I Look To You:

Religious Leaders as Social Support in the Management of Uncertainty within the African

American Community

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Abstract - Extended

African-Americans continue to show stronger relationships between spirituality, worship, and daily life. When faced with uncertainty in life, these individuals may look to their religious leadership as a tool for social support and guidance in decision-making. This study uses Uncertainty Management Theory as a framework to look at the relationship between these individuals and their religious leaders. Credibility will also be measured to see if religious leadership can be perceived as credible when dealing with issues that are not based in faith and worship. The importance of this study is seen in understanding how African-Americans are able to cope with uncertainty, and to what extent their faith and church attendance plays in that coping.

The CIAWorld Fact Book (2010) indicates that United States' citizens identify as members of a multitude of religious groups, ranging from Protestant (51.3%), Roman Catholic (23.9%) and Morman (1.7%) to Jewish (1.7%), Buddhist (0.7%), and Muslim (0.6%). Given the presence of various religious sects in the United States, religious beliefs can be an important component in predicting engagement in a variety of behaviors, including making decisions in issues that are not faith-based. Therefore, it is important to explore the role that religion and spirituality have in life issues that are beyond the doors of church. The purpose of this study is to explore the perceptions of credibility among religious opinion leaders in the African American community on issues that are not faith-based. If religious opinion leaders are perceived as credible in areas where they are not natural experts, important inferences can be made about the relationship between African American religious leadership and their members.

Within the African-American community, strong ties to spirituality and religion can be found. For years, researchers have established a significant amount of spiritual recognition

among African-American individuals and have also identified it as a channel to other beliefs and behaviors. (Harris et. al., 2008). Even more than other races, the only united stable organizations in the community are established religious organizations (Holt, 2009). Harris, et. al (2008) found that African Americans showed a significantly higher response to spiritually focused ads on health when compared to White Americans.

According to uncertainty management theory (Brashers et al., 2000), we seek to maintain, increase, or decrease uncertainty by information seeking and information avoiding. We react to uncertainty based on the meaning it has for us, appraising the situation as either danger or opportunity and then experiencing corresponding emotions (Thompson & O'Hair, 2008). A danger appraisal is accompanied by feelings of anxiety and distress, whereas an opportunity appraisal is accompanied by hope or optimism. This process then leads to choices, which manage our uncertainty, choosing to seek or avoid information. Social support assists with information seeking and avoiding, and encourages reappraisal of uncertainty (Brashers, Neidig, & Goldsmith, 2004). Perceived supportiveness of social support may be moderated by survivor uncertainty-management needs (Brashers et al., 2004). Supportive communication can increase, decrease, or maintain certainty and uncertainty for breast cancer patients (Ford, Babrow, & Stohl, 1996). Breast cancer survivors, who perceive more support, experience less uncertainty, leading to even more social support and a higher quality of life (Sammarco, 2001). Breast cancer survivors who report a wide network of support also reported low levels of uncertainty (Wonghongkul, Moore, Musil, Schneider, & Deimling, 2000).

Uncertainty management, in regards to this study, will be used as a framework for observing individuals in the African-American community. If individuals perceive themselves to be uncertain about a situation, they may seek out help and social support from religious

leadership (pastor, elder, youth leader, etc.) in their church. Therefore, this study seeks to observe the relationship between African-American church members and their spiritual leadership with the following hypothesis.

H1: African-Americans with lower uncertainty will report a lower amount of social support from their religious leadership than African-Americans with higher uncertainty.

In previous related literature, Hovland and Weiss (1951) found that trustworthiness was an important role to the "acceptance" of messages sent by the source. Their study showed that the trust in the relationship played a key role as to whether the message would be judged as credible or not. In relation to this study, it can be assumed that trustworthiness is also an important part of credibility for the relationship between religious leadership and members in the African-American community. Therefore this measure of credibility is of good fit to measure the validity of the sender's message.

For the purpose of this study, credibility will be measured as the identifying factor for opinion leadership. A survey will be administered to locate the patterns of opinion leadership through the varying factors of credibility given. Once measured the amount of credibility should provide insight to the characteristics of opinion leadership and implications of the effective potential of opinion leaders in the African-American community. This will allow for further research to observe these strong relationships and move towards a better understanding of what is most predictive for opinion leadership-information seeker relationships in the African-American community. The importance of this measurement will hold a strong link between opinion leadership in the African American community and the information-seeking behaviors of African American church members.

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In regards to this study, spiritual leaders in the African-American community will be observed to see how credible they are perceived in other aspects of life (specifically health-related issues). In other words, this study aims to see how people perceive credibility of their spiritual leaders in non-religious matters. This is important as it gives a clearer picture to the amount of influence religious leaders have in other aspects of communication, especially those that are not faith-based. As a result this study also seeks to answer the following question.

RQ1: How will the level uncertainty affect behavioral intention in African-American church members to seek out information from religious leadership?

RQ2: To what extent will African-American religious leaders be perceived as credible opinion leaders in non-religious issues, when compared to religious issues, by their members?

Upon approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB), subjects will be recruited by an invitational email sent to religious leadership or communication directors of area churches. These invitations will include information about the study and information about the researcher and their credentials. The letter will request that leadership work with the researcher to organize a date for information to be collected. Once these times are developed and agreed upon, each of the churches in the area will be visited by the researcher to collect data. An incentive (e.g. gift card, or prize basket drawing) will be used to increase reward for participants.

To collect data, the researcher will use a mobile device (e.g. laptop computer or tablet) to collect survey data. The cookie storage link will be adjusted to allow for multiple subjects to take the survey on the same device. The researcher will allow each participant to fill out the survey in full privacy.

Each participant will be presented with an online consent form upon starting the online survey. This document will describe the purpose of the study, the affiliated institution and the

contact information for the researcher. Subjects will be given the opportunity to read about the risks of the study and the assurance that their responses will be kept confidential. They will also be assured that their identity will remain anonymous. Each subject will be allowed to ask any further questions they may have before continuing (the option to not participate will also be given). If the subject gives their consent, and agrees to continue with the survey, they will be taken to the online survey where they will be asked questions measuring their level of uncertainty, amount of social support from religious leadership, and perceived credibility. At the end of the online survey, each subject will be thanked for their time and contribution to the study.