of their leadership experiences and the elements of personal mastery, including deepening personal vision, developing patience, and committing to the truth by adapting the way one sees reality (Senge, 2006).

Implications

My study has implications for leadership practice, policy, and scholarship from the Illumined Leadership Spirit grounded theory and outcomes of this study. The first implication of this study and resulting grounded theory covers both practice and policy. This research has the potential to provide a forum and space for people, specifically women, to discuss spirituality in the context of their work. Several participants expressed that their work environments do not lend themselves to the discussion of spirituality, yet it plays such a major role in their lives and the lives of the people that they serve. Since the Illumined Leadership Spirit grounded theory is agnostic, individuals who desire leadership development, but may deem themselves spiritual and not religious, might be able to relate to and embrace the elements of the theory for their own leadership development.

The outcomes of this research study can impact the way health care professionals are trained in leadership. Universities are now incorporating leadership training into their clinical curricula for health care professionals. Collectively, they recognize the importance of training clinicians, providers and administrators on leadership, and the aspect of spiritual identity in leadership would be an asset to their professional and personal career, ultimately impacting their clinical leadership practice. As clinicians are trained to consider a more holistic view of clinical practice, they will also be encouraged to view their leadership practice from a holistic view which includes the influence of Illumined Leadership Spirit on their practice.

Illumined Leadership Spirit provides a theory for leadership and a potential model for not only clinical practice, but other aspects of leadership practice. The elements and stages of Illumined Leadership Spirit are transferrable to other leadership contexts and may be tested as theory for leadership in other fields. Those with interests in leadership development from an integrated perspective might use the Illumined Leadership Spirit to understand the influence of spiritual identity and spirituality on the leadership experiences of individuals within an organization or community.

In terms of scholarship, this study has the potential to make significant contributions an area of existing scholarly research related to spirituality in health care. The current research focuses on the importance of considering spirituality in clinical and medical treatment of mental illness and chronic diseases, especially in patient self-management strategies. Yet, as research ensues related to spirituality in treatment, the research related to spiritual identity/spirituality in health care leadership is still underrepresented. Therefore, there is value added for this study to directly impact the research on spirituality, leadership and health care. Continued focus on the scholarship of leadership and the domains contained within its context provides an opportunity

for researchers with an interest in leadership and spiritual identity/spirituality to continue adding to the existing, yet limited, body of knowledge.

Additionally, the Illumined Leadership Spirit encourages a redefinition of leadership and its use in study and practice. Generally, leadership is defined and considered in the context of the fields of business and education and refers to a specific position. The Illumined Leadership Spirit requires one to embrace a new viewpoint related to leadership. As it delves into the process of leadership development, one should view leadership from a holistic perspective that involves a personal journey.

Recommendations for Further Research

Opportunities abound for research in the areas of spiritual identity, stressful life events and leadership, as well as research focused on the Illumined Leadership Spirit grounded theory. One recommendation for further research is to use the Illumined Leadership Spirit grounded theory to develop a study that examines the leadership experiences of different population groups, including men, adolescents, and college students. There is also an opportunity to hone in with specific subsets of the women leader population. For example, several of the participants mentioned their experiences of being African- American women leaders and how that impacts the way they coped with their stressful life events in relationship to their spiritual identity. African- American women often experience a unique set of challenges in leadership than their Caucasian counterparts. A study that examines the experiences of African- American women leaders' connection between their spiritual identity and stressful life events and its impact on their leadership experiences has the potential to add greatly to the body of knowledge in several areas of study. The opportunity exists to test the Illumined Leadership Theory grounded theory

with women leaders from various racial/ethnic backgrounds and across different fields and professions.

Using the Illumined Leadership Spirit grounded theory, there is an opportunity to develop an instrument to survey women who consider themselves leaders to determine if and how they use their spiritual identity in their leadership experiences. Such a study would focus on the usefulness of Illumined Leadership Spirit in the leadership development of women. As a result, because I am interested in facilitating leadership development skills with college-aged, the study results would potentially be helpful in developing leadership development curricula for this population. This might impact the existing increased focus of colleges and universities on student leadership development.

While this specific research study did not focus on the temporality of spiritual identity and stressful life events, the women leaders emphasized various time periods during their lives and reflected on their leadership based on those time periods. One potential area of focus for future research is the trajectory of women's leadership as a result of connecting stressful life events and spiritual identity. There are varying trajectories or pathways women leaders take as a result of negative (or positive) stressful life events. The Illumined Leadership Spirit model could be applied to a research study that poses the question: what is the influence of the connection between stressful life events and spiritual identity on the leadership trajectory for women (or men)? Additionally, this study focused on negative stressful life events, however, there are also positive stressful life events on the Social Readjustment Rating Scale that have been shown to require life adjustments similar to those caused by the negative events. Therefore, an opportunity exists to determine the relationship between positive stressful life events and the Illumined Leadership Spirit development.

Conclusion

Finding answers often results from asking questions. My interest in women leaders, and their development, led me to inquire about how women leaders make meaning of their negative, stressful life events in the context of their spiritual identity and leadership. Throughout the research process, I questioned, listened, contextualized, reflected, and conceptualized their narratives. I meditated upon the words of each participant to hear the messages that they conveyed. As a woman leader, I reflected upon my own stressful life events and how they have shaped my own personal leadership journey. As a researcher, I embarked upon an exploratory process and arrived at a grounded theory that explains the connection between stressful life events and spiritual identity for the women leaders in this study.

The Illumined Leadership Spirit is the result of the meaning that the women leaders in this study placed on their experiences of pain, heartache, disappointment and distress and how they sought and found serenity, perspective and purpose through the application of their spiritual identity to their wounds. Each of their leadership experiences was impacted or enhanced by living their personal journeys and arriving at their life and leadership truths. Their specific stories and the meaning ascribed to them explain the importance of the leadership journey, especially the ones wrought with challenges and difficulties.

As women leaders seek to recognize and relinquish control, adopt new perspectives and find purpose in their pain, they are developing an Illumined Leadership Spirit that will serve as a compass for their continued leadership journey.

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Appendix A

Individual Interview Protocol
North Carolina A&T State University
School of Education – Department of Leadership Studies
A Grounded Theory Exploration of Spiritual Identity and Stressful Life Events for Women
Leaders
Margaret A. Brunson – Principal Investigator

The following protocol establishes a guide for performing two individual interviews with the study participants. The first interview will consist of an unstructured grounded theory research interview. Unstructured interviews are "conversations with purpose" (Burgess, 1994) used to help establish a more non-hierarchical relationship between the researcher and participants (Bryant & Charmaz, 2007). During an unstructured interview, the participants are in a position of more power over the direction of the conversation (Bryant & Charmaz, 2007).

The following prompts will initiate the unstructured interview with each participant. During the conversations, follow-up questions may be asked for clarification and to further enhance each conversation.

First Interview:

1. **Tell me about your stressful life event(s).**
2. **Tell me about your spiritual identity or spiritual journey.**
3. **How do these two connect for you?**

During a subsequent interview, participants will be asked a series of questions that will emerge from the data collected during the first interview. Questions will be based upon the emerging codes and categories that were identified as a result of the first interview. In addition to those questions, the participants will be asked to respond to the following prompt:
Tell me about your experiences as a woman leader.

After the individual interviews, I will conduct a blinded group interview that will bring together women leaders who have experienced stressful life events. The blinded group interview will be conducted via telephone conference call and identifying information will remain confidential. This interview will consist of questions or prompts developed from information gathered during the individual interviews.

Appendix B

Group Interview Protocol
North Carolina A&T State University
School of Education – Department of Leadership Studies
A Grounded Theory Exploration of Spiritual Identity and Stressful Life Events for Women
Leaders
Margaret A. Brunson – Principal Investigator

Thank you for taking time out of your busy schedules to participate in my research study and to join this call today. As a reminder, this call will be recorded and transcribed later. I would like to give a few instructions, take roll and then start the recording.

This is a blinded group interview. If you choose to identify yourself, that is up to you. However, if you choose not, that is fine, as well. There will not be any identifying information in the final dissertation document. We will discuss three questions for a period of about 40 minutes. In order to ensure the audibility of each speaker, please mute your line until you speak. Before you speak, please use your initials so that I will know who made the statement.

TAKE ROLL: EA, BLS, BM, TN, PR, RS, ST, MW

Are there any questions?

Ok, I will now start the recording:
Free Conference Recording
Subscriber PIN code: 461510#
To start recording, host hits: *9, then the PIN
To stop recording, host hits: *9

Each of you has already shared your stressful life events with me. When thinking about those experiences that you shared:

1. **Has your commitment or focus on your leadership changed as a result of your stressful life event(s)?**
2. **As you look back over your experiences with stressful life events, what themes would you ascribe to how you coped, spiritually, with those experiences?**
3. **How do you explain the connection of the relationship between stressful life events and spiritual identity to your experience as a leader?**